

**“CORE CONVICTIONS OF SUSTAINED MINISTRY”**  
**(2 Corinthians 2:12-17)**

One of my favorite shows of all time is the old Andy Griffith Show, and one of the most loved characters on the show was Barney Fife, the bumbling, over-excitably deputy. Don Knotts was so good at playing his role as Barney Fife that he won four Emmys in six years. One of Barney Fife’s characteristics was his tendency to become discouraged and quit. He wore his emotions on his sleeve and if he felt unappreciated or slighted in some way, he’d take off his badge and gun belt and place it on Andy’s desk. He’d say, “I’m done with the law business,” and hand Andy his letter of resignation. Andy would pause for a moment and say, “Okay, if that’s what you want to do,” and then he’d walk over to his filing cabinet, take out a thick file folder and place Barney’s letter in it. Barney would say, “What are you doing?” “Oh, I’m just putting your letter in with all of your other resignation letters.” Andy knew that with a little time and perspective, Barney would have a change of heart and put his badge back on.

All of us know what it’s like to become discouraged and want to give up, and as a Christian there’s a lot right now to be discouraged about. In many ways it appears as if Christianity has lost its influence in the world, church attendance has declined, and more and more professing believers are walking away from their faith. To be a Christian in today’s world seems like we’re swimming upstream against a current that is growing stronger every day. It’s tempting to become dejected and lose heart... “What difference am I really making? Is it worth the effort?”

The question before us this morning is: What keeps us going? In the midst of so much cultural upheaval and spiritual darkness – of growing hostility against Christianity – how do we keep from turning in our resignation and remain faithful, even joyful, in our calling?

Today we come to a tremendous passage of scripture. One well-known pastor, Ray Stedman, said this was his favorite passage in the Bible. In 2 Corinthians 2 we find the Apostle Paul at a low point. Paul was about as spiritually grounded a person as you’ll ever meet, but he was human and felt the full weight of discouragement. Two decades earlier Paul was called by God to be an apostle to the gentiles, and he faithfully fulfilled his call, courageously traveling from town to town spreading the life-changing message of Christ. On occasions his message was received well, people were saved one-by-one, and churches were planted. But there were also times of intense opposition and hostility to his message – he was publicly mocked and ridiculed, beaten, and run out of town – but he kept going.

In addition to persecution from the world, Paul carried the burden of shepherding each of the churches he founded. As their spiritual father he had an intense interest in their spiritual well-being. Each church had problems, but no church had as many problems as the church in Corinth. A few years earlier Paul started a church in Corinth and spend 1 ½ years getting it off the ground. He then moved on to Ephesus, where he stayed for three years. In Ephesus Paul heard reports of several problems in the Corinthian church dealing with disunity in the body, competition between church leaders, and sexual immorality and idolatry – and in response to these problems he wrote 1 Corinthians.

After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul sent his protegee, Timothy, to visit the Corinthian church, and Timothy returned with discouraging news that certain divisive teachers and leaders opposed Paul and threatened to undo all the work he had done in Corinth. Paul immediately put everything aside and traveled to Corinth to try and put things right. He referred to this trip as the “painful visit.” It did not go well. He was treated disrespectfully by his opponents, and the rest of the church did nothing to stop them. Paul was so discouraged that he left.

A short time later he wrote the church a letter he referred to in chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians as the “tearful” letter. In his letter he called for the church to stand up to those causing division and discipline them. Paul sent Titus to deliver his letter, and waited anxiously to hear from Titus how his letter was received.

This gives us the setting for what Paul writes in 2:12-13... “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.”

From the book of Acts we know that Paul left Ephesus after being confronted by a mob, and he headed north to Troas, where he had arranged to meet Titus. While he was waiting, the Lord opened a door of opportunity for the gospel to be preached in Troas. Paul was able to preach without being attacked by a mob and his message fell on receptive hearts. But despite all this, Paul says, “I didn’t have peace of mind,” and what was weighing on his mind was, “Where’s Titus?” He could not be at rest until he found out what was going on in Corinth. So despite an open door of ministry in Troas, Paul went on north to Macedonia hoping he might find Titus there.

Out of all the books he wrote, Paul is the most transparent in 2 Corinthians. In this letter he expresses his pain, his hurt, his disappointments, his loneliness, and his worries – and we’re reminded that even the greatest saints experienced times of great discouragement.

Later in chapter seven we find out that Paul eventually found Titus in Macedonia, and heard the news he had been waiting for... “For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever” (2 Corinthians 7:5-7).

Like someone waiting for a call from the doctor to hear what the diagnosis is, Paul was elated to hear that his letter to the Corinthians had turned the tide – the church had taken action against Paul’s opponents and they reaffirmed their love for him. Hallelujah! This good news puts a spring back in his step, and he expresses his thanks to God in verses 14-17. These verses are deep and profound, and using word pictures Paul presents a realistic understanding of what it means to be a Christian in a world largely opposed to God. Let’s read these verses and then explore what they mean...

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.”

In these verses Paul expresses three core convictions of ministry for Christ that keep us going through the difficulties and disappointments of service for Christ.

