

Triumphing over Discouragement in the Ministry

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Code: 80-138

As some of you know, I have been teaching through II Corinthians, and the Lord has been using so much of what the Apostle Paul says in this letter to encourage my own heart, that I want to draw your attention tonight to a very important portion of this letter, and that's back in II Corinthians chapter 2. II Corinthians chapter 2. We're gonna be looking at verses 12-17, and I think you're going to find this a wonderfully helpful and encouraging portion of Scripture.

The call to the ministry is an invitation to unequalled privilege - none of us would argue that. It is an invitation to unsurpassed blessing, but that is not all. The call to the ministry is also an invitation to discouragement. What pastor, while understanding the privilege and the blessing of his calling, has not also has his heart broken? We all have. And there are those times when we are disheartened and downcast -- maybe when we feel like giving up. Let me read a letter from a young pastor to his mentor. This is a true letter.

My dear Jim,

I'm through. Yesterday, I handed in my resignation, to take effect at once. This morning I began work for The Land Company. I'll not return to the pastorate.

I think I can see into your heart as you read these words and behold not a little disappointment, if not disgust. I don't blame you at all, for I'm somewhat disgusted with myself.

Do you recall the days in seminary when we talked of the future and painted pictures of what we were to do for the Kingdom of God? We saw the boundless need for unselfish Christian service, and longed to be out among men doing our part toward the world's redemption. I'll never forget that last talk on the night before graduation. You were off to the foreign field, and I was off to pastor my church. We had brave dreams of usefulness, and you have realized yours. As I look back across 25 years, I can see some lives that I have helped, and some things which I have been permitted to do that are worthwhile. But sitting here tonight, I am more than half convinced that God never intended me to be a minister. If He did, I'm not big enough and brave enough to pay the price. And even if it leads you to write me down a coward, I'm gonna tell you why I've quit.

In these years, I have found not a few earnest, unselfish, consecrated Christians. I do not believe that I am especially morbid or unfair in my estimate. So, as far as I know my own heart, I'm not bitter. But

through all these years, a conviction has been growing within me, that the average church member cares precious little about the Kingdom of God and its advancement, or the welfare of his fellow man. He is a Christian in order that he may save his soul from hell, and for no other reason. He does as little as he can, lives as indifferently as he dares. If he thought he could gain Heaven without even lifting his finger for others, he would jump at the chance. Never have I known more than a small minority of any church which I have served to be really interested and unselfishly devoted to God's work. It took my whole time to pull and push and urge and persuade the reluctant members of my church to undertake a little something for the Kingdom. They took a covenant to be faithful in attendance on the services of the church, and not one out of ten ever thought of attending prayer meeting. A large percentage seldom attend church in the morning, and a pitifully small number in the evening. It didn't seem to mean anything to them that they had dedicated themselves to the service of Christ.

I'm tired - tired of being the only one in the church from whom real sacrifice is expected; tired of straining and tugging to get Christian people to live like Christians; tired of planning work for my people and then being compelled to do it myself, or see it left undone; tired of dodging my creditors, when I would not need to if I had been paid what is due me; tired of the affrighting vision of a penniless old age. I'm not leaving Christ -- I love Him. I'll still try to serve Him. Judge me leniently, old friend -- I can't bear to lose your friendship.

Yours as of old,

William

Sad, isn't it? When a man called and a man gifted leaves the ministry -- not because of sin, not because of indifference - but because of discouragement. And at intervals in our lives, we all face that kind of temptation -- even the most gifted and the most fruitful of us. Even the Apostle Paul faced it. That's right. Paul knew deep, penetrating, disheartening disappointment over the Corinthian church. Their shallowness, their sin, their rebellion was a sad return for the great love he had felt for them, and the great sacrifice he had made in their behalf. And this Corinthian church had potential over any other European church. The city had been restored by Julius Caesar after being in ruins for 100 years. It was a magnificent place. It was more open to the gospel than other cities, and the Apostle had great success in founding the church there, making the resident Jews extremely jealous.

