



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

“The Triumphant Glory of Christian Ministry”

TRANSCRIPT

We are at 2 Corinthians chapter 2 in verse 12 in our exposition of this marvelous epistle that the apostle wrote to the Corinthians. We know that this is really at least his fourth letter that he wrote to the Corinthians, but since we only have one other one besides this. This is called 2 Corinthians.

So now in verse 12, he writes,

“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 his 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.”

Incidentally, this expression “perishing” does not suggest that there is any possibility of them not perishing if they do not believe in our Lord. In fact, some Greek scholars suggest that the present tense translated “perishing” here is what is called a perfectivised tense; that is, it’s certain to end in perishing. So as we look at it, we are

looking at that which is really an indication of hopelessness apart from the gospel of Christ.

The apostle continues,

“To the one, an aroma from death to death; to the other, an aroma from life to life.” And then he asks the question, “And in who is adequate for these things?” And in the next chapter he will answer that question by saying our sufficiency is of God. But here he asks the question and the final verse of chapter 2, “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.”

That of course is the way in which all ministry should be carried on from sincerity, from God, in the sight of God, in Christ. Marvelous description of what all teachers of the word should do as they teach. This is the place from which they should teach.

May the Lord bless this reading of His word, and let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these words from the apostle for they say very plainly how solemn it is to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we recognize, Lord, that the apostle is simply saying that gospel preaching is never in vain. And we thank Thee, Lord, for the way in which, through the apostle, Thou didst use the word and bring to the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Europeans. And we thank Thee for that which resulted in the spread of the gospel over that continent and then ultimately to our continent as well.

We are indeed grateful, Lord, and we are thankful this day that we are able to meet in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and from the Scriptures worship Thee. We thank Thee that Thou art the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and through eternal covenant has made it possible for us to know Thee. We thank Thee for

all of the other blessings of life that have come with our Lord, the blessing of the constant presence of the Holy Spirit, the blessing of the preservation of the word of God, the blessing of the forgiveness of sins, of a righteousness that is acceptable to Thee, of the standing of an adult son before Thee, membership in the family of God and in the church of God which is the body of our Lord.

We thank Thee, Lord, for the privilege of prayer that we are able in our Lord to lift our voices to Thee and know that Thou doest hear us. We bring before Thee the whole church of Jesus Christ and ask Thy blessing upon it and upon Believer’s Chapel and its ministries, the written ministry, the radio ministry, the tape ministry, and the Bible classes, other forms of outreach. Lord, we ask that they may receive the ministry of the Holy Spirit as the word of God is given out, and may there be conviction and conversion, regeneration in faith.

We thank Thee for our country. We pray Thy blessing upon it. And we especially, Lord, remember those who have requested our prayers. We pray for them. We ask that specifically the petitions that have been offered and that we have been requested to make too may find a favorable response from Thee. But, above all, Lord, we desire Thy will.

Now we pray Thy blessing upon us as the word is preached, as we sing hymns in praise of our Lord. May our time together be profitable for each of us. If there are some here who do not know the Lord, may through the preaching of the word, they turn to him.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

[Message] The subject for today as we continue our exposition of 2 Corinthians is the “Triumphant Glory of Christian Ministry.” If you notice that when I speak, my voice just gets louder and louder as we talk about the triumphant glory of Christian ministry.

And somebody has finally awakened in the tape room back there and cut on the loud speaker.

A generation ago, one of my old teachers, Professor James Stewart of the University of Edinburgh, described the preacher’s role a few years earlier from his standpoint as materialistic, progressive, and self-sufficient. And Professor Stewart went on to say, “It was thought that perhaps social effort would speedily bring the New Jerusalem down to earth from heaven.” He went on to cite Swinburne’s famous words, “Thou art smitten thou God, thou art smitten; thy death is upon thee, O Lord. And the love-song of earth as thou diest resounds through the wind of her wings - Glory to men in the highest! For man is the master of things.” And he asked if perhaps Thomas Hardy was not correct in saying that he recommended that Christianity should throw in the sponge and say I am beaten and let another religion take its place.