The first conviction of ministry is that **we are called to suffer for Christ**. This is seen in the first part of verse 14 where Paul says... “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession”

As Paul thinks about his role as an apostle and minister, a word picture comes to his mind of a triumphal procession. His Corinthian readers were very acquainted with the Roman custom of celebrating and honoring Roman generals who returned home after a long-fought military campaign. These processions were similar to a victory parade after winning a Super Bowl, where the winning team parades through town as thousands of fans cheer them on. During the time Rome was in power, there were 320 such triumphal processions and they all followed a similar pattern.

At the front of the procession was the victorious general, along with his officers and soldiers. A big cheer would go up, celebrating their victory. The general was seated in a chariot drawn by four horses, and chained to his chariot were all the kings and their officers that had been defeated. The goal was to humiliate your enemies and display your triumph over them. The worst thing that could happen to you if you lost a war was to be paraded in front of your enemies. In 30 B.C., Cleopatra committed suicide to keep from having to endure the humiliation of being chained to Octavian's chariot. Following behind the defeated general and officers would come the defeated army with ropes around their wrists and ankles. Most of them were marching to their death, either by being executed or taken to the Roman coliseum to fight lions for the entertainment of their enemies.

In the same way, Paul pictures Christ as triumphant over His enemies, and uses the same word picture in Colossians 2:15... “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” Jesus left heaven to come invade the territory of Satan, who along with his demonic forces of evil held creation captive to sin and death. On the cross Jesus crushed Satan and freed us from his evil tyranny.

After Jesus conquered His enemies, He triumphantly ascended back to heaven as the exalted King of Kings and Lord of Lords. When we put our trust in Christ, we become part of His victory – we're part of His victory parade. Paul did not always feel victorious, but he knew that no matter what happened to him – whether it was being mocked or beaten or having his integrity questioned – no matter what happened, he was on the winning team. He may lose some battles and suffer some defeats, but took comfort in knowing that Christ would ultimately win the war and reign triumphantly over the earth.

The stunning part of Paul's metaphor is that, while we are on the winning team, we are being led in Christ's triumphal procession as *captives*. Paul saw himself as a conquered enemy chained to the victorious general's chariot. He once had been an enemy of God and His people, but God conquered him on the road to Damascus, and Paul surrendered his life to the Lord. He often referred to himself as a slave to Christ. His life was no longer his own – he belonged to Christ.

Listen to how Paul describes this in 1 Corinthians 4:9... “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.” Whereas captives in a Roman victory parade would be dejected, humiliated, and bitter – Paul, the captive of Christ, offers thanksgiving... “Praise be to God who leads us as captives in His triumphal procession.”

To the world, and even to some in the church at Corinth, Paul looked like a fool. Who would willingly sign-up to be mistreated and humiliated? Who would willingly become a slave? Who would give up his life to go around the world being jeered and mocked, have no home or life savings, and be marked for death? Who does that?

Only someone who takes joy in identifying with Christ in His suffering. Romans 8:17 says, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” Just as Christ suffered, the Bible says, so will we – and just as Christ triumphed over evil, so will we.

Suffering comes with the territory of being a Christian, and once we understand this, once we have this perspective, suffering for Jesus becomes a badge of honor and a joy. We know that as we share in Christ’s suffering, we will also share in His glory. This is the core conviction that kept Paul going through all his difficulties and disappointments.

The second conviction of ministry is that **we are called to spread the message of Christ.** At the end of verse 14 Paul presents another word picture – that of an aroma... “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere.”

When we’re discouraged, we wonder if we’re making any difference in the world. Paul says that even in the midst of suffering, God is using faithful Christians to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. It’s an interesting word picture. What does it mean to spread the aroma of Christ to the world? The word “aroma” is used 37 times in Leviticus and Numbers to describe sacrifices as having a pleasing aroma to God. It wasn’t the actual smell of the sacrifice itself that was a pleasing aroma, but that the sacrifice provided an atonement for sin that pleased or satisfied the holiness of God. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament was designed to teach God’s people that a payment for sin was required to be right with God. All these sacrifices pointed to Jesus, who was sacrificed on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. Ephesians 5:2 says that Christ “gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Once we come to faith in Christ, Romans 12:1 says that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Our lives become an extension of Jesus’ life, and we are called to spread the aroma of Christ to the world through our life and message everywhere we go. This gives great significance to our daily lives – by our life and message we display the knowledge of who Jesus is everywhere we go – as we go to work, as we go to school, as we shop at the grocery store, as we interact with people online, and as we interact with our neighbors.

It can be discouraging to build relationships with unbelievers and share the gospel with them, but see no results. What Paul wants us to know is that regardless of the response, God is pleased because we are being faithful. We don’t control how people respond, our job is to boldly and faithfully represent Christ whether there is a mass revival or, like Paul, we are kicked out of town.

Paul highlights this very fact in verses 15a-16... “For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life.” Regardless of how people respond to Christ, our faithfulness to love the lost and share the message of Christ is pleasing to God.

We are tempted to evaluate our success by how many people are in church or how many kids come to VBS or go to camp – of course we’re thrilled to see lots of people come and hear the gospel, but not everyone is going to respond. All God is looking for is that we share the message and provide people with an opportunity to be saved.

