

The Triumph and Aroma of Christ

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Date: 17 July 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's great to be with you guys. I don't know many of you. My name is Brian and I'm one of the pastors at One Harbor Moorhead. So if you're new to our church, we have one church in multiple locations. And so my post on a Sunday morning is typically in Moorhead, but today I get to be with you. And I feel the weightiness of today because there is always a weightiness that comes from preaching, but I also brought the coffee today. There's a lot riding on my shoulders and I nearly spilled the coffee, but I didn't. I got it here and I didn't screw that up. Hopefully I won't screw this up. But it isn't just a weight to preach. It's also a delight. So why don't I start just by praying for this God. So Jesus would often tell people, take care how you hear. So there's a sense in which you can hear and just hear wrongly. We can all do that. We can hear God's word and not hear it well. So I want to pray that we would hear well this morning. Lord, thank you for gathering us together as your church. You are the sovereign Lord. If we are in the room right now, it is because you have drawn us near. We thank you for the privilege of being here. I pray that you would prepare us for your word. And I pray that we would hear it well. I pray that the result of your word being proclaimed is that we are stronger, that we are more likely to sacrifice for you, to obey you, to live for you, because we are more convinced that you love us and you have sacrificed for us and you have done hard things for us. We pray for your blessing over our time in

Jesus' name. Amen. So if you're new to One Harbor, we've been preaching through the letter in the Bible, called 2 Corinthians. I trust that this letter has been explained or the context of it a little bit over the last few weeks. It's a little bit confusing, so I'm not going to try to rehearse everything that maybe has already been said. But you have this guy named Paul who is an apostle of the early church. He had planted a church in a town called Corinth. And we have some correspondence between him and this church. And so over the last few weeks, we've been looking at what Paul has been saying to this church. He's been addressing a very painful situation. There's been a lot of back and forth about various things. The relationship between him and these believers has become strained over a number of issues. Now, part of it seems a little bit hard to connect with. And honestly, there's a lot of detail that at least initially can even feel irrelevant. You know, Paul's going on and on about his travel plans. And it's hard, you know, 2,000 years later to know why we should care about Paul's travel plans and why he made it on this trip but didn't make it on this trip. But the bigger point of all of that is that you have a group of people who've taken very serious offense that Paul didn't come visit them. And so they're beginning to wonder if he's even trustworthy. Paul, who's been appointed by God to be a messenger to these folks, they don't really know that he's trustworthy anymore.

And they're not convinced that they need to be supporting him or maybe even believing the message that he has brought to them. And so in addition to that, you have other folks who come into this church and are slandering Paul. We're going to read more about this at the end of the letter. And if you read 2 Corinthians, you maybe remember these super apostles, as Paul calls them. These are guys who, to make matters worse, you've already got this very strained relationship with this church, but you've got these guys who've come in and they said, look, Paul is weak. He's not a very capable orator.

What public speaker goes around making tents for a living? He doesn't have, I mean, there's a sense in which public speakers were celebrities in that day and they were expected to live like it. And so Paul was not living like that. He lived as a very simple man. He didn't depend on really sophisticated public speaking skills like maybe other people did. And so this isn't just about Paul getting his feelings hurt. That's one thing that maybe is helpful to understand. This is really not about Paul so much.

He has been appointed by God as an apostle. He's been tasked by the sovereign Lord to take the gospel to places just like Corinth. But now you've got people saying, don't trust him. And when someone says, don't trust God's messenger, that's really saying, don't trust God. That's what this amounts to.

[4 : 31] They're rejecting the message of the gospel. And so 2 Corinthians is in many ways Paul's defense. And again, up until this point, a lot of it's been about his travel. We're at kind of a high level if you're trying to understand 2 Corinthians as a written work anyway. What we're going to read today is an interesting part of this letter. We're going to read chapter 2, verses 12 through 17.