Professor Stewart went on to say that he, himself, at that time a generation or so ago, thought that there were signs of a shaken self-confidence in the liberal establishment. I thought, as I read that some years ago, about twenty-five years ago to be exact, that perhaps he was right. Conservatism, it seemed, was beginning to make its way a bit again, seemed to be a bit on the rise, and even Calvinism began to come to life again. But I am not sure if the world is really crying earnestly, Is there any word from the Lord?

If that’s what is happening, and I’m sure it’s happening in some places because God is continuing his work, it surely is happening in a minority of the human hearts. Perhaps today is there any money from the Lord, or is there any self-esteem from the Lord or is there any meaning in life from the Lord would be more appropriate from the age of which we are apart.

Dorothy Sayers, who is not known for her theology but rather for her mystery stories and other excellent literature, during World War II gave a talk in which she spoke about one of the reasons for the present situation, World War II, was the fact that Britain had forgotten Christian theology and Christian doctrine. She went on also to compare

Britain with the Church of Rome, and she spoke of the Church of Rome as a theological society. Now, she was not saying that she agreed with the Church of Rome about the things that Rome taught, but that, nevertheless, she thought it was good that Rome was a theological society, that they recognized that one must stand for something specific and not everything in general.

One of the things I think that bears that out, aside from the simple fact that Christian theology is really nothing more than Christian doctrine, which is really nothing more than the doctrine of Christ is surely the most important thing that we do, but I think in the present day we see some indication of that in the attitudes of and the activities of the present pope. Pope John Paul II, who has been a marvelous advertisement for the Church of Rome, is a person who is committed to restoring certainty in the teaching of Rome. Even though that teaching, by my understanding, is faulty and contrary to the teaching of the word of God in this basic essential fact that we do not come to God through a sacramental system but through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, I must admire the fact that the pope believes that it’s important for the church to stand for something. And he is very busily engaged in seeing that certainty in the Church’s teaching is restored and has finally turned his attention to America, as he should have a long time ago. Because in America many of those who are part of the Roman Catholic Church and its teaching establishment have departed from the teaching that is historically associated with Rome. The bishop in the Seattle area has been largely - had his teaching responsibilities taken away from him. A special deputy has been sent to him in order to take care of things like that. So that the moral pronouncements of the bishop, which have been contrary to the historic teaching of the Church of Rome and incidentally contrary to the historic teaching of the Church of Christ, have been in measure restored.

Others in the teaching establishment in the universities have been relieved of their tasks, as you know, if you read the newspapers. In other words, the pope has regarded it

as essential that there be certainty in the message that the church proclaims. Now if he would go on and eliminate the sacramental system and say that we do not have our original sin removed by the waters of baptism, daily sin by the sacrifice of a mass, forgivable sin by the oil of extreme unction, and other sins by the fires of Purgatory, then I would say hallelujah because we are coming closer and closer to the teaching of the word of God. Because obviously, the Bible teaches that sins are removed by what Christ did on the cross and his work is a finished work and that work is available through the instrumentality of faith. But at any rate, I must admire the fact that there is a recognition of the need of certainty in the teaching of the word of God.

Now, the Apostle Paul, as we shall see in this great section of the ministry which begins here in chapter 2 in verse 14 and does not conclude until chapter 7 in verse 5, we’ll see that the apostle is very definite and very clear and very plain about the message that he was proclaiming as from the Lord God.

Now, remember just a few sentences by way of review that in 2 Corinthians the apostle is concerned with three great truths, truths concerning ministry, the first seven chapters; truths concerning Christian giving, in chapters 8 and 9; and truths concerning his own apostolic authority in the remainder of the chapters of the book.

