

11,6,25 2 Cor. 2:12-3:18, From Death to Life and Darkness to Light

We will be closing out chapter two tonight and moving into chapter three, so let's begin with the last section of chapter two (vs's 12-17)

Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia. Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses (lit. "manifests") the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

First, think about the 'humanness' of the decision Paul made. We'll learn in chapters 8 and 12 that Paul sent Titus to Corinth on several occasions, partly to help them grow, but also to find out how they were doing and communicate that back to Paul who was worried about them.

As we've seen in our previous studies, there were several people in that church who accused Paul of being a false apostle, of being someone who was only in the ministry for personal gain, and they said other things that were very painful character-assassinations. And none of that diminished Paul's love for them. He still loved them, and was so stressed out worrying about them, that he left an effectual ministry and went back to Macedonia to find Titus so he could find out how the Corinthians were doing.

That's what I mean by a "human" decision. Did God want Paul to leave his open-door ministry out of worry for the Corinthians? Should Paul instead have continued to work where fruit was being produced and trust the Lord to take care of the Corinthian church? Is this Paul letting his emotions and lack of faith in the Lord dictate his actions?

I don't know the answer to all those questions, but I do know that there's nothing wrong with caring so much about someone that concern for them drives you to do

things you might not ordinarily do – and apparently, the Lord didn't have a problem with that either.

We may or may not be making a mistake if we take some action when we have “no rest in our spirit” because we need answers about someone we care about. I believe God will overlook a mistake that is taken under those circumstances.

We don't see that kind of stress in Paul later in his life when he wrote the prison epistles, even though he was nearing a time when he'd write this in 2 Tim. 1:15; “. . . all who are in Asia turned away from me. . . “ I'm sure he was hurt deeply by that, but his deepening trust in the Lord kept his spirit from being overly stressed.

How many Christian parents have had to entrust their children to the Lord either not knowing how they are doing or knowing that they are in desperate need of a spiritual awakening? We can't live in a state of perpetual panic in spite of the fact that the greater our love is, the greater will be the pain we experience when our children are either suffering or are not in fellowship with the Lord.

At some point, panic has to give way to faith in Christ to do for them what we *can't* do. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, but He still had a course to run and a mission to accomplish – He had to move forward with a broken heart and not let anything turn Him away from what He had come to do.

These are the kinds of very human things Paul struggled with in his letters and visits to the church in Corinth. If we love as he did, we will have to struggle with the same things. I'd be more concerned about someone who is never worried or shaken when they see others floundering, than I would about someone having a possible over-reaction because deep concern for someone they love has moved them in a direction that might not be the best course of action to take.

The Lord overrides a million mistakes in our lives to ensure that those whose hearts belong to Him reach the goal God has set for them.

Here's another consideration along this line that we should always remember. These are some comments by Sparks on how God equips us to finish our course;

So long as we are in line with God's purpose His work can go on in us. What matters is not first of all our activity. God is more concerned with what is done *in* us than what *we do* for Him. He often reaches His end with us much

better when we are in a state of inactivity than in times of much work. The hand of the Potter was upon Moses when he was in the wilderness where he could not do much. During forty years he was just looking after a few sheep. That is not very grand. No doubt he wondered sometimes to what purpose he was there, whether his life had any value. But principalities and powers saw something and wondered at God's wisdom. God knew how to equip this man, how to get His way in that life.

That is true in the case of many a servant of God. God is working for the good; He is shaping His vessel. There is wisdom in all His dealings with us. But we have to see to it that we have no personal ambitions of our own. The clay has to be completely in His hands. If we are really here for God, we can be assured that He will reach His end, that He may work out His purpose in us.

We all have some part in God's purpose. Paul, when speaking of the church, illustrates it thus: "that all the body is fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplies." No part of the body is without function. Some parts may be very small; they nevertheless are equally important. We have to remember that God has called us for a purpose which will be realized as we abandon ourselves to Him. Whatever it may be to which He has called us, let us be ready and do it. A Holy Spirit possessed life is always marked by purpose. Nothing can be lost in such a life; let us not believe in mere generalities. There is something far more definite in God's thoughts for our lives. Let us abandon all personal desires, and be filled with the Spirit of urgency – time is short. Those who realize that they are called of God, will be wholly given up to it. Such no longer have any interest for the things of this earth. They have no time to lose.

