

From The Pulpit Of



IMMANUEL
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CHURCH

Triumphant Procession

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2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Series: 2 Corinthians

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Text

[12] When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, [13] my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

[14] But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. [15] For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, [16] to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? [17] For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. (ESV)

Introduction

- Arouse Interest:
 - Anyone heard of the 'pink salt trick'? According to sources online, pink Himalayan salt may just be the weight loss key that everyone has been looking for. Mixing a little bit with water and lemon may provide a concoction that's natural and perhaps just as effective as Ozempic.
 - It's cheap, convenient, and absolutely a lie. There is no evidence that pink salt or any other colored salts have any real bearing on weight loss or health. As it turns out, the true key to lasting health and effective weight loss is what it has always been: eat less and move more.
- Surface Need:
 - But in a world like ours, where fake news and faulty AI claims continue to deceive millions of people on a regular basis, you and I need to start asking ourselves some important questions.
 - How can we tell when someone is telling the truth? It seems nowadays that every claim is a little more biased than it used to be and every fact is starting to feel more and more fictional. Friends, in a world where everyone has an agenda, everyone is trying to sell something, how can we tell who is actually trying to tell us the truth?

- Especially in matters of faith and religion, when so many spiritual leaders and pastors have actually turned out to be hustlers in disguise, how could you even know whether any religion has any shred of truth in it or not?
- Orient to the text:
 - The apostle Paul was dealing with a church that was questioning the validity of his ministry. They were being lured away by these super apostles Paul is going to talk about in 2 Cor. 11. These were teachers who looked credible and professional but whose teachings ultimately were a cancer to the church.
 - But because of the polish on these pseudo-apostles, the church in Corinth were attracted to what they had to say. They started preferring the smooth words of these teachers, rather than the blunt and heavy words of the preaching Paul.
 - During the time of this letter, the Corinthian church started to call into question the validity of Paul's ministry. And in our section today, Paul begins to state his defense. But the way that Paul goes about defending his ministry here is a little different. Paul doesn't point to his various degrees or academic accolades. Nor does he list his various miracles as a means of authenticating his ministry.
 - No, here, the thing that authenticates the validity of his ministry is his willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel.
 - In short, Paul's argument this morning can be summed up like this, ***God uses Christian Suffering to make much of a Crucified Savior.***

Organizational Sentence:

- Our passage this morning breaks into three parts. In verses 12-13, Paul is going to talk about the Pain of the Christian Minister. Then in verses 14-16, Paul speaks about the Purpose of the Christian Minister. Finally, in verses 16-17, Paul speaks about the Priorities of the Christian Minister.

The Pain of Christian Minister (12-13)

- So let's get into this. According to Paul, why is Christian ministry often so painful? Well, here in verse 12, Paul starts recounting his time in the city of Troas.
- As I said earlier, the Corinthian church at the time was plagued with serious heresies and false teachers who were questioning the validity of Paul's ministry.
- And Paul was deeply concerned about this matter. Originally, Paul had intended to travel from Ephesus through Macedonia and reach Corinth at the end of his missionary journey (1 Cor. 16:5-9). But because of what he was hearing, it seems as if Paul actually changed his plans and decided to go to Corinth first to sort things out personally.
- Unfortunately, things didn't go so well on his first visit. The church in Corinth was so vitriolic, so hostile to Paul, that he actually had to leave early from them. This is why Paul, at the beginning of chapter 2 in verse 1, recounts his trip as a painful one that he wasn't too eager to repeat.