In the section that we are looking at now, the apostle is apologizing or giving an apology, I perhaps should say, for the way in which he has carried on his relationship with the Corinthians because they have misunderstood some of the reasons for a change of plans. And some opponents have taken these changes to be opportunities for them to oppose the apostle’s teaching and to stir up difficulties in the church at Corinth. So he’s been talking about those things. And in the immediate context, as is clear from what later appears in chapter 7, the apostle is very concerned about the fact that he has sent Titus to the Church in Corinth with a stinging letter, this sharp letter, evidently critical of some of the things that were happening there. And he’s very much concerned about the response of this church that he was the instrument for bringing into spiritual existence. So the

apostle, very concerned, waiting for Titus to return and give him news of what had happened there, went to Troas, waited there, could find no rest for his spirit. Isn’t that interesting that in verse 13 he says, “I had no rest for my spirit”? Now, this is the apostle, who in chapter 4 in verse 6 of his letter to the Philippians should say, “Be anxious for nothing, but at everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request be made known unto God.” So don’t be anxious for anything, but in Paul’s case he was very anxious about how the Corinthians would respond to his letter. Perhaps we should harmonize those things by pointing out that in this case he was concerned about the work of God and not so much about himself. And in Philippians, he’s interested in warning us, or admonishing us, not to be anxious for things about ourselves, but to commit our affairs to the Lord and look to him for the solution of our problems.

At any rate, he was very concerned. And when Titus didn’t show and it became evident that there were going to be no more port boats from Macedonia to Troas, which as you know is located on the northwestern shore of what is today Troy -- what is today Turkey, I should say, where ancient Troy was, Paul then made his way around the Aegean Sea to Macedonia and there he met Titus.

Now, the news was all good, and we read in chapter 7 in verse 5, “For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest (he was still disturbed) but we were afflicted on every side. Conflicts without, fears within, but God who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced the more.”

So now we find in verse 14 after Paul has said now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me and 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 -- suddenly he breaks into this marvelous digression, it has been called. In fact, Bengel, the German Lutheran commentator, calls this a *nobilissima digressio*, that is, a most noble

digression. It begins in chapter 2 in verse 14, and it does not conclude until chapter 7 verse 4.

Paul is thanking God, praising God, and outlining, as he praises God, the function of Christian ministry, its methods, its strategy, its message. And therefore, this is, so far as the New Testament is concerned, the greatest passage on Christian ministry.

Now, let me hasten to say, that when we say that Paul is talking about Christian ministry, of course, it has primary application to apostolic ministry. But then apostolic ministry is only an aspect of ministry in which we all share, so every one of us is a minister of Christ, a servant of Christ. And we are, as individuals, responsible for the spreading of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, not as an apostle, I surely am not an apostle, don’t claim to be an apostle, and do not speak with the authority of an apostle, but I am, as a Christian, a minister of Christ. And therefore, the principles that are found in these great chapters that Paul writes are principles that, while they apply first to and foremost to Paul and apostolic ministry, are also words of instruction and guidance for all of us.

So now, without a word of explanation as someone has said, Paul leaps out of the slew of despond and springs like a bird to the heights of joy. Notice what he says, first to all, “But thanks be to God who always leads us in his triumph in Christ.” Now, that sounds so different from “I had no rest in my spirit” and yet now he writes, “thanks to God who always leads us in his triumph in Christ.”

The apostle is using a figure that the Bible expositors have often referred to. It’s the figure of the Roman triumph. For example, when a Roman general had won a great victory and when certain requirements were met, he was given the privilege of being a part of a Roman triumph. We would call it a parade, a parade in which he was the honored guest or the honored character. Now, this Roman triumphal parade was one that was made up something like this. First of all, with reference to the requirements for participating, the individual who was the object of this honor had to be the actual

commander in the field. In other words, it couldn’t be someone who stayed back at headquarters and who therefore, might get credit for victory. He had to be an actual commander in the field. Further, the campaign had to be a concluded campaign. It had to be over. It could not be a campaign that was still going on. Five thousand of the enemy must have fallen in the campaign. And, further, Rome must have received an extension of the territory of their empire.

