

The Book of 2nd Corinthians

Chapter 2:12-3:6

November 29, 1998

- **Outline of 2nd Corinthians:**
 - Chapter 1 God equips His people through trial, comfort and perseverance.
 - Chapter 2 Restore fellowship to the repentant; One aroma, two response.
 - Chapter 3 The glorious covenants
- **Review & Introduction**

In this section, Paul continues to address two accusations against him. The first accusation was that Paul is not reliable since he had promised to visit the church at Corinth twice more but instead only visited once. The second accusation was that since Paul was not reliable in what he said about his visiting the church therefore, the rest of what he taught was unreliable. These accusations were obviously brought about by those attempting to discredit him but it appears that their voices were in the minority.

As is characteristic of Paul, in this section he concludes one line of defense and then begins a tangential discussion that will continue through to chapter 7:5. As Paul labors in this letter, we are greatly blessed by his tangents for in them are much instruction that we might not otherwise have.

- **Exposition of 2nd Corinthians 2:12 - 3:6**

12 Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord,¹³ I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia.

- Here Paul gives more supporting detail as to why he did not return to Corinth as he had previously said that he would. Paul had most likely delivered the "severe letter" (possibly 1 Corinthians) by the hand of Titus and he was later expecting to meet him in Troas to get a report. Despite the fact that the Lord had opened a door of opportunity for ministry in the city, Paul was distressed by the fact that Titus was missing. Any number of possible scenarios were running through Paul's mind with regard to the whereabouts of Titus.
- It is fascinating to see into the mind of Paul. As a man commissioned miraculously by Christ to preach the gospel, an "open door" would have been an unusually good opportunity to evangelize. But Paul was feeling the burden for those to whom he was a spiritual father and allowed the opportunity to wait for another day. Just because we may perceive an opportunity to evangelize, this does not mean that we forsake the other areas that we may be responsible. For example we don't abandon our families so that we can evangelize our co-workers. The wonderful thing about this principle is that because God is sovereign over all things, we can rejoice at setting aside a clear ministry opportunity when our other responsibilities call us away.

14 Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.

- When Paul begins this tangent with discussion of a triumphant procession and then uses a fragrance illustration, he is not mixing his metaphors. As a common practice, when a general of an army returned from a victorious battle, he would be granted a triumphant procession with the booty and captives being displayed in the procession. As the people hailed the victors, they would frequently burn incense as a pleasing aroma to the crowds.
- Notice that it is God who leads us in triumph and our position in this victory is in Christ. Even though there may appear to be setbacks (as Paul was experiencing) these are actually part of the victory procession of Christ. The reality is that Christ has already completed His work and is seated at the right hand of the Father where He will stay until His enemies are made to be His footstool. It is this truth that gives us the hope of glory in the midst of defeat.

15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.¹⁶ To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?

- It is a glorious thing to see that in the previous verse, it is God who diffuses the knowledge of God through us. Then in this verse we see that the fragrance of knowledge is the fragrance of Christ. But notice that it is a fragrance *to God*. God makes us into a fragrance that is pleasing *to Him*. This pleasing, "victorious" fragrance which God diffuses to Himself, is done in the presence of the world. He does not do it directly for the world but instead the world sees it as He does that which glorifies Himself.
- We see here that which is absolutely foundational for our evangelistic instruction. Notice that there is only *one* aroma and yet there are *two* responses (and only two responses). God takes the one aroma which He primarily provides for His own

glory and displays it (the knowledge of God in Christ) among those to whom it is the aroma of death and those to whom it is the aroma of life. As those who are called to declare this gospel to the world, we are not responsible for either response—God is. What is it that makes one revile the fragrance and another rejoice? What kind of death and life does this smell like to them? This is spiritual life and spiritual death. It is the Spirit of God who goes forth and makes men and women come alive or remain in their death.

- Who is sufficient for these things? The answer to the rhetorical question is no one in himself. If preaching the gospel is a pleasant aroma to God and yet has the consequences of either eternal life or eternal death for those among whom it is preached, then who could be up to this task? No one in himself. When we realize that we are not sufficient in ourselves for these glorious things then we become sufficient because grace is supplied. But if, in our arrogance, we believe that we are sufficient, then we are clearly not. If we attempt to steal any of the glory which completely belongs to God then we prove our insufficiency for the task. However, when we come to the realization that it is God through and through who makes us into the life and death fragrance then we see how there is nothing at all for us to glory in but Him.

17 For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

- Paul contrasts his ministry of sincerity versus those who are simply in the ministry for the money. Just as true today, the preacher is not to be a gospel monger. This is a perennial problem where we turn the ministry into a profession like banking, engineering or selling insurance. Although those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel, this is not a career where you fill out a time card or charge a fee for each speaking engagement because you have some special message that the market will buy. No, the ministry is a calling by God to do a miraculous work which cannot compare to other vocations. Notice that Paul's ministry to men is done in the sight of God in Christ.

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?² You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men;³ clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.

- Paul really dislikes having to defend himself and point out that his ministry is superior to the others who were disparaging him. Paul did not need credentials or recommendation letters from anyone when the Corinthians could simply look around and see the fruit of his ministry. Just as God promised in Jeremiah 31, the internalization of the law was evident in the lives of the faithful Corinthians. Generally speaking, God produces fruit that authenticates a ministry. Although it may take much time for us to see it, God is the one who grants or denies increase in various ministries.

4 And we have such trust through Christ toward God.⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God,⁶ who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. NKJV

- Paul did not rely on letters of recommendation and was confident that the fruit he saw in the Corinthians was supplied through Christ by God. Paul then answers his own rhetorical question from verse 16 by declaring that he is not sufficient for the task but he is made sufficient through God.
- It appears that all of what Paul has been saying in regard to comparing his ministry with the others culminates in this last verse. The contrast between the letter and the Spirit seems to be a comparison between the ministries. The foundational comparison appears to be the distinction between external righteousness and internal righteousness. Those who are relying on their external righteousness (like letters of commendation or credentials) will suffer condemnation. But those who rely on internal righteousness which works it way out in the form of external righteousness are those who have letters from Christ. We cannot have righteousness on the outside without it on the inside nor can we be internally righteous and yet have external condemnation.
- Notice carefully here that the contrast he brings up is not between strict righteousness and loose righteousness. As a minister of the new covenant he is declaring the message which completes the Old Covenant. Those who are under the law are those who are under its curse of total condemnation because of their total innate inability to comply with its requirements (Romans 3:19-20). However, when the message of the New Covenant comes along (for which Paul was a minister) we come to see more fully that the law was given not as a means of righteousness but instead a means of pointing us to our need for grace (Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 3:23-25). This message became fully revealed under the New Covenant (Romans 8:1-4).