September 26/27, 2009

He Leads Us in Triumph

II Corinthians 2:5-17

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

Pastor Bryan Clark

It's fairly common when a professional athletic team wins the championship that there's often some sort of a victory parade that goes through the streets of the hometown. You can kind of imagine in your mind that scene: The Yankees win the World Series and there's a parade coming through New York City and people line the streets. It's a festive affair. Convertibles are coming through the parade and the athletes— the best of the best—sit in these convertibles and they're waving to the crowd. There is special attention to the superstars and somebody is probably carrying the championship trophy and somebody is displaying their MVP award. It's quite a celebration. While there's a handful of people who are the focus of the parade, everyone else stands on the sidelines and they applaud and they dream about what it would be like to have a moment like that, knowing they never could play at that level.

When you think about that picture I would suggest to you that the view that many people have of Christianity, the view that many people have of the church—many Christians have of the church—looks very similar to that. If that scene were the church, you would have a handful of people coming through: the best of the best, the high performers, the spiritual celebrities. You have a few superstars and you have somebody carrying the trophy and somebody with the MVP award, but the overwhelming majority stands on the sidelines and recognizes that they'll never perform at that level. At the end of the day you either have spiritual arrogance or discouragement and despair—both of which will ultimately destroy.

Paul has a very different imagery of a parade in mind. As a matter of fact he presents the imagery of a parade that is so graphic—in some ways so horrific—that there have been commentaries down through the years that have been unwilling to even acknowledge that that's what Paul meant. Yet the truth of the matter is that if we can get that image that Paul presents stuck in our heads, it could dramatically change the way we view our lives as Christians. If you have a Bible, turn with us to II Corinthians, Chapter 2.

II Corinthians is a rather difficult book to outline. If you don't believe that, just pick up ten commentaries and notice that no one agrees. Paul just kind of seems to meander his way through the book and you have to keep following the train of thought.

In chapter one he reminded us that it's broken people that God uses to reach a broken world. He went on to remind us in chapter one that ministry is messy. Anytime there are people, there are going to be messes. And if you're going to be a Traveler and not a Balconeer, you just have to accept the fact that sometimes it gets very, very messy!

At the end of chapter one and on into the first part of chapter two, Paul describes why he chose not to come back to Corinth. His original plan was to visit Corinth on the way out and to visit Corinth on the way back but he chose not to do that and he's being criticized for that. So he explains to them that the first visit was so hostile, there was so much conflict, that he felt if he came back a second time he would only make matters worse. At the end of chapter one he describes some sort of a situation that he had to deal with. Nobody knows for sure what that situation was but, whatever Paul

did, his critics are accusing him of being a spiritual bully, of lording it over them. Paul goes on in the first part of chapter two to say that's not true at all. He just wanted to do the right thing and then he tells them that he wrote them a tearful letter to remind them how much he cares about them and how much he wants this relationship restored. Apparently Paul gave that tearful letter to Titus and Titus delivered it to Corinth and now here in II Corinthians Paul is picking up on the results of what's transpired since that letter was delivered.

Verse 5:

> **But if any has caused sorrow, he has caused sorrow not to me, but in some degree—in order not to say too much—to all of you.** (*NASB, II Corinthians 2:5)

Now just to open there, Paul is going to make the case that it's time for the Corinthians to restore and to love this one whom they've had to discipline—probably what he's talking about at the end of chapter one. What's interesting to note here is that Paul goes out of his way to minimize the pain and the sorrow in order to work towards healing. In a culture where we seem to thrive on *playing the victim* Paul is moving through the hurt toward restoration. The fact of the matter is we play the victim because it's a very unhealthy way to remain the center of attention. The motive of that is very selfish. Paul is, rather than playing the victim, choosing to minimize the hurt in order to bring restoration and healing. He goes on in verse 6:

> **Sufficient for such a one is the punishment which was inflicted by the majority so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort him, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.** (Vs. 6-7)

The Corinthian church was always a church of extremes. It seems like the pendulum swung from one end to the other. In I Corinthians they were unwilling to deal with certain situations. Some people think this might be the I Corinthians 5 situation where a man was having sexual relations with his stepmom and the Corinthians were unwilling to deal with it. Whatever it was, the pendulum has now swung to the other side and Paul is saying, "*You know we disciplined this person enough.*" Apparently the person was repentant; the person was full of sorrow and Paul is now encouraging them that we need to love this person; we need to encourage this person; we need to welcome this person back into the fold.

The word **punishment** there is unfortunate. The Greek word can mean *punishmen*t but it can also mean *discipline* or *correction* or *reproof.* Just as when we discipline our children, discipline in the church is not punitive. The motive is not to make someone pay. The motive is to bring correction. Just as in parenting, there's always that sensitivity to how far you go in discipline to bring correction versus going too far and bringing destruction. And so Paul has said, "Okay that's far enough. He gets the message and he's filled with sorrow." In fact the language that Paul uses reflects someone who's drowning. The idea is the person is drowning in his sorrow and, if we don't love him back, he's going to go under; we're going to lose him. So it's a very graphic imagery.

Verse 8:

Wherefore I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. For to this end also I wrote that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things. The one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his schemes. (Vs. 8-11)

Paul is inviting the Corinthians to invite this person back, to love him, to accept him back. The correction has been effective and he encourages them to forgive him. As a matter of fact he takes the lead. Whatever the situation was, there seems to be a personal connection with Paul. There were some Corinthian believers who had taken up an offense for Paul, so Paul is leading the way by minimizing the sorrow and not playing the victim. And he's leading the way by saying he's going to forgive them and, whoever they forgive, he's going to forgive.

One of the things I've seen over and over again—over the years—is that often times in hurtful situations, the situation reaches a stalemate. What I mean by that is that whether the husband or wife, parents or children, whether it's a relationship within the church or the market place, there are wounded people and everybody just *gets stuck.* Nobody's willing to take the first step and say "I forgive you"—to take the first step toward healing—and so the relationship just gets stuck; it turns into a stalemate. Paul is clearly modeling here his willingness to take the first step and to model forgiveness. Apparently when he wrote the tearful letter he was saying to them, "I told you to respond in order to see if you would pass the test—that you would do the right thing." What he's talking about there is that they would discipline this person. Now he's saying, "Okay now you need to do the right thing and forgive this person and begin the process of healing."

It's interesting that he says "...**in the presence of Christ**". He's painting a picture that when we forgive someone or choose not to forgive someone, we do it *in the presence of Christ*. So imagine Jesus standing there knowing all he's done to forgive us our sin and, in His presence, being willing to say, "Jesus, I know you did all this for me but I am unwilling to forgive this person." Jesus, in Mathew Chapter 18, talked about the fact that each one of us who has trusted Jesus as Savior has been forgiven much. No matter how wounded you have been by someone else, in the eyes of God, it's little compared to the degree to which you offended God. So Jesus is willing to forgive you much. He asks you in return to forgive little.

Let's not pull any punches on this, when the fact of the matter is: If, as a Christian you are unwilling to forgive someone else, you are nothing but a hypocrite. You are nothing but a hypocrite! For you to receive the depth of forgiveness that God has offered you and then to turn around and are unwilling to extend forgiveness to someone else, that is nothing but pure hypocrisy. So Paul says, *"We do this in the presence of Christ and forgive as He has forgiven us."*

He closes that section in verse eleven by reminding us that this is important so we don't play into the schemes of the enemy. The enemy is a very crafty opponent. The enemy is always looking for a beachhead. He's always looking for a base of operation from which he can destroy your life, your family's life, the life of a church. Paul is saying that when we choose not to forgive, what we create is a beachhead. We create a place of operation where Satan can set up camp and, from that base, systematically begin to destroy our lives and our relationships and our families and our churches. Satan's primary weapons are lies and deception; it's guilt and self loathing; it's shame. And as long as he can keep heaping those upon us, he will systematically destroy our lives.

A culture of *unforgiveness* causes guilt and shame and self loathing to thrive. The only way we can create an environment where the enemy's lies do not have their impact, is if we create a culture of *forgiveness* where we ourselves model what God has done for us and create a culture which does not give him a beachhead—does not give him a base of operation. So forgiveness is not only the right thing to do, but forgiveness is for our own sake—that we don't allow the enemy a place from which he can systematically destroy our lives.

He takes what seems like somewhat of a turn then in verse 12 and says:

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

Now this is a very interesting two verses here. Apparently Paul sent the tearful letter with Titus. He was to go to Corinth and then he was to meet Paul in Troas. Paul went to Troas in order to proclaim the gospel and, what he is saying here is, when he got to Troas God had given him a wide open door—a wide open door for the message of the gospel to thrive. And yet because Paul was so disturbed about what was happening in Corinth, because Titus had not met him there—so he wondered what happened, what happened to him in Corinth or somewhere along the way—he was so upset that he was unable to focus on his ministry. He was unable to carry out the call, even though God had given him a wide open door, and he packed up his toys and he left.

Now this is rather shocking when you think about it. What do you think of when you think of the apostle Paul? Most people think of a ministry machine. I mean: throw the guy in prison and he sings hymns of praise; beat him up and he praises Jesus. The guy seems to be fearless.

I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago that II Corinthians has more biographical information about the apostle Paul than any other New Testament letter. This is a very interesting insight into Paul. Paul was saying that even though God had given him a wide open door, that he was so upset about the Corinthians, that he was so disturbed about Titus, that he couldn't focus on ministry and all he could do was pack up his stuff and leave. There is no way to interpret this other than it was a total failure. This section of Corinthians reminds us that Paul was not a ministry machine. Paul was a human being and Paul felt the pain and he struggled and sometimes he failed. In chapter one he basically said he was depressed to the point of despairing of life. He wasn't sure he could go on.

One of the interesting questions here in II Corinthians is, "Why is Paul telling us this?" Think about how critical the Corinthians had been to him. Why would you tell them this great failure—just give them more ammunition from which to criticize? You know Paul isn't exactly on a roll here. Paul left Ephesus because it all blew up. They had to flee for their lives. Everything in Corinth seems to be coming unraveled and now Paul gets to Troas and it's a total failure. God's given him an open door but he couldn't handle it...and he walked away. This isn't exactly Paul's shining moment.

It raises again the question, "Paul, why are you telling us this? This seems like a good thing to keep secret." You have to think about the backdrop of what was happening in Corinth. We know in Corinth that Corinth was filled—the church was filled—with spiritual arrogance. It was driven by false teachers and the false teachers were not *pagans*. The false teachers were *legalists*. Legalism thrives on performance. Legalism thrives on self glory and they were competing with one another to demonstrate who was the "*best of the best"*. If the church is going to be a parade like the New York Yankees, I want a seat in the convertible; I want to hold the MVP trophy; I want to be applauded as somebody. And that was the climate in Corinth—so everybody was battling to demonstrate they were the *best of the best!* Up against that as a backdrop Paul says, "Hey count me out. I don't want anything to do with that; I'm not a superstar; I don't want a seat in the convertible; don't vote for me as MVP." In a climate such as there was in Corinth, it would be very easy to get sucked into that game and to come back and say, "Well let me tell you what I've done."

Instead Paul lays it on the table and says, "Hey I'm a struggler; sometimes I'm a failure; sometimes I don't get it right." Paul lays out that picture in order to present the imagery of the following paragraph.

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ... (Vs. 14a)

That phrase **...leads us in triumph...** is actually one Greek word. It's a very technical word. Pretty much everyone agrees it's in reference to what were referred to as: The Roman Triumphal Entries. These Roman triumphal entries were legendary. As a matter of fact we found over three hundred fifty times in ancient literature where they mentioned one of these Roman triumphal entries.

Basically they were this: When a general went to battle and was able to kill at least "X" number of people—some put the number around 5000—was able to take "X" amount of ground for the Roman empire, able to bring forth a complete victory! If it was really a top-notch operation that general would be given a Roman Triumphal Entry. For a Roman general that was their shining moment. That was everything they lived and served for. That would be their moment of fame!

It was an all-out celebration with all of the pomp and circumstance that Rome had to offer. It was a fabulous event. It would start with the victorious general leading the procession. He of course would be the star of the show. He would be the center of attention. This was ***his moment***. Behind him would be slaves who were in chains, who were the enemies who had been conquered. They would march through the streets, behind the general, with the very clear message that they had been conquered and they were marching to their death. Behind that would be the "loot" and whatever else was taken in the battle. The streets were filled with all kinds of incense—with perfume. Even the smell of sacrifices, as they would get to the end of the parade, the sacrifices were offered to the gods. Most of the time these slaves were then put into an arena and would be put to death with wild animals. All of that had one purpose and that purpose was to bring glory to the general. This was his moment!

The question is, "Is that the imagery that Paul intends and what is the imagery?" The debate is over whether Paul is the *subject* or the *object* of the verb. In other words, "Is he the one leading or is he the one being led?"—Two very different images.

There is no question from the language in the text that Paul is the one being led. So get that imagery in your head of the conquering general and then these slaves in chains that are marching behind and Paul is saying that he and his team are those slaves in chains marching behind the conquering general. It's a picture that John Calvin found so offensive that even though he admitted that's what the text says, he would not interpret it that way. As a matter of fact he interpreted this text basically..."But thanks be to God who causes us to triumph." As a matter of fact, if you have a King James Bible, that's probably how it reads. Because Calvin's interpretation won the day for three hundred years, until Greek scholars came back to the text and said again, "That's just not what it says." What it says is that Paul is the one being led in this Roman triumph. So rather than trying to change what the text says, let's think about the imagery.

What Paul was saying is that Christ is the conquering general. At the end of the day the parade of the church is not going to look like the New York Yankees, where all these Christians try to out-perform one another and some of the superstars end up in the convertibles and take the applause and a few hold the MVP award. That's not the way it's going to be. It's going to look very different from that.

How it's going to look is: There's going to be one conquering general and that will be Christ Himself, followed by slaves in chains which are those who Jesus has conquered by His power, by His grace, and now follow Him as slaves of Christ. One of Paul's favorite ways to describe himself is that he is a slave to Christ. And what Paul was saying is, at the end of the day, there are no superstars, no high performers. There's no basis for arrogance. There's One victor; there's One who

brings the triumphal entry into town. The rest of us are simply slaves of Christ and our purpose in life is to bring Him glory. Paul may even have in mind that he believed at the end of this parade he will actually be sacrificed—put to death—in order to ultimately bring glory to the *General*. He has this sense that is how he will die.

It's a powerful imagery that helps us rethink who we are as Christians. It helps us rethink this whole performance-based Christianity and to get it in our heads again that we're slaves of Christ. There are no superstars; there's no MVP's; there's nobody that outperforms somebody else. There's just One who has conquered and brings forth the victory. As a matter of fact, Paul picks up on this concept of the incense and the smells and the aroma when he says...

> **...and manifests** (which means to make known) **though us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, and to the other an aroma from life to life. Who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ and in the sight of God.** (Vs. 14b-17)

Paul's picking up on the aroma, the incense, the smells that were part of that parade and he says that, when we see this correctly, we understand that from us comes an aroma. But it isn't the aroma of our own performance; it isn't the aroma of our ability to keep the rules. It isn't our aroma at all. What people smell, in our brokenness, is the aroma of Christ. As a matter of fact he paints an even more vivid picture and he says that the aroma that God smells is ultimately the aroma of Christ. It's very important for us to understand that our call is to walk in obedience; that's true. But at the end of the day what God sees—what God smells—is not your ability to perform; it's not whether or not you were some sort of a Christian superstar; it's not whether you were really good at keeping all the rules. What God's going to smell is nothing except the aroma of Christ, in you. In this parade the only superstar, the only one worthy of applause, will be the conquering general. When we are sent out by God—if we go out in brokenness—we have that sweet smell of Christ. Paul says it will be smelled by both the believers and those who are perishing. To the believers it's the sweet smell of Christ and to those who are perishing; it's the smell of death.

Paul is in essence saying that this is a high and holy calling. It separates out those who will perish and those who experience life. And so he responds at the end of verse sixteen by saying **...who is adequate for this call?** If the stakes are that high, who can possibly be qualified?

In verse seventeen his answer is, "It's not those people who go out and use Jesus in order to make a name for themselves." They become spiritual peddlers; they become religious hucksters. It's very easy in our culture to use Jesus to sell books, to use Jesus to write music, to use Jesus to make a name for yourself, to use Jesus to become *somebody* in the Christian church. Paul says these people are just peddlers. But the one who is sufficient is the one who finds their sufficiency in Christ. That's going to launch us into our discussion next week.

In essence what Paul is saying is that spiritual performance stinks. Religion stinks. Legalism stinks. But when we understand that we are not the superstars, that this isn't about us, this isn't about our ability to perform, but rather we are slaves in chains that are being led by the One who has conquered. At the end of the day it is He alone who is worthy of the parade. When we understand that—in our brokenness—what we give off is the sweet, sweet smell of Jesus. When those slaves came through the parade, no one was applauding. No one was saying, "Wow". Their only purpose in the parade was to bring glory to the one who had conquered them.

Paul creates a vivid imagery. If we can understand it, if we can get it stuck in our heads that the Christian life, the church of Jesus Christ, is not like the Yankees winning the World Series. It's like the Roman Triumphal Entry. It changes the way we view our lives. Broken people forgive one another. Broken people are willing to put their stuff on the table like Paul did... as a fellow slave traveling on this path.

One of the biggest problems in churches is because we have imagery like the Yankees winning the World Series. It feels like a competition and nobody is willing to name their *stuff*. We all have to pretend like everything is okay—because we're hoping for a slot in one of the convertibles, maybe a chance at the MVP trophy. Or we're on the sidelines saying, "I'm never going to measure up and I know it." But that performance-based culture provides an environment where nobody can name their stuff. What we want to create here at Lincoln Berean is an imagery that looks much more like the Roman Triumphal Entry—where we all understand we're all in this together; we're fellow slaves. Some days we do well and some days we crash and burn. Like the apostle Paul, there may be times when it just feels like everything's coming unraveled. In those moments we understand and we can even rejoice, as Paul has done, to know at the end of the day the victory does not hang on my ability to perform. The victory is not determined by whether I'm a high-flyer or not. The victory is determined by the One who has conquered. Our sufficiency is in Christ alone and it is only in Christ that we triumph. It is only in Christ that we win the victory. Our sufficiency is in Christ alone. At the end of the day, in the parade, He's the only One worthy of the applause.

Our Father, we're thankful that You love us, that You sent your Son to save us—in Paul's language "He conquered us". Lord, I pray that we would not let the performance-based culture in which we live define for us who You've called the church to be. Lord, may we reject that imagery and understand more the imagery Paul has presented. We're just slaves and our purpose is to bring glory to the general. Lord, were fellow slaves; there are not superstars here. There are no high-flyers. There is nobody more worthy than somebody else. Lord, help us to understand, at the end of the day, the victory is not determined by our ability to perform well but is determined by the sufficiency of Christ alone, in whose name we pray. Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2009 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

He Leads Us in Triumph

II Corinthians 2:5-17

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. How does Jim Collins describe a Level 5 leader in his book "Good to Great"?

   How does this definition differ from the common perception of an effective leader?

2. How would you describe an effective Christian (level 5 Christian if you will)? What are the differences between what really makes for an effective Christian and the image of an effective Christian that is often portrayed in religious circles?

3. How do you picture the Apostle Paul? How do you picture Paul in comparison with your life as a Christian?

Bible Study

1. Read II Corinthians 2:5-11. In what ways does Paul intentionally lead the Corinthians to forgive the member who caused sorrow to them and Paul? Why must they forgive him? (there are at least 3 reasons given in the text)

2. Read II Corinthians 2:12-13. How do these two verses help us paint a more accurate picture of Paul as a missionary? How does this affect how we view ourselves and our struggles in seeking to be obedient to God's call?

3. Read II Corinthians 2:14-17. What does the phrase "leads us in triumph in Christ" mean? What is the imagery?

4. As it relates to the imagery, what makes us a "sweet aroma" to both those who are being saved and those who are perishing?

5. In what way is the aroma of Christ that we spread a matter of life and death?

6. Who is adequate for such responsibility (v16b)? What makes anyone adequate?

Application

1. Is there anyone you need to forgive? What are the consequences of choosing to not forgive? What do we need to remember to be willing to truly forgive others?

2. Is it your performance or your brokenness that makes you useful to God? Which have the sweeter aroma, your great performances or your miserable failures? Why?

3. How does this text help you redefine the marks of an effective Christian?

Copyright 2009 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.