

Lesson 4: II Corinthians 2:7-17

1) Forgiveness of the Offender, Continued (2:7-13)

a) Verses 7-8 (So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.)

i) Someone has hurt Paul and people he considers his children. Nevertheless, he does not gloat over the fact that this one has received his comeuppance and is weighed down by sorrow. He does not say, "I am glad that this one got what he deserves," Instead, he says, "Take him back." "Reaffirm your love for him." "Grant him pardon and comfort him."

ii) We can draw several insights from Paul's approach to this conflict.

(1) 1. He emphasizes forgiveness.

(a) C. S. Lewis has said, "We all agree that forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it."

(b) True forgiveness neither excuses the sin nor ignores what happened.

(c) Love may be unconditional, but forgiveness is not. John 3:16 teaches us that -- God loves the whole world, but he does not forgive the whole world.

(d) The forgiveness mentioned here followed and required repentance. If repentance had not been required, then why didn't Paul tell them to forgive the offender rather than expel the offender? The expulsion was intended to bring about repentance, which would then lead to forgiveness.

(e) God does not forgive us absent forgiveness, and he commands us to forgive others as we ourselves have been forgiven.

(2) 2. Paul also instructs them to comfort the offender.

(a) The verb "comfort" includes many different kinds of activities. They should deal benevolently with him, support him, and encourage him. In 1 Thess. 2:11-12 Paul uses the verb to describe his dealing with them as a father deals with his own children, "encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."

(b) "Comforting" is therefore not unrelated to spurring others to live worthily of the gospel. It does not mean making others feel comfortable about their past sin but leading them to godly sorrow where they find God's forgiveness.

(3) 3. Paul also underscores their need to show love.

- (a)** He tells the Colossians: "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (Col 3:12-14).
 - (b)** The reaffirmation of love requires some public, concrete expression rather than just mouthing expressions of love.
 - iii)** Paul knows what it is to be burdened by sorrow (2:3,13) and does not want to inflict such a state on anyone else unnecessarily.
 - (1)** He worries that the man might be overwhelmed (lit. "drowned," "swallowed up") by excessive sorrow (see Ps 69:1).
 - (2)** Christians are to live triumphantly, knowing that their sins have been forgiven by God; and living under an excessive, all-consuming guilt can only destroy life, not bring life.
 - (3)** The past disgrace may continue to burden the offender, but now he will not need to carry the load alone but will have his fellow Christians to bear him up.
 - iv)** The issue of church discipline is a difficult one, and the danger is that we will go to one extreme or the other.
 - (1)** On the one hand, we may not want to do anything when someone is guilty of an offense that brings disgrace upon or disrupts the community. We will bury our heads in the sand and hope that all the unpleasantness will soon go away.
 - (2)** Or we may try to substitute cheap grace for real grace by letting bygones be bygones without signs of genuine repentance.
 - v)** On the other hand, we may be tempted to go too far in discipline so that it becomes destructive rather than constructive.
 - (1)** We may try to turn the one who is condemned into a scapegoat and inappropriately cover up our own hidden sins by taking out our anger on this victim. It is equally wrong to withdraw from a penitent sinner as it is to wink at flagrant wickedness.
 - vi)** One final lesson -- if this person is the one guilty of incest who then confronted Paul in open rebellion, are we surprised that he repented? We should never write people off as lost while Jesus continues to look for their return. The elder brother likely wrote his younger brother off for good, and we

know how that story ended.

b) Verse 9 (For to this end also did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be obedient in all things.)

- i) Paul explains that the reason he wrote to them instead of coming in person and taking the disciplinary matters into his own hands was that he wanted them to accept responsibility and act.

(1) In 13:3 Paul states that they wanted to test his character. The word translated "proof" in 13:3 is the same word used here in 2:9. But Paul turns things around: They are to test themselves, lest he come and find that they have not met the test (13:5-7).

- ii) All worldly criteria that attest to character are invalid; one can only be attested if one is in Christ.

(1) Paul gives several criteria in this letter for confirming Christian character.

(2) It reveals itself when they discipline wrongdoers and forgive them after they repent (2:6-9); when they maintain the joy of Christian faith in the midst of affliction (8:2); when they demonstrate love (8:8) and respond with generosity to those in need (9:13); and when they do what is right (13:5-7).

