

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 3/28/99 PM
2 Corinthians 2:14-17 "Having a Vision for Ministry"

One Sunday several years ago I had a problem. It was a problem of vision. I couldn't see clearly. I didn't know why. All I knew was that my eyes were fuzzy. When I tried to read the Scripture, the words melted together. When I tried to preach, my eyes strained to focus on the congregation. There was something wrong with my vision.

It wasn't until the next day that I discovered what the problem was. The problem was so simple that I could kick myself. It was so easy to correct once I identified it.

I wear soft contacts. I don't know how I did it, but somehow I had switched my right and left contacts! A contact is supposed to help your vision--but not if you don't use it properly!

You know, it's hard to function when your vision isn't clear. And what's true for you as a person is equally true for the church.

When it comes to ministry, vision is vital. We need vision to function. And not just any vision. We need God's vision. Not mine. Not yours. But God's.

It's so easy for our vision to get out of focus. Ponder some information. By the year 2000...

*There will be 2.1 billion people in the world who identify themselves as members of the Christian church.

*There will be 1.2 billion Muslims. Muslims are the fastest growing major religious group, largely as a result of a high birth rate.

*There will be over one billion people who are Buddhist or who practice Chinese traditional religion.

*There will be 850 million Hindus, largely in India.

*There will be 230 million people who identify themselves as atheists.¹

The least evangelized part of the world is the eastern world from China to North Africa. In this part of the world...

*Over 1.1 billion people live who have little chance to hear the gospel unless someone goes to tell them.

*There are 500 people groups who have never heard the Good News.

*These people groups include the Bengali people in Bangladesh (120 million), the Han groups in China (97 million), the Bhojpuri Bihari in India (62 million), the Punjabi in Pakistan (57 million), the Awadi in India (53 million), and the Turks in Turkey (42 million).

Would you agree there is a great need in this area of the world, the area often referred to as the 10/40 Widow? Yet here's what's alarming... (see chart)

*Christians are allocating only 1.2% of the mission funding and their foreign missionaries to the 1.1 billion people who live in the unevangelized world.

¹Source: Barrett, Status of Global Mission, *IBMR*, 1996.

*Only 1% of the Scripture distribution and only 3% of the languages for which the Bible has been translated are directed toward the least evangelized world.²

Something's wrong. We need to *see* the world as God sees it. We need to see the glaring need for the gospel in far away places. We need to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send laborers into His harvest. We need a vision adjustment.

But it starts at home, doesn't it. Yes, we need a vision for the lost in China, India, and Burma. But there are lost people all around us here, too. We need a vision adjustment so we'll see them, *really* see them.

Where can we go for such a vision adjustment? Where can we find a spiritual ophthalmologist who can give us a checkup and make the necessary adjustments on our spiritual vision? Where should we go to find God's vision for our ministry?

The answer is the Word of God, namely 2 Corinthians 2-6, a text which is all about ministry. In 2 Corinthians Paul shows us how to have a God-honoring ministry. He wrote this epistle to defend himself against some flagrant attacks by critics in Corinth. They were accusing him of ministry abuse. Some were saying he was using the ministry to line his own pockets. So he responded in 2 Corinthians 2-6.

We don't have time to investigate the entire response, but tonight we're going to look at the first paragraph of the section. It's there that Paul shares his vision for ministry.

READ 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Paul saw what others failed to see. He was a man of vision. He invested his life with this purpose in mind: to know Christ and to make Him known. That was his mission in life. Is it ours?

What does it take to have a clear vision? We're going to have a vision adjustment tonight. According to 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, if we are to have the kind of vision that pleases God, we need to see three things. We need to see the promise (14), the potential (15-16), and the people (17).

I. We need to see the promise (14).

What's the promise? "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him."

God promises to do two things. What are they? One, He promises to lead us in triumphal procession in Christ. And two, He promises to make Christ known through us in every place. He promises to do something *in* us and *through* us. He's committed to enabling us to know Christ and to make Christ known.

Did you catch that? God has committed Himself to making Christ known through His Church. That's what *God* does.

Question: Is it our responsibility to make the church grow? No. Whose is it? What did Jesus say, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

What's our responsibility then? It's to allow God to make Christ known through us. *To make Christ known*. As we do that we can claim Christ's promise. God will cause

²Bryant Myers, *The New Context of World Mission*, p. 48.

the ministry of His church to triumph. And our appropriate response should then be the same as Paul's--"Thanks be to God...for leading us in triumphal procession!"

There's a beautiful cultural imagery that provides the backdrop for verse 14. Paul has in mind the picture of what was known as the Roman Triumph. The highest honor a Roman general could receive was called a Triumph. To attain it, he had to meet certain conditions. He must have been the actual commander in chief in the field of battle. He must have finished the campaign, defeated the enemy, and brought the troops home. He must have killed 5,000 opponents in one engagement. He must have conquered enemy territory. And finally, he must have won over a foreign foe, and not in a civil war.