Now, if these things were met, an individual might have in his honor a Roman triumph. The actual parade itself, or the triumph itself, was a parade in which many people participated. For example, at the head of the parade there would usually be State officials and the Senate, then the spoils that have been won in the campaign would be displayed. (I guess that would be like in our modern campaigns when tanks and guns and other things that one had captured from the enemy might be paraded as being evidences of the victory of those who won.) The spoils would be displayed and then following the spoils, the captives, that is the prisoners of war. Now the captives were in chains often, and they were part of the parade, too. And usually, at the end of the parade the leaders among them were put to death, but they had the privilege, quote, “of being in the triumph until they were put to death.”

Included in the parade were religious people like the priests who carried their senses and they also had incense so that the parade was characterized by the odor of incense. For the incense pots were part of it. Now, Paul makes allusions to that, as you can see. Following at the end of the parade, there would be the general in his chariot with the crown of Jupiter over his head. This, the Roman triumph, and the people shouting *eo triumphe* or *to Jove be the triumph*. The conquering Christ and Paul in his train is the figure that the apostle gives us here, and he thinks of himself, as you can see, as one of the captives following in the train of the victor who in this case is not a Roman general, but the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s what he means when he says, “Who always leads us in his triumph in Christ.” So the apostle has taken a common figure, which all of

the Corinthians would be familiar with, and has turned it to the use of the conquering Messiah as the representative of the people of God and in whom the people of God are victorious.

When I was growing up and studying Latin, because everybody in Charleston studied Latin, I was planning to be either a doctor or a lawyer, and in Charleston everybody had to take Latin if you wanted to be a doctor. Of course, I can remember in my youth -- this will let you know how old I am, the doctors in Charleston wrote their prescriptions in Latin. So you had to know what they were, but you couldn’t read their writing, however it was in Latin, nevertheless. Latin was something that everyone was expected to take. That’s why I speak with such a beautiful accent is because of the Latin. But anyway I took four years in high school, and when I go out of high school and went to college, also in Charleston, I took four years more of Latin. And incidentally, in Charleston -- the College of Charleston, the first year of Latin was the fifth year of Latin. No one could take first year Latin at the college in those days. You started with the understanding you’d had at least two years, and so I went on and took four more years of Latin.

Now, I remember reading “Caesar’s Gallic Wars” particularly, and Caesar had as one of his opponents a Gaulish general by the name of Vercingetorix, and he was a man who almost overcame Caesar and almost turned the Roman Empire back upon itself. But finally he was captured, and he was taken to the city of Rome, and there he was kept for six years and finally he was executed by Julius Caesar. So all of those things come to my mind as I think of Paul’s statement, “I’ve praised to God who leads us in his triumph in Christ.”

Now, furthermore, Paul says as he continues, “and manifests through us the sweet savor of the knowledge of him in every place.” Now, in the case of the figure, of course, the incense would be going up in the air as the sensors had the fires burning in them, and the sweet aroma of the incense characterized the parade but the apostle turns that to the

sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place, which is the product of the ministry of the apostles. Now, I should say here that it’s obvious that the apostle thinks of this as a triumph in Christ, and that the aroma is the knowledge of him in every place.

Now, if you’ll look at the other things that Paul says about his ministry in Corinth, for example, in the first letter he says, “I determine not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified.” And also in the immediate context here in verse 23 through verse 25 of Chapter 1, we have the apostle saying things like this -- did I say 23? I did not really mean that. It’s 19 through 22,

“For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us, by me and Silas and Timothy, was not yes and no, but yes in him. For as many as be the promises of God in him, they are yes wherefore also by him is our amen to the glory of God through us. Now he who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God who also hath sealed us and given us the spirit in our hearts as a pledge.”

So it’s obvious from the statements that the apostle makes in his first letter and the context here in the second letter that when he talks about the aroma of the knowledge of him, he is talking about Christ crucified. In other words, the message that Paul proclaimed was a message that centered not simply in the loveliness of the character of Christ or not simply in the moral principles that are for which our Lord stood, or not the teaching of our Lord, per se, but it was the crucified Messiah, the knowledge of God as seen in the crucifixion or the ministry of our Lord as a crucified savior.