And this is kind of a hinge point in the letter. The first two verses of the passage we're going to read today are kind of his last comments about his travel plan. So I'm going to read these verses first. Verses 12 and 13 say, Paul says, Now we know from this letter that later when Paul gets to Macedonia, he finds Titus. And here's why that matters. This isn't about Paul missing his buddy. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to find out, is this church that I've given my heart to, do they still believe the gospel? Do they still love Jesus? And so he's waiting to hear from Titus, has the enemy destroyed everything or is the work continued? That's kind of what's at stake here. And so we know from later in the letter that he does find Titus. Titus gives him a great report. The Corinthians still love Jesus. They still believe in your message of the gospel. But perhaps because of the memory of what had happened at Macedonia, at this point in the letter, Paul abruptly interrupts himself. And this interruption really becomes the main thrust of 2 Corinthians. This next verse we're going to read, this interruption really lasts from here and it goes all the way through the end of chapter 6. And it's a very long discussion that really amounts to a defense of Paul's apostolic ministry, which is what we're going to spend the next few weeks looking at. But the way that he makes this interruption in the letter is with a remarkable paragraph. This is one of the high, in my opinion, this next paragraph is one of the high points of 2 Corinthians. I would say these next verses we're going to read are key to understanding what does the victory of God look like in your life when everything in your life looks like it's going wrong. That can be hard as a Christian. It can be hard to take the promises of scripture and believe that they're true when everything looks like it's not going the right way. Even maybe things that, you know, dreams that you thought that God gave you and those dreams don't come true. Or you suffer in ways that seem unfair or unexpected. What does it mean that God is still faithful and victorious in your life? One commentator says about these next verses, this short paragraph is one of the most encouraging, freeing, and motivating passages in the entire New Testament.

So I'm hoping we leave feeling some of that today. So remember, here's the context. The Corinthians, very upset with Paul. Outsiders have come in and slandered him. His friend Titus is missing.

Things are not going well. And then Paul says this, But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we, with the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life, who is sufficient for these things? For we are not like so many, peddlers of God's word. But as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God, we speak in Christ. So Paul says, no matter what happens, thanks be to God. On the worst day of my life, thanks be to God.

On the worst day of your life, thanks be to God, because he's always leading us in triumphal procession. God is always leading you in his victory parade. Not sometimes, not on the days that feel like, you know, things are going great today. Oh, it's sunny and we feel sunny. No, no, no. Even on your worst day, God is on the move. He is marching and he's headed always towards victory. He's unstoppable and you are a part of it. He's always leading you in his triumph.

[9 : 10] Now, here's where things get really interesting in this passage. Paul is actually using, there's a lot of debate about these verses, so we're going to get into that in just a second. But everybody agrees that when Paul, all the scholars agree that when Paul says, God's leading you in a triumphal procession, he's actually, this is a metaphorical reference to something that's very specific. It's a reference to something that is, that's called today the Roman triumph, which was a, these very famous parades that would happen in the city of Rome. And they would always be used to celebrate things like military victories or the crowning of a new emperor, a new Caesar, or perhaps to give thanksgiving to the gods.

And the focal point of that triumph, that's what it was called, a triumph. The focal point of that triumph or that parade was either the general who had won the battle, a famous battle, an important victory, or perhaps Caesar. And that person was called the triumphator. He was the center of the parade and he rode in a chariot. And so that you get the full flavor and really the scandal even of what Paul is saying in these verses. I want to help you maybe vividly imagine this in the way that certainly, Corinth was a Roman, it's in Greece, but it's a Roman city full of Romans. These people knew what the triumph was. I want you to, I want to help you imagine it like they were probably imagining it when they read these, or heard these verses read. So here's how the triumph would work. It would start early in the morning. The triumphator would be outside the city with his personal guard, the soldiers closest to him. There would be a ceremony, a private ceremony, where they would dress him in a purple tunic and a crown of laurel would be placed upon his head. His face would be painted red, so he would look like Jupiter. The statue of Jupiter had a red face, so his face would be painted red to kind of identify him with the gods. And then his soldiers would shout an acclamation of his lordship. They would perform acts of acclamation. And they would accompany him from their camp, which is outside the city. They would accompany him into the city. They would go through a gate called the triumphal gate. And then once they're in the city, this parade would take shape. And there's a lot of other people in the parade. In particular, you've got the triumphator. Behind him and his, behind his chariot, you'd have his guards, his soldiers.