(3) But the primary characteristic is being "obedient in everything." Paul does not say here to whom they are to be obedient, but in 10:5-6 he makes it clear that they must be obedient to Christ.

c) Verse 10 (To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ;)

- i) Paul continues his tactful approach by saying "if there was anything to forgive."

(1) If the offender were the one guilty of incest, Paul could not mean that sin. He must refer to the insult he received during his aborted visit.

(2) This comment shows that Paul did not hold personal grudges. But his charitable response is more than a strategy to keep friends. Paul recognizes that it would have been no victory if he triumphed personally in the dispute and left a church riddled with dissension.

(3) As for him, it is not a matter that a wrong directed against him be redressed but that the community understand correctly the principles

involved in the offense and act responsibly.

ii) "I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake" literally reads "in the face of Christ" and could have a variety of possible meanings.

(1) It may mean in "the light of the forgiveness which they had all received through Christ."

(2) But it is more likely that Paul refers to "in the presence of Christ" or perhaps as Christ looked on with approval and as a witness. It is comparable to the way the father of the prodigal son would have looked on with approval had his eldest son rejoiced at the repentance of his younger brother and received him with welcoming forgiveness.

(3) With this expression Paul also reminds them that forgiveness cannot be unmindful or indulgent. Christ is our judge, who assesses what we forgive too easily and what we refuse to forgive. We cannot forgive something that Christ has not forgiven, can we? If we pretend we can forgive an unrepentant sinner, then aren't we doing much more harm than good?

iii) Since the punishment was for their sake, the forgiveness also is for their sake.

(1) Paul's concern is always for the whole group and not for himself or even the offender. The forgiveness mends the differences between Paul and the individual, the individual and the church, and, most important, between Paul and the church.

d) Verse 11 (Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.)

i) Paul's final comments about the dispute puts it in the context of the cosmic battle between God and Satan.

(1) Satan is mentioned here and also in 11:14 and 12:7. He is identified as the god of this age in 4:4, Beliar in 6:15, and the serpent in 11:3.

(2) Another lesson for us is to ask Paul's question -- are we today ignorant of Satan's devices? Do we know how he uses the things of this world to lure us away from God? Are we perhaps unaware that we are already caught in his net?

(3) Satan is real! Satan is active! Satan has devices!

ii) The verb in verse 11 can mean "gain advantage" or "outwit," but it can also mean "rob." Satan will rob the church of a member.

- (1) If Paul refers to the man in 1 Corinthians 5, they may have turned him over to Satan, but Satan cannot keep him if he repents. If the church does not forgive and accept the contrite offender, however, Satan may cheat them of another soul.
 - (2) For Paul, Christians experience salvation as a part of a community, not as isolated free agents. If the community stubbornly blacklists persons who have sinned and genuinely repented, they bear responsibility if they drive them away from Christ and back into the clutches of Satan.
 - (3) We can only ponder, for example, what might have happened in Jesus' parable had the returning prodigal son run into his elder brother first rather than the outstretched arms of his forgiving father.
- iii) In this passage Paul reveals that showing forgiveness is one way for the church to close the door on Satan's evil designs to destroy it.
- (1) Satan's realm is one where immorality, the thirst for revenge, ruthlessness, heartlessness, and deadly rancor hold sway.
 - (2) Those who are in Christ have received God's free pardon, and they are transferred into a realm where faith, hope, love, and tender mercies rule. Satan is powerless before a united church filled with love and humble forgiveness.
- iv) Satan's goal is always to foil God's work of reconciliation.
- (1) Note how the wiles of Satan work in the Gospel narratives. Satan induces one disciple, Peter, to try to dissuade Jesus from obeying God's will in going to his death (Mark 8:31-33). When that fails, Satan coaxes another disciple, Judas, to help ensure Jesus' death by handing him over to the enemy (Luke 22:3; John 13:27).
 - (2) If we had one word to describe Satan at that time, it would be "frantic." How else explain the dream that Pilate's wife had to let Jesus go at the same time Satan was using Judas to hand him over?
 - (3) Satan can be behind both moral laxity (anything goes) and a callous inflexibility (everyone goes who does not toe the line).
 - (4) Satan can use the church's permissiveness in failing to chastise sinners in their midst to bring it to ruin, and he can use the church's rigidity in failing to forgive chastened sinners to bring it to ruin.
 - (5) All too often, "efforts to remove evil may lead to the ultimate triumph of evil." Therefore we should be wary because Satan can be at work even in

attempts to purify the church.