If a general accomplished this, he was entitled to a Triumph. Here's what happened. A fabulous procession paraded through the streets of Rome in honor of the victorious general. Here was the order of the procession:

1. The State Officials and the Senate
2. The Trumpeters
3. The spoils taken from the conquered lands. For instance, when Titus conquered Jerusalem, he took to Rome the seven-branched candlestick, the golden table of the showbread, and the golden trumpets.
4. Pictures of the conquered land
5. The white bull which would be sacrificed to the gods
6. The enemy princes, leaders, and generals who would be flung into prison, and then executed
7. The musicians
8. The priests swinging their censers burning with sweet smelling incense
9. The General himself, in a chariot drawn by four horses, wearing a purple tunic, embroidered with golden palm leaves
10. The General's family
11. The army wearing all their decorations, shouting the cry of triumph

The Triumph was quite a sight! It usually happened only once in a lifetime. And apparently, it's the picture Paul had in mind when He thought of Jesus Christ.

Right now, Christ is marching in triumph through the world. And nothing can stop Him. Two thousand years ago He defeated the enemies of sin, death, and the devil. And now He's marching in triumphal procession.

Beloved, that's the perspective we need to have when we do ministry. Ministry is a manifestation. Ministry is making known the victorious accomplishment of Jesus Christ to people still in bondage to the enemy. We are soldiers in Christ's procession. The triumph of the ministry is certain. Why? Because of God's *promise*.

Do you view ministry that way? Fellow soldier of Christ, we exist to make Christ known. Ministry isn't merely what we do on Sunday or with our spare time. It's why we're here. Our purpose for living is to know Christ and to make Him known to others.

Once that fact gets a hold of us, it'll change the way we look at our lives. It will sharpen our vision. God desires to do something through us. He's committed Himself to making Christ known. The question is--do we want what God wants?

Why is vision so important? It's because of the potential...

II. We need to see the potential (15-16).

There is great potential for ministry all over the globe. We need to see the harvest fields of the 10/40 window. But we also need to see the harvest fields of Crescent Avenue and Gallia Street. Two out of three people in our area have no real association with any church (let alone a church that teaches the Word of God). The potential is great.

Having said that, we need to realize that when we seek to make Christ known we'll encounter two different responses.

READ verses 15-16

There's potential out there. But there's also potential right here, in the church. According to verse 15, what are we to God? To God, we are the "aroma" of Christ. A sweet savor.

The imagery again grows out of the Roman Triumph. The eighth party in the procession were the priests. They carried their censers burning with incense. The smell reached the nostrils of everyone in the area.

How did the people respond to the smell? There were two responses. To some, the aroma was a *fume*. Who was that? The captives. The ones in chains. The smell reminded them of their hopeless condition. It was a smell of death.

But to the rest, the aroma was a *fragrance*. A sweet smell that reminded them of their victory. It was a smell of life.

That's the way it is in ministry. Our task is to make Christ known--and the potential is great. But as we minister, what can we expect? Two very different responses.

A. To some, the message of Christ is a *fume*. Who's that? Verse 15 says to "those who are perishing."

Beloved, the gospel is good news. But it's also bad news--to those who reject it. To those who persist in rebelling against God, and refuse to repent of their sins and believe in Christ, the gospel is a message of death. It's a reminder that they are condemned, and doomed to spend an eternity apart from God. To those who are perishing, the message of Christ is a horrid fume.

Last week, a former professor of mine, Dr. Grier shared about a conversation he had with a man on a flight from Chicago to Grand Rapids...

It's true. We won't be popular with everybody when we tell them the message of Christ. To some, the message is a fume. But thankfully...

B. To some, the message of Christ is a *fragrance*. Who's that? Verse 15 says "among those who are being saved."

No, not everybody will reject the message we proclaim. By God's grace, the Spirit of God will bring life to some. To some our message will be a sweet fragrance.

Do you remember the day you smelled the fragrance? I was eleven when the fume became a fragrance. I'm so glad for those who helped me to know Christ. Aren't you?

Who are you helping to know Christ right now? Who are you spending time with for the purpose of sharing the aroma of Christ? There's a world of potential out there. Do you see it? Do you see your neighbors? Your classmates? Your family members? Do you see that fellow at work? Do you see, or has your vision become clouded?

Perhaps you've been discouraged. Perhaps you've shared Christ with someone who mocked you, or ignored you. And you've clammed up.

I'm sure Paul felt that frustration. Notice how he concludes verse 16, "And who is equal to such a task?"

Beloved, when it comes to potential, here are the simple facts. Sure, to some the gospel is an offensive fume. But keep spreading it. Why? Because to others it is a sweet smelling fragrance.

So what does it take to have a clear vision? First, a clear focus on the promise--God's promise--He will lead us in triumphal procession and spread the fragrance of Christ throughout the world. Second, a clear focus on the potential--we are the aroma of Christ. As we make Christ known, to some we'll be a stench, but to others--thank God--we'll be a savor. Thirdly...

III. We need to see the people (17).

Who does God use to make the knowledge of Christ in the world? Angels? No. Gospel blimps? No. Cloud formations? No. He uses people.

But here's where it gets messy. Why? Because people are driven by different motives. In fact, in verse 17 Paul informs us that there are people in ministry with two types of motives.

A. First, there are people ministering with wrong motives. "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit." In Paul's day as in ours, there were peddlers who used deceptive means to make an extra buck. They would use false weights to mislead their buyers. Another trick was to adulterate their wine with water. These hucksters tried to make a profit by selling shoddy goods.

That's what Paul says some people do in ministry. In fact, he doesn't say "some." He says *many*. Many corrupt the Word. The problem isn't *what* they say, but *why* they say it. Their motives are wrong. They peddle the Word for personal advantage.

Listen carefully. Did you realize it's not enough to make Christ known? We must do it with right motives. Why? Because when we minister with wrong motives, in the long run we do a great disservice to the cause of Christ.

This is convicting, isn't it? Make it personal. Do you want to see your children come to faith in Christ? A good desire, but what's your motivation? Could it be so that it will make *you* look good as a parent?

Are you burdened for your unsaved neighbor? That's good, but why are you burdened for him? Is it merely because you're tired of his beer cans in your yard, or some other personal inconvenience that you hope would leave if he got saved?

Are you burdened to see our president come to know Christ? That's good, but why? Is it because you're afraid that if he doesn't this "Christian" country will continue to slide down the moral slope? And if that happens we might lose some of the blessings of prosperity we've known in the American church--is that why?

When it comes to vision, we need to take a look at the motives of people. Not the people who need Christ, but the ones making Christ known. That's *us*!

You ask, "How can I tell if my motives are right?" Take a look at the end of verse 17. Here we see that...

B. There are people ministering with right motives. "On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God." How can you tell if

your motive is right? Paul gives us four tests. Yes, we must speak for Christ--that's a given. But our ministry must pass four tests. I'll put them in the form of four questions.

1. *Test #1: What?* What's our perspective to be as we minister? "*In Christ we speak before God...*" Our consuming passion for minister is Jesus Christ. We know we are in Him. We're no longer in our sins. If any man is *in Christ* he is a new creation. Old things are passed away; all things are become new (2 Cor. 5:17)." How do we view ourselves? What's our perspective as we minister? As those who are *in Christ*.

2. *Test #2: Why?* Why do we minister? "In Christ we speak *before God*." It's not for personal gain. Our sole ambition is to please God.

When you witness, remember this. There's an unseen audience, and it's the one that matters. The real audience is not the person with whom you are sharing Christ. The real audience, the one that was fixed in Paul's vision, was *God*. We speak *before God*.

That's what should drive us as we seek to make Christ known. God is watching. Do you believe that? Are you glad He gave His Son for you? He's watching to see how glad we really are. Are we glad enough to inconvenience ourselves any? Are we glad enough to tell others about Him?

3. *Test #3: Who?* Who are we seeking to honor as we proclaim Christ? "In Christ we speak before God with sincerity, *like men sent from God*." When our motive is right, we will see ourselves as did the Old Testament prophets. We are people sent from God. We speak because God has burdened our hearts with a message we can't contain.

Do you see yourself that way? Do you see yourself as a "missionary?" A missionary is simply a person who takes seriously the *mission* of the church. Is the mission of the church *yours*, or just someone else's? Do you see yourself as a person who has been *sent from God*?

4. *Test #4: How?* How are we to minister? "In Christ we speak before God *with sincerity*." Nobody should ever be able to say of us, "What you care about is *yourself*. Yea, you minister, but when you do it it's to get something, not to give. You're hungry for power, and thirsty for prestige." That's not true of a person who's speaking *in sincerity*.

I hope you love the ministry. It's amazing to be a part of the grand triumphal procession of God in this world. But we need constantly to check our motives.

Some people are critical of the way others minister. They accuse them of having the wrong motives. But the truth is, the most vocal critics are often themselves not involved in ministry. They're spectators. Pew sitters. And it's easy to complain when you're sitting on the sidelines.

D. L. Moody was once criticized by someone who said he didn't like the way he did evangelism. Moody responded, "Frankly, sir, I prefer the way I do it to the way you don't do it."

So how's your vision tonight? To have the kind of vision that pleases God we need to see clearly the promise, the potential, and the people of 2 Corinthians 2. Would you answer two very important questions.

One, are you making Christ known? When was the last time you shared Christ with someone? Are you a part of the procession, or are you a spectator on the sidelines?

Two, are you making Christ known with right motives?