In the nearly 20 months or so that he labored in that evil city, he built deep affection for the believers there. The church was flourishing, and apparently strong. But because he loved them so deeply, they had the capability to hurt him, and they did. Upon his leaving one sin after another, he took up residence in that communion of believers. The pressure of caring for that church was more difficult than all the other physical pain he had suffered through his multiple persecutions. The concern for the church hurt him more than anything that was done to him physically. Anxiety over the Corinthians ate

at his noble soul.

They possessed all the gifts. They came behind in no gift, but they were divided, disorderly, worldly -- and chaos reigned in their worship. Sin stained the Lord's table. They fought each other, sued each other, sexually sinned with each other, and were proud all the while.

Conditions in the Corinthian church had become so bad that Apollos would not stay or return to Corinth, though Paul urged him to do that. Additionally, false teachers had come into the Corinthian church and managed to deceive members of the church to join an open mutiny against Paul. Paul's character was being blasted, his controversy with Peter (indicated in Galatians 2) was being exploited, his name was being slandered. Doctrinal issues, the use of spiritual gifts were all mixed up with personality jealousies. They winked at incest, they abused their marriages, they ate at demon feasts, they failed to give as they should, they questioned the resurrection...what a church. A congregation to bring grief to a pastor's heart. And so much so that Paul was not sure he could even go back there -- for two reasons. One, he was afraid he wouldn't be welcome; and secondly, if he wasn't welcome, he was afraid he would say more that would exacerbate their animosity toward him.

On top of that, in Ephesus, where he was, a riot had started that could have taken his life. And some also tell us that he may well have picked up a serious, even potentially fatal illness, to which he refers in chapter 1 and chapter 6. He's really at the lowest point of his ministry when he writes this letter. And it's not hard to understand. He's on the brink of death every day, he says. Every day he knows could be his last. A riot starts all around him, and the church which he loves is in utter chaos. And the main issue there is whether Paul is true or false. His own integrity is being questioned. And of course what compounded the anxiety that this produced was the deep, deep love that he had for that church. He had already written them a letter out of much anguish of heart, much affliction with tears. He refers to it in chapter 2 verse 4. He then sent Titus, you remember, to Corinth. He sent him with that severe letter -- that second letter that's not included in the New Testament -- and he was now waiting for Titus to come back, and he wanted to hear how they responded to the letter. Such is the scene before us. He can't stay where he is, he can't go where he wants to go. The people he loves so deeply have turned on him. Titus hasn't come back with a report. He doesn't know what the situation is. It's in that scenario that we find him penning these words.

Look with me at verse 12. "Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God."

The first two verses establish for us the trouble in Paul's soul. Look back at verse 12. Troas - "When I came to Troas," he says. He has by now left where he was, he has come to Troas -- a seaport city on the Aegean Sea in Western Asia Minor at the mouth of the Dardanelles, founded in about 300 B.C., ten miles from ancient Troy in Mysia. And Augustus had made it a Roman colony. His departure had been caused by the life-threatening riot in Ephesus. But he had already planned to go to Macedonia, and Troas was on the way, whether he went by land or by sea. Paul, by the way, had been to Troas before, according to Acts chapter 16. But apparently on his first visit, he did not found a church. A church is mentioned at Troas in Acts 20, so it is most likely that he founded a church on this brief visit.

And he says in verse 12, "When I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ." He came to evangelize the city. He left Ephesus, moved to Troas for the purpose of evangelism. We don't know how long he stayed, but it was a very brief visit. He had a tremendous spiritual opportunity there, as verse 12 indicates. "A door was opened for me in the Lord." Not just favorable from a human standpoint, but God had opened this door. Now, he must have preached to know that. You can't tell if the door is open until you knock. He must have begun preaching, and he preached with success and blessing. And that is why a church was born, even in this very brief and trying visit.

It was the kind of situation that the servant of God longs for. It was the kind of marvelous situation that every preacher would love to step into. He came to preach Christ, and the door was wide open, and had been opened by the Lord. And in a very brief time, a church was born. Some men labor and labor and labor to plant a church -- and it happened almost spontaneously. Apparently, he had complete freedom to preach the Word, and people responded with open hearts and eagerness. But in spite of that, verse 13 says, "I had no rest for my spirit." No rest. He was a troubled man. No rest, literally, in the inner man. Over in chapter 7 verse 5, he says, "When we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, and fears within."