- (6) A situation that requires forgiveness is the time when Satan can work his worst and is the most dangerous. Satan fans the flames of hurt into an inferno of hostility. The next verses demonstrate how Satan schemes through the conflict between fellow Christians to undermine their preaching in the world.
- v) Paul's concluding greetings in Rom 16:20, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet," may seem ironic --- a God of peace crushing an enemy. But Satan is the enemy of peace. He is defeated by reconciliation. Christian love neutralizes all of Satan's powers over us and serves as an invisible, protective shield.
- e) **Verse 12 (Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord,)**
- i) These next two verses serve as a transition from his defense for failing to come as planned and his defense of his boldness and afflictions as an apostle of Christ.
- (1) Paul does not complete the story of the relief he felt when he finally saw Titus in Macedonia and received the good news about their godly sorrow and renewed zeal for him (7:5-16). Instead, he returns to the theme of the grief he suffered from his visit (2:3).
- (2) On the one hand, pointing back to his aborted mission to Troas reinforces his point that his failure to visit them as planned was not because he did not care for them but because he was overwhelmed with sorrow regarding them. It also makes clear that he does not make changes in his plans lightly; he was weighed down by anguish.
- (3) On the other hand, it provides a transition for the discussion of his many afflictions which have caused some in Corinthians to question his suitability and qualifications as an apostle.
- ii) Paul may have traveled to Troas to wait for Titus and, as in Athens, could not resist the urge to proclaim the gospel.
- (1) Troas was one of the few Roman colonies in Asia Minor and therefore had the status of a Roman city, as did Corinth, Ephesus, and Philippi.
- (2) The gospel of Christ is the catalyst that controls all that Paul does as an apostle. His purpose was to take the gospel to places where Christ has not been named (Rom 15:20), and he reports that "a door was opened in the Lord."

(3) "In the Lord" may express both the means by which the door was opened and the sphere in which the opportunity presented itself. He stormed through it to seize the opportunity but then quickly exited.

f) Verse 13 (I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my brother: but taking my leave of them, I went from thence into Macedonia.)

i) Paul candidly shares his anxiety, "my spirit could not rest," because he wants to convey how devastating his conflict with the Corinthians was.

(1) It sends the message to them how deeply he cares for them. Paul was burdened by worry because he did not know how they would respond to his letter, and that worry was compounded when days passed with no word from Titus.

(2) The unexplained delay may signify that all was not well at Corinth. Paul's worst fears may have been realized, and the situation had worsened. With no high speed communications system in the ancient world, waiting anxiously for news could be excruciating.

(3) Paul was therefore torn between Troas and Corinth, between putting out a brush fire in a church conflict and kindling the embers of new faith as an evangelist. Most ministers know firsthand that the demands and pressures of the ministry can pull them in different directions. Thus they may sympathize with Paul, who could not put his distress about Titus and the Corinthians out of his mind.

ii) These verses explain to the Corinthians why Paul was writing to them from Macedonia.

(1) He left for Macedonia perhaps after he realized that Titus was not on the last boat of the season (now autumn) and would now have to travel by land through Macedonia.

iii) This spiritual unrest so distracted him that it inhibited his work in Troas, so he was forced to make "a reluctant and solemn farewell." That good-bye does imply, however, that all was not lost; some converts were won (see Acts 20:6-12).

(1) This sad account reveals how interconnected Christians are.

(a) We cannot hurt one another without also hurting the work of God in the world. Paul does not discuss whether it was the right thing to do to abandon a place where God had made an opportunity. His uneasiness over the Corinthians, however, made it impossible for him to continue his work there.

(b) The implication is that Paul's change in plans was caused by the Corinthians and that they also were behind his failure to pursue fully a golden opportunity

for evangelism.

(c) Again we can see Satan's designs at work! The conflict with Corinth agitated Paul so much that it sabotaged a mission opportunity. His grief undermined his effectiveness and led him to exit doors that God may have wanted him to enter.

(d) Church strife never speeds the gospel's advance. The household of God must never be a house divided.

iv) We learn later in the letter that God's plan overrules, and Paul's anxiety was transformed into joy. But Paul breaks off this account about Titus and does not pick it up again until 7:5, where he exults over the good news that Titus bore from Corinth.