Why is that so? Why is that so significant? Well, for this simple reason, that it’s in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ that one learns theology. Take, for example, the nature of man. How do we best learn the nature of man? Well, there are many ways in which the Scripture speaks to this question, of course, but, fundamentally and preeminently, we never get a proper picture of the nature of man until we look at the

cross of Christ and realize that it is there that he is suffering for the sins of sinners, for the sins of men. That will give you the best idea of all about what it means to be a man in and under sin.

So to preach Christ crucified is to reveal man as well. For there the Lord Jesus hangs as the sacrifice for sinners, his death, the death of the Son of God, the death of the Godman as required because of our sin, our rebellion against God. There you get a picture of what you are. And when Jesus Christ cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,” that’s the revelation of God’s attitude to men outside of Christ. That’s the first thing. The second thing is, of course, that here we learn the nature of God. That God is a God who is a righteous God and, therefore, he does not forgive sins apart from the sacrifice of Christ. Sin must be paid for, and the Lord Jesus dies for sinners, paying for the sins of sinners. And thus we find the significant revelation concerning the nature of God as well as the nature of man. We learned some significant things about God. In fact, I do not believe that we can know man nor can we know God if we do not look at man and God in the light of the cross of Christ. And of course salvation itself and all of the features of our salvation can only be understood when we finally come to understand that the Lord Jesus, as our representative, is taking our punishment and making it possible for sinners to have the righteousness of God in Christ.

So he says as a result of the ministry of the Lord, we are a fragrance of Christ, notice to God, to God first of all. God’s pleased with what he sees among those who are serving him, “manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place for we are a fragrance of Christ to God.” Now, to my mind the apostle modifies the metaphor here. It’s a rather bold change in the first statement leading us in triumph, he looks at himself as being one of Christ’s captives. But here he looks at himself as being the incense itself. He says verse 15, “For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved.”

Now, that word “fragrance” is a very interesting word because it’s a word that related to an Old Testament Hebrew word translated by this same word in the Greek Old Testament which related to the word “rest.” For example, in the burnt offering we read that when the sacrifice was made and the smoke went up, it went up toward heaven, and God smelled an odor of rest, an odor of well-pleasing. He was well-pleased with the sacrifice. Now, of course the sacrifice pointed on the Lord Jesus Christ. And so, in effect, it was Moses’ way of saying under God’s direction that when the Lord Jesus Christ died on Calvary’s cross, the odor of divine pleasure in what he was doing, the perfect obedience and making it possible for sinners to be saved, for the people of God to be gathered to the Father in heaven, all of that gave great pleasure to the Lord God in Heaven. So when the smoke arises from the sacrifice of the Messiah to God, that’s pleasing to the Lord, and it diffuses as it ascends the knowledge of God as seen in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Now, Paul lays stress in verse 15 and 16 on the herald’s participation in the triumph. He says, “For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.” Isn’t it striking? We are a fragrance of Christ to God even among those who are perishing? We can understand how God might be pleased with those who are being saved, but how can we possibly say that we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are perishing? It’s obvious that Paul believes that whether the gospel is received or opposed, we are a sweet savor of Christ to God. So that if I were to preach to an audience such as this, not you, but to an audience like this and not a single person was a Christian or even should respond to the gospel, could we say that God was pleased? Yes, according to Paul, we could say that God is pleased. In fact, it’s very plain that the apostle includes those who are perishing with those who are being saved. And he says that we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved or those who are lost.

Well, that means then that the gospel is never preached in vain. That means also, incidentally, if I may make a personal application to you, that it is never in vain that you

should say to one of your friends, Christ is the savior of sinners and seek by God’s grace to bring them to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s never done in vain. Even when you are rejected, even when you feel you have made no impression whatsoever, you can be sure it is not done in vain. I don’t know how many incidentally appeals I rejected before God opened my heart to the gospel of Christ, but there were many. It’s never done in vain. The God would cite we are a sweet savor. We are incense bearers, not income boosters, incidentally, incense bearers. That’s far more important than raising money in spite of the tenor of the age.