So, in the first part of this section of 2 Corinthians 2 we see Paul's longing to connect with Titus and hear about the spiritual condition of the Corinthian church, and now, at the end, Paul reminds the Corinthians that he's not a "televangelist".

We are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

The word “peddling” could be translated “adulterating for gain”. Paul’s ministry was motivated by obedience to the Lord and by love for the Corinthians. He had no other agenda.

In between the beginning and end of this chapter, Paul uses a metaphor (“fragrance”) to explain an extremely important reality related to the effect that a growing believer has on those around him. Historically, this imagery draws from the ancient practice of burning fragrant incense as an offering to God.

The Pulpit Commentary has an interesting take on the principle of the “fragrance”. But first, I need to set the historical context for this metaphor;

“At the Roman Triumph celebration, the aroma of the incense was a token of victory and honor for the conquering legions, but it was a sign of sure execution to the captives in the parade . . . “

Now, here’s the explanation from the Pulpit Commentary;

To those who are perishing, the incense of the Name of Christ which our work enables them to breathe, seems to rise from death, and to lead to death. They are like the doomed captives, who, as they breathed the incense on the day of triumph, knew where that triumph would lead them before the victors can climb the Capitol. To them it would seem to bring with it not "air from heaven," but “wafts from the abyss”. So, Christ was alike for the fall and for the rising again of many. To some he was a Stone of stumbling which grinds to powder those on whom it falls. Paul is fond of intensified expressions, like "from death unto death," as in Romans 1:17; "from faith to faith," etc. (2 Corinthians 4:17). Similarly, the rabbis spoke of the Law as "an aroma" alike of death and of life. "Why are the words of the Law likened to princes (Proverbs 8:6)? Because, like princes, they have the power to kill and to give life. For those that walk on its right, the Law is a medicine of life; to those that walk on the left side, a medicine of death". Everything is as a two-edged sword. All Christian privileges are, as they are used, either blessings or banes.

Finally, J. Vernon McGee brings out the practical implications of this as related to God’s purpose in us;

Today the incense is ascending; the Word is going out. And we are a savor of life to some and a savor of death to others. This is the entire plan of the Christian ministry. We are not to corrupt the Word of God or distort it or make merchandise of it, but to give it out in sincerity as the Spirit of God reveals its truth to us.

One thing that got my attention as I was thinking about this was the fact that being entrusted with the Word of Life has eternal implications. Telling the truth divides humanity eternally. Each of our lives is an aroma to God that others react to, either in trust toward Christ or rejection of Christ. What we bring to others has eternal consequences.

Once a believer presents his body as a “living sacrifice” to the Lord (as we’ve seen in Rom. 12:1), he has the opportunity to build a life on that foundational decision. In the Romans passage, Paul calls this our “reasonable service of spiritual worship”. As important as our actions are in impacting others, the source of those actions is meant to have a spiritual cause or, as one author put it, “birthplace”.

The underlying principle behind what Paul is describing is this; the invisible Christ within us will be the Source of the image of Christ we are being conformed to in terms of character and nature. As that transfiguration takes place over time, we increasingly become the visible expression (or metaphorically, the fragrance) of the indwelling Christ.

Actions can be imitated; but if what we do is springing from who we are becoming in Christ, our actions are seen as a “service of spiritual worship” to God as well as a “fragrance” of the presence of Christ to those around us. I don’t know if you’ve ever “sensed” Christ in other Christians and I know that most unbelievers, if they did sense something different in us, would have a hard time identifying its Source, but the reality is there.

If Christ is radiating through us, then people whose hearts are open to the truth will be drawn to us and those who are antagonistic to the Truth will want nothing to do with us – or in some cases, they may even irrationally hate us.

John Kennedy (not the U.S. president) was a missionary to India, and in his book on Church history entitled, “The Torch of the Testimony” he wrote this;

In many countries today, there is great concern among large Christian bodies to make the Church popular. Every conceivable scheme is being brought into play in order to attract people to the Church. It is forgotten that the true Church can never be attractive to the world and was never meant to be.

The world is a spiritual system that is in full opposition to God. The Lord isn't trying to appeal to those who have fully locked into that system, He's calling people whose hearts are seeking something other than what the world offers *out* of the world unto Himself. That's why it's so important that what others see in us is not simply a moral improvement over the condition of mankind in general, but instead, they need to see, to sense, a spiritual fragrance that is unlike anything this world represents.