(1) In 7:5-16 Paul rejoices that they have renewed their longing for Paul and their bond with him (7:6-7), that they had repented (7:8-13a), and that his boast to Titus about the church proved true (7:13b-15). This reaction to the letter of tears reaffirms Paul's confidence in the church (7:16).

(2) What follows in the intervening sections is Paul's defense for his apostolic boldness in that letter and for his many afflictions, which seem to make such boldness incongruous if not completely inappropriate and groundless.

(3) The theological grandeur and complexity of what follows in chapters 3 and 5 have so occupied readers of 2 Corinthians that they have tended to eclipse the issue of the dispute, which almost ruined his relationship with the congregation.

(4) For this reason some readers may be surprised that Paul comes back to the issue in 7:4-16 since they may assume that it is not as important as his theological affirmations preceding it. But the matters of Paul's confidence, his integrity and apostolic boldness, the painful visit that precipitated the painful letter, and Titus's return frame Paul's arguments in 2:14-7:3.

2) 2. Overview of Paul's Defense of His Frank Criticism (2:14-7:3)

a) The transition in 2:14 from the previous verse is abrupt. Since 7:5 seems to continue the thought of 2:13, some have theorized that 2:14-7:4 is a separate letter. If, as I have argued, 2 Corinthians is a unity, it is necessary to ask how this sudden shift in Paul's train of thought fits his argument as a whole.

i) His outpouring of thanks to God (see 8:16; 9:15; Rom 6:17; 7:25; 1 Cor 15:57) may anticipate his joy over the happy result from the letter and Titus's visit (7:5-16), but Paul specifically gives thanks for all that God has done in his ministry.

- ii) He thanks God because God's designs are wiser and more powerful than Satan's (2:11) and because, in spite of failures here and there, the knowledge of God spreads everywhere through the apostolic preaching like an aroma.
 - iii) The preaching generates differing responses-both rejection which leads to death and acceptance which leads to life. The life-and-death impact of Paul's apostolic ministry causes him to ask who is adequate to shoulder the responsibility for proclaiming such a potent word from God.
- b) What follows in 2:14-7:3 is a long explanation that establishes Paul's justification for his boldness in his severe letter, in which he must have frankly confronted them for their moral failures.
- i) In this section he does not explicitly take on his rivals. Instead he defends himself against the complaints raised by some Corinthians that he overstepped the bonds of friendship by challenging their moral failures so directly and provocatively.
 - ii) He had to speak to them severely to bring them back into line, but he also had to be careful so they did not feel that he crossed the line of propriety by being too severe. They would then break off relations with him completely, Paul therefore justifies his license to be so frank with them in this letter while assuring them that he meant it for their own good.

3) **Paul's Sufficiency for a Ministry that Results in Life or Death (2:14-17)**

a) **Verse 14 (Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.)**

- i) The verb translated "triumph" is a Latinism (from triumphare) that has long puzzled interpreters.

(1) The setting of this metaphor is the elaborate celebration of victory for the conquering Roman general parading through the streets of Rome.

(a) See the handout for this lesson. Plutarch was a Greek historian who wrote about the "triumph" of Aemilius, a Roman leader who defeated Perseus, the last king of Macedonia.

(2) Normally, the verb is used intransitively with the meaning "to celebrate a victory by means of a triumph." But in the rare cases when the verb is used transitively, as here, it means to lead captives in a triumphal procession.

(a) Many interpreters, however, could not understand why Paul would picture

himself as a defeated captive. Consequently they have tried to make the meaning of the verb fit an interpretation more in keeping with the triumphal sweep of the gospel.

