

2nd Corinthians



We are still traveling down Route 66 as we take Exit 8 into 2nd Corinthians in the New Testament. This is Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. If you could be commissioned by the President of the United States to be an ambassador to another country, which country would you want to serve in; Israel, Aruba, China? Would you choose Iraq? Would anyone choose Afghanistan, or Syria? Very few of us want to be an ambassador to a war torn country. We need to understand that we have been commissioned to be ambassadors for Christ.

Scripture

"Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and He died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one

according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says,

***"In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you."***

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation."(2nd Corinthians 5:11-6:2)

Again, the purpose of Route 66 is to look at every book in the Bible and understand the big story of the Bible, which we ultimately believe takes us from a garden of ruin to a city of restoration. That is only possible, only doable, because of what God has done for us in Christ. We believe each book of the Bible has a specific purpose. In this series, we are not doing an exhausting entail study of the book. We don't want to exegete the book in its entirety; we are just trying to grasp the big picture.

This second letter that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth is so different from his first letter. According to Paul, this second letter is following a painful visit he had to make to Corinth. So he wrote a sorrowful, stressful, tearful letter to them. Now, he gets word about how they have responded

to that letter, so now he writes another letter to them, which possibly may not be his second letter. It is possibly his third letter, and some scholars actually believe it is the fourth letter he wrote to the church at Corinth. But, only two made it into the canon of our Scripture. God not only had a purpose for these two letters to the church at Corinth, but He had a purpose for us today as followers of Jesus Christ.

I want to give a simple outline of 2nd Corinthians, beginning with the title theme.

Ambassadors for Christ

1. Introduction: Chapter 1:1-11
2. The Ministry of the Saints: Chapters 1:12-7:16

Unlike any other letter he wrote, you hear the passion, the heartbeat of Paul, not just for the gospel's sake, but for the ministry of the saints.

3. The Cheerful Giver: Chapters 8-9

I think of this as the second part of the book. He talks about the Macedonian example of giving. In that second section, he talks about how Christ was rich but became poor, so that we who are poor might be made rich. Then, he shows how the Macedonians, in their struggle of poverty, grasp that truth. Next, they heard about the need of the saint in Judea, and they didn't just give according to their means, Paul said they went above their means. Then Paul laid down this principle for the Corinthian Church, "God loves a cheerful giver."

4. Paul Defends His Ministry: Chapters 10:1-13:10

In this last section of that book, he talks about the misunderstandings of him as an apostle.

5. Conclusion: Chapter 13:11-14

He closes with some final words, a final greeting.

We are going to highlight what I believe is the big story of Corinthians. That is primarily revealed in the first section of the book that deals with the ministry of the saints.

War Zone

When you go on vacation, most people like to get a souvenir to remind you of your travels. When we go to Disney World, the grandkids have to have the toy of the day to remind them of Disney. When I go to Gatlinburg, I like to stop at Aunt Mahalia's and get a box of Pecan Nests just so I remember the beauty of the mountains of Gatlinburg. Now, if we are going to take a souvenir from this lesson home, our souvenir will be to leave with this thought that as a believer in Christ, we are ambassadors for Christ. But we do not live on the beaches of Aruba or in the Holy Land of Israel. We don't live in peace time conditions. We live in a war zone. Do you understand that? If we are going to learn anything from 2 Corinthians, we are going to learn that God has commissioned us to be an ambassador; in a world, in a land, in a culture, that is growing more and more hostile to God, and thus, us. Therefore, the Christian life is not going to look like life on the beach in retirement. Neither is it going to look like life on a mountaintop where you are alone where you are alone with God. If we are going to picture our life, we have to realize we are in a war zone. Paul starts out this way in chapter 1:3-4, "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*" In other words, Paul said it is the same comfort we received from God while we were in our affliction and came out of it.