Paul makes one other statement about this at the end of vs. 16 that is essential if we are ever to actually become the kind of person who has this "life or death" impact on others – he wrote; "Who is sufficient for these things?" There is no expectation on God's part that you and I will ever achieve this 'aromatic' ministry to those around us using our own resources, our own strength or intellect. As we'll see in a future study, Paul reaffirms this in 2 Cor. 3:5; "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything (of value) as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God." As one author put it, "Throughout his epistles, Paul consistently implies that nothing but the grace of God could enable him to discharge the great duty laid upon him."

As I'm sure you know, there is an immense amount of failure and trial and error that all of us have to go through over the decades of our lives to get to the place where we have no confidence in ourselves to produce anything of true spiritual value. Heb. 11, for example, is a hall of fame of individuals who had reached a mindset that had caused them to transfer *all* of their faith from themselves to the Lord. Everything we're told about what they accomplished was done by walking exclusively by faith in God.

That's what "entering the rest" is all about. The Lord and the apostles were extremely active; they weren't sedentary, they just stopped depending on themselves to accomplish what only God could do – and by faith, they stepped into His will confident that what He had asked them to do, He would provide the inner resources necessary to make it happen.

On the surface, this is a simple concept; “It’s not I who live, but Christ lives in me. . .” (Gal. 2:20). But getting to the place where we understand what it means, personally and practically, is a challenge. And, of course, the enemy will do all he can, through deception, to keep us convinced that what we are doing is what the Lord would have us do, even when it’s not even close. I’ll let DeVern Fromke explain how this works;

Now to be sure, there are tens of thousands in our fundamental churches who loudly proclaim that Christ is all we need, that He is completely sufficient; that He is the *only* sufficiency we should have. That Christ is our center and circumference. These have become very popular slogans. But perhaps many have only learned these nice phrases and echo them as a parrot would. It seems quite evident that the real significance of Christ as our all has not dawned, for in the very next breath they launch into extensive methods and programs for accomplishing the work of God; immediately they start to search out patterns and principles for doing things – all of which are simply religious substitutes for Him.

Sparks once said that the organized church cannot understand anything that is not organized by man.

So, as I said, the concept of trusting the Lord alone for everything, is not complex; but discerning the difference between Christ as our life and Christianity as our life can be difficult. As we grow, we will need to pray that the Lord will bring us into situations that enable us to move beyond the *theology* of the exchanged life into the *experience* of it. He desires this for us even more than we do, we just have to let Him do whatever it takes to get us there.

Now, let’s go ahead with the time we have left, to move into chapter 3; we’ll start with vs’s 1-11;

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves,

but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

First, Paul feels compelled, once again, to defend himself against the accusation that he is not a true apostle; possibly even a false teacher.

It was customary at that time to have “letters of commendation” – (for us, in our time, it would be like “reference letters”). Churches knew enough about the enemy’s devices in trying to bring the trojan horses of false apostles and prophets into the Church that they had set up a system which required anyone claiming to be from God to have letters from men or churches they respected commending their ministry.

In typical Pauline sarcasm, he makes a very good point – the Corinthians were a group of people who were saved, who were Christians *only* because of Paul’s ministry – so, how could they question his validity as someone sent to them from the Lord? They had apparently asked for “letters, epistles, of commendation” about Paul, and even asking for that was something they had not thought through. It made no sense at all since they were living proof of the effectiveness of Paul’s gospel. And, as Paul wrote, the fruit of his ministry among them wasn’t some kind of external, “written on stones” manipulation drawing them into a religion of some kind, it was the activity of the Spirit of the Living God bringing spiritual life to them.

In making his argument about this, Paul reaffirms his own realization that it wasn’t *his* sufficiency or charisma-empowered presence and preaching that brought life to them; it was the sufficiency of Christ. It wasn’t their intellect or emotions that were being targeted by “the letter of the Law”, it was the life-giving work of the Spirit penetrating their hearts.

And Paul uses this initial defense as a springboard to instruct them about one of the most important principles they would ever learn; the distinction between the Old and New Covenants. Simply put, the Old Covenant through Moses was what Paul calls, “a ministry of death”; in contrast, the New Covenant was a ministry of life and the manifest glory of Christ.