- (b) Calvin, for example, knew the common meaning of the phrase but contended that it did not fit his understanding of what Paul could have meant. He asked: How could Paul praise God for leading him as a vanquished and dishonored prisoner? How could he liken himself as an apostle to one chained and marched in disgrace to his death before the conqueror? Such incongruity led Calvin to argue on theological rather than lexical grounds that Paul must have meant "to triumph with." Paul praised God because God graciously allowed him to share in this triumph. Paul pictures himself as joining the procession as a soldier in God's victorious army.
 - (c) At first glance, this interpretation may seem to make better sense of the text, but we must allow the first century meaning of the word to guide our interpretation before trying to make it match what we think Paul ought to be saying.
- ii) Williamson's evaluation of the evidence leads him to conclude: "When followed by a direct personal object, the verb means 'to lead as a conquered enemy in a victory parade.' "
- (1) It was not used to refer to those who participated in the procession as members of the army. If Paul's use of the verb accords with its common meaning, he does not represent himself as a garlanded, victorious general nor as a foot soldier in God's army who shares in the glory of Christ's triumph. Quite the opposite; he portrays himself as a conquered prisoner being put on display.
 - (2) He was previously God's enemy but is now defeated (Rom 5:10; see Phil 3:18) and being led to death in a display that reveals the majesty and power of God and effectively proclaims the gospel.
- iii) But how could Paul see himself as a conquered prisoner (now a slave) who is exposed to public ridicule?
- (1) Writers choose metaphors to stir the imaginations of audiences and to awaken new insight and inspire new wisdom. Paul was a master word painter, using metaphors in creative and arresting ways, as in 3:2, where he pictures the Corinthians themselves as his letter of recommendation written on his heart. The metaphor of the triumph can convey several things at the same time.
 - (2) **Lesson #1:** The imagery presupposes God's prior victory and fits well with Paul's theology that before becoming followers of Christ we were all "enemies of God" (Rom 5:10).
- (a) Paul himself bemoans his past as a persecutor of the church of God who

sought to destroy it (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13). Christ had to conquer him and did.

- (b) The purpose of the Roman triumph was to flaunt the power of the victorious army and nation and gods. The celebration reinforced the mythology of "the ruler as the invulnerable victor and guarantor of the world order." The victory was "proof" of the unique and godlike nature of the ruler" and reaffirmed for one and all that the gods were on their side.
- (c) Captured prisoners were exhibited to exalt the might of the triumphant general and bring glory to the gods who won for him the victory. By applying this image to God, Paul asserts that the Roman ruler is not the invulnerable victor and guarantor of world order. That role belongs only to the God who is fully revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and proclaimed by the apostles.
- (d) The image points to God's absolute sovereignty over the world. Later in his argument, Paul will say that we have this treasure, the knowledge of God's glory, "in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (4:7) and that the purpose of "the grace that is reaching more and more people" is to "cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God" (4:15). Paul pictures himself as a previously defeated enemy of God being led in a triumph that reveals and heralds God's majesty and power.

iv) Lesson #2: This interpretation also interjects the idea of Paul's suffering and fits the immediate context in which he wishes to justify to the Corinthians his own perils and afflictions, most recently, in Asia and Macedonia.

- (1) Some Corinthians were overly enamored with power, success, and triumphalism; and to them Paul's suffering exposed his impotence which, in turn, cast doubt on his power as an apostle.
- (2) This metaphor fits the wider context of his dealings with the Corinthians, who regarded him as a figure of shame, regularly exposed to ridicule. In 1 Cor 4:9-13 he directly confronts their disapproving attitude toward him:
 - (a) For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.
- (3) He is "always" being led to death (see 2 Cor. 4:10); and some in Corinth have asked, How can divine power be revealed in such human adversity and misfortune? They apparently have a myriad of guides (1 Cor 4:17), and the Corinthian dissidents do not see any need to listen to an absent Paul, who did not baptize them, appears so flawed in comparison to

others, and seems so handicapped by unrelenting suffering.

- (4) Witherington points out the irony that Paul's humble view of himself as God's captured prisoner and slave probably lies at the root of the Corinthians' alienation from him. He contends, "They were looking for a leader powerful in speech, deeds, and personal presence, that is, one who exudes the self-confidence of an agent of God."
 - (5) I would argue, instead, that the Corinthians disputed whether someone who suffered as much as Paul should assert the authority he did in his letters. It is not that they want a more forceful apostle; they question whether one so forceful and bold as Paul is in his letters has the right to be so. Where does he get such authority and boldness to tell them what they must do?
 - (6) Paul insists that his suffering does not nullify his power as an apostle but that it reveals more clearly the power of God. The central argument in this section is how God's glory is manifest in him through his suffering, and the theme of power through weakness emerges in 4:7-5:10; 6:3-10.
 - (7) Paul asserts through this image of being led in a triumph that God does not make Christ's followers winners, as the world defines winners, but instead captures them and leads them as prisoners in humiliation. But he would rather be God's prisoner and slave than Satan's vice regent in a promenade leading to eternal damnation.
 - (8) God's gracious and sovereign reign wrests victory from seeming defeat and bestows life instead of death. As Christ triumphed by dying a humiliating death on a cross, Paul triumphs with God as one who has been defeated. With this metaphor, Paul subtly refutes any criticism of his ministry by turning it into a cause for thanks to God.
 - (9) Paul's critics regard him as inferior and weak. He concedes his weakness but will not concede that he is inferior. As God takes the captive Paul in tow in the grand pageant showcasing God's power throughout the world, the knowledge of God emits a distinctive aroma that spreads everywhere. Being set aside as a minister of the new covenant who preaches the gospel gives him his boldness and confidence in wielding his authority.
 - (10) The cross determines both his message and his style of ministry, and those who preach Christ crucified cannot expect to be crowned with glory by the world which crucified him.
- v) **Lesson #3:** The metaphor also fits Paul's self-identification as a slave of Christ.