And why was he so restless? Why was he so burdened, so upset, so tormented? Simply, his concern for the Corinthian church. It literally paralyzed him. It debilitated him. Would they love him? Would they respond to the letter he sent with Titus? Would they listen to him? Would they repent? Would they turn away from the mutiny organized by the false teachers? Would they abandon the divisions? Would they turn away from the incest, the quarrels, the confusion regarding marriage and divorce, the issues of idols, the Lord's Supper, sexual sin? Would they discipline the man who shamefully accused Paul and created such a tremendous rebellion? Would they confront the false apostles? Would they acknowledge the integrity of the beloved Apostle? He didn't know the answer to those aching questions. And he loved the church enough to ache over those issues.

And so, he says in verse 13, "I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother." Titus didn't come back. Apparently, they were to rendezvous in Troas. And Paul went there to preach the gospel and prearranged a plan for him to do that and for Titus to come; but Titus didn't come. And until Titus

came, Paul was imagining the worst.

This is a dangerous hour for the preacher. His heart, at this point, is in danger of severe discouragement -- danger of rebellion. And then when the door is closed, the door that once was opened, resentment may set in. There was no happiness for Paul at Troas. He had lost his zeal for the work. He had lost heart. Everything seemed to be going wrong. There was no joy anymore in his restless spirit. And there can come a real drudgery when the heart is not in it. The gold at the end of the rainbow seems a very far distance. And the temptation may come to just quit; to just say, "That's enough -- I can't do it." That's where Paul was. A wide-open door, and he had no heart to preach.

He was oversensitive. He imagined all kinds of accusations against himself -- all kinds of slights and insults. And all of a sudden, the simple, normal, day-to-day, routine difficulties and problems of the ministry got magnified out of all proportion. And he was in jeopardy; in danger of becoming bitter, discontent, beginning to drift. He just had no heart for ministry.

As one writer said years ago, "Time spent in nourishing the feelings of a broken heart is time lost for eternity." There's really no room for that, especially where you have an open door. But how many unfaithful congregations have so debilitated their pastor? He was actually -- and I'm using his word -- depressed (chapter 7 verse 6). And he needed help. So he turned away from an open door. He had no zeal for the opportunity, however promising. And he couldn't think of anything but the hassles that everybody was giving him. Sound familiar?

So he says in verse 13, "Taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia." He couldn't stay. And, no doubt, the people in Troas couldn't make any sense out of this. Because they must have been in some kind of a euphoria. Right? I mean, the church was exploding in that place -- born in just a very brief amount of time. New Christians on hand wanting desperately to be fed the Word of God, excited about reaching their city as new Christians are; and Paul is depressed. And he leaves them, and he went to Macedonia. I'm sure that he went on a route that he assumed Titus would be taking to come to Troas, in hopes that they would meet. Perhaps, if he took a boat, it would be about a five-day boat ride, across the northeast corner of the Aegean sea, then on foot. And maybe, somehow he got word to Titus about the path he was taking; we don't know.

By the way, the Corinthians did respond positively to the the Apostle. He was encouraged when he finally met Titus. The response was good, and he became encouraged and comforted by the meeting with Titus, as chapter 7 says. But it wasn't enough to totally end his discouragement. Though it was generally a good response, he knew that the false teachers were still there. Some of the rebellion was still there. It wouldn't die easily. And if he really thought it was completely over, why would he write 13 chapters in this epistle to them, after Titus had come to him? No, he knew there were still deep problems.

The question is, how is he gonna deal with his discouragement? And that's what I want to address tonight. How is he gonna deal with his discouragement? Well, it doesn't take him long, at least with his pen. Look at verse 14; here's how it starts. "But thanks be to God." Now that is a - something happened in the white space between 13 and 14, friends. And he steps out of this despair and depression and says, "But thanks be to God." And that's the way to deal with your anxiety -- to turn to what you can be thankful for. And that is exactly what he does. He turned away from the debilitating, depressing, discouraging, heartbreaking circumstance, that brought him such sorrow and anguish and tears, to what caused him to be thankful. And in so doing, from verse 14 to 17, he gives us an astounding vision of the ministry. And it's all set against a most remarkable background.

