

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever dreamed about finding a valuable antique at a flea market? In 1989 a bargain hunter in Adamstown, NY bought a picture at a flea market for \$4. When he took the frame apart, he discovered a document folded between the canvas and the frame. It turned out to be one of the 200 official copies of the first printing of the Declaration of Independence. After it was authenticated, he sold it for more than \$2 million.

That reminds me of a funny story about a man telling his pastor he had recently cleaned out his attic and thrown away an old Bible written in German. He said it was some kind of Gutenstein Bible. The pastor said, “Could it have been Gutenberg?” The guy said, “That’s it.” The pastor said, “And you threw it away? It could have been worth a lot of money.” The guy said, “Well, probably not, because some guy named Martin Luther had written all in it!”

These days, autographed documents can be very valuable. Have you ever wondered what the most valuable autograph in the world is? Elvis? No. Tiger Woods? No. George Washington? No. John Hancock? No. Actually, the world’s most valuable autograph doesn’t come from an athlete, movie star, or politician. The most valuable autograph is that of William Shakespeare. There are only about five in existence, and none of them are for sale, but if they were, it is estimated you could buy one for a tidy \$5 million. And none of Shakespeare’s original manuscripts have ever surfaced. If someone were to find an original copy of “King Lear”, or “Othello”, or “Romeo and Juliet” signed by Shakespeare, it would be worth an estimated \$50 million!

So, let your mind wander with me for a moment. Imagine there is an archaeologist digging near Capernaum in Galilee, and he finds a clay jar with a sealed top, (just like the jars containing the Dead Sea Scrolls). He takes the jar to a sterile laboratory and using the latest scientific technology, opens the jar. Inside, he finds a scroll of papyrus, perfectly preserved. As the scientists and scholars unroll it, they discover it is a letter written to Simon Peter and it is signed by Jesus of Nazareth.

Can you imagine the stir that would create in the scientific and academic world? If it could be authenticated, could you imagine how much it would be worth? Millions? Billions? Trillions? No doubt, that letter would be the most valuable writing in the history of the world.

This morning, I want to announce that such a letter, signed by Jesus Christ HAS been discovered. I will show you this signed letter of Christ. Are you interested? We can read about this letter of Jesus Christ in 2 Corinthians 3:1-3:

“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”

Where is this signed letter from Christ? Just look in the mirror! You are a letter from Christ. There are many beautiful metaphors the Bible uses to describe our relationship with Jesus. For

instance, in John 10, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and we’re the sheep of His flock. In John 15 Jesus is the vine and we’re the branches. Jesus is the Bridegroom and the church is the bride. In 1 Peter 2, Jesus is the Cornerstone and we’re the living stones. The Bible is full of such analogies. Have you ever wondered why God employs so many different pictures to describe us? I believe it’s because our relationship with God is so deep and wonderful that a single picture can’t capture it all. In this message I want us to focus on what it means for us to be letters from Christ.

1. EVERY CHRISTIAN IS A LIVING LETTER

Eugene Petersen paraphrases this truth in these words, “Your very lives are a letter that anyone can read by just looking at you. Christ Himself wrote it-not with ink, but with God’s living spirit; not chiseled into stone, but carved into human lives.” (*The Message*)

Some letters have ulterior motives. I read one letter from Marie to her former fiancé, Jimmy: “Dear Jimmy, No words can express the deep unhappiness and regret I’ve felt since I broke off our engagement last week. Please forgive me and take me back. I love you. I love you. Love, forever, Marie. P.S. And congratulations on winning the lottery.” The only motive God has for us is that we communicate His life changing message to others. Let’s take a moment and analyze the different components of this beautiful metaphor.

(1) The pen is the Holy Spirit

Before the days of typewriters or computer printers, people wrote letters by hand using pens. The pen transferred the ink onto the paper. That’s what the Holy Spirit does when He comes to live in our lives. He transfers the life of Jesus Christ into our personality.

The Bible says this living letter isn’t written with ink but by the Spirit of the Living God. I love that designation of the Holy Spirit. It reminds me of that beautiful chorus that says, “Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me. Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.” Are you allowing the Holy Spirit to fill you with the life of Christ?