- (1) Being captured makes a man a slave.
- (2) In 5:14 Paul says the love of Christ "constrains" me. The verb used there could also mean "to take or hold captive," but the striking combination of words makes clear that "Paul is not 'led in triumph' by a vengeful deity." He has been captured by love.
- (3) That love revealed to him that deliverance can only come from the defeat of the old life. God rescues us by shattering the fortified walls of our own strength, wisdom, and rectitude and making us slaves to Christ. Paul's image therefore accords with what those captured by Christ have recognized through the ages. Martin Luther said: "God creates out of nothing. Therefore until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him."

vi) Lesson #4: The metaphor may also fit Paul's assurance of God's final rescue.

- (1) The prisoners of war being exhibited before the crowds knew that they were being led to their execution, which would come when the cavalcade reached its destination. Some were spared, however, in an act of grace by the one celebrating the triumph.
- (2) Paul knows God as his deliverer and comforter (1:3-7). God has rescued him from death and will rescue him from ultimate death (1:9-10; 11:23). He has been put on display as prime evidence of God's mercy. Consequently, he is not downcast or defeated but gives exuberant thanks to God. His defeat and submission to God does not result in his annihilation but his salvation. He is treated as one who is dying, and yet he lives; as punished, and yet he is not killed (6:9).

vii) Paul's joyous thanks to God derives from his understanding of the paradox of victory in Christ.

- (1) The image of the conquered slave exhibited as a showpiece of God's triumph matches his assertion in 12:10: "I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."
- (2) His conquest by God actually allows him to take part in God's triumphant march as one now reconciled to God.
- (3) Paul's theology is remarkable for its sense of paradox. He suffers with Christ in order to be glorified with him (Rom 8:17,37). Victory comes in defeat; glory, in humiliation; and joy, in suffering (Col 1:24). The wise must become fools to become truly wise (1 Cor 3:18): the rich one becomes

poor so that the poor might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).

viii) Paul chooses another metaphor in referring to the effects of his being paraded before others. The aroma of the knowledge of him spreads everywhere.

(1) The "him" could refer to God or Christ; but since the metaphor of light is used for knowledge of God in 4:6 in the last verse of this section, it is more likely that he refers to knowledge about God.

(2) Thrall comments, "Just as perfume spreads everywhere into the atmosphere, so the divine revelation is all-pervading."

(3) But as in Jesus' parable of the sower, the sower scattered the seed widely, but the soils where it lands are not equally productive. In some soils the seed is destroyed before it can even begin to take root; in others it is destroyed eventually. In Paul's metaphor the gospel's aroma permeates everything so that persons are forced to take notice. But what some find to be a sweet aroma, others regard as a stench.

b) Verses 15-16 (For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?)

i) In 2:14 Paul uses a metaphor that pictures himself being carried around as God's display of Christ to the world. In 2:15 he switches metaphors to affirm that he carries around the aroma of Christ pleasing to God.

ii) The noun changes from "fragrance", a neutral term referring to a smell of any kind, in 2:14, to "aroma" which refers to a sweet savor aromatic, in 2:15, and back to "fragrance" in 2:16. Paul is not the source of the aroma. It comes from his message about the cross of Christ.

iii) This image most probably derives from the Old Testament.

(1) After the flood, the pleasing aroma of Noah's sacrifice aroused in God a benevolent disposition toward humankind (Gen 8:20-22).