- Instead of visiting the church again, Paul sent Titus, his friend, with a stern letter of rebuke. You can see some of this background in 2 Cor. 2:3-4 and 7:8-16.
- Now, according to Paul, the original plan was for Titus to go to the Corinthian church on his behalf and read Paul's letter. Ideally, the church would have heard the heart of Paul and repented.
- But however this turned out, Titus and Paul had agreed to meet once again in the city of Troas. And here in our passage, Paul is recounting his time waiting in Troas for Titus.
- And it's interesting what it says here. Paul says that while he was waiting in Troas, "a door was opened for me in the Lord." This is a phrase that Paul often uses to describe significant ministry opportunities (1 Cor. 16:9; Col. 4:3).¹
- People in Troas wanted to hear about the Lord. They wanted to hear what Paul had to say. And this isn't some small insignificant town here. Troas was the primary Asian harbor for ships destined for Macedonia.² This was a major harbor, with potential opportunities for the spread of the gospel all over the place. There in Troas, Paul had a significant opportunity and a pretty solid excuse to stay away from the church in Corinth for a while.
- But Paul wasn't okay there. As Paul says in verse 13, his spirit was not at rest because he could not find his brother Titus anywhere within Troas. Now, obviously, Paul is concerned with the safety of his friend. But the overwhelming emphasis of this letter suggests that the main reason Paul was under such duress was because he wanted to know what had happened in Corinth.
- This is one of those rare moments when we are reminded that as awesome as the apostle Paul was, he was still just a human being. A human being who sometimes struggled with anxiety.
- What did they do after they heard his letter? Did they repent? Did they make things right? Are they walking with the Lord now, or are they still flirting with those superapostles and their doctrines from hell? What do they think of him? Do they want to reconcile? Do they hate Paul? What is going on?
- Paul desperately wanted to know. And so, even though things were going well in Troas, even though he had a good excuse to stay away, Paul didn't stay to look after the ministry there. He went on to look for Titus in Macedonia. He wanted desperately to know what happened to the Corinthian church.

Application

- Now, friends, there are all kinds of applications we can make on the basis of these two verses alone.
- One application you ought to think about is if you want to know whether or not the pastor you are following is a true Christian minister, you oughta think about whether or not he truly loves you. Here in our passage, Paul isn't simply trying to recount a story for the Corinthian church. No, he's actually trying to remind the church in Corinth of just how much he loves them. He's trying to persuade his people not to listen to these other false teachers, but to listen to him. To listen to

¹ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2005).

² Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*.

- this true apostle who is sincerely anxious for their life and well being. A minister who loves his people enough to tell them hard things even if by doing so he himself might suffer for it. That's one application to think about.
- But another broader one I think everyone needs to hear is simply this: if you are going to be a Christian, you are going to be in Christian ministry. According to Ephesians 4:12, all Christians are responsible to participate in the work of building up the church of Christ. So if you are going to be a Christian, you're going to play a part in this as well.
 - And if you are going to do any sort of Christian ministry, if you attempt to live the Christian life as it is supposed to be lived, inevitably you are going to suffer in this life.
 - There is great joy in the Christian life. There is great joy in knowing that you are right with God, that you are loved by him, that you have spiritually been adopted into his family in Christ.
 - But there is also a great deal of sorrow that comes with being a Christian as well. And many of the members of our own church can personally attest to this.
 - Some of you have been rejected or maligned by your former friends and family.
 - Some of you have been left out of significant opportunities because of your faithful witness to Christ Jesus.
 - Within the church, some of you have strived to love your brothers and sisters in Christ, to warn them of the dangers of various sins or false teachings, and in the process you yourself have been misunderstood and mistreated.
 - I'd like to say that these kinds of experiences are simply the exceptions to the Christian life, but that just isn't true. There are Christians all over the world who can testify to the fact that to follow Christ they had to give up finances, freedoms, and for some even their very lives.
 - This is what Christ himself warns his disciples about in Matthew 10:37:
 - [37] Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. [38] And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. [39] Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.
 - Friends, make no mistake about it. If you endeavor to follow Christ in this life, inevitably you will share in the sufferings that Christ himself endured as walked in this world.
 - And I'm here today preaching in this room trying to persuade us all to do it. In spite of the suffering, it is worth trusting and following a Savior like this. Why?

Purpose of the Christian Ministry (14-16a)

- Well that's a good question. And this leads us to the second part of our text this morning, the Purpose of the Christian Ministry. Now here in verse 14, things start to get a little weird. You'll notice, Paul doesn't actually finish his story about what

happened to him and Titus in Troas or Macedonia. He just kind of leaves this hanging.

- As a matter of fact, Paul actually isn't going to get back to this story until chapter 7. Because from 2:14 to 7:5, Paul goes on this major side tangent in explaining Christian suffering and defending his apostleship. This is one of the funny things that Paul does in his letters. At times he will start an idea, but then something in this idea reminds him of another idea, and he will start talking about that. And when he's finished with his rabbit trail, he will come back to his original thought. We saw another example of this in our study of Ephesians 3 in our midweek services.
- As Paul is reflecting on the sufferings that he went through for the sake of the Corinthian church, he is once again reminded that God has a purpose behind all of his ministerial suffering. And it causes him in verse 14 to proclaim:
 - [14] But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. (ESV)
- Now, you might hear this verse being read out and think to yourself that this sounds awesome! Yes! In Christ, we have the victory and are being led to triumph in this world as we follow him. We're gonna get out there and just dominate and win and be super successful and win the whole world to Jesus.
- That's not what this verse teaches. In the Roman world the triumphant procession was a victory lap. If a general had conquered and overcome a city, he would lead a victory march around the borders of the city to demonstrate his domination over the vicinity. And it was a glorious victory march.
- The problem was that it wasn't a victory march for those who were being led within the triumphal procession. The ones who were being led were the captives, the POWs, the conquered rulers of the city who were now being led in a humiliating procession around their conquered city until the lap ended in their execution. That's the triumphal procession.³
- And if Paul is being led by God in a triumphant procession, then that means that Paul is God's conquered enemy, who is now being led in humiliation, being led even to his death, so that through his suffering he could give people a small picture of who Jesus is and glorify this newly reigning king. That's the image. And if that sounds a little crazy to you...I understand.
- The imagery that Paul uses here is striking and hard to swallow. Is this really the purpose of the Christian life? The divine intention behind all Christian suffering?
- If this is true, then this raises a host of other questions. What kind of God is worth glorifying through suffering? What kind of God is really worth dying for?
- Paul's answer to this question, a God who was willing to die for you first. There is a little phrase here that makes all the difference in the world when it comes to this passage. In Christ. God leads us in Christ in a triumphant procession. And this is a simple reminder that the sufferings that Christians participate in today are merely

³ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Second Edition. (InterVarsity Press, 2014).

a small reflection of the greater suffering that Christ himself went through on our behalf.

- The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15:
 - [14] For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; [15] and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (ESV)
- Friends, think about what Paul is saying here. You were an enemy of God. You were a rebel in his kingdom. You deserved to be captured, condemned, and executed because of your treason against God. And in that state, God loved you. In that state God sent Jesus Christ his Son here on this earth to endure all kinds of suffering, persecution, and abuse to accomplish a perfect righteousness on our behalf.
- And then in order to deal with our sin, Christ himself took on the punishment we deserve at the cross. He died for us so that when we die, we no longer face eternal condemnation, but resurrection in him and everlasting life with God no longer as our judge but as our Father.

Application

- Friends, if you are here today and you are thinking that there is no possible God out there that is worth suffering and dying for, I want you to know, I understand where you're coming from.
- I would never believe Allah would be worth dying for. I would never say that anyone ought to die for the sake of Buddah, or Vishnu, or Shiva.
- But for Jesus, for a God who loved me enough to die for someone like me, friends, that's a God worth serving. That's a God worth suffering for. And when you and I are fully confronted with and accosted by the depths of the love of Christ, you and I will come to believe that this Jesus, that a God like this is a God even worth dying for. That is what Paul believed.

Explanation

- And the purpose of Christian ministry is to give people through our participation in Christ's sacrificial love a small picture of just how much Jesus loves us.
 - Now I want to be careful here. I'm not saying that you can witness to people simply by imitating Christ around your co workers. That is not enough. Paul clearly states in Romans 11 that for people to be saved, Christians actually need to go and tell them about the good news of the gospel. Paul is not saying here that you can preach the gospel without actually using words.
- But what he is saying is that when a Christian sacrificially loves the people around him, cares for others even when it is costly to himself, is willing to share the truth about the gospel even at the risk of personal suffering or loss, when Christians do these kinds of things they give the world a small picture, a small scent of just how much Jesus Christ actually loves us.

- And this is one of the marks Paul uses to vindicate his ministry. According to Paul, his suffering is a reason why you should listen to him. It's not a bug in his ministry. It's a feature. It's a picture of the love of Christ to a lost a dying world.
- This wording here in verse 14 and 15 behind fragrance is drawing from the Old Testament imagery of sacrifice (Gen. 8:21; Ex. 29:18; Lev. 1:9). In the New Testament, Paul uses this imagery to describe the sacrifice of the death of Christ in Eph. 5:2.
 - [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (ESV)

Application

- Brothers and sisters, this is something that you and I need to think about today. In our witness to the world today, do the people around us encounter the aroma of Christ on us?
- Too many of us think that the way we win the world to Jesus is by being smart, by being affluent, by being admired by the world so that everyone around us would want to be like us.
- This is why too often we get more excited when a celebrity professes faith rather than a simple church attender who's quietly come to Christ in the back row of our sanctuary. We think we need to be influential in the world to be an influential witness. But nothing could be further from the truth.
- Friends, we need to come to terms with the fact that in the eyes of the world, Jesus wasn't cool. He wasn't rich. He wasn't always that winsome with his words. And he didn't live a life style that people naturally wanted to emulate. No he suffered and died on the cross to save sinners like us.
- And when you and I try to make Christianity look cool to win people to Jesus, all we're really doing is giving people a souped up Jesus that doesn't really exist. Brothers and sisters, if you really want your family members, your friends, your loved ones to encounter the fragrance of Christ for themselves, if you want your church members to grow in knowledge and love of the real Jesus, the best way that you can do that is by simply telling the truth about the crucified Savior and then picking up your own cross and showing them what it looks like to follow Jesus as well.
- It's not always going to look attractive introducing people to the real Jesus. As we see in verses 15 and 16, some people aren't going to like the scent of the real Jesus. But some people will be interested. According to Paul, some will encounter the fragrance of the real Jesus and it will be a fragrance from life to life.

Priorities of the Christian Minister (16b-17)

- So we've looked at the Pain of the Christian Minister, and we've looked at the Purpose of the Christian Minister. Now we are going to look at the Priorities of the Christian Minister in verses 16 and 17.
- Remember, the ultimate goal of Paul in this section is to vindicate his ministry in light of the charges of these super apostles who were claiming that Paul's ministry looked weak and pathetic. And so far, Paul has done a pretty good job flipping the

script on them by talking about how his weakness is the very thing God likes to use to make much of a crucified Savior.

- But here in this last section, Paul switches tactics. He starts to ask here how can we tell the difference between a true Christian minister and a fake. In the words of Paul at the end of verse 16, “Who is sufficient for these things?”
- And there’s kind of two answers that Paul gives to this question, on the one hand left to ourselves, no one is sufficient to be a true Christian minister. Paul says this quite clearly in 1 Cor. 3:5. But on the other hand, if you want to know the minister whom God affirms, the minister whom God equips for the real work of the ministry, Paul’s answer to this question is real simple: the real Christian minister is the one who is more concerned with pleasing God than they are with pleasing men. As Paul states in verse 17:
 - [17] For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. (ESV)
- The background to the word peddlers has to do with public philosophers or teachers who weren’t actually concerned with the truth of what they were saying. They were simply saying the things that everyone around them wanted to hear so that they could make a quick buck.
- And here, Paul is subtly alluding that these super-apostles that have captured the attention of the church in Corinth, they were really scam artist trying to use religion to prey off of the masses.
- But that’s not what Paul is doing. And the Corinthians knew this. They could clearly see this in the ways that Paul was willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel. At the very least, the Corinthian church knew that Paul was sincere. That he truly believed in what he was preaching.
- Not only was Paul sincere, Paul also had a sincere desire to please the Lord above and beyond his desire to simply please the Corinthian church. Paul truly believed that he had been sent by God with a message from God that he is called to be faithful to. And that all the while as he was preaching about Christ, God himself was watching Paul to see if he would be faithful to his word.
- This also picks up a theme that we didn’t touch on when we went over verse 15. According to Paul, when Christians participate in the sacrificial love of Christ, the sweet aroma of Christ’s sacrifice spreads not only to other people, but also to God himself.
 - [15] For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, (ESV)

Application

- Brothers and sisters if you want to be an effective minister for Christ, if you want to stand out from the crowd of fake news and faulty religions of the world, the best thing you or I can do is to be more concerned with pleasing God than we are with pleasing men.
 - If you want to be faithful to a crucified Savior, you must preach the same message that initially got him crucified.

- If you want to love people the way Jesus loves them, you must tell the truth about heaven and hell, sin and the fact that salvation can only be found through faith in Jesus Christ alone.
 - Friend, if you want your loved ones to encounter the sacrificial love of Christ, you must be more concerned with how they see Christ than with how they see you.
- In striving to be a true Christian minister, you and I will never be pleasing to everyone around us. But I can assure you of this, we will be pleasing to God. And truly knowing what it means to be pleasing to God, to be loved by him, would be enough for us to endure whatever sufferings we need to face in this life.
 - Friend, if you are here today, and you're wondering whether or not Christianity has something real within it. Whether or not there is something genuine here or whether or not this is simply another scam for your money, I want you to know that I'm glad you are here today. And any pastor or member of our church would love to talk with you about your questions after the service.
 - But let me just leave a little pebble in your shoe for you to think about. What do we Christians have to gain by telling you about Jesus today? Yes it is true that I personally do get paid for being a pastor of this church. I gotta concede that. But at the same time, I could probably make a lot more money if I was just willing to tweak a couple of things in the Bible. I could probably do really well for myself if I stopped talking about sin, if one day out of the blue I stopped believing in the doctrine of hell and solely preached a Jesus of love without any judgment.
 - Beyond me, there are a ton of Christians in the church and around the world who get absolutely no material gain for trusting Christ and trying to tell other people about him. There are even some Christians around the world who are in jail now because they dared to proselytize and tell their neighbors about the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ alone.
 - You may think we are all stupid for doing what we do. But at the very least I hope you can see that we all actually believe in the stuff we're saying and we're trying to tell you the truth. Beyond this, I hope and pray you can actually see the heart behind everything we do and catch a small glimpse of how much we actually care about you.

Illustration:

The atheistic magician Penn Jillette once remarked regarding Christianity:

- I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward—and atheists who think people shouldn't proselytize and who say just leave me alone and keep your religion to yourself—how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?

- “I mean, if I believed, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn’t believe that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.”⁴
- Since that time, Jillette has remained an atheist. But ever since I heard that quote, I always thought to myself that this was man who had remarkable insight into the motivation of the Christian. This was a man who, perhaps was encountering the fragrance of Christ, in the faithful witness of a Christian.
- Penn Jillette isn’t a Christian yet, but I hope through the sacrificial love of other Christians around him he’s beginning to catch a small glimpse of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus Christ made to save us. I hope that the sincere love and care of Christians will lead him to sincerely trust in the sacrifice of Christ alone for his own forgiveness and salvation. I pray that that will be true for him. And I pray that that will be true for you.

⁴ beinzee, *A Gift Of A Bible*, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6md638smQd8>.