- **Affliction**

In the Greek language, this word, "affliction," literally means 'to be squeezed or crushed.' We have a little saying where I come from when we feel like we are in a pinch and we are getting squeezed a little bit. We say, "I am between a rock and a hard place." Have you ever been there? Have

you ever noticed that God allows life to put the squeeze on us? Sometimes when you get squeezed, it is not when you are expecting it. Usually, when life puts the squeeze on you, something comes out. Have you ever been surprised at what comes out? The reason we are surprised is because we really didn't know that was in there. But listen, if it hadn't of been in there, it wouldn't have come out. If I were to take a lemon, cut it in half, and squeeze it, what would come out? Don't say lemonade...lemonade doesn't come out! I have never cut a lemon and got lemonade. You squeeze a lemon and you get lemon juice. Squeeze it hard enough and you get lemon pulp. After it is squeezed, that lemon looks pretty bad. To get what is inside out, the outside takes a beating. That is the picture Paul is painting.

I don't know how in the world someone today can write a book and make Christian life seem like a walk through the park, or a sunset on the beach, or a retreat on a mountain. I don't get it. Paul paints the picture of ministry as on the outside, we are going to take a beating from time to time. Paul will say that the reason for the beating is so that we learn not to rely upon ourselves, but to rely upon God. In other words, God will ordain situations where life will put a squeeze on us, and our only dependency is Him. He loves you and me that much.

Paul Defends His Apostleship

The Corinthian church was a metropolitan. There were a lot of educated and wise people there, so when Paul showed up looking like he looked; I mean he wasn't Mr. Greece, so to speak. He didn't have a powerful oratorical skill, though he sounded like it when he wrote.

Have you ever read a book by someone, then had the privilege of hearing them speak, and you ended up disappointed? I remember being at a Southern Baptist Convention one time, and they had a scholar scheduled on the program. They gave him the highest honor of the last speaking spot. All day long, we had listened to men like Charles Stanley and Adrian Rogers. This speaker took the podium and he emptied the conference of pastors. He wrote so well, but he spoke so poorly.

Paul did not fit the bill of their idea of an apostle to the Corinthian church. Therefore, some others had come into the church and they are using their power of rhetoric and oratorical skills to pull the Corinthian church away from the Apostle Paul. So he was writing this letter to defend his apostleship. Just so the Corinthian church gets the picture, he says he is thankful to God that he is in that triumphant procession.

The Fragrance of God

You see, Corinth was part of the Roman Empire, and the Roman Empire had a way of honoring its generals of the highest level. The highest honor you could receive as a general in the Roman army was to receive a triumphal procession. Titus, the Roman general who marched on Jerusalem in AD 70, received a Roman procession when he got back home. If you were a Roman general, you had to lead the Roman soldiers into a battle as the Commander in Chief in the field. You had to win a victory and the victory had to be finished. The region had to be pacified. The Roman territory had to be expanded, and it had to be a foreign foe. At least five thousand of the enemy had to be slain. When you came back home, you would get a triumph of Rome. Some of the senators, some of the representatives, would start a parade through the streets of Rome. Following them would be musicians, other dignitaries, and then the priests would come swinging their incense. Following them would be the spoils of war, the people who were actually taken alive and brought back to Rome; they are usually the highest officials. Following them would be things brought back from that country so the city of Rome could understand what that country was like. There would be pictures of their ships and their fortified cities so that everyone would know how valiant the Roman army had been. When Titus got his Roman procession, they actually carried the candlestick from the Temple in the parade. Then, the general and his family would come, and his soldiers with them. As that censor was swinging back and forth and that smell was penetrating that city of Rome, to the Roman citizens, to Titus, to the soldiers, it was the smell of victory! But imagine what that smelt like to the captives. It was the smell of defeat.

The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat, that is the picture Paul paints of ministry. We smell. When God breathes us in, we smell like Christ. To God, the life you live in ministry smells like Christ! Paul says that God is taking you and me, who has the aroma of Christ, and He is spreading His knowledge, His fragrance throughout the world.

There are two groups of people in the world, those who are perishing, and those who are being saved. Paul talked about those who were perishing and those who were being saved in his first letter. The gospel is the power of God to those who are being saved, and it is foolishness to those who are perishing. It we as a stumbling block. So in his second letter, he returns to that theme to say that as God dispenses His fragrance, Christ to the world, that 'cologne bottle' is you and I!

I can't tell you how many times my wife and I have been in a mall and passed one of those counters, and she picks one of those bottles up and says, "Come here." I don't want to go over there! She sprays and sniffs, and says, "Oh that smells so good!" I am going, "Whew that stinks!"

