

Always and Everywhere 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

What's the most important thing you're going to do this week? Think about all that's coming up – as you think about those things and how you're going to put your plans and schedule together, what rises to the top as most important? What's going to capture most of your focus and attention this week?

Will it be accomplishing something at work? Maybe you have a project or goal you're working on that's near completion and you're finally going to get it done this week. Is it something related to education or study? Maybe you're getting close to the end of an online class or some other education goal that you've been working on. Is it something family related – a tournament for your kids, a birthday, a wedding, vacation? Maybe you have a significant appointment related to a health issue – a test or a surgery or some kind of treatment. Maybe it's hobby related – going for a bike ride, playing golf, planting food plots, working on your flower garden.

We have a lot of important things going on in life and a lot of things that grab our attention and I want us to think about how that all fits in with our calling as Christians to go and make disciples. How important is *that* to you? How does it fit into your plans for this week? What space does it fill in your schedule? And how should it stack up against all these other really important things? Should it be more important? Equal? If it is, how do we fit it in our lifestyles and schedules when they're already so full of other really important things?

I think that most of us would say that keeping our relationship with God a high priority is a real struggle and keeping a focus on his mission of making disciples is even more. As we look at our text for today, my hope is that it will be a challenge and inspiration for us to elevate our role as disciple-makers but also give us a realistic vision for what that can look like in our lives this week and in the weeks to come.

We are in 2 Corinthians and will be finishing chapter 2 this morning and we're going to find a fascinating description of the importance of gospel ministry that we're to be engaged in and how God uses us to carry that out. Paul will be

describing his ministry as an Apostle, and even though that's a different level of gospel ministry than we have, the importance of it and the influence it should have on our lives is the same whether you're a full-time traveling missionary or a Christian construction worker, stay at home mom, teacher, or custodian.

After starting this book in a very personal way with lots of specific details about his relationship with the church in Corinth, Paul now turns his attention to a long section that describes the nature of the gospel ministry he's engaged in. We'll be in this section for several weeks.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12-13.

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

This is Paul's explanation of his most recent travels. (Map) After leaving Ephesus he traveled north and ended up in Troas, which was in the far NW of Asia Minor. He says a door was opened for him to preach the gospel, some kind of opportunity for fruitful gospel ministry was before him. But instead of lingering there to preach and teach, which would have led to the salvation of many souls, he left and went on to Macedonia. And the reason he gives is that he was anxious about the fact that Titus had not met up with them yet.

When Paul left Ephesus, he sent Titus the other direction to Corinth to either deliver his severe letter or check up on how they had received it. Titus was supposed to report back to Paul and apparently they had planned to meet at Troas. But Titus wasn't there. He was taking longer than expected and Paul's spirit was troubled. So instead of starting a fruitful ministry there, he and his team continued on into Macedonia, hoping to find Titus.

I want us to notice something here that I think all of us can relate to. Paul was faced with a decision about how to spend his time. He had an open door for fruitful gospel ministry in Troas – ministry that would result in salvation for many people. Preaching, teaching, ministering to people's needs... You can't get more direct gospel ministry than that. Should Paul stay and do that?

The other option he had was to keep going and try to find his friend and ministry partner who was supposed to be there but wasn't. Paul was worried about him – troubled in his spirit – and wanted to find him. But if he left to look for Titus, it would mean getting on a ship and going to Macedonia and leaving the open door and spiritual harvest in Troas behind.

What should Paul do? Both options were important. One was obvious and direct gospel ministry, the other was trying to find a missing friend. Paul chose to find the missing friend...

Does that surprise any of you? People in Troas were lost and headed for hell unless someone came and preached the gospel to them. Titus was already saved and if something had happened to him, he'd be in heaven. It seems like Paul's decision was largely influenced by trying to alleviate his own internal struggles. Why did Paul choose Titus over Troas?

I think these are the kinds of decisions we face every day... There are people around us who are lost and headed for hell. There are open doors for gospel ministry. The harvest is ripe. We could spend all our time doing intentional gospel ministry – witnessing to people, sharing the gospel, leading Bible studies, praying with people, serving the poor...

But there are also bills to be paid, jobs to go to, kids to feed, diapers to change, baseball games to watch, marriages to pay attention to, classes to study for, yards to mow, houses to maintain. And we all need sleep, rest, and a healthy balance for our souls. What are we supposed to do?

