**GOSPEL CENTERED MINISTRY: SERVING IN WEAKNESS AND POWER**

**A Study in 2 Corinthians (Fall 2015)**

**Week 3: (2 Corinthians 2:14-3:18)**

**Review:** 1 Corinthians 1:1-2:13

I. The letter opening and prologue (1:1-11)

A. Letter opening (1:1-2)

B. Prologue (1:3-11)

1. Praise God for his encouragement (1:3-7)

2. Paul's recent deliverance (1:8-11)

II. The integrity of Paul's ministry (1:12-7:16)

A. Why Paul did not come directly to Corinth (1:12-2:13)

1. The integrity of Paul's actions (1:12-14)

2. Misunderstanding Paul's change of travel plans (1:15-22)

3. Why Paul changed his travel plans, part 1: Confrontation would have been painful for the Corinthians (1:23-2:11)

a. A painful visit and a painful letter (1:23-2:4)

b. Forgive the one who caused the pain (2:5-11)

4. Why Paul changed his travel plans, part 2: An open door and an absent coworker (2:12-13)

**Outline:** 1 Corinthians 2:14-4:6

B. Paul's reflections on authentic ministry (2:14-7:4)

1. Paul commends his authentic ministry (2:14-4:6)

a. Led in Christ's triumph (2:14-16a)

b. Qualified for ministry (2:16b-3:6)

c. The better ministry of the Spirit (3:7-18)

d. A ministry of integrity (4:1-6)

***Paul's Reflections on Authentic Ministry (2:14-7:4)*:**

* As virtually all commentators mention, 2 Corinthians 2:14-7:4 seems to be an abrupt change of direction in the thought of the letter. If we look ahead of this section to 2 Corinthians 7:5, we find a passage that seems to naturally follow from what Paul said in 2:13. Paul has been talking about why he had to change his plans to visit the Corinthians and how such changes were unavoidable. As he is explaining those changes, he mentions that when he came to Troas to preach the gospel to them, he didn't find Titus as he had expected. Paul had been anxiously awaiting news from Titus on his visit to Corinth and their reaction to his "sorrowful" or "painful" letter (which Titus had delivered). Paul's concern for the Corinthians (and Titus) was so deep that we are told that his "spirit was not at rest" when he didn't find Titus. So he traveled on to Macedonia. If we go directly to 2 Corinthians 7:5 from here we find a continuation of this description of Paul's travels and his relief when Titus came with good news from Corinth.
* Perhaps thinking of this reunion with Titus is what leads to the praise of 2:14. Paul thanks God for his grace in giving him and his coworkers the privilege of sharing in this ministry. This leads into this extensive description and defense of the type of ministry that they have had among the Corinthians as true apostles of Jesus Christ before continuing with the description of his travels.

***Led in Christ's Triumph (2:14-16a)*:**

* A consistent emphasis in Paul's letters is the fact that God called him to his ministry. It is not his own idea or his own abilities that produced his ministry. It is wholly from God. 2 Corinthians 2:14-16 emphasizes this in a very powerful way. In fact, virtually all of 2 Corinthians emphasizes this point. As Christians who are called to take this gospel message to all nations (Matthew 28:16-20) and who are indwelt and empowered by the very same Holy Spirit for ministry, we need to listen carefully for what God has to teach us here about ministry. "Authenticity" is a cry of our times. People talk about being authentic in their lives which usually means "leave me alone and let me be whatever I want to be." It is a word that is used selfishly so that others will not try to change us and make us into something we are not. However the gospel is all about changing us into something we are not. It is a complete transformation of who we are and how we need to live. "Authenticity" in the Christian life is about being authentically like Jesus Christ from the inside out. This is to be at the heart of our lives and ministry.
* *"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession..." (2:14)* -- When we look carefully at what Paul says here we are given a glimpse into his heart for God and the ministry he has been given. He jumps into thanksgiving to God when he thinks about the privilege of this ministry. As we have already seen in 1:3-11 and will continue to see throughout 2 Corinthians, this ministry has been filled with trials, persecutions, and suffering. However, the nature of the life and ministry to which he has been called is more than worth the pain. So God deserves constant praise for what he has done and is doing.
* When Paul says that God "in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession" he is alluding to a practice that would be well known among the people at Corinth. It speaks of an elaborate and festive occasion that celebrated the victory of a conquering Roman general. Sometimes when the verb we find here (thriambeuomai) is used, it simply speaks of celebrating a triumph. However, the manner in which it is used in this passage, it speaks of leading captives in a triumphal procession. What this means for our passage is that Paul is not saying that he is a part of the conquering party in this parade, but he is the one who has been conquered and is being led along by his conqueror.

