

Retired pastor Verl Lindley tells the story of how his wife woke up one night to find him hunched on his hands and knees at the foot of the bed, muttering unintelligibly—still asleep. His arms embraced an invisible object. When she asked him what he was doing, he—still sleeping—replied, “I’m holding a pyramid of marbles together, and if I move, it’s going to tumble down.”

Most pastors can probably relate to something like that dream. Paul certainly could—as the letter of 2 Corinthians testifies. The text before us is one of the many in this letter in which Paul reveals the great strain he underwent as he laboured for the health of this assembly.

It may be helpful to note that 2:14–7:4 form what is known as “the great digression” in this letter. Paul begins a thought in 2:12–13, and then digresses, before returning to his thought in 7:5.

Trouble (vv. 12–13)

As we have seen, Paul had left Corinth after his emergency visit deeply wounded. The opposition he faced caused him to write a severe letter (lost to us), which he sent to Corinth with Titus. He, meanwhile, travelled to Troas, where he and Titus agreed to rendezvous. He waited anxiously in Troas to hear Titus’s report back.

Paul was deeply troubled that Titus did not return as quickly as he had hoped. He was so deeply troubled, in fact, that it affected his ministry. The New Testament language of an open door means more than gospel opportunity, but refers to flourishing gospel ministry (see 1 Corinthians 16:8–9; Acts 19:1–10). It means not only that Paul was preaching the gospel but that his preaching was bearing fruit. Still, his concern for the Corinthians was so profound that even successful gospel ministry could not lift the cloud.

TO THINK ABOUT

Do you think that ministers of the gospel today ever feel so burdened by problems in the church that it negatively affects their calling to preach the gospel? What sort of problems might have this effect? How can church members help relieve this sort of unrest in their leaders?

The anguish was so bad that Paul bid farewell to a flourishing ministry and moved on to Macedonia—where the unrest not only continued but even heightened to something that sounds very much like depression (7:5ff)!

Triumph (v. 14)

Even in the deepest pit, however, Paul would not lose sight of the gospel and its realities. We see this in the glorious language of v. 14.

The concept of a triumphal procession may be lost on us today, but in the Roman Empire, a conquering general would ride into a city on a horse-drawn (sometimes elephant-drawn) carriage, clothing in purple, carrying an eagle-tipped sceptre, with his face painted red in honour of the god Jupiter. A long train of conquered subjects formed the vanguard. Incense was offered during the procession, and at the end, the conquered subjects were put to death.

The only other time that the Greek word translated “triumphal procession” is used in the New Testament is in Colossians 2:15, where Christ is seen “triumphing” over his enemies at the cross. The triumph there is seen in the death of his enemies.

Taken together, this sketches a fascinating scene. Paul imagines himself in this scene not as the triumphant leader of the procession, but as a conquered subject in the procession. And since the conquered subjects in a procession were led to their death, Paul considers himself to be God’s captive being led to death! Paul’s enemies mocked him as weak and helpless—and he agrees with them! But it is his suffering that is the medium through which God displays his victory. By displaying the apostle as his defeated subject, God wafted his gospel fragrance over the ancient world. The gospel emanated, not from the power and triumph of God’s servant, but from his weakness and death. The very thing for which his opponents mocked him was the thing God used most effectively in his ministry.

TO THINK ABOUT

Be honest: As you consider gospel ministry, do you like to think of the church as a triumphant leader or as a conquered subject? What role does suffering play in the advance of the gospel? In what way might the triumph of the gospel be magnified in the weakness of God’s servants?

Testimony (vv. 15–16a)

As the false apostles gloried in their successes, Paul was confident that the gospel faithfully testified and lived was always effective. Whether hearers believed (“those who are being saved”) or rejected (“those who are perishing”) the message, the gospel remained “the aroma of Christ to God.”

The persistent testimony of Scripture is that Christ preached always accomplishes what God designs. Jesus was “appointed or the fall and rising of many” (Luke 2:34). Those who believe Christ receive eternal life; those who do not face eternal death (John 3:36). Either way, God’s word always accomplishes its intended purpose (Isaiah 55:10–11). “The same aroma is to one ineffable sweetness but to another an unpleasant odor” (Hughes).

TO THINK ABOUT

Paul’s words are intended to offer comfort and encouragement to any faithful Christian who is committed to ministering the gospel. In what way do these words offer encouragement as you go about your daily evangelism?

Note that it is not technically the GOSPEL MESSAGE that is the aroma of Christ, but the MESSENGERS. The obvious, but important, implication is that those who minister the gospel are called to live a life that is in keeping with the message they proclaim. It does little good to proclaim the truth of the gospel if your life does not adorn the very gospel you preach.

TO THINK ABOUT

The following words are attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” Critique this statement.

Trust (vv. 16b–17)

Paul understood his call to, on the one hand, follow Christ in his triumphal procession while, on the other, being an aroma of Christ to the world. Given these weighty callings, he could only ask, “Who is sufficient for these things?” The answer, of course, is, no one—apart from Christ (3:4–6).

The false apostles found their sufficiency in themselves, which is why they peddled God’s word—tampering with or watering down the truth for personal gain. This peddling earned them the praise of men—unlike Paul (and his companions), whose faithful gospel witness invited ridicule.

Readers of the New Testament, of course, want to be like Paul—faithful ministers of the gospel. The apostle closes the chapter with four marks of gospel ministry integrity.

1. **“As men of sincerity.”** Paul’s ministry was sincere. He did not have any hidden motives. What you saw was what you got.
2. **“As commissioned by God.”** Paul preached because he knew that God had sent him to preach. He had been appointed to gospel ministry (see 5:18–19) and he remained faithful to it.
3. **“In the sight of God.”** God was his audience. He ministered the gospel with humility and trembling, but with no thought of human praise.
4. **“In Christ.”** Paul preached the gospel because he was in Christ. It was his union with Christ that empowered his ministry for Christ.

As we think about these realities of a ministry of integrity, we must do so realizing that ALL Christians—“clergy” and “laity” alike—are called to be faithful ministers of the gospel truth.