But that needs a current application; not necessarily because we are in danger of forsaking Christ and embracing Judaism, but because the New Covenant can be Judaized; a spiritual covenant of life in relationship with God can be set aside and replaced with a temporal, legal, external religion; which in our generation is called “Christianity”.

I found an explanation on the idea of a “Judaized” Christianity; see if this helps clarify what that means;

You can have Christian law just as much as you can have Mosaic law; you can be in bondage in Christianity just as much as men were in Judaism. Christianity can be made into an imposed system just as much as Mosaic law was, and there are many Christians today who live under the fear of the "Thou shalt" and the "Thou shalt not" of a legalistic conception of the Christian life. You can take the Bible as God's standard for your life and try to fulfill it and yet still be burdened with a sense of constant failure. It is God's standard, and it is a very exhaustive one which leaves no part of the practical life untouched, but those who make the effort to try to live up to it only end in disillusion. No, it is not just a matter of a Book but of a Person, the Person who did live up to that standard, absolutely fulfilling every least demand with the most perfect success, so satisfying God to the full. By His death He has delivered us from the bondage of legal demands. This same Person now lives in us by His Holy Spirit, seeking to work out that perfect will of God not on the basis of some binding instructions from without but as a living force within. We have the law written in our hearts. To be in Christ is a matter of Life and not of legalism.

There is a major difference between a “living Force within” us and “instructions from without”. Legalism is an externally imposed religion. It is conformity to written rules and regulations that are accepted by the majority as the way we are supposed to live. The life of Christ is within us, not on the outside; its organic,

living, growing. We don't do God's will because we see it written on tablets of stone; we do His will because *the desire* and *the knowledge* needed to do His will is becoming stamped on our souls as we study His Word and grow spiritually into His image.

The glory of God that Paul talks about is being generated from within us, not imitated by external behavior that seems to match Biblical imperatives.

And you can take that application of our individual lives and expand it to include corporate assemblies or 'churches'. Here's how that would look. These comments are by Sparks;

Christianity has become a tremendous buildup of things which were not at the beginning. The Christianity which we know today is a very complicated thing. The hands of men have come upon the things of God, and men have tried to build this great thing according to their own judgment. And so we have all the confusion, all the divisions, and all the complications. Christianity has become its own great hindrance.... You will go about this country, you will go about this city, and you will see these great religious buildings with a cross at the top. And when people enter those buildings they look very reverent. And they think that this is a sacred building. If you interfere with anything there, it is called sacrilege. To God that is all nonsense. It does not mean anything at all. The only thing that matters to God is not the wonderful building and all the wonderful things inside the building, and not even the cross on the top. The one thing that matters to God is whether He is there. Is God Himself present in this place?

You probably all remember this passage in Acts 7:48; "The Most High does not live in houses made by men." He doesn't live in anything made by men – He indwells us both individually and corporately, and His Life, His glory, is expressed outwardly through us *if* we are willing to die to the self-life, especially a *religious* self-life, in order to give the Holy Spirit freedom to manifest the indwelling life of Christ through us.

And the one thing that shuts that whole process down; the one thing that takes something alive and turns it into a ministry of death, is legalism – the attempt by man to do what only God can do. Christianity has become exactly that; it is a man-generated organization rather than a Spirit-generated expression of Christ.

What I want to share now is another example of what the author was able to see in terms of reality simply because of mature spiritual discernment that the Lord gave him over a lifetime of seeking to understand both what the Church is and what it's not. Here's what he wrote;

It seems a terrible thing even to think, but as we have touched so very much on what is called 'Christianity' we are bound to believe that vast numbers who call themselves Christian are in an utterly false position, and the system itself has become so largely an earthly, traditional, formal, and unspiritual thing. Consequently, this world-wide shaking to separate that which is made by God from that which is made by the hands of Man; the shaking that the Lord promises to accomplish at the end of this Age, is quite necessary and will be justified.

We know that what Christ wants most for His people is that they become a ministry, a "fragrance" of Life to others, and we know that can't happen unless that Life of Christ Himself is radiating from them. Whether it's called Christianity or something else, any system developed by man, and which makes man's efforts the foundation of it's religious expression is spiritually impotent, because like Laodicea, Christ is forced outside and must knock on the door to obtain entrance and fellowship.

If Paul were here in our generation observing what Christianity has become, he would go to war against it. He would force a decision – do you serve Christ or do you serve Christianity; you cannot serve both?

In 2 Cor. 3:3 we read this: "(You are) an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart." Paul's focus is on the heart, not the external religious expression of what is only a "*form* of godliness". And in 2 Cor. 3:15-18 Paul issues a warning and a repeated explanation of what the Lord desires for us;

Even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when (the heart) turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Those involved in a Judaized Christianity are blind to their spiritual condition and would vigorously oppose anyone who suggested otherwise. Their heart is closed to the Truth. But if they open their heart, that veil is taken away and they will find true freedom in Christ, because “the Truth shall make you free”.

And the way this freedom is brought to us is by the transformative work of the Spirit in us as we behold (lit. “gaze upon”) the glory of the true, *uncommercialized* Christ through His Word. This results in our inward transformation into the image of the One we behold.

It’s an incredibly freeing thing when a participant in the religion of Christianity sees Christ. Here’s another explanation of what I mean;

We, by the Holy Spirit, receive a new faculty of sight. You know how much there is in the New Testament about having our eyes opened. Jesus pointed to this principle by opening the eyes of the blind. He was illustrating the great spiritual truth that in the new creation, we get a new faculty of sight. And every truly born-again child of God ought to be able to say, "Whereas I was blind, now I see." The truth about a child of God is that at some point they will be able to say, "Now I see." They have discovered the faculty of spiritual sight. It goes by different names in the New Testament. Sometimes it is called spiritual discernment. Sometimes it is spiritual understanding or spiritual perception, but whatever the name is, it means the same thing: I now see what I was not able to see before as to the true meaning of Divine things.

We can do all we can to try and explain that, but the reality is, it’s more than an issue of doctrinal or theological understanding; it’s a spiritual experience given to open hearts, unveiled hearts, enabling them to see through the surface of things to the reality underneath; to be able to penetrate behind the external Christian religion and see the presence of a living Christ in those who are awake, and also to see the blindness of those who are standing in a false spiritual position before the Lord.

There are few things that even come close to being as important as this is as an object of our prayers. Praying for the scales to drop from our eyes, to stop seeing “men as trees walking” and see them clearly; that is an experience of incredible emancipation from darkness and confusion.

By using the examples of the Old and New Covenants along with several illustrations of ministries related to spiritual death versus life and blindness and a veiled heart versus the inward transformation of the Spirit, Paul is desperately trying to communicate these truths to the Corinthians so they can be set free from tablets of stone and enter into the inward revealing of the indwelling Christ.

Ok I'm going to close with some personal comments on what we've seen in this chapter, and I want to make some suggestions, just to provide some practical guidance on what to do about it.

So, let's say all of this makes sense and you find yourself in a church that is the "Christianity" we've been talking about. It may be that you are to "come out of the camp" as we've seen by application in Heb. 13:13. But it's also possible that the Lord wants you exactly where you are, because the people in that place are your brothers and sisters in Christ, and besides the need we all have for fellowship, how are any of them going to see what you've seen if everyone who *does see* the spiritual reality of the Body of Christ leaves and isolates themselves in cloisters of so-called 'enlightened' believers?

If the Lord makes it clear to you that there is no hope of reaching those who assemble together in the Church you're in, then absolutely, try to find a place where that hope exists. But if you are uncertain about the receptivity of those around you and you aren't sure that door is closed, then continue to fellowship and instruct and pray – and wait upon the Lord to see what He does.

I have been in churches where, in spite of the spiritual deadness of the leadership, there were people who were open, and many of them have now been friends for many years. I've been in other churches that made it clear that they would greatly prefer that I leave, which I did.

Whenever we are uncertain what to do, the safest is to pray and wait for the Lord to bring some clarity to us.

And while you're waiting for direction, just make absolutely sure you are supplementing what you hear on Sunday morning with teaching from other sources that can take you deeper into God's Word. If you don't, the Church you're in will eventually spiritually assimilate you. It will be gradual and difficult to detect, but I've seen it happen way too many times- and it's tragic. You can become blind

to things that were once crystal clear simply by the constant exposure to, and influence of, watered down teaching from the pulpit. That is one of the greatest dangers we all face, and it's also the real meaning of why the Church is in the condition it's in. Apostasy isn't always based on false doctrine; sometimes it happens simply due to a lack of *in-depth* instruction of *sound* doctrine.

So, please continue to pray for clarity and direction; God is more than willing to provide both so that we can continue to move forward in this life.