

The Power of God in the Gospel

2Corinthians 2:12-17

Many years ago, over twenty years ago in fact I took on a job of repairing an old building.

The walls were rotten, but the roof was still good and so I carefully removed all the bad sections of wall and replaced them with new ones.

In an effort to prevent the walls from rotting again I braced the building, jacked it up, and put it on a raised foundation with a pressure treated piece of wood between the new wall and the concrete.

After that it was all cosmetic work on the outside.

It took a fair bit of work and because it was on a street with a number of houses every now and again I would get visitors from the neighborhood.

One guy came by many times.

He didn't say anything he just stood there staring at me which I have to say was a bit weird.

Besides the guy that stared all the time there was one other visitor that stands out in my mind.

I never saw him, I just heard his voice.

I was working away just inside the door of the building and a friend of mine was standing just outside the door chatting with me.

I heard a passerby get the attention of my friend and he said, "You've done a really nice job on that building."

My friend said, "Thank you!"

Now that might have made sense if he had done some work, but that was his first visit to the sight and he hadn't done a thing.

I didn't run out and say, "Hey, I did the work not this guy!" but I confess I wanted to.

Why? Because he didn't do the work, I did!

Has that ever happened to you? Where someone takes credit for the work that you did?

We don't like it when that happens do we?

None of us like it, but you know it is easy to be guilty of doing it especially when it comes to the work of God.

It is very easy for us to take credit for things that are only possible because of God.

Do you know why that is? It is because God makes everything possible!

That is true whether we are talking about a problem we solve, something we build, or even the next breath we take.

It all happens according to the power and purposes of God.

[Nowhere is that more evident than in the work of the gospel. That is subject of our text this morning **2Corinthians 2:12-17**. In these verses the apostle Paul gives us some more insight into his ministry and what stands out here is the attention he calls to the power of God in the gospel. He gives us three lessons, number one being that...]

Point #1 – God directs people in the preaching of the gospel. (Verse 12-13)

It is the LORD, by the power of His unseen hand, who directs the course of history so that His servants can proclaim His salvation and so His people can hear it.

These verses serve as somewhat of a transition in the letter of 2 Corinthians.

In the verses leading up to verse 12 the apostle Paul has been explaining the change he had made in his travel plans.

He continues in verse 12 speaking of his travels and reminds his readers about the reason for his journey which was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Look with me at **verses 12-13** and listen carefully to what it tells us here about the ministry of the apostle.

He finds himself in a place called Troas.

He is there to fulfill his call from the LORD Jesus to preach the gospel and without taking away from his responsibility to the task he turns the attention of his readers to the LORD.

He says there in verse twelve that ‘a door was opened’ for him ‘in the LORD’.

He likely means at least two things by that. One - that opportunity was given to him to preach, and two - that people believed his message.

That only happens by the power of God at work in the world.

No human being, not even an apostle, can make a spiritually dead person alive. God does that.

It is the LORD who leads His servants to appointed times and places as He directs the steps of His people each and every moment.

We see that happen again as Paul is ministering in Troas.

It would seem he had an expectation of Titus being there and when he is nowhere to be found, he says, “my spirit was not at rest”, and he leaves behind the work at Troas and sets sail across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia.

That seems like a strange thing to do in the middle of what appears to be good gospel ministry.

How can he leave when everything is going well and new people are believing the gospel?

I believe the answer is that he both knows and trusts that his ministry depends NOT on himself but on the power of God.

He sees the turmoil in his spirit as being from the LORD and so against common sense he travels on from Troas to Macedonia.

He sees his life and ministry as being directed by God.

[When I think back on my own walk with the LORD I can see that. I can see a day of corn de-tasseling cut short by rain leading to my hearing and believing the gospel. I can see an unexpected conversation leading me to Bible College. I can see a passing comment at a family gathering

leading me to become an electrician and the same being used to bring me to this church and on and on it goes.]

If I'm reading my bible correctly, then it is God who directs all the everyday events in our lives.

Of course it is possible to be totally blind to that and give it no regard, or to despise it and reject it, but it is far better to rest in that reality.

Resting and delighting in God's direction can do all sorts of good things for us especially as it relates to sharing the gospel with people.

We can easily miss opportunities because we aren't looking for them.

We can miss opportunities because we make them in to high pressure situations as though it all depends on us.

What if instead we trusted God to direct us? What if instead we rested in the power of God? What if we concerned ourselves more with obedience than results?

How do we do that? How do we apply this to our lives practically?

I would like to suggest three practical ways.

First – Know the message of the gospel. While it contains mysteries the human mind can only marvel at, it is also simple enough for a small child to understand. Every Christian should know the basic gospel:

1 – Human beings are under God's judgement. Everyone has disobeyed God and because He is Holy He must deal with that.