To God, we smell like Christ, and Paul teaches that He wants the world to know about Christ. He is defusing His knowledge throughout the world through His Church. There is a group that when they get a whiff of us, oh wow, we smell just like Christ! They get the smell of life because they are the ones that are being saved. But the other group, the one that is perishing, when they get a whiff of us, they think, shoo, we stink! There are very few of us who run to things that stink. It is why the world doesn't run to the ministries of the Church. We stink to them. We are the aroma of death to them when they get a good whiff. Then why do we keep doing what we are doing? Because according to the Apostle Paul, there is a group of people who are not perishing, but are being saved; and when they get a whiff of us, it is the smell of life.

Can you imagine Paul bragging to the church at Corinth saying that he is the aroma of Christ? Can you imagine me beginning my sermon announcing to you that I, Ricky Cunningham, pastor of Hardin Baptist Church, am the aroma of Christ? That is why in chapter 3:1, Paul kind of backs down and says whoa, does it seem like I am bragging here? The Apostle Paul is doing this because he is under attack. Now he has their attention, and he paints this picture that the reason he is this way is because he is not living the Christian life on a beach somewhere; he is in a war zone and God has a purpose for his life, and that is to make Christ known.

It may be good that for the first time, we are finally getting a glimpse that the United States is not a Christian nation. Some of us still don't want to believe that. We still want to live like we are in peacetime, and everybody loves God and we are all on the same page! There is a war going on, and it starts with the mind of our young. Do you understand this?

A Letter from Christ

Then Paul asks if he needs a letter of recommendation to them, or from them. Imagine living in the ancient world and somebody just showing up on your doorstep and telling you who they are. You have no way of checking them out, so in the Biblical world, people carried letters of recommendation that were sealed by people of authority. Paul is asking if he needs one of those letters from them, or if he needs to go get one and give it to them. Then he basically asks, hasn't my ministry with you shown that you are my letter of recommendation? He said you are written in my heart! Has my ministry not shown you how much I love you and care about you? Then, he immediately goes to this place, and "*you are a letter from Christ.*" Then he asks who is sufficient for this?

Now, certain books in our New Testament are actually letters God wrote (through men) to a group of people. They read that letter and it hopefully changed their life. It painted a truer picture of God in Christ for them. But, there are people who have not read Paul's second letter to Corinth. As

much as you and I in the Church love Romans and love Ephesians, there are people who do not read Romans. Some of you are married to a person like that. Some of you are born to parents like that. Some of you work with people like that. Some of you have just had people move into your neighborhood and they have never read a letter that is in our 66 books of the Bible.

Paul is trying to say you are a letter from Christ to someone else, not written with ink on tablets of stone. In other words, God didn't put your picture on a billboard. He didn't flash your picture on social media. He didn't send out a tweet about you. He did a work of salvation in your life because He wanted you to be a letter to someone else and He is writing your story, your letter, from Him to them on the tablet of their heart by the Spirit of the living God. If you run a business, you could be a letter to your employees. If you have a co-worker, you could be a letter to him. If you have an unbelieving spouse, you can be a letter to him or her. What does your letter say? Is it as powerful as Paul's letter to the church at Rome, his letter to Corinth, Galatia, the Thessalonians, the Philippians, or the Colossians? Someone is going to have an opinion about God based on their reaction with you and me. We are in a war, and we are in the procession of Christ.

- **Ministry of Righteousness**

Paul wants you to know that God is writing this letter to someone in your life because you and I are ministers of a New Covenant. Paul says it is a ministry of righteousness, not a ministry of condemnation. When Paul uses "ministry of righteousness," he is referring to is that the Law killed people, condemned people. It brought them to realize they were sinners separated from God. But the Law could not empower them to change their life. Under the New Covenant that we have with God in Christ, where God has dealt, once and for all, with what is wrong with us and justifies on the basis of faith by His grace, it is a ministry of the saving activity of God. Do you understand that? There is a divine side of salvation, but there is a human

side of salvation too. God has chosen for us to be a part of His redemptive plan in bringing salvation to all the people of the world, starting where we are!