(2) But it is the self-offering of Christ on the cross that Paul believes has replaced all sacrifices: "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:2; see 2 Cor 5:21).

(3) This sacrifice that shows God's love for us is the sum and substance of Paul's preaching. The smell of death therefore permeates Paul's preaching and ministry.

- (4) What was seen in Jesus can now be seen in Paul -- namely the suffering that gives his ministry divine confirmation. The key phrase is "to God." Paul only cares that all he does is well-pleasing to God.
- iv) The image of a sweet aroma could have other associations in Paul's culture, and his first readers would have made the connections.
- (1) In ancient religious ceremonies, fragrances conveyed the ethereal yet keenly sensed presence of the deity.
- (2) During religious festivals when the image and accouterments associated with a deity were carted through cities in processions, cult personnel would spread incense or other aromatic substances along the way to announce the approach of the deity.
- (3) Duff suggests that as "the pleasing fragrance of Christ" Paul "depicts himself as the harbinger of the deity's presence because it is through him that 'the knowledge of God' is made known" (see 4:6). Paul will write later that God is making his appeal through us as ambassadors of Christ (5:20).
- v) The message of the gospel creates a crisis of decision that does not allow anyone to remain neutral or to take a wait-and-see attitude.
- (1) In 1 Cor 1:18 he makes a similar appraisal: to some who are being destroyed the word of the cross is foolishness, but to others who are being saved it is the power of God.
- (2) How persons respond to the gospel determines whether their final fate is eternal life or eternal death.
- (3) The use of the present participles, "those who are being saved" and "those who are perishing" would argue against any idea that they have been predestined for one or the other. They are being saved or destroyed because they choose to accept or reject the message.
- vi) We do not normally think about an odor producing death or life, but such an idea did conform to ancient perceptions. We are aware that smells may warn of something deadly or attract us in some way.
- vii) Paul says that to some we reek of death. It is not surprising, since his message is Christ crucified and he himself is always being given up to death for Jesus's sake (4:11).
- viii) Modern translations miss a nuance of meaning by translating the phrases that read literally "the smell from death to death" and "the smell from life to life" as simply "the smell of death" and "the fragrance of life."

- (1) Paul may have more in mind than simply a deadly odor or life-giving fragrance. The first preposition he uses refers to the source or nature of the apostolic message; the second preposition refers to the results.
 - (2) Clement of Alexandria interpreted the phrases to mean that unbelievers regard the preaching of Christ's death on a cross as foolishness or a stumbling block and that this response results in their own death. Believers, on the other hand, do not view the cross as merely death but as something that offers them life, and this response leads to greater life.
 - (3) Paul concedes that many already have and will continue to disdain him, recoiling at the acrid stench of death that seems to hang over his ministry.
 - (4) But we should recall the epigram from Martial: "He smells not sweet who always smells sweet." The aphorism implies that the person who smells sweet all the time is trying to cover up some shameful foulness with some artificial scent.
- ix)** Paul does not smell sweet to everyone, and he cautions his readers not to dismiss him.
- (1) He always carries around the death of Jesus (4:10), and only those who are perishing are repelled by his message and by the messenger.
 - (2) To God, however, his ministry emits the sweet aroma of Christ's loving sacrifice. To those who are being saved, it is redolent of the life assured them by God.
 - (3) If any in Corinth disdain his apostolic suffering, weakness, or close acquaintance with death, then perhaps they have not fully understood the gospel or the significance of Christ's death.
- x)** The awesome responsibility of preaching a message that has such eternal consequences for others is a heavy burden to bear.
- (1) For some, the word about Christ opens up the way of life; for others, the same word causes them to become even more hardened in their resistance to God and destines them for destruction.
 - (2) Paul asks, Who is equal to it? The noun "equal" (hikanos) means "to be sufficient, large enough, or large in number or quantity, and also more generally to be fit, appropriate, competent, qualified, able or worthy."
 - (3) Paul does not give a direct answer to the question because it may seem obvious. No human could ever hope to be sufficient in himself for such a trust. Nevertheless, Paul implies that he is fully sufficient for these things,

but only by the grace of God.

(4) His own afflictions in God's service have taught him that he cannot rely on himself but only on God, who raises the dead. His confidence therefore rests in faith that God gave him his ministry in the new covenant, and when God gives one such a ministry, God also bestows the necessary sufficiency to discharge it.

xi) Since Paul compares himself with Moses in what follows, he may be alluding to the qualms voiced by Moses when God called him to lead Israel out of bondage.