(2) The paper is my heart

In the Old Testament times, God first wrote His law on tablets of stone. But in this age of grace, God is writing His life on human hearts. The Law said, “Do this” or “Don’t do this.” It was simply outward behavior modification. But Grace transforms us from within.

When the Holy Spirit transcribes truth into our lives, He is communicating the feelings, thoughts, and desires of God. In this age of computers, we’ve come up with a new term: writeable. Some discs are writeable, which means they are capable of receiving data, and others are unwritable, which means they can’t receive data. How writeable is your heart? Is it so full of selfish, sinful, trivial data that there’s no room for the Holy Spirit to transfer God’s truth there? We should constantly be allowing God to write His message on the pages of our hearts.

(3) The readers are everyone

Notice our text says, “known and read by everybody.” Sometimes you receive a letter that has “personal” written on it. That means it is to be opened and read by the addressee only. There’s another kind of letter that’s called an “open letter.” That means it’s not really addressed to a specific individual, it’s for everyone to read. Some people try to keep their faith private, but the Bible says we are an OPEN letter. That means wherever we go and whatever we say and do, people are reading our lives.

You can’t really be a closet Christian. You really are the only Bible some people will ever read.

(4) The Signature is Jesus Christ

When we write a letter, we sign our names at the end of letters, but in the time of Jesus, the signature came first. For instance, the first words in 2 Corinthians are, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus.” When you are a living letter from Christ, the first thing people will read in your life is Jesus Christ.

An ordinary object that has been autographed by someone famous becomes more valuable. For instance, a golf glove only costs about \$15, but you can look on Ebay and find a golf glove worn and signed by Tiger Woods selling for \$2500. It’s his signature that makes it valuable.

Our lives aren’t worth much without the signature of Jesus Christ. But once He has autographed our heart with His matchless name, we become precious and valuable.

Brennan Manning has written a great book entitled, *The Signature of Jesus*. He says the cross is the Jesus’ signature, and He wants to engrave the insignia of His cross in our lives. He writes: “True followers of Jesus recognize that many of the burning theological questions in the Church today are neither burning nor theological. They see Christianity neither as a moral code or a belief-system but a love affair. They know that following Jesus means living dangerously, and they have no greater desire than to have his signature written on the pages of their lives.” (*The Signature of Jesus*, p 206) Have you discovered yet that YOU are signed letter from Jesus Christ? Now that we’ve analyzed this metaphor, let’s talk about the message we should be communicating. How would you answer this question?

2. WHAT KIND OF MESSAGE AM I SENDING?

Have you ever heard the expression, “The medium is the message?” The phrase was coined in 1964 by Marshall McLuhan in his book *Understanding Media*. In simple terms, it means if a company advertises on television, the fact that they can afford television commercials communicates the message itself: They are a strong company. In that case, the medium, television, is the message. Because God is in the life-changing business, He uses people with changed lives as the medium for His message. Before He ascended back into heaven, He told the disciples, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you shall be my witnesses (you can substitute “living letters”) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

God could have chosen angels to be the messengers of the gospel, but instead He chose us to be the medium of His message. Let’s look at four different kinds of letters that God wants us to be.

(1) God wants me to be a warning letter

Sometimes an employee who isn’t performing well will receive a warning letter from the boss that basically says, “Shape up or ship out.” Or if you don’t pay your electric bill, you’ll receive a warning letter from the utility company saying that your power will be shut off if you don’t pay. Nobody enjoys receiving a warning letter—and it’s really not fun to BE a warning letter. But the Bible makes it clear that one of our jobs to *warn* people that after they die, they will either spend eternity in heaven with God or spend eternity separated from God in a place called hell.

That doesn’t mean you have to stand out on the side of the road wearing a sandwich board that says “Repent or perish!” It means we should lovingly remind people that the Bible says, “it is appointed unto men once to die, and after that, the judgement.” (Hebrews 9:27)

In Ezekiel 33 God compares His children to a watchman posted on a city wall to warn the population when an enemy army was approaching. If a watchman didn’t sound alarm, he was responsible for the deaths of his fellow citizens. Then God makes a spiritual application about warning others. He says, “When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.” (Ezekiel 33:8-9) It’s not our job to convert them, only God can do that. It’s our job to warn them.