Now, there was some glory in the Old Covenant that killed. Moses went up on the mountaintop with God, and when he came down, he had to cover his face with a veil because the people could tell he had been with God. Paul puts a different twist on that story. When you read that story in the Old Testament, you come away thinking Moses has been in the presence of God and people couldn't stand to see that because the glory was so strong he had to veil his face. That's not the full story. Paul says the reason Moses veiled his face because that glory, as a minister of the Old Covenant, was fading away. When Moses went up on the mountain with God, yes, it affected him outwardly. But when he came back down to where the people were, they would have seen that the glory would have been gone in a few days. Moses couldn't sustain it. He couldn't keep that glow on his face. Paul teaches the Corinthian church that we minister with an unveiled face because there is more glory in the New Covenant than the Old Covenant. Under the New Covenant, we behold the glory of Jesus. We see Him as He really is!

- **Transformed**

As we enter into a relationship with Jesus and sustain fellowship with Him, we are being transformed. It is that Greek word, ***metamorphoo***, from where we get our English word, 'metamorphosis,' which talks about a caterpillar that feels the call of death, so he hides in a cocoon. While hidden, he dies to the world he knows, and emerges amazed. I think he has to look at himself and not believe he used to be like he was. It all happens in a private coffin. What God says, what Corinthians teaches us, is that God is not going to put a veil over you and do a work in your life, and then, all of a sudden, you emerge and woo the world with Christian virtue! No, God is going to transform those who know Christ, and slowly, little by little, the world will watch us being transformed as we behold Him, the

glory of the Lord, and the revelation of God to us. We will move further and further away from Adam, more and more into the image of Jesus Christ, and it happens right before a watching world. Wow! The glory, as a minister of the New Covenant, will never fade away because God will not quit working on you.

- **Light of the Gospel**

Now Paul throws in that if our gospel is veiled, it is not veiled in our life. It is veiled because there is a veil over the heart of those people who are perishing, and thus their minds have been blinded by Satan. It paints a picture I wish we could get. I don't know why the Church can't grasp that because of sin, man who does not know Christ is living in utter darkness. He can't see, and doesn't want to see. Paul says that he used to be like that until the God of creation, who commanded light to shine out of darkness, that same God calls the light of the gospel to shine in our hearts and opened our eyes to see the beauty of Jesus!

Jars of Clay

In chapter 4:7, Paul says we have this treasure, (God in Christ who is now in us) but we are in a jar of clay. They used clay pots in the Corinthian community. They would go to the marketplace and choose a clay pot, but over time, that clay pot showed signs of wear. Our old bodies are wearing out. How many times have you made the statement you wished you had of taken care of yourself a little bit better? We can't reverse aging. Paul is not just talking about what just naturally happens to the body. To live the Christian life in a war zone and be on the enemy line in hand to hand combat, it takes a toll on the physical part of a believer. Paul said my outer man is perishing, but inside, I am getting stronger and stronger.

I was talking to a friend of mine about this very thing. Some 40 or 50 years ago when his body was awesome and athletic, he led his high school basketball team to a state championship. They were undefeated in the Basketball Hall of Fame. But his inside man was a whole lot like Adam. He

was all about himself, it is one of the reasons he pursued basketball. That is not who he wants to be remembered for anymore. He wants to be remembered for who he is in Christ. That is what you and I desire also.

- **Away from the Body, Present with the Lord**

Now Paul faces his mortality. He said my inner man is being renewed day by day. The more I fight this battle the stronger I get, but I know one day this body is going to be gone. It is just like a tent, it is like changing clothes. He said to be in this body is to be away from the Lord, but if I could be away from this body, I would be with the Lord. He knew the same God who raised Jesus from the dead would one day raise him from the dead. Then, he would stand before Christ and give an account for his ministry in the body that God gave him, because the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Then, Paul emerges to the thought that he is not only a minister of a New Covenant, he is a member of a new creation. That is the souvenir I want us to take home. As ambassadors of Christ, we are ministers of a New Covenant and we are members of a new creation.

