

Down But Not Out
2 Corinthians 2:14b-17
Part 7

A few years ago I went to Disneyland with several of my grandchildren. And while I was waiting in line for one of the rides I heard a commotion behind me and I turned around and saw Kobe Bryant and his daughter being escorted to the front of our line by a fairly large number of Disneyland security staff.

Now if you are not a Laker's basketball fan you may not even know who Kobe Bryant is, but believe me when I say in the sports world he is a very big deal.

And you should have seen the people scurrying about trying to get a better view of him. It was hilarious. But there was someone of much greater importance there that day other than Kobe Bryant.

And who was that? Me! I may not look particularly great. I may not be particularly smart. I may not be particularly well known, but I am, by the grace of God, an ambassador of Jesus Christ. I am representing Him in this world and hopefully you are as well.

Therefore when we are at Disneyland or any other place, our desire, our single desire, should hopefully always be to make Him known, not only by allowing our lives to be the channel through which His life would flow, as we die to ourselves daily, but also that we might be His mouthpiece to deliver His message, or in other words, His mouthpiece to deliver the gospel message.

Will Kobe Bryant do this work? No! But hopefully we will do this work. And as we hopefully do this work we can be certain that our lives will not simply affect a few people but every person whom the life and message of Christ touches through us, His ambassadors and this brings us back to our study of **2 Corinthians** and more specifically to our study of **2 Corinthians 2:12-17**. And what is the question we are seeking to answer? The question that we are seeking to answer is this:

What do we learn from the Apostle Paul about ministry in 2 Corinthians 2:12-17 that will help us persevere when faced with difficulties?

First of all, we learned from the Apostle Paul that no matter how gifted we might be as a minister, the stresses, strains, and disappointments of ministry will at times become overwhelming (2 Corinthians 2:12-13).

Let me read for you **2 Corinthians 2:12-13**. **“Now when we came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, (13) I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.”**

So how did Paul in these two verses communicate to us that no matter how gifted we might be as a minister, the stresses, strains, and disappointments of ministry will at times become overwhelming?

Paul communicated this particular lesson by giving us insight into an intense personal struggle that he himself endured while in Troas, that did, in fact, overwhelm him, a struggle that was associated with his ministry to the Corinthians. And how intense was this struggle?

It was so intense that Paul, out of concern for the Corinthians, turned his back on the door that God had opened for him in Troas in an attempt to intercept Titus in Macedonia. And why would he have done this? He would have done this so that he might be able to hear from Titus how the Corinthians were doing. In fact, the struggle became so intense that later in this epistle, in **2 Corinthians 7:6**, Paul indicated to His readers that while he was in Macedonia again waiting for Titus that he had become depressed. Ministry is not easy and it will certainly at times become overwhelming, and, in fact, will certainly at various times involve suffering. So, what else have we learned about ministry from the Apostle Paul in **2 Corinthians 2:12-17**?

We also learned that the sufferings that we endure as the captives of Christ in the performance of our ministry is the means by which His triumph over us is put on display (2 Corinthians 2:14).

And where do we see this particular truth in relationship to our text? Let us now go to **2 Corinthians 2:14** and read the very first part of the verse. **“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ.”**

Yes, Paul was knocked down in **2 Corinthians 2:12-13**, but he was not knocked out. For we see Paul at the first part of **2 Corinthians 2:14** praising God. And why was he able to do this? He was able to do this because even in the midst of all that he had suffered as an apostle, he continued to see God as leading him in triumph in Christ. And what did he mean by this?

The meaning of this verse comes alive for us when we recognize the word that Paul chose to use in **2 Corinthians 2:14**, that is translated, **“leads us in triumph,”** is a very technical word that pictures for us a Roman triumphal procession that would take place after a great military victory, a procession that would not only display all the treasures that the Romans had secured but their captives as well, captives that would, in fact, be very shortly put to death.

And this is exactly how Paul, I believe, wanted us to see him. Not as a captive of Rome but rather as a captive of Christ who was being led by God on a death march.

Let me read for you once again the words of a man named Scott Haffemann concerning this verse.

Paul’s metaphor in 2:14 may be “decoded” as follows: As the enemy of God’s people, God had conquered Paul at his conversion call on the road to Damascus and was now leading him, as a “slave of Christ” (his favorite term for himself as an apostle), to death in Christ, in order that Paul might display or reveal the majesty, power and glory of God, his conqueror.

We might at times, as the captive of Christ, look pretty pathetic to the world as we in obedience to Christ deny ourselves, as we in obedience to Christ take up our cross, and as we in obedience to Christ follow Him, but in the midst of whatever suffering might come to us as a result of us doing the very things he has called us to do, let us give thanks very much in the same way as Paul was able to give thanks in **2 Corinthians 2:14** knowing that as God

leads us in His triumph over us in Christ on this death march that His power, majesty, and glory is being put on display before the whole world.

So, what have we learned so far about ministry from the Apostle Paul in **2 Corinthians 2:12-17**? First of all, we learned from the Apostle Paul that no matter how gifted we might be as a minister, the stresses, strains, and disappointments of ministry will at times become overwhelming (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). And secondly, we learned that the sufferings that we endure as the captives of Christ in the performance of our ministry is the means by which His triumph over us is put on display (2 Corinthians 2:14).

But now we are ready to move on and to consider a third thing that we can learn from the Apostle Paul about ministry from **2 Corinthians 2:12-17**. And what is this third and final thing?

We also learn that when God is leading us as the captives of Christ in His triumphal procession, we will have a profound and widespread impact (2 Corinthians 2:14-17). Not just on a few people but on everyone who comes in contact with us.

And what is my hope for this message? My hope is that we, as the captives of Christ, who are being led by God in His triumphal procession, might be given the grace to understand our strategic importance in advancing God's eternal plan and embrace this work enthusiastically even though it may at times be difficult. This is my hope.

But let me, before I begin to expand on these verses, make sure we all understand that saying that we are a captive of Christ, and being a captive of Christ may be two different things. What do I mean?

If we truly are a captive of Christ and have been conquered by the gospel of Christ then we will in obedience to Christ be seeking to spread the gospel of Christ wherever He may lead us just as Paul and His associates were doing when Paul wrote the epistle of 2 Corinthians.

So now with this understanding, how do we know that we have such a strategic importance? Let me read for you the words of Paul immediately after he had given thanks to God for the opportunity, as one of Christ's

captives, to be led by Him in His triumphal procession in the first half of the verse.

And then what did he say in the second half of **verse 14**? “ **And manifests through us** [or in other words, manifests through us as the captive of Christ in this triumphal procession] **the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place. (15) For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; (16) to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? (17) For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.**” So do these verses communicate to us that those who are being led by God in His triumphal procession as the captives of Christ and who are being put on display by Him before this world will have a profound and widespread impact? Absolutely! And how does Paul communicate this? Paul communicates this profound and widespread impact in two different ways.

First of all, Paul communicated the profound and widespread impact of the captives of Christ in God’s triumphal procession by referring to the sweet aroma that would be flowing through them (2 Corinthians 2:14).

Isn’t this exactly what Paul said in the latter half of **verse 14** when he said, “**And manifests through us** [or in other words, manifests through us as the captives of Christ in His triumphal procession] **the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place?**”

So how did Paul, first of all, communicate the profound and widespread impact of the captives of Christ as God led them in His triumphal procession? Paul, first of all, communicated the profound and widespread impact of the captives of Christ as God led them in His triumphal procession by speaking of the sweet aroma that will flow through them when God is leading them in His triumphal procession.

So why did Paul choose to draw upon the imagery of the “sweet aroma” to make this particular point? First of all, the imagery of the sweet aroma was very consistent with the imagery of the triumphal procession. When a Roman military victory was being celebrated, not only would the treasures that were captured be displayed and the people that were captured be

displayed, but there would also be the burning of incense along the processional route filling the air with a sweet aroma. So why would Paul choose to use the imagery of the “sweet aroma” to make his point? First of all, the imagery of the sweet aroma was consistent with the imagery of the triumphal procession.

But even more importantly, the imagery of “the sweet aroma” powerfully communicated the profound and widespread impact of the captives of Christ as God led them in His triumphal procession.

And why is this? Odors and fragrances are intrusive. If you were driving down the freeway at 70 miles per hour, and if a skunk had suffered some kind of displeasure somewhere along the highway in the last two hours, would we know it? Absolutely! Would everyone in our car know it? Absolutely! Would everyone in the car ahead of us as well as behind us know it? Absolutely! Odors and fragrances are intrusive. They will invade our space whether we like it or not.

So clearly, when Paul chose to use the imagery of the sweet aroma, he did this not only because the imagery of the sweet aroma was consistent with the triumphal procession, but the imagery of the sweet aroma also powerfully communicated the profound and widespread impact that Paul believed that the captives of Christ would have wherever God might lead them in His triumphal procession.

And the same thing should be true for us as well if we are, in fact, the captives of Christ and if we are also, in fact, being led by God in His triumphal procession.

In other words, if we are, in fact, the captives of Christ and are, in fact, being led by God in His triumphal procession, then we like Paul and his associates will be having the same profound and widespread impact as they did. In other words, we should be giving off this same sweet aroma.

So, what exactly is this sweet aroma that should be flowing through us as God leads us in His triumphal procession? The verse actually tells us. So let us continue to read the verse. **“And manifests through us [the captives of Christ who are being led by God in this triumphal procession] the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.”**

So who is the “**Him**” referring to? The “**Him**” could refer to God the Father of Christ or to Christ Himself. But I believe in light of the fact that in the first half of **verse 14** Paul describes us as being led by God in His triumphal procession rather than by Christ, it would appear to me that the “Him” in the latter half of the verse is referring to God rather than to Christ.

So how does Paul initially communicate to us our profound and widespread impact? He refers to us as the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him, or in other words, the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God.

When we purpose ourselves as an ambassador of Christ to spread the gospel of Christ by denying ourselves daily in order to allow the life of God’s Son to flow through us, then all those who come in contact with us will come in contact with God Himself. Isn’t this what Jesus said to Philip in **John 14** when he said to Philip, “**If you have seen me you have seen my Father?**”

Can the same thing be said about Kobe Bryant or any other person other than a captive of Christ who is being led by God in His triumphal procession? No! If the world is going to see God, it will only be as the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God flows through the captives of Christ.

And not only will the world only be able to see God through the captives of Christ, they will only be able to see Christ through these captives as well. And this leads us to a second way that Paul communicated the profound and widespread impact of the captives of Christ. And what was this second way?

Secondly, Paul communicated the profound and widespread impact of the captives of Christ in God’s triumphal procession by referring to them as the fragrance of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 2:15-16**. “**For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; (16) to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.**”

Are we, the captives of Christ, the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God? Yes! But we are also the fragrance of Christ as well.

When we, as ambassadors of Christ, seek, as the captives of Christ, to spread His gospel by denying ourselves daily so that His life might flow through us, then all those who come in contact with us will come in contact, not only with God Himself, but with Christ Himself. In other words, we will not only become the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God to them but also the fragrance of Christ to them as well.

Can the same thing be said about Kobe Bryant or any other person other than a captive of Christ who is being led by God in His triumphal procession? No! If the world is going to see God the Father and God the Son up close and personal it will only be through us, the ambassadors of Christ, who, in purposing ourselves to spread the gospel of Christ, are willing to deny ourselves daily in order that the life of Christ might flow through us.

We cannot become the channel of the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God in this world unless we, through our commitment to spreading the gospel of Christ, have become the fragrance of Christ to God in this world.

But if we have become the fragrance of Christ to God in this world, we certainly will have an impact on everyone we come in contact with whether they know it or not. And not just to a few people, to every person we engage as an ambassador of Christ. And why can we see this? Because Paul compares us to an aroma. Paul compares us to a fragrance. And what is inherently true of aromas and fragrances? They are inherently intrusive.

Being the fragrance of Christ to God in this world, by our commitment in spreading the gospel of Christ, will have a profound impact both on those being saved and on those who are perishing.

Isn't this exactly what we learn from **verses 15 and 16**? And what do these verses say? **“For we [the apostles and ministers of Christ’s gospel] are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.”** And then what does Paul say? Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 2:16. “To the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life.”**

If we, as an ambassador of Christ, walk into a room, a workplace or an amusement park purposed to spread the gospel of Christ as we deny ourselves so that the life of Christ might flow through us, we will become to

every person that we engage within that room, workplace or an amusement park the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God and the fragrance of Christ.

And what will be the impact on them? It will depend. If they do not respond positively to the aroma and the fragrance that is emanating from us it will identify them as one who is walking along the path leading to eternal destruction. And if that is the case we have become to them an aroma from death to death.

But if they positively respond to the aroma and the fragrance that is emanating from us it will identify them, not as one who is walking along the path leading to destruction, but rather to eternal life. And if that is the case we have become to them an aroma from life to life.

We may not be a famous sports star like Kobe Bryant, but if we as ambassadors of Christ, seek as the captives of Christ, to spread His gospel by denying ourselves daily so that His life might flow through us, then all those who come in contact with us will come in contact not only with God Himself but with Christ Himself. In other words, we will not only become the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God to them but also the fragrance of Christ to them as well.

And this contact with us will be significant. For either it will identify them as someone who is walking along the path leading to destruction or it will identify them as walking along a path leading to life. Is there anyone else in this world that can do this? No! Just us! In other words, God has placed us in this world to usher those who we come in contact with to the seats they will occupy in eternity: either to the seat of salvation or the seat of damnation.

May we, as the captives of Christ who are being led by God in His triumphal procession, be given the grace to understand our strategic importance in advancing God's eternal plan.