

# The Tough Smell

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[ 0 : 00 ] power of God to then Paul, who in his recent reversals in not visiting Corinth as he promised, and that he was run out of Ephesus, and with his message of a crucified Messiah, well he was a sorry figure. He was a defeated figure.

Paul was the embodiment of weakness compared to the self-sufficient power ministry of the super-apostles. So how would you feel if you were Paul? How do you think you'd feel? Well, it's not like there's some sort of moral scandal going on here. He's preaching the true gospel, and he's being treated as if he is a common criminal.

You see, I think the Corinthians are a little embarrassed, because the gospel that Paul preached doesn't seem to produce the same sort of results of that of the super-apostles. I think the sort of criticism the super-apostles are making would be like, if he's truly God's apostle, and if he was preaching the true message, well, in fact, our churches would be filled, or his churches that he was preaching to would be filled, instead of he himself being kicked out of town after town and being put into prison.

And so at the end of chapter 1 and beginning of chapter 2, and I want you to take your Bibles up, you need to be following me with this. At the end of chapter 1 and beginning of chapter 2, Paul is dealing with the criticisms of the super-apostles, some of the criticisms that he's thrown at him.

[ 1 : 24 ] One of the big problems is that Paul did not visit Corinth when he said that he wouldn't visit them, and Paul's last visit with them was a fairly painful visit. He even refers to that as a painful visit. But he indicated that he would try and visit again on his way through to Macedonia, but he didn't, and instead he wrote them a letter.

And this gave ammunition to the super-apostles. Paul responds to the accusations of the super-apostles by expressing his love and his care and his concern for this church at Corinth. He says at the end of chapter 1 that his conscience is clear. However, you can throw all the stones at me you like. You can look on the surface and say, I've disappointed you, I let you down, but there was no evil intent in me not coming to visit at Corinth.

His reason for not visiting was actually far from evil intent. He didn't visit because he thought it would be better if he didn't visit. So chapter 1, verse 23, I call God as my witness that was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.

Or in chapter 2, verse 1, So I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. His earlier visit didn't go so well, so he thought that he would write a letter rather than a personal confrontation.

[ 2 : 46 ] He didn't visit in order to get revenge, but because of love. Chapter 2, verse 4, For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart, and with many tears, not to grieve you, but to let you know the depth of my love for you.

Do you think there's any evil intent there with Paul when he decided not to visit? Paul expresses here a deep love and concern for this church. The issues brought a deep level of distress and anguish to him.

He even refers to a member of the church who has caused particular grief, but whom he forgives. And he mentions here that in fact the whole church, it's a very significant thing he says, it's actually the whole church got together and dealt with this issue.

It wasn't just Paul up against this one difficult person. It wasn't just Paul dealing with it himself. He says the whole church came together and we dealt with this difficult issue.

And I reckon he wants them to do the same now to deal with these super apostles. He wants the whole church to band together and deal with these false apostles who are causing him grief and doing significant damage in this church.

[ 3 : 59 ] This is a major issue for Paul and it needs to be dealt with. He is very distracted and distressed by it. So much so that when he went to Troas and he didn't find Titus there, he moved on.

It seems that Paul arranged to meet Titus at Troas to hear how the Corinthians had responded to the letter that he'd written. But when he found that Titus wasn't there, he moved on.

His zeal for preaching the gospel actually brought him to Troas, but his passionate care for the Corinthians actually kept him from staying there. Seems like an odd thing really, because doesn't it appear that God brought him to Troas?

And then Paul says, I had no peace of mind. I was in great distress when Titus wasn't there and so I moved on. I moved on. It's a kind of a strange sort of thing that Paul would even raise this really, because what he's doing here is again revealing his weakness.

It would seem that he's playing straight into the hands of the super apostles. Isn't this just another case of Paul getting it wrong? Another example of his weakness? Another example of him running away from his problems?

[ 5 : 19 ] Well, you'd think so. On the surface anyway, you'd think so. Paul is actually revealing his weakness. And in revealing his weakness, he's mustering his defense.

This is where something very interesting happens in 2 Corinthians. You see, he could have just told us the whole story of what happened after he left Troas, but he decided not to.

So if you've got your Bibles there, I need you to see this. Flick over to chapter 7, verse 5. Because here's the rest of the story.

For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn. Conflicts on the outside, spheres within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.

You see, he could have just actually continued on the story. He could have said we had no comfort because Titus wasn't there. And so we moved on to Macedonia.

[ 6 : 28 ] And Titus was there. And we were comforted. And God was sovereign. And he reigned. And he could have just told a story of God's triumphal intervening in a difficult situation. And his ministry in his ministry.

And he would have played straight into the hands of the super apostles. He could have just traded blows with the super apostles on whose ministry was more triumphal, who was more powerful, whose ministry had God intervening.