In verse 16 he says, “To the one an aroma of death to death, to the other an aroma of life from life to life. And who is adequate for these things.” Now that’s a very important statement, and I want you to look at it carefully because he says to the one an aroma from death to death. In other words, when Christ is preached these individuals are dead, but as the gospel is not received there is an aroma, a fragrance of Christ from death leading to death. And on the other, there is an aroma from life leading to life. So in other words, each has tendencies before the coming of the odor, some death, others life. You’ll look at that in Paul’s statement. It’s very plain. He uses the Greek preposition *ec* which refers to source, primarily, and so it’s from death to death, from life to life.

But as we say, regardless of the outcome, the gospel is never preached in vain. And if we are to explain something like this, well Professor C. K. Barrett of the University of Durham in Britain put it this way in his commentary: He said what we see here is the profound -- incidentally he was a Methodist by background, or is a Methodist by background, and still is a Methodist minister, so he is not one who comes from what I would call a more biblical theological background. But he says what we are faced with here is the profound mystery of predestination.

Now, I would like to, just for a moment, remind you of what the Bible says. It’s, I think for some people, it is very difficult for them to grasp this, but the apostle obviously believes this, you remember the Lord Jesus, when he gave his great parable of the sower,

could be called the parable of the soils, better in my opinion. He spoke about how the sower went out to sow his seed. He sowed some beside the road. It was trampled under foot. The birds of the air devoured it. He sowed other seed on rocky soil. It grew up quickly, withered away because it had no moisture. He then sowed some among the thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it to death. And finally, he said some fell on good ground, and it grew up and produced a crop a hundred times its great. Then he said words that are for us, he that hath ears to hear let him hear. This is what preaching of the gospel is all about, given by the Lord Jesus himself. Well, the apostle said, “Explain it to us,” and so he explained it to them. He said, “Look, those on the rocky soil are those when they hear receive the word with joy. They have no firm root. They believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away.” He said, “Those beside the road are those who have heard the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so that they may not believe and be saved. Those among the thorns are those who have heard and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life and bring no fruit to maturity. And the seed in the good ground, these are the ones who have heard the word and an honest and good heart and hold it fast and bear fruit with perseverance.”

In other words, when the word of God goes forth, we won’t use any mathematics to speak about it. We could say twenty-five percent here, but we don’t know questions like that. It’s obvious that our Lord anticipates that from the preaching of the word of God there is a general lack of an acceptance but some do accept. The word of God then, as Paul says, is from life to life, from death to death.

There is no a better picture of this, in my mind, than the experience of the blind man that the Lord Jesus healed, marvelous individual. When I get to heaven, he’s one fellow I want to seek out and talk with him, because the Lord Jesus came by and he healed the blind man. He told him to go wash in the pool of Siloam, which means “sent,” and he went away and he washed and he came back seeing. The neighbors looked at

him, and they were a little puzzled because when blind people actually begin to see, their countenance does change in appearance. This is one of the signs of the authenticity of this. And they said isn’t this the fellow that used to sit and beg? Others were saying this is he. Still others were saying, no, he’s like him, and he kept saying, I am the one. I am the one.

And so they were saying how were your eyes opened? He said, Well, this man Jesus made some clay and anointed my eyes. He said to me go to Siloam and so I went away and washed, and I received my sight. They said unto him, where is he? He said, I don’t know. So the Pharisees were brought, naturally. And they were brought to him, and it was the Sabbath day on which the Lord had made the clay and opened his eyes. And so the Pharisees were asking him how he received his sight, and so he said he applied clay to my eyes, and I washed and see. And the Pharisees said, This man is not from God. Why, it is obvious that he did this on the Sabbath. He doesn’t keep the Sabbath. And then others were saying, How can this man be a sinner who performs such signs, and there’s division. There always is a division when the gospel is preached. So here is the division.