The only voice we ever hear coming from hell in the Bible was that of the rich man in Luke 16. Jesus said he died and woke up in hell where he was tormented. He could see into heaven and saw the poor beggar Lazarus there with Abraham. The rich man cried out, “Father, please send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” (Luke 16:27-28)

If I knew a bridge had been washed away and I didn’t warn the approaching drivers, I would be guilty of negligent homicide. Keith Green wrote a song once that said, “Do you see, do you see; all the people sinking down? Don’t you care, don’t you care? Are you gonna let them drown?...The world is sleeping in the dark; that the church just can’t fight; ‘cause it’s asleep in the light. How can you be so dead; when you’ve been so well fed; Jesus rose from the grave; and you can’t even get out of bed.” Is there someone you know who needs to be lovingly warned of the judgment to come?

(2) God wants me to be a thank-you note

Isn’t it refreshing to receive a thank-you note from someone? The proper etiquette for a thank-you note is that it should always be handwritten (not an email), and it should be written within 72 hours of the event or deed for which you’re expressing thanks.

The first President Bush was well known for his habit of writing thousands of hand-written

thank-you notes. He always carried a box of cards and immediately after meeting someone he would jot a personal thank-you note to volunteers and campaign workers. Some political experts believe this habit was one of the reasons he was elected President. He lived a life full of gratitude.

The Bible says we should be living thank-you notes. "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) Do you want to know what God's will is for your life? There it is in black and white. It is God's will for you to give thanks in all circumstances.

Are you humbly grateful, or grumbly hateful? People are constantly reading your life. If you are filled with gratitude and are constantly telling people, "thank you, thank you, thank you" then they are going to have a positive read on the Christian life.

(3) God wants me to be an invitation letter

Isn't it nice to receive an invitation to a wedding, a party, or a graduation? It means someone cares about you enough to ask you to enjoy life with them. Our lives should be living letters inviting people to enjoy the abundant life of knowing God. In one parable Jesus described the Christian life as a great banquet, and He said, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full." (Luke 14:23) God invites *everyone* to join the party. The Bible says, "Whosoever will may come," and we are His living invitations.

I saw a beautiful poster recently that pictured a banquet table in heaven with the most beautiful place settings you can imagine. The message on the poster said, "You are invited to come dine with me; from now through all eternity; believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and dine with Jesus as your Host; to live in heaven eternally; all you have to do is RSVP."

I know most of you already know this, but when you receive any kind of invitation that has RSVP on the bottom, those four letters stand for the French phrase, "répondez s'il vous plaît" which means "respond please." You should *always* respond with "yes or no" when you read RSVP. It means the host has a place prepared for you and they are expecting you. If you don't respond when you read RSVP, it is the height of rudeness.

God has prepared a place at His table for everyone, and He requires everyone to RSVP to His invitation. You can't ignore it. It's either "yes" or "no." We don't just deliver the invitation, we ARE the invitation. People should look at us and say, "I want what you have."

(4) God wants me to be a love letter

Isn't it wonderful to receive a love letter? One of the greatest romances in history took place between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. Perhaps the best known love letter of all time was her poem that said, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach when feeling out of sight for the ends of Being and ideal Grace. I love thee freely as men strive for Right; I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise. I love with a passion put to use in my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith. I love thee with a

love I seemed to lose with my lost saints. I love thee with the breath, smiles tears, of all my life! And, if God chose, I shall love thee better after death.” That’s a great love letter!

But as powerful as that love was, it doesn’t compare to the matchless, unconditional love that God has for us. God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son as a love letter to each of us. And now, God wants each of us to be a living love letter to those we meet. Jesus said, Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this ALL MEN WILL KNOW that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35) The mark of a Christian isn’t wearing a cross, or carrying a Bible, or having a “honk if you love Jesus” bumper sticker. The only mark of a Christian is love.