He could have done that. Because clearly God was at work in that situation. But he didn't. Why didn't he do that? Because he's not like the super apostles in one very important way.

Flick back to chapter 5. This here, I think, is one of the key aspects of 2 Corinthians. We see here in chapter 5, where Paul outlines his perspective on life and ministry.

Chapter 5, verse 7. We live by faith, not by sight. And this is contrasted to the super apostles, who a couple of verses later, in verse 12, we are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen, rather than what is in the heart.

[ 7 : 52 ] That's the contrast between Paul and the super apostles. It's taking pride, which is what is on the surface, the superficial aspects of ministry, rather than what is at the actual heart of ministry.

And so from this point on until, so back into chapter 2. So from this point on, in chapter 2, right up until chapter 7, verse 6, Paul takes, Paul takes, if you like, a diversion.

A kind of diversion. It appears to be a diversion. But he takes us right into the heart, in these next 80-something verses, into the heart of gospel ministry.

He takes us below the surface, superficial things, to the things that the world cannot see, to the things that the world doesn't want to see, to the things that the super apostles couldn't see, and he takes a look at what is authentic gospel ministry.

Paul wants this church to know that this conflict is not because he's messed up, but because of the effect that the Christian message has on people. And that is the irony of it all.

[ 9 : 06 ] In the midst of all this antagonism and divisiveness, God is actually leading a triumphal procession, because the conflict is actually a sign that the gospel is at work.

It says it there in chapter 2, verse 14, 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.

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing, to the one we are the smell of death, to the other the fragrance of life, and who is equal to such a task.

What Paul is saying here is that despite the appearance of weakness, it was God who always and everywhere led Paul in triumphal possession. This was not the triumphal language of Paul's opponents.

They declared themselves to be superior to Paul in missionary success, as well as experiences of God. Success and strength were the marks, as well as the objects of their ministry.

[10:12] They wanted to see significant numbers, and they wanted to see this church come under their influence. Christian triumphalism, although can I say a contradiction in terms, has always had its appeal.

Through the Middle Ages, it was believed that God was glorified through soaring church buildings and spectacular church ceremony. Even in our own time, triumphal language has been used by some in the church growth movements and the development of the so-called megachurches. It's partly because we have brought this idea that the world has sold it and we have taken it on, the church has taken it on, that it's effectively the growth fetish of our culture, where if it's growing, it must be good, and bigger equals better.

The number of times I've heard people say, oh, they must be doing something right, purely because they look on the surface and see multiple programs and people being drawn together.

But I don't want to throw too many stones out there. There are clearly those who are in the triumphal language category. You've only got to turn on the Australian Christian Channel and you see a number of them.

[11:37] But can I say, I think that Sydney Anglicans fall into the same category as well at times. Our own diocese. It seems to me that you get your article or your picture in Southern Cross when there's a success to be told.

I'd be surprised if actually, in fact, that Paul would get an article in Southern Cross. The stories that are told about how many people have gathered, what churches are growing, what programs are effective, where are the failures, where are the setbacks.

That's what I want to know. Where are the failures and where are the setbacks. Isn't that authentic gospel ministry too? I even heard a diocesan official one day, a few years ago, say that the churches that are growing are the ones that will get the money from the diocese.

That's triumphalism. Paul consistently uses anti-triumphalist language to describe his ministry. He describes himself as a servant of the Corinthians, a dying man, he's weak, a fool, his ministry, like his Christ, was characterized by crucifixion.

Paul understood clearly that what is important to God is not bigness of church buildings or the number of who are gathering, but faithful and sacrificial service based on the example of Christ himself.

[13:10] And so, to describe this anti-triumphal language, Paul tries to come up with an illustration about what sort of thing he's meaning. And so he comes up with it there. It's there in verse 14.

It's like when the Romans come through town just after they have had a big war and they have this triumphal procession parading through the streets.

And what they do is they get the prisoners that they have captured in their enemy towns and they pluck out the eyes of the leaders, they chain them to chariots and they drag them through the streets so that all the empire of Rome might know how powerful and mighty they are and what they've done to their enemies.

And Paul says, he uses this illustration, he says in verse 14, thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ. I heard someone on Australian Christian Channel actually talk about this verse and he quoted it, he said, thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph. And then went on to talk about the triumphal Christian life. life of success and prosperity. No, actually, you didn't quote the whole verse. It's not a life of triumph, it's the triumphal procession in Christ.

[14:31] He says that the great thing is that when I preach this gospel from place to place and I get kicked out of town from place to place, it is God who is leading me. There is a great victory that has been won and it is Jesus' victory.

And I am his captive. I am not the triumphal one, he says, it's Jesus who is the triumphal one. I am the sorry one who's chained and tethered behind him and yet, at the same time, I am caught up in this procession in a positive way because Jesus, my king, is on display.