So the question is why Paul would thank God for such a humiliating and disgraceful thing? While many have tried to hang on to what they would consider a more positive idea that Paul is one of the conquerors here, that is not the normal way of taking this use of the term. When we stop and think about what Paul could mean by including himself with those who have been conquered, it begins to fit with his normal way of speaking of himself and his ministry. He is not saying that he is not a part of the victorious life and ministry that God provides for his children. He is just emphasizing that his victory comes initially through his defeat. He is the enemy of God (Romans 5:6-11) who has been conquered by God's amazing love in Jesus Christ. Paul never minimizes the nature of his own sinfulness that God saved him from. And now, as an apostle of Jesus Christ who is called to live and proclaim the gospel, he chooses to emphasize how this new life and ministry came about. **(See also 1 Corinthians 4:9-13)**

This is a fitting launching pad (along with 1:3-11) for Paul's defense of his apostolic ministry. He defends his ministry in a number of ways in this letter as we will see, but the constant drumbeat throughout is that it is his weakness that highlights God's power and strength. While his opponents are quick to pull out their resumes and "letters of recommendation," Paul pulls out his weakness and suffering as a defense of his ministry. (See also 4:7-5:10; 6:3-10; Philippians 3:1-11).

* "*... and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life." (2:14-16a)* -- Paul goes on to use another powerful metaphor that adds another dimension to the way we are to view ministry. It speaks of gospel ministry as God working through us to spread a fragrance or aroma as we live and proclaim the gospel. This fragrance is said to be the knowledge of God, the aroma of Christ, which is the smell of life to believers, but the smell of death to those who reject Christ. It is another way of emphasizing how much our lives and words are meant to proclaim the excellencies of the one who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9-12). When we live and proclaim Jesus we will also be treated like Jesus was. Some will embrace this message as a pleasing and irresistible aroma. Others will treat it as if it smelled like raw sewage. (See also 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16).

***Qualified for Ministry (2:16b-3:6):***

* *"...Who is sufficient for these things?..." (2:16)* -- The answer to this question is, in one sense, "No one!" We are all insufficient to carry out such an amazing and life-transforming ministry. We have no sufficiency in ourselves. However, God works through us and makes us effective. Our sufficiency comes completely from him. Through our new life in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, God actually does make our ministry effective. He really does spread the fragrance of the knowledge of God in Christ through us!
* *"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. (2:17)* -- Paul here begins to distinguish his ministry from that of his opponents. They are not like effective salesmen. They are not selling the word of God to others. They do not use underhanded methods or tricky sales techniques to get the desired result (4:2). They are authentic in their ministry. They have sincere hearts that love God and others and they operate as those who have been commissioned by God and are ultimately accountable to God. One of the most important things we can remember about ministry is to carry it out as those who sincerely love God and others and see ourselves as completely accountable to God for our lives and ministries. This is the most powerful safeguard against trusting out own abilities and methods.
* *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letter so recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." (3:1-3)* -- These opening words of chapter 3 seem to reflect both a charge that may have been leveled against Paul and his coworkers as well as a challenge to produce some official letters of recommendation to validate his ministry. His response is to emphasize that personal boasting and letters of recommendation are not necessary. Why? Because they already have the most powerful letters of recommendation in the Corinthians themselves. Anyone could write a letter that proclaimed how wonderful and qualified they were, but the Corinthians are a letter that is open for all to read. Again we see Paul's heart in these words. This letter is written on their hearts. He deeply loves the Corinthians and needs no other letter of recommendation to prove the validity of their ministry except for the transformed lives of the Corinthians themselves. These are not humanly created letters penned in ink on paper, but letters created by the Holy Spirit--new creations in Christ that are obvious for all to see (5:16-17).
* *"Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (3:4-6)* -- Their sufficiency is from God and not themselves. It is God who makes them competent for this task. And what a task it is! They are carrying the message of the new covenant. This is the message of new life in the Messiah that was promised throughout the Old Testament, most clearly through the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Ezekiel 36; Jeremiah 31). These prophecies of a new covenant point to a time when God would work in his people's lives through the Holy Spirit to bring about an internal transformation. It is this message that Paul and his coworkers were called to live and proclaim.
* The statement that the "letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" is focused on the same truths that Paul unfolds in Romans concerning the Law and its inability to make people right with God. The Law accurately reflects God's character and his requirements, but that only leads to condemnation and death. We are sinners who need an inner transformation by the Holy Spirit. We need to be forgiven and cleansed from our sin through faith in Christ. Only when we are made right with God through Christ and transformed by the Spirit are we enabled to truly obey God from the heart (Romans 5-8).

***The Better Ministry of the Spirit (3:7-18):***

* This section is essentially a commentary and further revelation of what God was pointing to in Exodus 34:29-35 (reading all of Exodus 32-34 will give you the context of those verses). This is the account where Moses returns from the mountain after having received the second copy of the Law from God (the "tablets"). If we are to break up the commentary of these verses, vv.7-11 comment on Exodus 34:29-30 and vv. 12-18 comment on Exodus 34:33-35. The connection between these two section is very clear and this is highlighted in the Greek version of the Old Testament text (the LXX, Septuagint) and its correlation to the wording of 2 Corinthians 3:7-18).
* *"Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit, have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory." (3:7-11)* --
* *"Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome f what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." (3:12-16)* --
* *"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (3:17-18)* --