CONCLUSION

I recently read a true story about a man named Darryl. Darryl was 40 years old, never married, and not a very attractive guy. He was shy, but he loved working with the young people in his church. The youth group took on a project of leading a monthly service at a local nursing home, but since Darryl didn’t like nursing homes, he agreed to drive the van but not participate in the service.

On their first service began, Darryl stood at the very back of the room and leaned against the wall. Suddenly he felt someone grab his hand, and he looked down and saw a very old man whose eyes were closed. Darryl didn’t even know if the man could even hear or speak, but since he didn’t know anything else to do, he just kept holding the old man’s hand.

When the service ended, Darryl was still holding the man’s hand and he realized that he didn’t want to let go. He leaned over and whispered, “I’ve got to go now...but I’ll be back...I promise.” Without looking up or saying a word the old man squeezed Darryl’s hand and then let go. Darryl was surprised to find tears in his eyes, and then he heard himself say to the old man, “I love you,” and he wondered, “Where did that come from? I hate nursing homes.”

Darryl returned the next month, and for several months afterward. Each time he would stand at the back and hold the old man’s hand. Darryl had learned that the man’s name was Oliver, and each time he had to leave Darryl would lean over and say, “I love you, Oliver.”

One month they arrived and the service started but Oliver wasn’t there. Darryl didn’t worry at first because it often took time for the nurses to wheel all the patients in. But when Oliver didn’t show up halfway through the service, Darryl asked the nurse and she motioned for him to follow her, and she led him to Oliver’s room. Oliver was lying in bed and it was obvious that he was dying. Darryl sat down beside the bed and held Oliver’s hand, but there was no response.

Finally the youth minister came and gently told Darryl it was time to leave. Darryl bent over and said, “Goodbye Oliver, I love you.” Then he felt pressure on his hand. With his eyes full of tears Darryl stumbled for the door and almost ran into a young woman who was entering. He said, “I’m sorry.” She said, “That’s okay, in fact, I’ve been waiting to see you. I’m Oliver’s granddaughter. When the doctor told me he didn’t have much more time I came last night and I’ve been sitting with him. The nurses told me he couldn’t talk, but they were wrong. Grandpa

talked to me last night." She choked back her own tears as she continued, "Last night he woke up and looked at me and said with a clear voice, 'Tell Jesus goodbye for me.' I was so shocked that it caught me off guard. I said, 'Grandpa, I don't have to say goodbye to Jesus. You'll see Him soon, and you can say 'hello' to Him.' Then grandpa's eyes lit up again and he smiled and said, 'I know, but Jesus comes to see me every month to hold my hand, and he might not know that I have gone.' Then he closed his eyes and he hasn't opened them since. I told the nurse and she told me that you were the one who holds grandpa's hand. I wanted to thank you for him, and for me. I've never thought of Jesus being chubby and bald, like you, but I can imagine that Jesus is glad to have had you mistaken for Him. I know grandpa is...thank you." Then she kissed Darryl on the cheek and within hours, Oliver had slipped on to be with Jesus.

Darryl was a love letter from Jesus. Has anyone ever mistaken you for Jesus because of the love you show to others? Remember, people are reading your life every day. Are you a warning letter? A thank-you note? An invitation? A love letter? Let me conclude with this little poetic reminder: You are writing a gospel, A chapter each day, By deeds that you do, By words that you say. Men read what you write, Whether faithless or true, Say! What is the gospel According to you? (Author unknown)

OUTLINE

1. EVERY CHRISTIAN IS A LIVING LETTER

“Your very lives are a letter that anyone can read by just looking at you. Christ Himself wrote it-not with ink, but with God’s living spirit; not chiseled into stone, but carved into human lives.” (*The Message*)

- (1) The pen: The Holy Spirit
- (2) The paper: My heart
- (3) The readers: Everyone
- (4) The Signature: Jesus Christ

2. WHAT KIND OF MESSAGE AM I SENDING?

(The medium IS the message)

- God wants me to be
- (1) A warning letter
 - (2) A thank-you note
 - (3) An invitation letter
 - (4) A love letter



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes