

2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6
(Psalm 73; Matthew 20:20-28)
“Who Is Sufficient for These Things?”

Introduction

You and I live in a culture that values people according to what they do and how well they do it. We are functional rather than relational, and want to know how someone fits into our performance and success based society. We carry this into the family and tend to reward with the most attention the child who does well in school or sports, or who goes on to a successful career.

In these verses Paul calls us to a different perspective, a different way of looking at things and of evaluating people. His words, which at first reading may seem quite innocuous, actually challenge us to a radically different world-view: a different way of reading people, situations and texts like the one before us this morning. These verses mark the end of the beginning of this letter. Here Paul transitions from his opening defense of his ministry to the specific issues that he wants to address. Once again, he had changed his plans, and this change seemed the most suspicious of all.

Paul had become so distressed at the failure of Titus to join him in Troas as planned, that he walked away from what he describes as a wide-open door for ministry. If the Lord had opened a door for him to proclaim the gospel of Christ, how dare he walk away just because Titus had not joined him? Paul contends that his change in plans was motivated out of love for the church in Corinth: he was waiting for Titus to bring him a report about them, and his anxiety was for their welfare, not for himself. When Titus did not arrive, Paul went looking for him to find out how things stood at Corinth. In other words, he was more interested in the welfare of the churches he had already planted than he was in planting new churches.

Paul now explains his actions by using three illustrations, three pictures familiar to his original audience: the first, a triumphal procession, a grand spectacle celebrating the power of Rome over her enemies; the second, a sacrifice, a burnt offering, giving off an aroma that either delighted or repulsed, depending on one's perspective; and thirdly, a letter of recommendation, attesting to one's authority and integrity. Paul takes these simple images and develops them in a way that exposes the paradoxical nature of the Christian life, and the danger of evaluating success and blessing according to the values of the world.

Remember that Paul is defending himself against teachers who presented the Christian life as one success after another, one triumph after another, a message known in our day by the words “wealth, health and prosperity.” Paul's images call all such cultural accommodation into question, and challenge us to read and hear the gospel anew.

Body

1. Paul uses three pictures that challenge our way of seeing life:

A Triumphant Procession: The image of the triumphal procession was familiar to citizens of the empire. When a Roman general significantly extended the borders of the empire or defended her against her enemies in a decisive battle, the senate would reward him with Rome's highest honor: a triumphal procession. The hero would be placed at the front of the procession in a gold chariot drawn by white horses. Around him would be his cheering troops, behind him his conquered enemies and carts covered with plunder. The climax of the spectacle was the sacrificing of the captured and defeated foes. Standing in the chariot behind the conquering general was a slave, who held above the hero's head a gold Etruscan crown and whispered in his ear, "Look behind you – remember you are but a man."

Because of Paul's enthusiastic praise to God for leading him in triumphal procession, many commentators have found it difficult to take the description of a *Triumphus* in a Pauline context and often, I think, end up missing the entire point that Paul is making. The description points to Paul's being one of the conquered, led along to the place of sacrifice by the one who has captured him. This interpretation is confirmed by Paul's description of a triumphal procession in his first Corinthian letter: "For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death" (1Corinthians 4:9). *But what is the point of such a picture, and why would it be a reason for such enthusiastic thanks?*

Think again of the context: Paul is defending himself against those who say that his weakness and suffering are proof that he is not walking in the strength and wisdom of the Spirit. His argument throughout has been to rejoice in his sufferings as proof that he is following in the life and ministry of Jesus. So here he sees the same kind of marvelous paradox that he pointed out in the opening chapter of his first letter to Corinth. God's power at first appears weak, and his wisdom foolish, to people living according to the values of the world. God's way of winning the greatest of victories appeared at first to be a colossal defeat.

A Fragrant Sacrifice: Paul then introduces idea of a fragrant sacrifice. Nothing but music has such power to evoke memory, to create a sense of *déjà vu*, as does an aroma that brings a complex of memories and feelings. In 2001&2, when our son was serving as a Marine in Afghanistan, the smell of his aftershave lingered in his closet, and when his mother was worried about him, wondering where he was and if he was safe, she told me that sometimes she would go to his room and stand for a moment where she could still catch, however faintly, his fragrance.

Some commentators think that Paul is referring to the incense that was burned along the route of the triumphal procession, but the language is that of sacrifice.

And so, again, we see the paradoxical nature of the gospel. To those who hear of Christ's sufferings and death, or who observe the suffering of Christians, the sacrificial life may stink of death and defeat and failure. But to those who understand that God defeats the power of death through the sacrificial suffering and death of his Son, and that he continues to spread that message of life through the sacrificial suffering of his people, such sacrifice is redolent of life.

A Letter of Recommendation: Again, the picture that Paul uses is one quite common in the empire: a letter of recommendation. If the first two pictures are too paradoxical, if his opponents found it too difficult to see how sharing in Christ's sufferings was proof of his apostleship, Paul simply points to the existence and health of the church in Corinth as proof. Paul was the apostle who planted the church and nurtured it through its controversies and problems. If the task of an apostle was to plant and nurture churches, then the proof of Paul's apostleship was the churches he had planted.

And there is a paradox even here: Paul himself could not save anyone, nor could he write the new covenant on the hearts of the people at Corinth. Only God could do that. So again, it is nothing so much as our weakness that displays the power and glory of God. This will be a major theme of this entire letter, as it was of his ministry. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." "When I am weak, then I am strong." "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Paul always boasted in his weakness so that the power of God might be displayed through him.

2. Three lessons to help us form a new way of looking at life:

Our triumph is not in the applause of this world, but in the applause of heaven. Max Lucado has made that last line familiar through the title of one of his books, but we need more than familiarity with the concept. It needs to shape our world-view. We are called to live for the day when we receive our praise from God (1Corinthians 4:5b).

Our lives will ultimately smell either of Christ or of self. Those who are on a life-giving path and smell the fragrance of Christ coming from us will be drawn to it. It will remind them of all they have hoped and longed for. It will be life to them. Those who are pursuing their own hopes and ambitions will

not smell Christ and life, but death, the death of all they want of the world's health, wealth and prosperity. And they will flee.

Our lives are ultimately about relationships. Jesus makes this clear in every picture that he gives of judgment. Never does he evaluate based upon one's theological acumen or by one's success at accomplishing one's goals. Always the question is, "How did you treat your neighbor? What did you do for those whom the world considers the least important?" God is triune, one God in three persons, and is thus a relational God in his very essence, and he has created us in his image for relationship with him and with one another.

Paul's final defense, and ours, is this: We have been God's people in loving and leading others into a living relationship with Jesus Christ. So Paul says, "You yourselves are our letter of commendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all" (3:2). Do you and I have such living letters testifying to our claim to be God's people?

Conclusion

In conclusion, please realize that our ordinary ways of reading the Bible and of reading our world will not yield these lessons. We live in an information culture and are taught to read for information. This is important, it is necessary, but it is not enough. When we have the information, we have only begun. We must also learn to read for *formation*. Christ wants to use his Word to re-form us, to trans-form us from the inside out and con-form us to his own image.

As Paul writes, "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:6). This is at the heart of Paul's defense. He says in effect, "I have had the inestimable privilege of sharing in Christ's sufferings and in the salvation of his people." God offers us this same privilege today. Will we pursue it with gratitude, finding it the very fragrance of life, or turn and pursue our own hopes and dreams that, in the end, lead only to death?

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