(1) In the interpretive translation of the LXX, Moses says, "I am not worthy" (hikanos or sufficient; Exod 4:10).

(2) God responds by assuring him that the "one who gave a mouth to man" will "open your mouth" and will "teach you what you are to say" (Exod 4:11-12).

(3) In Paul's case God does much the same (see 12:9). God chooses him despite his personal insufficiency and gives him a divine sufficiency to fulfill the task assigned him.

(4) But Paul will go on to say that God works through him in a far more glorious way than God ever did through Moses because the ministry of the Spirit is far more glorious. As he did with Moses, God supplies the sufficiency, and it applies to the persuasion of his words and the power of his actions. The comparison, however, breaks down, and Paul will argue for a stark contrast between himself and Moses that derives primarily from his service in the new and greater ministry of the Spirit.

c) **Verse 17 (For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.)**

i) The word used here (correctly translated "peddle" by some modern translations) does not mean "to corrupt," "to water down," "to falsify," or "to adulterate."

(1) Instead, Paul refers to "selling the Word of God as a retail dealer sells his wares in the market."

(2) Paul avows that he does not treat his apostolic calling as a trade, and his refusal to accept material gain from his preaching the gospel was well known to the Corinthians and a sore spot with them (1 Cor 9:3-18; 2 Cor 11:7-11).

(3) He was not simply in "the business of preaching." His ministry has ultimate

significance both for himself and the world. He does not "market" the gospel with an eye for the bottom line.

- (4)** To survive in the marketplace the peddler must adapt to the market either by making sure that he has what people want to buy or by tricking them into thinking that they want to buy what the peddler has to sell.
- ii)** Paul also may be contrasting himself with the professional rhetorician.
- (1)** In Petronius's *Satyricon* a teacher of rhetoric tries to defend his means of earning his bread:
 - (2)** When spongers are trying to get a dinner out of their rich friends, their main object is to find out what they would most like to hear. The only way they will get what they are after is by winning over their audience. It is the same with a tutor of rhetoric. Like a fisherman he has to bait his hook with what he knows the little fishes will rise for; otherwise he's left on the rocks without a hope of their biting.
- iii)** Although the verb "to peddle" means simply "to engage in retail business," it was associated with deceptiveness and greedy motives.
- (1)** Isaiah decries the sellers who dilute wine with water (Isa 1:22, LXX).
 - (2)** Sirach cynically expresses the view that a merchant can hardly keep from wrongdoing, nor is a tradesman innocent of sin.
- iv)** Paul may have intended the image of peddling to evoke connotations of fleecing unsuspecting buyers in some way by charging too much, misrepresenting what is sold, or tampering with the wares in some way.
- (1)** In 4:2 Paul insists that he has "renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways." Paul's ministry is not driven by an eye for the bottom line; he does not "do deals."
 - (2)** The gospel he preaches is the unvarnished truth. He commends himself as a man of sincerity, who, before God, speaks in Christ with confidence (3:4) and boldness (3:12).
 - (3)** If, as we believe, Paul is defending his bold speech to the Corinthians, then he implies that he is not some vendor trying only to move the merchandise while compromising ethical principles just to make a sale. He can be honest, blunt, and forthright because he is not concerned for profit margins or market share. He does not water down his directives to make them more palatable or comfortable for the disobedient in Corinth.
- v)** "The many" need not be a reference to some particular group but may be a

contemptuous reference to "the mob of teachers."

- (1)** The description can apply to both Christian or pagan teachers.
- (2)** Concern for money undermines their sincerity as they tailor their teaching to the audience.
- (3)** It causes them to cultivate those with money and leads them to be preoccupied with success.
- (4)** By contrast:
 - (a)** Paul speaks as one who is sincere (see 1:12). His manner and methods are determined entirely by God's grace in his life, not by worldly cunning.
 - (b)** He speaks as one whose message comes "from God."
 - (c)** He speaks before God (4:2; 12:19) knowing that he will be judged by God.
 - (d)** He speaks as one who is "in Christ."
- (5)** What follows is Paul's bid to establish in his converts' minds not only the sufficiency of his ministry but its superiority. This ministry is centered on Christ and is bold in its open proclamation of Christ.