- **Christ Died for All**

You see, Paul says there are two things that motivate him. One is the terror of the Lord and the other is the love of Christ. When he thinks about what it is going to be like to stand before God who is an awesome God, it puts a little terror in him. But, it is the love of Christ that compels him. Paul's thought is that when Christ died, all died. When Christ died, He died for all, so in a sense, all die. Paul goes from man being in sin in darkness to man in sin being dead. He dies with Christ, that those who live...then, Paul makes a contrast. The contrast is all have died, but there is a group who died that lives. They get back up; they experience a spiritual resurrection! Those people who experience a spiritual resurrection live for God. They begin to understand not to regard man according to the flesh. Why do we care about what a guy with athletic ability thinks about things?

It is because we regard people according to the flesh. Paul says I won't do that anymore. I now understand that if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. I am no longer to look at people according to who they are in the flesh and believe that gives them certain authority over my life. I am going to view all man in Christ, and all who are in Christ are new creations. The former, the old, has passed away; all things have become new. If a person is in Christ, they have died to sin. They are alive to God and they are a member of a new creation, they are a member of the Church where things are different.

Ministry of Reconciliation

Then Paul says we have received the ministry of reconciliation. God has entrusted the message of reconciliation to us. The New Covenant was about the ministry of righteousness, how God makes a man who is a sinner right with Him. Now, Paul gives us another degree of our salvation. He tells us when we were not right with God, we were His enemies; but now, we have been reconciled.

Normally, if I do something wrong and my wife and I are at odds with each other, I have to do something to make it right if I am the one who blew it and caused the rift. I have brought many peace offerings in my lifetime. I have been on bended knee! You would not have thought I was the same guy who did what I did just hours before.

Now think about this...we blew it with God, but we are not the ones that bring something. He brings something. He brought His Son, and on that cross, He made Him to be sin. If you have this picture of God just laying our sin on Jesus and He is somehow shielded from our sin because He is carrying it around and it is foreign to Him, you missed it. Paul says He who knew no sin became sin, not a sinner, but sin. God judged our sin because Christ became our sin! You know what your sin is, you know what it has been, and He became sin.

Listen to me! God didn't just declare Him sin, God made Him sin; and God doesn't just declare us right, He makes us right! Those of us who have been made right have been commissioned as ambassadors, and God is speaking through us. Whoa! I want to believe God speaks through Bible, only. If he only speaks through the Bible, then somehow I am relieved! But I am not...He pleads with people through you and through me, a verbal message to be reconciled to Him. When a person wants to know what they have to do, you have to say you don't have to do anything because there is nothing you can do to undo what you did. But God dealt with what you did wrong when He dealt with His Son on a cross. All you can do is reach out the hand of faith and accept what He did for you.

- **Partners with God**

Then, Paul says something that I think some of us avoid. 2nd Corinthians 6:1 says, "*Working together with Him...*" There is a human side of salvation where we, who have been reconciled and have been commissioned to be ambassadors of Christ, work with God! That doesn't minimize who God is; it *shares* with us who God is. He calls us to partner with Him. He is going to speak through us as His Temple. In verse 2, Paul tells us the moment to stand up and let Him talk through us is right now. I have heard this verse quoted to sinners all my life that they realize that today is the day of salvation, now is the accepted time to receive Christ. That is not the context here. A sinner who is in darkness and deadness will not recognize that today is the day to be saved. The ones who should recognize that are those of us who are called ambassadors. Right now, this is the day and age in which you and I should be doing what we have been called to do, and that is be ambassadors. Let God speak through us to other people that they need to be reconciled to Him.

This is why we don't need to be yoked with unbelievers because if we get yoked with unbelievers, we will get caught up in the world. When the United States sends an ambassador to Iraq or Afghanistan, we do not want our ambassador to act like them; we want them to act like us. We don't

want them to speak what they speak, but speak what we speak. When the President wants to deliver a message, he doesn't go there himself; he speaks through his ambassador. So when his Ambassador speaks, it is the same as the President speaking. When we speak, we speak on behalf of God. How dare we live in the world and be like the world! We don't represent the world to God; we represent God to the world. If you deliver this message, it will take a toll of on you. The more you die in your body, the more marks the world sees of the life of Jesus Christ. We are ambassadors. Who you are an ambassador to? Who are you a letter to? Let us live out our calling.