Not me, but Jesus, my king. Paul says, don't be embarrassed by me, by my rejection for the sake of the gospel. I might be weak, in fact, I am weak.

I am a nobody. I might be unimpressive but I've been taken captive by an impressive king. I am dead to myself and now I'm enslaved to this king, Jesus.

And it doesn't get any better than that. The great victory has been won as the procession moves forward. The fragrance of Christ is spread everywhere and to some this victory through Christ is the smell of death.

[ 15 : 41 ] To them, the gospel, its message about this crucified Jesus, about a defeated dead man which they reject, they reject it and they move away from it as they would from the odour of a decomposing body.

These people, it says, as they hear the gospel message, they are perishing as dead in principle as they perceive Jesus to be. The gospel to them is cyanide gas.

And that's why Paul has been kicked out from town to town. And the Corinthian church was so quick to walk back and wipe their hands because they were embarrassed by their apostle.

Paul is saying the nature of true gospel ministry, nature of the true gospel itself is that it will bring rejection. To others though, the message is about a risen Christ which they perceive in the way a person receives, sorry, in the way that a person welcomes Chanel number five.

These people are being saved and they are alive in principle as they perceive Jesus to be. It would be no surprise then that Paul could have felt embarrassed by a message that proved to be so divisive.

[ 16 : 59 ] Those who turn away from the message inevitably turn away from those who bear the message. We don't need to seek out rejection and unpopularity.

The nature of the gospel means it will find us. It will find us. The gospel of our Lord Jesus polarizes people. It is either cyanide gas to them or it is Chanel number five.

That's the nature of gospel ministry. I expect people to get offended and turn away in anger. I expect people to smell Jesus and I expect them to want Jesus. I expect both things to happen.

Either way, it is our lot to suffer hardship as a result of faithful gospel ministry. What a task. What a task.

To think that as I stand up week after week that I am polarized because the gospel polarizes and the bearer of the gospel will be polarized.

[ 17 : 58 ] And Paul says, who is equal to such a task? Who can do this work of proclaiming Christ and not knowing if it's going to be rejected or accepted? Not Paul.

I think that's his answer. Well, actually, not Paul in his own strength is the answer. And frankly, the longer I've been involved in Christian ministry, the less I feel equipped, the less I feel I'm able to do this job, the more I know about God and his word, the less I realize I know about him and his word. But there is one thing I'm certain of. I am one thing I'm certain of. The crucified Jesus is alive and he's Chanel number five to me. And I will not, therefore, peddle the word of God for profit.

I will not twist the message or preach a sermon or not counsel a hard word just because people might reject me.

Going soft for fear of rejection is to peddle the word of God for profit. It is to say and do things that make people like me and to find Jesus a little bit less like cyanide gas to them.

[ 19 : 11 ] It might not be as pleasing as Chanel number five for them but maybe smell, maybe more of a wet dog smell would be just a little bit more comfortable than cyanide gas. Unpleasant but not as offensive.

And I think it's the problem sometime with the gospel we often peddle in our society. It doesn't polarize people. It is neither death or life. It's just pleasant or bland.

When was the last time there was deep offence at an Easter service or a Christmas service? Now don't hear me wrong.

I don't program for deep offence. I'm not I'm just asking the question is the gospel and all its implications clear?

We need to see clearly that the authentic gospel brings both acceptance and rejection. Authentic ministry will result in acceptance and it will result in rejection.

[ 20 : 19 ] And when the rich young ruler came running up to Jesus what must I do to have eternal life? Jesus didn't whip out a two ways to live line and say pray this prayer and you're in.

He said no no you actually don't trust me you get rid of all your all your wealth then come follow me. And when he walked away sad Jesus didn't go oh come on hang on a bit let's just rethink this for a moment. He walked away sad and potentially walked away angry.

The authentic gospel message brings both acceptance and rejection. And so may God give us the courage to stick at it and preach the hard word. May we remain true to Christ and not tamper with a message for the sake of popularity.

What a great example we have here in the apostle Paul who continued even when he got the boot even when it was difficult even though Paul rejects the triumphalism of his opponents his ministry itself was not without its effects.

He says there but thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal possession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. The fragrance is going out there because of Paul's ministry.

[ 21 : 37 ] Just like a fragrance that is invisible it clearly makes its presence known so Paul's ministry made its presence known. Paul's ministry although it seemed weak was in fact effective and noticeable.

and so as Christ leads us in triumphal possession as his slaves we will see both acceptance and rejection.

People may come to know Jesus and people may be repulsed by Jesus and so St Paul's may grow or it may decline whatever the outcome though when the going gets tough the tough keeps smelling.

Amen.