And then behind them, you would have the captives of the people that he had conquered. Many of them would be sold to slaves, but the leaders among them would be slaughtered along the way in sacrifice and in honor to the victor and to the gods. A sacrificial bull was also in this parade. And the bull would walk alongside the chariot. This bull is going to be sacrificed at the end. And next to the bull is an official carrying an axe over his shoulder, which is the implement of the animal's coming death.

And this procession would end. It would land at the temple of Jupiter. Now the temple of Jupiter, I won't get into why this is, but there's a very famous hill in Rome that the temple of Jupiter sat on.

And it was literally called the place of death's head. And that is where the sacrifice would take place. It was the culmination of the triumph. And at that point, the triumphator would be given a cup of ceremonial wine, but he wouldn't drink it. He would pour it out on the altar at the moment of sacrifice because the bull symbolized the gods. And so when the bull is killed, it's like the god is dying and reappearing as the victor in the person of the triumphator. And so there's this whole sort of ceremony that's meant to connect the sacrifice, the sacrificial animal to the triumphator.

[13 : 01] And then at that moment, at the end of this whole ceremony, the moment of sacrifice, the triumphator is acclaimed as lord of the land. His vice regents would appear, one on either side of him in all of their glory. And so there's the group of oftentimes three standing, receiving praise and glory. And depending on the triumphator's identity, he may even be hailed as a son of the gods or of a God. And so with all that in mind, here's why one biblical scholar says this, the glories of the spoils, the story of the battles, the strength of the prisoners of war, the humiliation of the conquered rulers and the final sacrifices and death of the captives were all meant to display vividly the glory, wisdom, power, and sovereignty of Rome and its leaders. One other scholar says this, in no other Roman ceremony do God and man approach each other as closely as they do in the triumph.

So this is what Paul has in mind when he's writing these verses. He's saying our whole lives are a constant procession of God's victory. And it is not a small detail that he says always.

The context here is that everything is going wrong for Paul, right? But he's saying even now, even now in my relational strife with this Corinthian church, in my inability to find my friend Titus, in all of my shortcomings and the sufferings of my ministry, God is always triumphing.

And so it, you know, I think naturally you read this and say, well, man, Paul, if everything's going wrong, in what sense does your life appear to be a triumph? Well, this is where the metaphor gets a little bit controversial because grammatically the way that Paul has written this, I mean, people have debated this for centuries. What Paul, what exactly, like we, everyone seems to agree on what the metaphor is, but how is Paul using it? Because many scholars, if not most, say that everywhere else in Greek literature, even outside the Bible, when the verb that Paul is using, when it's used in this way, it's always referring to the captives in the parade. In fact, this verb is only found in one other place in the New Testament. Colossians 2:15 says, he, God, disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him, in Jesus. So it seems like Paul isn't saying he's being led along as a victorious soldier. He's saying that God is victorious and he, Paul, is God's captive, which adds some texture to this that's maybe a bit unexpected. In fact, translations have really, translators have just wrestled with how to bring this out.

So the NIV goes in that direction. The NIV says it this way, but thanks be to God who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession. See, according to Paul, to be a Christian is to be conquered and captive in Christ. And so Paul, he loved paradoxes. They're all through the New Testament.

[16 : 13] We have one here. We know that Paul loved the idea of God conquering him. He regularly, in the New Testament, referred to himself as a servant or a slave of Christ. Many times where you see the word servant in the New Testament, it's a word that could just as easily be slave. Paul introduces himself in many of his letters. I'm a slave of Jesus. Paul, chosen to be an apostle, a slave of Jesus.

And then in 1 Corinthians 6, he said, we're not our own. We're bought with a price. So there you have a different sort of metaphor. I've, you know, Paul says, I've been ransomed by God. So we have a different metaphor here, not of a ransom, but of this triumph parade. But understanding this nuance really kind of turns the meaning of this upside down, or at least that's how it seems at first. Paul isn't saying, I'm, he's not calling himself the partner of the triumphator. He's calling himself the prisoner of the triumphator, a willing and privileged captive, a trophy of God's victory in his life. So how can that be a good thing? That's worth asking. Why would that be? Why would, why would you ever rejoice in that?

It seems outrageous. In the Roman triumph, the captives get executed. And, and I mean, in Colossians, what do we, what do we make of what it says in Colossians? Is God going to do with Paul what he does with the rulers and authorities and powers that he triumphs over there? The difference between Paul and the rulers and authorities mentioned in Colossians is that he is in Christ and they are not.

And that's it. Paul, Paul talked at length throughout the New Testament of the significance of being in Christ. In fact, the way that he talked about that, it's almost as if he's saying, um, there's nothing left to me except what is in Christ. In Galatians 2 verse 20, he says, I've been crucified with Christ.

I don't even live anymore. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So do you know why Paul is saying this here? The Corinthians thought he was a nobody. Again, there's these super, super apostles we're going to read about later who, you don't need to listen to Paul. He's weak, poor. He doesn't have the rhetorical skills for this job. He's not impressive enough. Don't trust him. Paul's saying that's exactly why you should trust me. Because it's not about me. Because my weakness shows off God's strength. Because I'm merely a captive in his parade. I'm not the triumphator. He is.

[18 : 38] It's not about me or the super apostles. It's always about him. Thanks be to God. We don't have to always seem great. We don't always have to be winning. Man, the world will tell you that.

The world will put pressure on you, man. You better be winning. You don't want to be a loser. You don't want to be a failure. No. Paul says, thanks be to God. He's conquered all of that.

He's conquered us. Conquered our sin. Our rebellion. He has won us. And now we are his trophies. And our weaknesses make him look really good. And so our job is to do what he tells us. Which brings up the second metaphor that Paul uses here. It's one of fragrance. I want to reread some of these verses. But thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession. And through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved. And among those who are perishing. To the one a fragrance from death to death. To the other a fragrance from life to life. God spreads the fragrance of his gospel through us. That's the job we have in this parade. Now in English class, in high school English class, for those of, I know, we got some who aren't in high school yet. Maybe your teachers would have, English teachers would have told you this too. There's a rule. You don't mix your metaphors.

No one told Paul that. And if you want to pick a fight with him in the new heavens and new earth, this would be a legitimate one to use. He made things confusing at times by mixing his metaphors.

Which he did here actually in a double sense. Because not only in this passage does Paul use two metaphors, but the second metaphor he seems to use in two different ways. So the first way he talks about this fragrance seems to be in relation to one of the jobs people had in the parade. So there were people who would actually go in front of the chariot and they were spreading in, this whole thing was meant to be overwhelming. And so you had people at the front who would spread incense.

[20 : 40] They would kind of walk before the triumphator. And so Paul's using some of that imagery here. You're not just, so he's using this metaphor in different ways. There's a sense in which you're a captive. There's another sense in which you have this responsibility to go before the Lord.

And where do you go? It literally says in the text everywhere. We take, we take the gospel, we take the aroma of the gospel everywhere. There is no place. We shouldn't take it. We take it to every place. Christ has triumphed. People need to know. And what is the fragrance? Well, Paul says it refers to the knowledge of Christ. It's without a doubt, he's using it as a metaphor for the message he's proclaiming. The good news that Jesus is Lord and he has triumphed over your sin, over the powers and rulers of the age. One day there will be nothing left that he hasn't triumphed over.

So Paul says we are his missionaries. We tell everyone. But then in verse 15, Paul takes the same metaphor and he uses it in a different way. He says, we are the aroma of Christ to God.

So what does that mean? Well, here, again, most scholars seem to think that Paul is kind of stepping out of the Roman triumphal procession idea. And now he's thinking about the Old Testament sacrificial system. You know, for Jews, they would have known when sacrifices are burnt on the altar as a gift, the aroma of that sacrifice is a big part of it. In fact, the first time in the Bible we hear of God enjoying the aroma of the sacrifice is at the very beginning of the Bible with a man called Noah. Noah gets out of the ark. He makes a sacrifice. Look at what it says. So whenever you see something introduced in the Bible for the first time, it's always a little bit significant. So this is the first place in the Bible we see this idea of aroma going up to the Lord. And here's what it says. When the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma of Noah's sacrifice, the Lord said in his heart, I'll never again curse the ground because of man. For the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. So what's happening there is God smells this aroma and then immediately there's something, it's a bit of a fancy word that theologians use, but there's something called propitiation. God smells the pleasing aroma and there's propitiation, which means the turning away of wrath. I will not again destroy the world with a flood. And so the aroma that's pleasing God has this idea behind it, atonement and sacrifice to turn away the wrath of God. And that's how Paul understood Christ's sacrifice. In Ephesians 5, he said, walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. That's talking about what he did on the cross, which he says is a fragrant offering. It's sweet smell and sacrifice to God. Now if you could read

Greek, this would be even more obvious that this is what Paul's saying in 2 Corinthians. In verse 14, when Paul's talking about the triumph parade, the word there for the people who are spreading the incense, he uses a word just for aroma that could be good or bad, just like smell. Could be a good smell, could be a bad smell. But when he gets to verse 15, he uses a very specific word that always means sweet smell. So you could just as easily say, we are the sweet smell. We're the sweet aroma of Christ to God. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, that word shows up all over the place and it's always about sacrifice. We're the sweet smell of Christ's sacrifice to the Lord. That is an amazing thing. It means that you don't have to get on the cross. You don't have to duplicate or redo what Jesus did. But when you live your life in submission to him, God looks at you and sees Jesus.

[24 : 19] The work of Jesus being lived out in your life. We go everywhere with the fragrance of God, this message of reconciliation. We bear it in our lives. That means we don't just merely tell people about the gospel. We act it out. But how do you act out the gospel? There's only one way. With humility and suffering and self-sacrifice. That's always what the sweet smell is. Like if you think there's any way to demonstrate the gospel without pain and without humility and without sacrifice, it's impossible.

that is fundamentally the sweet smell of Christ is sacrifice and pain. And how do people respond to Jesus? One of two ways. They fell at his feet or they rejected him. It is interesting in the gospels that it seems very intentional. The way that the writers of those stories told the stories is that nobody seemed neutral when it came to Jesus. There was always one of two reactions.

There was either worship and surrender or there was rejection. Which is why Paul says this fragrance is to some a smell that's from death to death and others life to life. Like you were dead in your sins.

If you reject Jesus, you will experience a greater death, an eternal death. You'll go from death to death. But Jesus who died has been resurrected. He's been brought back to life for you, an indestructible life.

And if you're willing to submit to Jesus, God's going to do the same for you from his life to yours. You're going to go from life to life. So when everything in your life goes wrong, when it seems like all is lost, and it seems like your life is falling apart, Paul says we always give thanks.

[26 : 10] Because God has us in his victory parade, and it has always been about him, not us. We were rebels, and he conquered us. And now we get to be a part of it. We get a role to play. He didn't just conquer us, he invites us into his parade. That all nations might catch the aroma of his gospel.

And we tell people about the work of Christ while filling up in our bodies the suffering of Christ. Paul would tell the Corinthians, oh, you Corinthians, you have misunderstood everything, haven't you?

You judge me as weak, small, unworthy. That has been the whole point. And as Paul would go on to say more eloquently in this letter, God's power is actually made perfect in our weakness.

And some of you need to hear that. You're like embarrassed about some aspect of weakness in your life. That's the point. God's power is made perfect in your weakness. He's always winning.

He'll say, Paul will go on to say, I will boast of my weakness so that God's power will rest on me. Wouldn't it be great if instead of being insecure about our weaknesses, we could boast in them? I am weak, and it makes him look so good.

[27 : 22] How is it that he would love me and use somebody like me? Paul will go on to say, when I'm weak, then I'm strong. And that's the aroma of Christ. A life of self-sacrifice.

A life of being God's captive. A trophy of his grace. His servant doing the work of taking his fragrance everywhere. It's our responsibility. Do you feel the weightiness? I mean, I was joking at the beginning of this sermon about the weightiness of preaching.

The weightiness of bringing the coffee, you know. Do you feel the weightiness of what's been demanded of you? Do you feel the weightiness of being in Christ's parade?

That you have a role to play? That actually the ability of the church to bear witness to God's glory to some degree depends on you saying yes.

Do you feel the weightiness of that? Paul did. The next verse, verse 16, he said, who is sufficient for these things? And the way that question is framed, you'd think the answer is nobody.

[28 : 22] And in a sense, that's exactly right. Nobody can do this on their own. But that's not the whole story. Paul answers this question a few verses later in chapter 3. He says, not that we're sufficient in ourselves to claim anything is coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.

Which is a great reminder that only God makes you sufficient to do his work. It's his parade. It's his victory. And it's his sufficiency in you. It's like everything comes from him. It's all about him and everything comes from him.

The point Paul's making here should have a massive impact on your life. But again, it helps to put it in context. People were coming in saying that they're better qualified than Paul.

Paul says, no, I don't think so. Who is sufficient to spread the fragrance of God? Who is sufficient to be in this parade? To take the knowledge of him everywhere.

Only those who get their sufficiency from Jesus. Not those who rely on a better financial status. Not those who rely on better public speaking skills. Paul didn't depend on those things.

[29 : 20] He's an incense bearer. And a good incense bearer lets the aroma do its work. Like, you don't got to make the gospel better than it already is. You don't have to make it smell better.

You don't have to make it sound better. You just hold it out. The Holy Spirit is the one who changes the world. Paul goes, filled with the Spirit, spreading the knowledge of God everywhere.

Do you think you're qualified for this? Are you qualified to be in God's victory parade? Spreading his fragrance everywhere.

So that people would know that Christ is king. See, some people will too quickly say no. But it's because they rightly see everything they're bad at. Alright? Oh, I'm not good at public speaking.

I'm not very confident. I'm not a leader. I've got questions myself. I don't have all the answers. Paul would say. I think Paul would say, just remember what kind of parade you're in.

[30 : 18] No one has asked you to be the triumphator. You don't need to worry about going around people thinking that you're, like, amazing. That's not what it's about. Like, when you don't know the answers, you can say, how amazing is it that I know that Christ loves me?

That's enough. I don't have to know the answers, actually. I don't have to know everything. I don't have to have all the answers. Because I know you can't convince me he didn't die for me. And that's enough for me. And then other people would too quickly say, oh, sure, I'm qualified.

Because they see everything they're good at. They're like the super apostles. The ones who think you've got to be flashy and cool and super smart. Paul would say, whoa, whoa, whoa. The only sufficiency for this work comes from the Holy Spirit.

Friends, you do not have to be impressive to hit home runs for the kingdom. You don't. You are not the triumphator. You are bearing his incense. You go as his captive.

The question is, will you let his sufficiency be enough? Paul distinguishes himself from his critics in verse 17. He says, we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God, we speak in Christ.

[31 : 28] The gospel is enough. And I think that there are a number of tests in here you can ask yourself based on what Paul just said. He said, we're not like so many peddlers of God's word.

To peddle God's word means you only share it because it offers you something. Money, fame, influence. Do you treasure Christ more than anything else?

Because if you don't, you will be a peddler of his word eventually. Will you be sincere? Paul says, we're men of sincerity. Will you be sincere? Will you reject hypocrisy?

Will you not pretend to be better than you really are? We live in the age of pretense, friends. Almost every, I mean, what is social media?

Other than trying to make ourselves look before others like we are better than we really are. Is the truth of the gospel enough for you to tell the truth about who you are?

[32 : 31] Paul says, we are commissioned by God. Will you speak as commissioned by God? And thus make his words more important than your own. Are God's words enough?

Listen, friends. Scripture does not have a boundless scope. It doesn't speak to everything. It doesn't tell you how to fix your car. There's all kinds of things it doesn't speak to. But it does speak to the most important things.

Who is God and why is the world here? What's the purpose of your life? Will his words be enough for you? Or will you go elsewhere looking for better words? Paul says, we speak in the sight of God.

Will you speak in the sight of God? Meaning, will you value his judgment and approval more than anyone else's? The Bible doesn't ever say you shouldn't care about being praised.

It's okay to want to be praised. The question is, whose praise do you really want? Jesus says, at the end of the day, you could hear these words from the Lord of the universe. You could hear these words, boom, well done, good and faithful servant.

[33 : 31] Do you want to hear those words? Or are you more motivated by hearing the praise of men and the words of others? Are his words enough? And will you speak in Christ? That's what Paul says.

He says, we speak in Christ. Will you speak in Christ? Will you reckon being in Christ the most central aspect to your identity? Will his name on your heart be enough? Like if you were to tell somebody one thing about your life, what would you want them to know?

Is it enough to be his servant in a captive in his parade? The most important thing about my life is that I'm in somebody else's parade. See, in the eyes of the world, here's why this is important.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, and many of you know this, but if you're a disciple of Jesus, it's a matter of time until you will look like a failure in the eyes of the world. And for everyone, including me, for everyone, that is always harder than you think it's going to be.

Because we're all swimming in this water, man. It is hard not to absorb the influence of the world around us, about what it means to be successful. What it means to live the good life.

[34 : 33] If you're following Jesus, it's a matter of time until you look like a failure. You look like a captive man. But when you understand the gospel, it takes whatever that issue is, it takes that issue and it turns it upside down.

Because the gospel is not just a set of facts that Christ has died for us. It's a set of facts by which we see and know everything else. It becomes a lens. And you know what a lens does? It turns things upside down.

Literally, that's how lenses work. Light goes into a lens and it comes out reversed on the other side. And the gospel functions that way in your life. It's a lens which, if you have eyes to see it, will turn your life upside down.

The failure will now look like victory. After all, what is the story of the cross? It is the Roman triumph turned upside down. Check this out.

The triumph would begin with the Roman general or Caesar surrounded by his guards. And they would give him accolades. Well, when Jesus had been sentenced to death, he was led away from Pilate and surrounded by soldiers and guards who mockingly gave him accolades.

[35 : 43] Hail, King of the Jews. And then the triumphator would be given a purple tunic. Those soldiers gave Jesus a purple robe. The triumphator's guards would also give him a crown of laurel that they would put on his head.

The soldiers gave Jesus a crown of thorns. And then the triumphator's face would be painted red in honor of Jupiter to try to identify him with God.

Jesus' entire body was red in his own blood. And here you have a God taking on the form of a man and a servant and a sacrifice. The triumph parade would begin and the triumphator would be led from outside the city in through the gate of triumph into the city.

Jesus is in the city and is led out of the city to a place of humiliation. The triumph included a sacrificial bull and alongside it walked an official carrying an axe over his shoulder, the implement of the coming death.

Jesus, as the sacrifice, carries his own cross, the implement of his own coming death. And then the triumph would finally ascend to the temple of Jupiter on a hill that was literally called the place of death's head.

[37 : 03] The place where the sacrifice would take place. And Jesus ascends a hill called Golgotha, which means the place of the skull, the place of death's head, where his sacrifice would take place.

And then the triumphator would be, he would take a ceremonial wine and he would pour it out and reject it. And in the next moment, the sacrificial bull is killed.

And on the cross, Jesus is offered sour wine, which he rejects. And in the next moment, he breathes his last and is killed. And the triumphator at the end of all of this would appear with his vice regents, one on his right, one on his left, the three receiving glory.

Jesus dies on a cross in between two thieves, one on his right, one on his left. The three receiving shame and humiliation. And then the people of Rome would shout and confess that their triumphator is the son of the gods.

And as Jesus hangs dead, it is a remarkable thing that it is a Roman soldier who looks at him and says, truly, this man is the son of God. The scholars tell us that the Roman triumph put on display the glory of Rome.

[38 : 15] Paul says that the cross put on display the glory of God. The cross is the Roman triumph turned upside down. And if you don't have the gospel to see that, if the gospel isn't a lens, it's just a story of failure.

There's plenty of people who reckon with the fact that the crucifixion of Jesus really happened in history. But they don't believe that he's the son of God. They reject the power of the gospel and say they don't see it as a triumph.

