

SMALL GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS FOR 10/11/09 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-17

In 2 Cor. 1 and 2, Paul answers charges that have been levied against him, particularly that his change of mind regarding his intent to visit the Corinthians was an act of insincerity that brought suspicion upon his integrity as an apostle. Although Paul now shifts to focus his attention on his ministry of the new covenant (2:14-7:4), he also continues to defend himself as an apostle appointed by God to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. In this broader section (2:14-7:4), Paul now begins to develop the theological content of his message over and against what is preached by false teachers. Paul will accept physical suffering as a result of preaching the Gospel, but he will not accept the gospel being adulterated. This short section (2:14-17) functions as a bridge between the previous section and 2 Cor. 2:19-7:4. It also serves to introduce an in-depth theological discussion of Paul's ministry and message. Paul the missionary is intricately linked to the message preached. If his intentions are suspect then there is cause to doubt his message as well. As Paul begins to unfold the content of his message, he will also assert himself in light of charges that have been brought against him. Paul's defense of himself is a defense of the Gospel. The Corinthians may view Paul as weak because of his sufferings and because of his lack of adherence to rhetorical tradition, but Paul is anything but weak. In his letters he comes out swinging and we see that his strength comes in accepting a humiliated position for the sake of bringing the salvation message to the ends of the earth. Paul has no reason to boast in himself, but the salvation message is in jeopardy if the Corinthians reject the sincerity of his ministry.

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-17

2 Cor. 2:14 is a prayer of thanksgiving that contains a deeper message. In this verse there are several things to note. 1) Paul's exclamation of thanksgiving puts the attention on God and His sovereignty in the whole salvation plan, including His call to those He uses to deliver this message. 2) Paul resorts to a dramatic change in his pronouns. In 2 Cor. 2:1-10, Paul speaks intimately with the church. He speaks to them as I/you: "I did this, hoping that you would do that . . ." He makes it clear that he has an authoritative relationship with them, but in 2:11, Paul changes pronouns and includes himself as part of this church "we." There is a relationship of "I" and "you," but "we" are all in this together. Then in 2 Cor. 2:11-13, as Paul returns to the subject of his travel plans, he again speaks in the first person. In 2 Cor. 2:14-17, Paul shifts back to the first person plural pronoun "we," however the tone in this passage changes. The "we" is no longer Paul and the Corinthians. Commentators refer to the "we" in this section as an "apostolic we." Paul is not referring to himself and his coworkers; rather he is making a strong assertion that this is the ministry of those with the apostolic calling. In the book of Acts, Paul consistently cites his Damascus Road conversion as part of his message. In this encounter, God confronts Paul and appoints him to the office of missionary, church planter, and discipler to the Gentiles. As the twelve disciples were chosen directly by Jesus, so Paul was chosen directly by God.

In 2:14 verse, Paul chooses a metaphor to describe his apostolic calling, and thus his role in the fulfillment of God's plan. The metaphor is drawn from a Roman military procession. The nuances of this metaphor would have been very clear to the Corinthian audience. When Roman leaders had a military victory, they would capture the opposing soldiers and lead them in a procession into their territory. This was a display of Rome's power and an act of worship to the Emperor. Fragrant spices would be scattered on the ground in front of the procession, and the captured, humiliated soldiers would ultimately be led to their death. Paul uses this metaphor to explain that he is not the triumphant Roman soldier; instead he is the captive soldier who is under God's command. The point of the metaphor is not the final end of the soldier, but that the soldier, in his humiliation, plays a role in a march of triumph. The point is the paradox that strength is displayed through weakness. Paul compares himself to the humiliated soldier. The Corinthians had a difficult time accepting Paul as he was. They had been influenced by their culture and the false teachers to believe that Paul needed to come in power and strength in order to have an influential message. In 1 Cor. 1:23, Paul writes that to the Gentiles, Christ crucified is foolishness. As he defends himself in his weakness, by implication, Paul also defends Christ's death on the cross in its apparent weakness. It is this very weakness that leads to triumph, and as Paul preaches this truth, he suffers humiliation as did the Son of God.