2 - People cannot save themselves. There is nothing we can do to erase the bad things we have done.

3 – Jesus saves people by dying and rising. On the cross Jesus takes our punishment upon Himself. Because Christ is completely perfect and infinitely worthy God is completely satisfied with His sacrifice.

4 – Only faith in Jesus makes us right with God. When we believe, Jesus' sacrifice gets applied to us, our disobedience is removed, and God sees in us the perfection of His Son.

5 – Being in Christ gives us a new life. God changes the hearts of His people giving us a desire to love and serve Him.

Second – Read your bible regularly and pray that God would shape your life for His glory.

Third – Acknowledge that God is in charge of everything and ask Him to direct your day for the sake of His glory.

[How much of our attitude and thinking would change if we could rest in God's direction for our life? Instead of being caught up in ourselves we would be trusting in God. I suspect our eyes would be opened to far more opportunities to talk to people about the LORD. When that happens

God is doing something very important in that moment. Paul tells us about that in verses 14-16 and that is our second lesson from this text, that...]

Point #2 – God is announcing His victory in the preaching of the gospel. (Verse 14-16)

I confess when I think of the work of announcing Jesus' work on the cross and the empty tomb I most often think about it as a part of winning the war against the kingdom of darkness, but the apostle here shows us that it is the declaration that the war has already been won.

If we look at Paul's situation from a worldly perspective we might be inclined to see his departure from Troas as a bit of a defeat.

Things were going along well, but then he has to leave.

Far from being a defeat, Paul describes it like this in **verse 14**.

The understanding of this verse largely hinges on the word that is translated here as 'triumphal procession'.

It is a word that the Corinthians would have recognized as referring to a Roman military victory parade.

The victorious general would travel through the streets of Rome leading prisoners of war behind his chariot as a way of showing all the people who he had defeated and more often than not the parade would lead to the execution of those being lead captive through the city.

Some commentators see this as a general leading a parade of victorious soldiers, but the difficulty, as scholars like Mark Seifrid point out, is that the word is never used like that it is always used to describe the leading of prisoners through the city for their humiliation and finally their execution.

At first that is a bit of a head scratcher because it sounds really bad for Paul and his fellow workers.

That is until we remember that God's ways often turn human wisdom on its head.

We need to remember what the LORD has waged war against.

He has waged war against sin and death and hell.

He won that war for His people through the humiliation of Jesus.

Jesus was mocked, beaten, and paraded through the streets leading to His being nailed to the cross.

And it was his death that overcame the power of sin and death for everyone who believes upon His name.

Through that victory God has taken prisoners captive.

Let's remember that we all start out as God's enemies, people on the side of sin and death and hell, and the picture here is that God has taken us prisoner.

When we are taken prisoner by God in Christ what is happening to us?

Is it not the case that our old way of life is being put to death?

That is exactly the way Jesus describes the Christian life. What does He say? He says, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Unlike a Roman parade of prisoners which simply ends in death, the death of our old self leads to eternal life.

So wherever the gospel is preached by those dying to themselves and living for God, the LORD’s complete and eternal victory over evil is being proclaimed.

It was also common for Roman generals to burn incense during the parade of prisoners and Paul uses that in his illustration as well (Verse 15-16).

Besides the Roman parade Paul may also have in mind the incense offered in the Old Testament as part of sacrifices called ‘burnt offerings’.

As Christians we don’t offer sacrifices of animals to God for the forgiveness of our sins.

We rightly understand that all the offerings prescribed in the Old Testament were all pointing to Jesus and fulfilled in Him.

We are, however, called to offer ourselves as spiritual sacrifices in the service of the gospel (Romans 12:1, 1Peter 2:5).

If you have ever witnessed incense being burned then you know it gives off a very strong scent.

Depending on who you are that aroma can mean different things.

To those ‘being saved’ the ministry of the gospel is the ‘fragrance of life to life’ he says, and to ‘those who are perishing’ it is the fragrance of ‘death to death’.

It has to be this way. That is the nature of God being victorious over everything and everyone that opposes Him.

There is either surrender or destruction. There is either life or death.

That is what the gospel is announcing. It is announcing that God has already won and for His people that means certain life and for His enemies it means certain death.

It is not the quality of the aroma that is at issue here, it is the aroma declaring the victory of God that is the focus.

[Think of it like cologne or perfume. Have you ever known someone who wears a distinctive cologne or perfume? The thing about that is the scent goes everywhere with them. Now if you are happy to see that person then for you the smell is a good one. But if you hate the person then no matter how good the cologne or perfume might smell in and of itself you are probably going to hate the smell. Why? Because with the smell comes the person.]

That is the image this text is trying to bring into our minds.

The gospel and those that give their lives to proclaim it are the ‘aroma of Christ’ in the world.