They see it as a failure. But if you believe the gospel, then you know that the world's greatest failure is actually God's greatest victory. It's an amazing thing. The worst thing that has ever happened all of a sudden becomes the best thing that has ever happened.

And it was the aim of Jesus to march in that parade of shame and humiliation. So friends, what is the aim of your life? Like, what kind of parade are you in?

Whose parade are you in? And where does it end? Does it end with you retiring and moving to the beach? Is the whole goal to make a name for yourself?

[39 : 18] Get a certain amount of money? Have a certain size family? You know, how come no matter how much you achieve, you and I, doesn't really matter how much those things may come true. There is still a hollowness, an emptiness, and a craving for more, an itch that never goes away.

Thanks be to God, he has set us free from all of that. He is leading us in his triumph. Jesus was a captive in a parade, a parade of death.

And yet it was God who triumphed through his sacrifice. Who do you think was winning when Christ climbed the hill to Golgotha? And who do you think is winning when you give and sacrifice and take the lowest place?

Who do you think is winning when your dreams seem like they're not coming true? When people slander you and tear you down and humiliate you? Who is winning? Friends, the worst your life seems, when that is offered to Jesus in sacrifice, it is the sweet aroma of Christ.

Thanks be to God, he's always winning, and you will not feel like a captive forever. Because this parade does not end ultimately in your death. It ends in your glory.

[40 : 33] Do not let the enemy discourage you about your life. Do not let him lie to you that you've missed it, that there's a better life that you could have had. If only things had gone differently. No, no matter where you find yourself today, give thanks to him.

Because he's winning. And as the song we're about to sing said, his presence is before you. It's beside you. It's around you. He is with you.

You are always in him. He's always in you. And if the parade feels painful, he's been in a painful parade too. He knows. He is so with you, and he's for you.

And lastly, for those here who are not Christians, I mean, maybe you're coming to church. But like, you've never sacrificed for Jesus. You've never gotten out of your parade to get in his parade.

You've not let him conquer you. You don't see him as someone who can make any demand of you that he wants. I would just remind you that in the end, he will conquer everyone.

[41 : 30] And you can be conquered in Christ, or you can be conquered on your own. A terrible price has been paid that you can share in his glory. You are not the triumphantor.

But for all eternity, the true triumphantor is going to share with you his glory and spoils. No Roman general ever did that. But that is what Jesus is going to do for you, and the price has been paid for it.

You just have to surrender to him. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the story of the gospel. We thank you that it isn't just true, but it's a lens by which we see how everything else truly is.

We thank you that it turns our failures upside down. I pray for this church that we would be encouraged to sacrifice for you. That we would be willing to give up our lives as a sweet aroma.

That we would not hold on to whatever our dreams are so tightly that we miss the call of Christ. Help us to live in obedience. Help us to know that you have walked this road ahead of us.

[42 : 38] You are walking behind us. You are with us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to take communion now. So go ahead and take out your little cup. And do your best to open the top.

You with me still? Go ahead and take out the wafer. We, every time we eat this, we do this in honor of him.

And Jesus gave bread to his disciples. He broke it and he said, every time you eat this, never forget the price that has been paid. Remember my body broken.

The true triumphant or his body broken for you. Eat in remembrance of him. Go ahead and open your cup, but I don't want you to drink it just yet.

Scripture says that the blood of Christ, this cup represents the blood of a new covenant. The blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Without a doubt, we can all say in confidence that we have at times not been happy to be in his parade.

[43 : 59] Sacrificing our pride is a terribly difficult thing to do. We have probably not been willing to be his captive like we ought to have been. I want you to take a moment.

I just want you to think about your own, just your life. Take a moment. If you're feeling some of that, man, Lord, I let you down. This is the moment to tell him and to ask for his gracious forgiveness.

Take a moment. Take a moment. For all who are in Christ and have asked for forgiveness again as your brother in the Lord, it's my privilege to tell you you are forgiven all over again, made clean by the blood of the Lamb.

I want you to drink in remembrance of him. Amen.