So they said to the blind man again, What do you say about him? He said he is a prophet.

The Jews therefore didn’t believe it of him that he had been blind and received sight until they called his parents. And they said let’s go check on his parents. And they said, Is this your son who you say was born blind, then how does he now see? His parents said we know that this is our son. We know that he was born blind. But how he now sees, we don’t know. Or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He’s of age. He speaks for himself. The reason they did that was because they were afraid of the Pharisees, and they’d be kicked out of the church, that is, out of Jewish society if they told what they felt probably was the truth.

So they go back to the man again and they say give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner. He said whether this man is a sinner, I don’t know. One thing I do know, whereas I was blind, now I see. Well, what did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? Now, this is where this fellow I think draws my greatest admiration. He looked at these religious leaders and nothing can be worse than to stand before a group of religious leaders. [Laughter] He said, I told you already and you didn’t listen. Why do you want to hear it again? You don’t want to become his disciples, do you? [Laughter] And they reviled him. They said you are his disciple, we are disciples of Moses. We know God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we don’t know where he’s from.

And so this man is beginning to be a theologian already. Now, listen to what he says. He says, Well, here is an amazing thing, that you don’t know where he is from and yet he opened my eyes. We know God doesn’t hear sinners, but if anyone is God-fearing and does his will, he hears him. Since the beginning of time it’s never been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. They answered and said to him, you are born entirely in sins and are you teaching us, and they put him out. They threw him out.

Now, the chapter ends. Of course the Lord Jesus, when he heard what had happened, that he’d been thrown out of the synagogue, he found him and he said do you believe in the son of man? He said, Who is he Lord that I may believe in him? And Jesus said, You’ve seen him. He’s the one who’s talking with you. And he said, Lord, I believe, and he fell down at his feet and he worshipped him.

Now, here is the interesting thing. Here the Lord Jesus has ministered to this person, there has been response from life to life, and he’s at the Lord’s feet worshipping him. The Pharisees, the religious leaders who had all of the understanding that such people had, they too have heard from our Lord and where are they? From death to death, they’re at this throat. That’s the difference. The blind man is at his feet worshipping him; the religious leaders, unbelieving, are at his throat and soon will be responsible, among

others, for putting our Lord to death. The same son that melts the butter hardens the clay. We have been told. The same son that brings life to some branches, brings death to others.

I saw a vivid picture of that in my own yard some years ago. It was in one of the homes that I had in which I was doing some initial planting of things. And some men came along in a truck with some very nice-looking trees, oak trees. And I had just the place that I needed an oak tree. I went out. They were bald and burlapped. I looked at them and they looked nice, beautiful tree, nice shape. I put it in the ground. Well, when the sun began to shine, my tree didn’t respond, and finally that tree under the sun revealed that it really was a tree that was dying, perishing. And when finally when I dug it up, there were no roots at all. They had cut the tree out and stuck it in some dirt, mulled and burlapped it and it looked as if it had roots, but it had none. I told the seminary students about it. One of them came to me about a week later, I had preached in chapel, he gave me this little piece of verse. “I planted oh so carefully a pretty little willow tree, then stuck a stick beside the tree to judge how fast it grew for me. I’m not ashamed to say I cried when the old stick grew and the willow died.” [Laughter]

Well, the apostle goes on to say who is sufficient for these things? Of course no one is sufficient for these things. Our sufficiency is of God. We preach the gospel as we find it in the word of God and some respond. The mass do not respond. That is the history of humanity. We are not sufficient for these things. We are to be faithful to his word. And if it’s offensive, we still have to be offensive, just like the blind man, offensive. No one likes to be offensive. We’d like to be pleasant and sweet so you would go out to say, Isn’t he a sweet man? But our responsibility as a minister of Christ as a Christian is to speak truth as we find it in the word of God.