That background is triggered by the word in verse 14, "triumph." That word "triumph" is a technical term, and it had some very significant meaning in the Roman world. The Romans had what they called, "a triumph." It was the highest honor that could ever be paid to a victorious Roman general. When the Roman government gave a general a triumph, that was the ultimate. Before any Roman general could be granted a triumph, he must have achieved certain things. He must have been the actual commander-in-chief in the field, and not a secondary leader; the campaign that he engaged in must have been completely finished; the region which was conquered completely pacified, and the victorious troops brought home. Furthermore, according to Roman history, 5,000 of the enemy, at least, must have fallen in one engagement so that it fell into the category of a slaughter. Furthermore, as a result of this campaign, a positive extension of Roman territory must have been gained, and not merely a disaster retrieved or an attack repelled. And the victory must have been won over a foreign foe, and not in a civil war. Triumphs didn't happen very often.

But in an actual triumph, the procession of the victorious general marched through the streets of Rome all the way to the capitol. And you can even read about the sequence of that march and the order of the people in the parade itself. First, there came the state officials and the Senate-- always the politicians. Then there came the trumpeters, who were heralding what was coming. Then came the spoils taken from the conquered land, carted along. For example, when Titus conquered Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the seven-branched candlesticks, the golden table of shewbread, the golden trumpets were carried through the streets of Rome in his triumph. Then there came some painted pictures of the conquered land and some models (can you believe it?) of conquered citadels and conquered ships. Then there followed the white bull, which was gonna be offered as a sacrifice to the gods. Then there came the wretched captives, the enemy princes, leaders, and generals in chains, shortly to be flung into prison and, in all probability, to be executed. Then there came the, what were called lictors, or punishers, who were beating these people with rods. And then there came the musicians. And then there came the priests swinging their censers with the sweet-smelling incense burning.

And then came the general himself after all of this huge entourage. He was in a chariot drawn by four horses, he was clad in a purple tunic embroidered with gold and palm leaves, and over it a purple toga marked out with golden stars. In his hand he had an ivory scepter with a Roman eagle on the top of it, and over his head a slave held the crown of Jupiter. And after him rode his family. And finally, at the very end, came the army wearing all their decorations and shouting, "Triumph! Triumph! Triumph!" I mean, it's a pretty impressive scene.

And all this massive procession moves through the streets of the city, all decorated and garlanded with flowers all shouting and, along the edge of the road of course are these mobs of people cheering. It was a tremendous day -- a day which probably happened once in a lifetime.

That is the picture in Paul's mind. He sees the conquering Christ, who has triumphed throughout the world, and Paul is in the triumphal parade. That's what he means in verse 14, when he says, "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ." Do you understand that? In the midst of despair, discouragement, depression, he is catapulted to a completely different level. And he begins to realize the privilege of being a part of the conquering army of the triumphant Christ. And it changes everything in his perspective.

That's what makes him say, "Thanks be to God. Whatever may be going wrong in my ministry-- whatever may be disappointing me and depressing me and discouraging me, I am in the triumphal parade." That's the issue. He gives thanks for the privilege of triumph. For the privilege of triumph. He's just really overwhelmed by that. The privilege of being led to triumph by God-- of, as verse 14 says, "being led in his triumph in Christ." That's really the first thing that grips his heart. And notice the way he says it. "God, thank You, because You always lead us in His triumph." Here is the sense of confidence in the Lord's sovereign leading. This is really the foundation of joy in ministry, folks. He uses *pantote* -- always, always, always.

No matter what may be going wrong in your ministry, no matter how small it may be, how disappointing, discouraging, depressing, how difficult it might be, how your heart breaks and grieves-- you are privileged to be marching among the ranks of those who serve the sovereign Lord. And, believe me, He is in control of every single detail, and He will triumph. Jesus said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." It should be enough for us to belong to the troops of the commander of all commanders-- to have been chosen by God to be a soldier of Jesus Christ, to wear His uniform, to carry His weapon, the Word, to bear His name, to serve His cause-- that should be enough. Just the contemplation of the privilege of being associated with Jesus Christ should bring back the joy. "Thanks, God, that I will triumph because Christ always triumphs."

