

Pictures of Serving Christ

2 Corinthians 2:14 – 3:11

Turn to 2 Corinthians 2 please. From 2:14 until the beginning of 2 Cor 7, Paul writes about the life of an apostle of Christ. His reason for explaining about an apostle's life, and my reason for teaching this to you, are not the same. His reason is different than mine.

Paul explained about an apostle's life because the church at Corinth had begun to doubt that Paul was a real apostle. There were false apostles now in Corinth, who did not think much of Paul, and said so to those Christians.

In our days, if someone teaches something doubtful, we read the Bible carefully, to see if that's what Christ and the apostles taught. But the church at Corinth did not have the NT. They had only Paul. They needed to be sure that Paul really was Christ's servant, saying what Christ wanted said, because that was the only way they themselves would be true followers of Christ.

Paul wants them to have joyful confidence that they are on the right track with Christ, so he needs to talk about the life of a true apostle, so they can have that joyful confidence. It is good for us to know that we're doing what Christ called us to do. Christ called us to faith and obedience, and we're doing what he said. We should be enjoying that.

That's Paul's reason described an apostle's life to them. We don't need that as much, we have the Scripture, and now that's what the Spirit uses to give us this joyful confidence.

Here's MY reason for describing an apostle's life: because ultimately, it describes the lives of all Christ's servants. The apostles lived lives of serving and suffering because they were Christ's messengers, and he lived a life of serving and suffering. "I came not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life for many." That's how Christ lived, and so also his apostles.

Do we think that Christ and his apostles lived one way, but the leaders of our churches will have a completely different life? No, if Christ and his apostles lived a certain way, then all those who lead God's people will have more or less the same life.

And if Christ and his apostles lived a certain way, and also those who lead the church, will all the rest of us who serve the Lord have a fundamentally different kind of life? No, we won't. All who want to serve Christ need to look at the apostles' lives as a basic measuring stick.

For the most part, neither our suffering nor our service are as intense as it was for the apostles. But it is good for us to what their lives looked like, so that we understand where this leads, as our faithfulness to Christ slowly increases. That's why I'm teaching about an apostle's life.

Paul's reason for writing this is different, on the surface. He writes so they can have joyful confidence that they are true followers of Christ. My reason is that all who serve Christ will in some way follow the apostles' pattern. But underneath my reason is Paul's reason, too. He also wants his life to shape the life of everyone who follows Christ.

1, Thankful captives (real victorious living). ¹⁴ *But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession.* When a Roman general won a victory in battle, he would come back to Rome afterward and have a victory parade. He would ride through the streets on his horse, and everyone would cheer. And at the end of the parade were some of the conquered soldiers, they were captives, now the slaves of the victorious general.

The parade would end up at the arena, and the captives, the defeated soldiers, would normally be executed there. Once in a while a kind general would free some of them. In Paul's picture, he has been conquered by Christ, he is now Christ's captive, he is Christ's slave, paraded by to show the great victory of Christ. And he is thankful to be in Christ's victory parade!

Here's how Paul used the same picture in 1 Cor 4:9 - *For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena.*
2 Cor 2:14 *Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession.*

Our lives, by living as Christ's thankful captives, living as Christ's thankful slaves, show HIS victory. "Victorious Christian living," as the apostles lived it, was the life of Christ's captives, Christ's slaves, and this displayed not their victory but Christ's victory. Christ obviously had complete victory over them, if they could live like his slaves and be thankful.

Jesus told parables. He told stories about seed and plants, and about sheep and shepherds. Do you know how he usually depicts his followers, in his parables? Not seed, not sheep, but slaves. Some of our Bibles translate it is "servants," but in Greek it is *doulos*, the normal word for slave.

In the parables of Jesus, that is usually how he talks about us. He's the master, we're the slaves. An apostle was a thankful captive, a slave who thanked God that he was captured by Christ.

2, The smell of Christ 2:14b - *God uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of Christ everywhere.* ¹⁵ *For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* ¹⁶ *To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?*

In the beginning of Leviticus, where Moses teaches the different offerings and sacrifices, again and again we read the phrase, "an aroma pleasing to the Lord." In Numbers 15 we learn about the finest flour that was added to burnt offerings, and olive oil, and a litre or two of wine, all to produce "an aroma pleasing to the Lord." See also Php 4:18; Eph 5:2.

The apostles were to God the pleasing aroma of Christ's sacrifice. When troubled believers stay faithful to God, we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ's sacrifice. Imagine God taking a deep sniff through his nose, and saying to himself, "Ahhhh! Nice! Smells just like Christ!"