So Paul says, Who is sufficient for these things? and answers his own question in verse 17. For, now I think we are to understand Paul to mean this we are, we are by God, that is by God’s grace. “For we are not like the many peddling the word of God,

but as from sincerity as from God we speak in Christ in the sight of God.” We are sufficient for these things because our sufficiency will say comes from God through us, but the many that he mentioned puts us in the minority. We are the minority. We are always the minority. Christians are always the minority. They will never be anything but the minority until finally our Lord comes and ultimately we shall be the majority, but not now.

Now, Paul’s statement when he says” peddling the word of God” is a remarkable apt saying for our day. That verb is a word that means to make “a trade of.” It means to adulterate. It has the idea of seeking cheap gain. It was used frequently of people who grew wine, and then in order to enlarge their produce they added water to it, so that the wine was adulterated, but sold as wine. And Paul says, we are not like the many who peddle the word of God. Plato used it of hockers who hocked their goods. The Christian church is filled with hockers, with peddlers who are not preaching the word of God as it is found in Holy Scripture. They are adulterating the truth. They are dodging the great truths of the word of God. And even among the Evangelicals there is a great deal of this going on. We don’t need nine hundred foot visions or crass appeals of God holding his men hostage or teary dreams of gifts for missions of one million dollars. We don’t need prosperity theology which gushes God’s got it I can have and by faith I’m going to get it. This is thoroughly out of harmony with the teaching of the word of God. We need, and this is offered to us in Christ, simple trust in what God has set forth in Holy Scripture. Our duty as a minister of the word of God is to present the sweet savor of Jesus Christ.

James Denny, the great Scottish professor from the University of Glasgow, used to say “No man ought to preach nor can he really preach who cannot make great assertions about Jesus Christ.” When Luther and Erasmus had their encounter, and Luther wrote his marvelous book on the “Bondage of the Will” in which he pointed out that there is not such thing as free will among men in the spiritual sense and Erasmus objected, Erasmus criticized Luther for this. He said, Luther is always making assertions. He is always

making assertions. He is always making assertions. Listen, to make assertions is to be a Christian. That’s what Christians do. They make assertions concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, assertions. And if we cannot make assertions about our Lord, about the cross, about the things of the word of God, we shouldn’t be preaching Christianity for we are not Christians if we don’t believe great assertions about Jesus Christ. Those are very strong words, but they are true words. We have a solemn calling to be faithful to the word of God.

I feel very much like Richard Baxter felt and I’m sure that preachers of the word of God who seek to be faithful feel the same way. Baxter used to say, “I never leave the pulpit without the thought coming to me, how couldst thou speak of life and death with such a heart.” We are dealing with the eternal things.

My appeal to you, our time is up, is to respond as you look at the cross of Christ to recognize that you are a sinner and you have need of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, a need that is ultimate. In fact, your sin required the sacrifice of the Godman, the son of God, for the payment of its penalty. And through the Lord Jesus there is offered the forgiveness of sins to sinners. If God in his grace, has brought you to the conviction as you look at yourself and look at the cross that you belonged there and that Christ has died for sinners and offers forgiveness of sins, come down to Christ, believe in him. And if God has brought you to that conviction that you want him and you want to come to him, come to him and receive eternal life.

May God in his marvelous grace work in your heart and bring you to Christ so that you too as Paul may be an aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these marvelous words that come from Paul the apostle. We know that they cost him, and we know that they always lay their obligations upon us who lean upon Christ and claim him as our only hope.

“The Triumphant Glory of Christian Ministry” by S. Lewis Johnson
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We worship Thee through Christ. We thank Thee for the forgiveness of sins.
Lord, by Thy marvelous power and grace, bring others to the knowledge of Christ.
Glorify Thy name by that. And in this audience if there should be some here who have
never believed in Christ, by Thy grace, Lord, touch their hearts and may they at this very
moment receive as a free gift forgiveness of sins through the blood that was shed at
Calvary’s cross.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.