No matter how disappointing your ministry may be, how discouraging, how difficult it might be, you are following the conquering hero in the victory parade-- not as a captive, not as a prisoner headed to judgment, but as co-conquerors. Isn't that amazing? In fact, Paul says, "We are *morethan*

conquerors." We are hyper-conquerors, super conquerors. And when we get to the end of this parade, the Book of Revelation says, "We will sit with Him on His throne." And here we come, the triumphant soldiers, bringing with us the spoils of war. What are they? The souls of men and women led out of Satan's kingdom into the kingdom of God's dear Son. Jesus wins, folks, and we win with Him.

Isn't it wonderful that Jesus said, "All that the Father gives to me shall come to me"? Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that wonderful that before the world ever began -- before time began, according to Titus 1:2, the Father made a promise to the Son, that He would give Him a redeemed humanity who forever and ever and ever would praise and glorify His name? That is the eternal covenant. Before the world began, God purposed in Jesus Christ to redeem humanity, to give that humanity to His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for the purpose of praising Him forever and ever and ever and ever. And all of those people whom the Father determined before the world began who would be a part of that redeemed humanity will, by the Father's drawing and the grace of salvation, come to know the Lord Jesus Christ and fulfill the Father's plan. And Jesus will lose none of them.

You see, we don't have to win all the little fights. You and I don't have to win all the little struggles along the way. It's just enough to know that we will be in the triumphant procession in the end. And everybody ordained unto eternal life from before time began will be in the parade. "All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me. I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." It is enough to know we will be triumphant in the end. It is enough to know Christ will win.

As I mentioned earlier, in such a victory parade, some would carry burning censers with a strong fragrant incense. And other women lining this parade would be throwing flowers. And the combination of the incense and the flowers and the garlands would create a rising fragrance, a sweet aroma that became known as "the smell of victory." Look at verse 14 again. "Thanks be to God who always leads us in His triumph in Christ." He's thankful, first of all, for the privilege of being led by God to triumph in Christ. And then he says, secondly, "Who also manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place." That's the second thing he's thankful for. You know what it is? "Thanks, God, for the privilege of influence for Christ." That's what he's saying. The thought here is that God in wonderful, remarkable, condescending grace and kindness has chosen to manifest the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Jesus Christ in every place through us. Through us! It says right in the middle of the verse-- through us. The sweet aroma is the gospel, the saving message of salvation. And it rises, as it were, to the spiritual nostrils of the world through the preachers-- through those who proclaim the truth.

"How shall they hear," Paul said, "without a preacher?" And the Lord in His wonderful mercy has chosen us. What exalted privilege! What incredible privilege! Do we deserve that calling? No. Do we deserve that honor? No. Have we done anything to earn it? No. On the other hand, will we belittle it if we don't experience the kind of success we think we deserve? I hope not. After all, "Neither is he who

plants anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase." It should be enough for you to say, "Hey, God chose me and put me in the triumphal parade!" It should be enough to say, "God chose me, and through me He has allowed the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him to go to every place that my life has touched."

You say, "Well yeah, but I'm not too sure. I'm not too sure I'm having much effect." Well, let me take you to the third thing he's thankful for-- that'll help you. Verse 15, "For we are a fragrance of Christ." To whom? To whom? "God." What a statement! Whoa! Listen, wherever you preach the truth, you please God. "Thanks, God, for putting me in the triumphal procession, for letting me be one of your soldiers, and wear your uniform, and bear your name. Thanks, God, for letting the aroma of the gospel come through me, and thank You for the privilege of pleasing You." We are a fragrance of Christ unto *God*.

As the great general offered the sacrifice to Jupiter, wherever the preacher's mission advances, the sweet smell of victory ascends to the throne of God and pleases Him. You don't need to walk away from your pulpit. When you've poured out your heart and preached the truth and feel discouraged, the fragrance went right to the throne. Our ministry not only reaches men, it reaches God-- and it brings Him pleasure. As we preach the knowledge of Christ to spread like sweet fragrance along the path, it touches men; and it goes beyond that and touches God. That's an incredible, incredible thing.

That's why Paul in chapter 5 verse 9 said, "We have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him." The issue is not numbers, it's not the size of your church, your popularity, your fame, your results; God is pleased with faithful preachers whose preaching rises like fragrance to His throne. That is a marvelous concept.

I learned long ago that people are not really good judges of what I say. I learned that a long time ago. That's why Paul said, "It's a small thing what men think of me," I Corinthians 4. "It's a small thing," he said. "What I think of myself, I really don't put stock in that. I don't put much stock in what people say because they don't know my heart. They don't know my motives and they can't always discern the realities of what I do and say. I don't put much stock in what I think, 'cause even I am biased in my own favor." He said, "I'll wait till the day that the Lord reveals the secret things of the heart, and then we'll have our praise." But it's a tremendous thing. It's a tremendous privilege; it's a tremendous honor to be able to please God.

So in verse 15 he says, "We are a fragrance of Christ to God," now listen to this, "among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." That's one of the most shocking statements in the New Testament. The first part of it isn't so hard to understand. Well, what is it saying? Well, it is saying when we preach, the fragrance rises to God among those who are being saved. We understand that. The God who is pleased when people are saved. The God who is honored and exalted when people are saved. We understand that He would be pleased with that. But what about

that second part? "And among those who are perishing." Certainly, certainly that doesn't please God. Yes it does. Say, wait a minute-- what are you saying? I'm gonna say something that may shock you. God gets as much glory out of His wrath as He does out of His grace.

When the fragrance came up to the general and to the victors, the perfume from the censers was like a perfume of joy and triumph and life. But to the wretched captives who were walking so closely, it was a perfume of death. And God receives it as both. In Romans chapter 9, the Apostle Paul said that God Himself acknowledges, "What if God willing to display His wrath endures vessels fitted unto destruction?" John Calvin said, "The force of the gospel is such that it is never preached in vain, but is effectual, leading either to life or death."

Look at verse 16. "To the one it is an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life." Probably borrowing an expression of Hebrew superlatives, he emphasizes the effect of the preacher's preaching. "Your preaching has an effect on those who are being saved -- those who believe. Your preaching has an effect on those who are perishing. In either case, it rises fragrantly to God." Where it is an aroma of life to life -- life out of life, God is pleased because of His grace. And where it is an aroma of death to death, He is pleased because of His holy wrath.

It's a frightening thing to think about in one sense. But in the end, God will be glorified. We think of heaven as the place where God is glorified; I want you to know hell is a place where God is glorified. He's not glorified by the people there; but the fact that they're there evidences His absolute holiness-- and that is to His praise.

The same message is an aroma of death to some and an aroma of life to others. The Jews in the ancient times wrote about the Law, or the Torah. They said, "As the bee reserves her honey for her owner and her sting for others, so the words of the Torah are an elixir of life for Israel, and a deadly poison to the nations of the earth." The sun shining on a tree brings life to some branches and death to others. The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.

Every time we preach, gentlemen, two things take place. It is an aroma of life to life to those who believe; it is an aroma of death to death to those who do not. In either case, the aroma rises to the nostrils of God, who is glorified in His grace and glorified in His judgment. What a privilege. Don't you ever underestimate your life. Every time you preach, that arises to God as an aroma- a sweet-smelling fragrance. Whether it is to be His glory in His grace, or His glory in His judgment. Whether everybody responds, or nobody responds. What a privilege to live a life in which your service renders every time it is properly exercised to God a sweet-smelling fragrance. Don't measure your ministry by how many people believe. It all rises when the truth is preached fragrantly before God.

One last point. And more could be said about that, but time is gone. One last point. At the end of verse 16 he asks a question. "Who is adequate for these things?" And there, he is giving thanks to

God for the privilege of divine power, divine enablement. He is thankful to God to be a soldier in the triumphal parade. He is thankful to God to have any influence for Christ. He is thankful to God that he can please God. He is thankful to God for the privilege of enablement, or power. And he asks the question at the end of verse 16, "Who is hikanos - who is competent? Who has sufficient ability? Who has what it takes in himself to generate a sweet-smelling fragrance to God? Who has in himself what it takes to give forth truth, which is a savor of life to life or death to death? Who has what it takes to render service to Almighty, Holy God? Who has what it takes to serve His Son and King Jesus Christ? Who has what it takes to influence the world for eternity? Who has what it takes to win the ultimate triumph? The answer? Not me. Nobody. No one. That's why down in chapter 3 verse 5 he says, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves," and in the first letter, chapter 15 verse 10, he said, "But by the grace of God I am what I am." Certainly he's not adequate. He doesn't claim to be - like the foolish, false teachers who were parading their self-appointed adequacy.

Wanting to show that his only adequacy was divine, he makes a telling contrast in verse 17. "We're not like many." That gives you a little idea about how many false teachers there were - there were many. "We're not like many, peddling the Word of God." Wow. "We're not like the ubiquitous false teachers, of whom there are many." Peddling is the word kaplos from kapleu; it means, "to corrupt." The noun came to be a term describing street hawkers who hawked their wares - con men, pitch men, hucksters - selling by ingenuity and cleverness with trickery and deceit. Even the verb came to mean, I quote a lexicon, "to sell at an illegitimate profit; to misrepresent." A kaplos was a huckster. He was a man concerned with cheating - making profit at the buyer's expense for personal gain. He was a marketer.

In Isaiah 1:22, they are those who sell watered-down wine, and they get people to buy by the sheer power of their cleverness. And Paul has the false teachers in mind here, who are the many - the oi polloi in Greek. They were cheapening and degrading the truth, adulterating the Word of God. They were mixing it with Judaism and paganism to get people to buy. They were trying to make it saleable and, at the same time, gain personal profit. Fraudulent adulterators of God's Word, in it for money, perverting and twisting divine things to make them marketable and palatable. They were selling a watered-down gospel by their cleverness - adulteration, excessive profit are the marks of those. They're still around. Liberals, cheap gospeleers, prosperity, health, wealth preachers; sacramentalists, legalists, pragmatists, manipulators of people. Paul is saying, "That's what your flesh does. If you operate in your own power, that's all you've got."

And he says, "We're not like them. We operate," he says in verse 17, "from sincerity. Not from human cleverness, not from oratory, not from brilliance, not from marketing strategy and savvy; but with a pure heart, devoted to the pure truth, and, dependent on God alone, we operate out of sincerity as from God. The single source of our message, unmixed and unaltered, the source of our power, we speak in Christ - in His person, in His power - knowing we do it in the sight of God." Anyone can preach a whittled-down gospel in which human truth is mingled with divine truth- contaminated truth.

Anybody can preach human cleverness. Any man is adequate for that. But the man who preaches unmixed, divine truth - pure and clean - can't do it apart from divine power.

What a privilege. Whatever may go wrong in your ministry, you have a privilege- a tremendous privilege. You have the privilege of being associated with the King of Kings, you have the privilege of promised triumph, you have the privilege of influencing men for eternity - whether life unto life or death unto death. You have the tremendous privilege of pleasing God and the great privilege of power in proclaiming the truth. And that ought to be enough to end any discouragement.

So Paul found his way out of the gloom of a broken heart by finding his way back to thanksgiving, and focused on his privileges. And we need to do the same. Nothing and no one should steal our joy except sin in our own lives. Apart from that, whatever success we may measure by our human measure, is not representative of how our ministry pleases God. And it should be enough for us to consider just the privilege that has been granted to us. And in that we find strength.

Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "Serving the Lord with all humility of mind in many tears and trials." But if you never lose your focus, you can stay faithful as he did to the end.

Let's bow in prayer. Father, thank You for this tremendous insight into the heart of this beloved Apostle. We feel his heart beating in this passage 'cause we can identify with it. And Lord, for all those hours and days and weeks and months that we labor in the ministry with discouragement, when we feel brokenhearted and we feel the ministry isn't accomplishing what we think it should, may we know that wherever we preach the truth with Your power, it rises to You as a sweet-smelling fragrance. That's enough - that wicked, useless sinners like us could ever be ever put into a position where we could bring to You a sweet-smelling sacrifice. What a privilege to influence people for You and Your Son, to wear the army uniform, and march in the triumph. And someday, throughout all eternity, praise and glorify You. We thank You for that. And like the Apostle Paul, we live in constant amazement that You have chosen to do this with us, who are so unworthy. Give us hearts filled with thanksgiving, and keep us, Lord, with an attitude of praise, knowing we deserve nothing, but You've given us everything. We commit ourselves to You again and ask Your blessing on the things which we've learned today. Seal those things which are true to our hearts and make us the men and women You want us to be in Christ's name. And everyone said, "Amen."

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