There have been many stories of missionaries who gave up everything to serve God in a foreign country only to experience one setback after another. Some went years before seeing one single convert. Paul could testify to the same thing – some people, like at Troas, were very open and receptive to the gospel, and others – like at Ephesus – formed a mob to run him out of town. God calls us to be faithful in season and out of season – when there is reception and when there is rejection, when people like you and when they don't like you – just... be... faithful.

Whenever we present the message of Christ – meaning the bad news that that we're all sinners fallen short of God's glory and the penalty of sin is death; and the good news that Christ paid the penalty for our sin on the cross, and by trusting Him as our Savior we can be saved – when we present the gospel message – there will be one of two responses: Some will be saved, and some will remain lost in sin. To those being saved, the aroma of Christ brings life, and to those who are perishing, it brings death.

When we live a godly life before the world and proclaim the name of Christ, an aroma is released. To some it is the aroma of life and hope and forgiveness – it is welcomed news. To others it is a stench – they're offended the bad news part of the gospel that they're a sinner in need of a Savior, they're offended to hear that Jesus is the only way to God, and so they reject the message. 1 Corinthians 1:18 sums up the two responses this way, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” The message of Christ divides and separates.

Jim Elliot, the Christian missionary who was martyred in Ecuador for sharing the gospel, kept a daily journal, and one of his entries, written when he was only 21 years old, summed up what he wanted his life to be. He said, “Lord, make me a crisis man. Let me not be a milepost on a single road, but make me a fork that people must turn one way or another in facing Christ in me.” Jim Elliot wanted to be a man that when people encountered him, they were faced with making a decision one way or the other concerning Christ in him.

What Paul wants us to know is that we are the aroma of God regardless of how people respond to our message. As long as we remain faithful to our calling, we smell good to God. Whether our efforts lead to life or death, that is up to God. Our job is to remain faithful.

The third conviction of ministry that keeps us going is understanding that **we are empowered to minister by Christ**. Verses 16b-17 says... “And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.”

The task to which we are called – to spread the message of Christ and risk ridicule, rejection, and even physical harm – is daunting. There is a long list of people in the Bible who felt inadequate to do the job. When God called Moses to deliver his people from bondage, he said, “Who am I, Lord? No one's going to listen to me... I don't have any clout... I can't speak well.” When God called Gideon to save Israel from the hand of the Midianites, he said, “Who am I, Lord? My clan is the weakest in Israel, and I am the weakest in my clan.” When God asks us to do something that seems impossible, that takes us out of our comfort zone, we say, “I'm not sure I'm up to the task.”

Paul himself felt that way – he was humble about his gifts and abilities, and yet he implies in these verses that he is up to the task – not because he is sufficient in himself, but sufficient in Christ. In 3:4-5 he says, “Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.”

None of us – not Paul, not Moses, not Gideon – is competent to do what God has called us to do – but the truth repeated over and over in scripture that God’s power is revealed in our weakness. Anything we do of lasting, eternal value is because of the Spirit of God working in us and through us. This core conviction that empowered Paul for three decades of ministry to face every conceivable adversity and difficulty. He relied not on his strength and power, but on the Lord’s.

In verse 17 Paul contrasted his reliance on God’s power to his opponents who relied on their own human power. Instead of suffering for Christ and preaching the message of Christ, they “peddled the word of God for profit.” A peddler in Paul’s day was someone who dishonestly tried to entice people into buying their product. It’s like the advertisements you hear online... “Take this one pill and all you’re aches and pains will go away... go on this diet and you’ll drop ten pounds in one week.” These ads rely on the persuasiveness of the pitchman to sell you something that doesn’t live up to the way it’s presented. Paul’s opponents peddled the word of God in order to make money and to gain popularity by dishonestly presenting the message of Christ. To gain money and popularity they told people what they wanted to hear and left out the bad news part of the gospel.

Paul says, “We don’t do that. As captives of Christ we are called to spread the aroma of Christ, we speak with sincerity, wanting only that people would understand the truth. Whether or not they choose to believe the gospel and live, or reject the truth and die, is beyond our control.” He says, “We are commissioned by God to speak His words, not ours. We’re not entitled to tamper with our message to please people and gain a following. It is God’s message, not ours.”

We started with the question: What keeps us going? What keeps us from turning in our resignation and [DM1] remain faithful to our calling? What keeps us going is conviction of who we are, what God has called us to do, and how we are to do it. It’s the core conviction that we are victorious in Christ – despite the suffering and setbacks and losses we experience in ministry for God, in the end Christ will triumph and we will be part of His victory parade.

Until then, God calls us to spread the aroma of Christ everywhere. Through our life and message we become a fork in the road – some believe our message and are saved, and some reject our message and remain lost. Our job is to love people, boldly spread the aroma of the gospel, and leave the results to God. And we are to find our boldness and courage to be God’s messengers through His power, not ours.

May these words from God penetrate your heart and mine, and give us the courage and joy to fulfill God’s call and spread the aroma of Christ to world desperately in need of the life only Christ can bring.