Everywhere that aroma goes it is announcing that God Almighty reigns victorious over all.

If you love God then that is a delight for you.

If you hate Him then it fills you with disgust.

Paul asks an important question here at the end of verse 16. He asks, “Who is sufficient for these things?”

That is a rhetorical question with the obvious answer being ‘no one’.

To be the ‘aroma of Christ’ in the world is far too great a task for anyone to do on their own.

It is only because we belong to the LORD and are being led by Him that we have any hope whatsoever in this glorious task of announcing God’s victory in the world.

[It is not our task to try and make the gospel smell good to the unbeliever. We are not to change the mixture of incense according to our own wisdom. Our task is simply to carry it with us wherever we go. Why? Because it announces the victory of God and that is life for all who believe. That brings us to one more lesson about the power of God in the gospel. It shows us a tremendous benefit of resting in the LORD as we seek to serve Him. Here is the lesson...]

Point #3 – Trusting God cultivates the right motives for preaching the gospel. (Verse 17)

From the beginning of the church until today there have been people who twist the ministry of God’s word to serve selfish desires. Seeing ourselves as belonging to God by His mercy, according to His will, completely dependent on His power, for the sake of His glory steers our hearts in the right direction.

Verse 17 begins with the word ‘for’ meaning this is a necessary implication of being the ‘aroma of Christ’ in the world. (Verse 17)

I find the beginning of that verse both troubling and heart breaking.

Even in Paul’s day which was in the very early years of the church being established in the world he writes that there are ‘many’ who are ‘peddlers of God’s word’.

That is people who preach the word of God like salesmen seeking to benefit themselves more than their hearers.

These men are not concerned with what God’s word truly says, they are concerned with making people feel good about them so that they can make a living.

More than that it often becomes about living in luxury.

My guess is that if the apostle were alive today he would say that the problem has become much worse.

It is fairly easy to spot with big name celebrity preachers.

I’d be surprised if Joel Osteen has ever said an offensive thing in a sermon, but his net worth is 50 million dollars.

Andy Stanley wants to throw the Old Testament in the garbage and stop talking about God's design for marriage. His net worth is around 45 million and he makes 3 million a year.

Creflo Dollar tried to convince people to buy him a new 60 million dollar private jet a few years ago.

This can happen with regular pastors too.

I saw a sermon about six months ago where a pastor in a small church was rebuking his congregation for their failure to buy him designer apparel.

Then there are the guys who think pastoring is just about a paycheck.

Did you know there is an entire support system for religious professionals who don't believe in God, but are afraid to say it because they will lose their job?

That's nuts and it is horrible for the church.

Paul, no doubt, is taking a shot at some of his opponents in the Corinthian church who were more interested in lining their pockets than building believers up in Christ.

He says, "We are not like that!" Instead he says he and his companions are "men of sincerity."

They do what they do and they say what they say for the sake of the truth regardless of how it works out for them.

What fosters this sincerity? At the end verse 17 he tells us.

It is the fact that they have been "commissioned by God".

That is they rightly see themselves as servants of God, not people.

Do they want what is best for people? Yes for sure!

Are they willing to say whatever people want to hear to be well liked and looked after? Never!

When Paul preaches the gospel it is about more than talking about God to people.

Look at what he writes there at the end of the verse? He says, "...in the sight of God we speak in Christ."

He doesn't see himself as only speaking in front of people, he sees himself as speaking before the LORD.

If we sincerely believe the Bible, then we will understand that this is always true.

Where does the Bible say God is present? Everywhere. If we really believe that in our hearts then it is going to impact what we do and say wherever we are.

If we really believe that then we will be speaking and acting to please Him regardless of any other factor?

That brothers and sisters is 'sincerity' and that is essential to the Christian life.

[One of the things I have resolved to do as a dad is to be truthful with my children. From the outside looking in that may appear mean at times. I'm not a believer that people should get a gold sticker for everything. One of my motivations behind that is I want my children to trust what I say to them. I want them to know that I'm sincere.]

How much more does God want that for His people?

Listen, there is nothing more trustworthy in this world than the written word of God as God intends it.

Because that is true I can think of fewer things worse than twisting it into something untrustworthy for the sake of personal gain.

Listen, there is no shortage of pastors and churches that will tell you what you want to hear.

Ask yourself, how many are there that will tell you what you need to hear?

This applies to more than preachers, it applies to all of us as believers.

We need to hold to the truth of God's word because we honestly believe it and understand that holding to the truth is the only way to truly love people.

We can only do that if we believe that it is God who directs every moment of every day.

We can only do that if we believe that God has already won the victory over sin and death and hell.

We can only do that if we trust Him because the truth is that the power of God in the proclamation of the Gospel is the only hope for the success of the gospel in the world.

That is a glorious truth that we can rest in and enjoy every day of our lives.