Paul chose Titus over Troas in his situation and I want us to see how he could make that decision...

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14-16a.

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. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."

A couple weeks ago, Aaron Hoffman preached about how we are to be salt and light in the world. Those are familiar images that help us understand what it means to be disciple-makers. Here Paul uses similar imagery, but one that's probably not as familiar, and one that points out different aspects in a very unique way. He uses the image of an ancient general's victory parade to teach us the significance and nature of our gospel ministry.

According to the Reformation Study Bible, a military general who was victorious in battle would lead a victory parade upon returning to his own city. He would go first with his chariots and soldiers and then the vanquished captives would follow. Here, God is the victorious general and, after studying various interpretations, I think Paul saw he and his team as the soldiers, engaged in joyful celebration, partaking of the blessings of the King's victory. The spiritual forces of evil are the vanquished captives. And the people that Paul and his team came in contact with were the spectators.

As a victory parade moved along, there would be a fragrance following them. Colin Kruse says: "During the triumphal procession incense was burnt to the gods and the fragrance of which wafted over the spectators as well as those in the procession." So Paul pictures the influence of the gospel and ministers of the gospel on the people they came into contact with was like this fragrance. Wherever they went, God was using them to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.

That's why Paul could leave Troas to look for Titus, because his gospel ministry wouldn't end – wherever they went, God was always using them to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.

This knowledge was experienced by people in one of two ways, similar to the responses at the victory parade to the fragrance of the incense offered to the gods. For the general, soldiers, and crowd at the parade the fragrance would be the joyful aroma of life and victory, but for the captives it would have been associated with slavery or death. Similarly, the gospel of Christ that was spreading through Paul's ministry was a fragrance of life to those who were being saved. But to those who were perishing it was a fragrance of death. You see this in Paul's travels as a missionary. Wherever he went, there were some who joyfully welcomed the gospel, and were others who revolted against it.

Now, our gospel ministry, though not necessarily as intense as Paul's, has exactly the same effect – it's an aroma of life or death. Do you realize that's what's happening when you engage in gospel ministry? Through you, God is spreading the fragrance of Christ and that fragrance is either going to bring life and light to people, or death and darkness. Salvation or condemnation. Heaven or hell. How important is that? Paul is elevating the importance of gospel ministry to the highest degree: this is an eternal life or death situation.

Paul ends with a statement that confirms the importance of gospel ministry.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:16b-17.

Who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ 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.

This is not a rhetorical question, like some might think. The answer is not “no one.” Paul actually gives the answer. Who is sufficient for these things? Paul's answer is: men of sincerity, who have been commissioned by God, and are under his accountability. That's who Paul was – he wasn't just a peddler of God's word, he was a minister of the gospel.

And that's who we are. Men and women of sincerity – we're not putting on some kind of show. We're not peddlers of the gospel. We are real. God has transformed us. And he has commissioned us to go and make disciples, and he is watching us to see that we accomplish his will.

So this calling to be disciple-makers is the most important thing you're going to do this week – far more important than the project at work or the assignment at school or your kids baseball game or the date with your wife or putting up your deer stands... And we need to let that sink in and take ownership of it. Nothing is more important.

But we also need to face the reality that it's not the only important thing in our lives and it is impossible to always and only engage in direct gospel ministry. There are many times when we're going to have to choose Titus over Troas and go to work or school or the baseball game or get on the lawn mower. But

the main point Paul is making is that God uses us always and everywhere to spread the fragrance of Christ to the people around us. 2 Corinthians 2:14 says: *“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.”*

Always and everywhere. That means when you're at a basketball game and everyone else is getting all bent out of shape and yelling at the ref., and you're maintaining a posture of peace because of God's Spirit in you, you're spreading the fragrance of Christ (Lord help me!). Or if you're on your lunch break and everyone is gossiping about your boss and you decide to stay quiet. Or if you take your wife out to dinner to invest in your marriage, you're spreading the fragrance of Christ. Or if you take your kids hunting or fishing to show them you care about spending time with them, you're spreading the fragrance of Christ.

Always and everywhere. The most important thing you're going to do this week is gospel ministry, but you don't have to stop everything else you're doing in order to do it. That's not what God expects or requires of you. But he is calling you to learn to look at your life as a mission – everything you do – to be a minister of the gospel, spreading the aroma of Christ always and everywhere.