That's what happens when believers in distress continue to trust God and obey him. Romans 12 says, *present your bodies to God as living sacrifices, living offerings*, and that's what we smell like to God when we live that way. *We are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ.*

To God, we smell like Christ. To others who like us are on the life path, it is the smell of life. And to those who want no part of Christ, who are on the road to destruction, we smell like death.

It is the very same smell. To God, it's the pleasing aroma of Christ. To other believers, on the life path, we are the pleasing smell of life. And to those who don't want Christ, who are on the destruction path, we smell like death. Same smell every time, it just depends whose nose it is. This room is full of this smell.

These days when followers of Christ smell like death to those outside, we assume that the followers of Christ have acted poorly in some way. Paul assumes for the most part that is NOT the reason we smell like death to them. Christ himself smells like death to them, so we do too.

3, Peddling the words of God.¹⁷ *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit.* Peddling the word of God for profit means selling the word of God to make money. Selling something for profit is not wrong. Paul made tents and sold them for profit. All of us who work sell our time and skills and some product for profit. Fine.

Nor is it wrong speak the word of God and be paid for it. Jesus himself said it should be that way, "workers are worth their keep" is how he explained it when he sent out the twelve. Matt 10:10. BUT, Jesus sent the twelve out, and they did what they did because he sent them and they were obeying him. They did not do it so they would receive food and care.

Unlike so many, v17 begins. *Unlike so many.* There were many in Paul's day that did the work of God for money, they sold it for profit. Paul probably had in mind the false apostles in Corinth. And if there were many in that day, do we assume there are none in our day? No, still many.

4, Serving the God who calls us. *On the contrary, we speak sincerely, from God, before God, in Christ.* This is the opposite of peddling the words of God. The right way is to sincerely serve the God who calls us. "From God, before God, in Christ." That's how it reads in Greek.

From God. God instructs us in how to speak and how to act. God has told us how to speak and how to act. We get this from God.

Before God. So we speak in God's ways and act in God's ways because we are in front of God, we are in his presence. He told us how to live, and we respond *to him*, we live it out *before him*.

In Christ. We do this as those that belong to Christ. We are Christ's captives. We get our instructions on speech and actions from God, we respond in obedience before God, in his presence, and we do this because we belong to Christ. And in all this we are sincere.

Those who peddle the word of God for profit might even say all this, but they are not sincere. The apostles were sincere in this.

I have wrestled with this over the years. I make a living by studying the Bible and making disciples of Christ by teaching it. I've been paid for this one way or another for many years. Doing this and being paid so I can continue is one thing, that's fine according to Scripture.

But doing this *so that I will be paid* is very different, I've crossed an important line, and in the kingdom I have become offensive. The problem is that, studying the Bible and making disciples by teaching it, *and being paid*, which is fine, easily slides over into doing this *so that I will be paid*. That's not fine, but I've done that. Then I am a peddler, selling the word of God for profit.

In this basic line, *we the apostles speak sincerely, from God, before God, in Christ*, there is no bargaining with God. The apostles don't do this to get something from him, to experience some blessing wanted, that he had not delivered yet. The apostles lived and spoke as they did because they belonged to Christ, and God had told them how to speak and live. In this they were sincere.

5, Christ's Letter of Reference. *3:1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

Paul writes 3:1-6 with two OT prophecies in mind, Ezek 36:25-29 and Jer 31:31-34. Both of these paragraphs describe the restoration of Israel, a work of God in the future. The same three elements are in both Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31: (1) forgiveness of sins, (2) God will change human hearts, so that (3) people will keep God's laws. Both paragraphs have these three elements. Note that the problem in the OT was not God's laws and commands, the problem was human hearts, which were hard and did not care about God's ways.

Ezekiel adds something to the three ingredients noted above: *the Spirit of God*. For Ezekiel, it was the Holy Spirit that would change human hearts. Jeremiah does not mention the Holy Spirit. But Jeremiah adds this: in Jeremiah this work of God was a *new covenant*. Ezekiel did not mention that.

Paul puts these two together, blending the two paragraphs. For Paul, the writing is on human hearts (Jeremiah), but the Spirit is the ink (Ezekiel), and this all is called the new covenant (Jeremiah).

Paul blends two prophecies here, one from Ezekiel 36 and one from Jeremiah 31, and describes the Corinthian church as a letter. The false apostles in Corinth had letters of reference, other people had written letters saying how wonderful they were, but Paul did not have such a letter, which these false apostles used against Paul.