It is important that the humiliation of the cross underlie the discussion. If the Corinthians have difficulty accepting the apparent weakness of their founder, how will they accept the apparent weakness of their Savior? It is through Christ's weak and humiliated state that reconciliation between God and humanity was made a reality. Christ's weakness is ultimately transformed by the power of His resurrection and His exalted position at the right hand of the Father. Christ's sacrifice ushers in the New Covenant. In confronting the expectations and opinions of the Corinthians, Paul defends himself, but he also provides an underlying defense for the greatness of the cross. In referring to the apostolic ministry as "the sweet aroma of the knowledge of God in every place," Paul recalls the fragrant aroma of the sacrifices made in the Temple. In Ephesians 5:2, Paul describes Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice and a pleasing aroma to God. It was this one sacrifice that satisfied all the demands of the Mosaic Law, that made the Temple no longer necessary, and that declared God's availability to all people in every place. Paul introduces the topic of the superiority of Christ's new covenant ministry to that of Moses' ministry (an issue introduced by the false teachers). He will expand upon this theme in chapter 3, but at this point in the argument Paul makes it clear that his ministry is to continue spreading this fragrant aroma to all who will hear. Paul describes his ministry with a sense of urgency. It is to those who presently are being saved and to those who are presently perishing. Paul is an evangelist and in this passage he makes it clear that his primary concern is the eternal state of those who hear his message. He is not interested in displaying his credentials, in succumbing to social norms, or in bowing to the expectations of his audience. His interest lies in offering life to a dying world. With Paul, it is very black and white, and he lives in the present moment.

Paul concludes with the question, “who is adequate for these things?” After condensing his ministry down to the most basic terms (life with Christ or life apart from Christ), Paul asserts that he is adequate to bear this message. This rhetorical question is meant to be answered in the affirmative—Paul is adequate for these things, those with the apostolic calling are adequate. They have the calling, the heart, and the understanding of the weight of the message. This is Paul’s strength, but in fulfilling his calling he often appears to be weak. By contrast, there is another group of teachers who appear to be strong, but are entirely inadequate for this ministry. We learn more about this group in 2 Cor. 11, but Paul speaks strongly enough against them in this one statement. Paul accuses his opponents of peddling the word of God. Acts 18 tells us that Paul supported himself by his trade while in Corinth, and we learn in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians that they were bothered by his refusal to accept their financial support. It appears however that Paul’s opponents had little trouble accepting money from the Corinthians and Paul accuses them of acting in an irreprehensible manner. This word “peddling” is used only here in the New Testament. We find the word “peddlers” in the Greek version of the Old Testament in Isaiah 1:22 where it is used to describe hucksters who water down the wine that they sell. It carries an extremely negative connotation. Other Greek writers use the word “peddler” to describe those who speak or teach with insincere motives.

In contrast to these peddlers, Paul uses a fourfold description of his ministry: he speaks the word of God 1) from sincerity, 2) from God, 3) in Christ, and 4) in the sight of God. Paul has a very high view of his calling. Paul has a profound understanding of what God has called him to do. Paul also has a profound understanding that God is the ultimate judge of his motives and his actions. Paul lives fully in the present, but he always has one eye toward his future life with Christ. This is the fuel that motivates, encourages, and spurs Paul on in his ministry despite the setbacks, the difficulties, and the church conflicts. Paul understands the new covenant ministry and that God chose him to deliver the news of salvation to the Gentiles. The Corinthians need to submit to his authority, to trust in the validity of his message (which has already been made evident by the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives), and to refute the false teaching of those who do not love this group of believers with the same compassionate affection that Paul offers them.

SMALL GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

2 Corinthians 2:14 - 17

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us 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.

1. With the understanding that Paul is referring to a Roman triumphal procession whereby those being led in triumph are captive soldiers being led to their death, what is your understanding of Paul's message?
2. In 2 Cor. 2:14, what is Paul's job as this captive soldier?
3. Do you think believers today have the same calling to be the fragrant aroma of Christ in every place? What do you think this looks like?

Read Ephesians 5:1-2

Ephesians 5:1-2

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; ² and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

4. How does God view Christ's sacrifice?

Read Hebrews 10:10-18

Hebrews 10:10-18

¹⁰ *By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ¹¹ Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; ¹² but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, ¹³ waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. ¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. ¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, ¹⁶ "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, ¹⁷ "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." ¹⁸ Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.*

5. How does Jesus' one time sacrifice compare with that of the priests?

6. What is the result of Jesus' sacrifice?

7. According to 2 Cor. 2:17, how does Paul compare his ministry with those who peddle the word of God?

8. Can you think of modern day "peddlers of the word of God"? How does the ministry at Creekside compare with theirs?