For Paul, that was silly. Paul preached in Corinth, and the Corinthians had received Christ, and salvation, and they had the Holy Spirit, and now after all that Paul needs to produce some kind of certificate to show that he is what he says? Paul was insulted. “You yourselves are my letter.”

So, picture a letter. Christ writes a letter, it is a letter from Christ, by Christ. Christ writes his letter on human hearts, and the ink is the Holy Spirit. Christ writes his ways on our human hearts, and the ink is the Holy Spirit. By doing this Christ changes us completely, not instantly, it takes a long time, but over time it changes us a lot.

Christ composes the letter, but he dictates, he does not actually hold the pen. People hold the pen, to write Christ’s ways on human hearts with the Holy Spirit.

I’m taking a liberty here. The Scripture does not say humans held the pen. It just says the letter was the result of Paul’s ministry. Christ writes his letter on human hearts with the Holy Spirit, and that happens as the result of human service.

If the Corinthian church was a letter of Christ, this church is a letter of Christ. Look around you. We are here today, meeting in the Lord’s name, because Christ wrote with the Holy Spirit on our hearts. WE are a letter of Christ, known and read by everyone.

Christ has used many different people to hold the pen, but the result is this church, a letter of Christ himself, written on our hearts, known and read by many. This is the true result of our serving Christ, that Christ will use OUR serving him to write with the Holy Spirit on human hearts around us.

6, We have no qualifications for this. At the end of 2:16 Paul said, *and who is qualified for this? Who is equal to such a task?* He comes back to that question here at 3:4, and his answer is, “we have no qualifications for this kind of work, none at all, but God qualifies us.

3:4 Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵ Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶ He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

“We are confident that by our ministry, Christ writes with the Holy Spirit on human hearts.

(1) We have this confidence *through Christ, before God.* (2) *Not* that we ourselves are qualified (3) to claim *anything* for ourselves, (4) but our qualifications *come from God.* (5) God has made us competent/qualified as ministers of a new covenant.

In 5 different ways Paul says that apostles are *not* qualified for their work, to administer Christ writing with the Spirit on human hearts. He’s NOT qualified, can claim *nothing* for himself. But God called him, so God will give what’s needed. Paul was well-educated, he knew the Scriptures forward and backward, he spent much time in prayer.

But none of that qualified him for apostolic ministry. The false apostles paraded their qualifications, and Paul would not play that game. His only qualification was that Christ had called him to do this. Same with us.

3:6b For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. This line has been used to mean all the writings of the OT are dead and done with. Not at all the sense here. Ezek 36 and Jer 31 are clear that the laws are not the problem, never were the problem, uncooperative human hearts were the problem. The Spirit gives life by writing God's laws and decrees on human hearts. The letter killed, not because there was anything wrong with what was written in letters, what was written came from God. The letter killed because it did not change human hearts, so they ignored God's ways. The Spirit will change hearts, so that people will follow God and live.

There is one more picture of serving Christ that puts a different flavour over all the previous. Let's review the pictures of serving Christ that we've seen so far:

- 1, thankful captives of Christ, which is real victorious living, our lives that parade his triumph over us, for which we give thanks.
- 2, Walking around smelling like Christ, to God and to the saved and to the perishing.
- 3, NOT peddling the word of God for profit, but ...
- 4, But serving the God who calls us, sincerely. We serve as getting instructions from God, we serve before God, as those who belong to Christ.
- 5, Christ's letter of reference, the result of our service, is this: Christ writes on human hearts with the ink of the Holy Spirit.
- 6, We have no qualifications for this on our own. God calls us and qualifies us.
- 7, Serving Christ is filled with God's glory. 3:7-11 - This last paragraph is built around three comparisons, all saying much the same thing. I have ignored the extra explanations, and cut this paragraph down to the bones. Paul compares what he does to the work of Moses at Sinai. There was glory there, the Shekinah cloud over the tabernacle, and other things. The message is clear.

⁷ *If the ministry that brought death ... came with glory ...,*

⁸ *will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?*

⁹ *If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious,*

how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ...

¹¹ *And if what was temporary came with glory,*

how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

These pictures of serving Christ are all overwhelmed by God's glory. Obviously this glory is not visible, or Paul would not have to use logic to show us. We do not see this glory, the whole business looks sloppy and unimpressive. But if Christ is writing on human hearts with the Holy Spirit, then serving Christ is thick with the glory of God. A lesser work of God had much evident glory, so serving Christ now certainly has more glory, even if we do not see it.

Amen.