

2 Cor 2:14-17 The Privileges of Christian Ministry

Years ago, when I was in the military stationed in England, I attended a church that emphasized three main things: salvation, sanctification, and service. We heard a lot of messages on those three critical parts of the Christian life, and rightfully so. One of the reasons I chose to enter Christian ministry was because I was challenged to do so through those messages. I'm glad I chose Christian ministry as my vocation.

In today's text, Paul begins a long, extended discussion of the privileges of Christian ministry. Extending all the way through chapter 7, Paul has a lot to say about the blessings of serving God.

One writer describes this section of the book as “the finest exposition of all sides of the Christian ministry in existence, one that reveals the wealth of Paul's nature and his mature grasp of the great things in service for Christ.”¹

Of course, Paul was an apostle, and that was a unique position. He experienced both great privileges and great persecution in his service for Christ. None of us are apostles, but we too can experience the blessings and privileges of Christian service.

Some people pursue the Christian ministry as a full-time occupation; they have the privileges and obligations of vocational Christian ministry—e.g., pastors, missionaries. I hope that some of the young people in our church would consider pursuing the ministry as a vocation. There are great privileges in Christian ministry, but of course, there are also great obligations and potential problems. But in this passage, Paul focuses on the blessings of the ministry.

Every Christian ought to be involved in ministry or service of some kind. Whether you do it as a vocation or as a volunteer, anyone involved in Christian ministry should see it as a privilege and a blessing.

Let's consider several of the things that Paul mentions as privileges of Christian service.

- I. .14 It's a privilege to be part of Christ's triumphal procession.

¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 2 Co 2:14.

- A. .14a “God... always leads us in triumph in Christ.” In the Roman world of Paul’s day, a conquering Roman army would often lead a great triumphal procession or parade through the capital city after a major military victory.
- B. The army would march through the city first, and behind them would often be the prisoners and the spoils of war that the army had captured. This impressive parade was intended to showcase/display the great power of the Roman army. It was a very impressive display of military might.

You can still see carvings of these Roman processions.

- C. Paul seems to picture himself here as a *soldier* marching in Christ’s victorious army. This is one of the privileges of Christian ministry—we get to participate in the great work of Christ and the church. Those who serve God are like soldiers in his army. That means that we share in the victory of Christ. We know that ultimately, Christ will gain the victory. The gates of hell will not stand against the church.
- D. This is a spiritual triumph, not a physical one. Our triumph is not political or economic; it’s in Christ. We will experience hostility and defeat in this world, but ultimately, we triumph in Christ. We are in this triumphant parade only because of our conquering general, not because of anything we have done. It’s a great privilege to be part of Christ’s victory.

Quote: Christ undertook a battle not rightly his; we share in a triumph not rightly ours.²

Trans.: I wonder if you are part of Christ’s triumphal procession. Only those who know Christ by faith have the right to march in this parade. Only those who have recognized Jesus as Savior and Lord have the privilege of enjoying the triumph of Christ. I hope that you can participate in this great parade.

And I hope that you are a soldier in the parade, not merely a spectator on the sidelines. I hope that you are engaged in the ministry in some way.

² Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 332.

II. .14b It's a privilege to spread the knowledge of Christ.

A. The word “diffuses” (φανερῶω) means “to make visible, to show, to make evident.” In this case, the word refers to something spread around, something people notice.

B. And what is being spread around is “the fragrance of his knowledge.” That's a rather creative way of describing the spread of the Gospel. The knowledge of God was spreading around like a pleasant fragrance.

1. In these Roman triumphal processions, it was common for people to burn incense or wear flower garlands.

2. So, directly associated with this victory parade would be certain beautiful smells/odors that participants would enjoy.

3. In modern America, we live in a fairly clean and inoffensive environment. We all bathe and brush our teeth fairly regularly. We use personal care products to prevent unpleasant smells.

But that was not the case in the ancient world. Besides human body odor, the air was filled with the aromas of animals, animal waste, and animal death. Most cities had open sewers running to the nearest river. The ancient world, and especially the cities, were very stinky places.

4. That fact made perfume and fragrant oils very important. People often wore perfume to counteract natural bodily odors and to deal with the other stinky situations that assaulted their noses. People appreciated a pleasing fragrance.

5. Paul refers to the spreading abroad of the Gospel message in terms of a sweet smell spreading around for all the enjoy.

6. In Christian ministry, what we are diffusing/showing/making apparent is the knowledge of Christ. Our audience should sense something about Jesus from our ministry.

It's funny how odors/smells are so closely associated with things. E.g., cigarette smoke—hockey.

In a similar way, we should have the fragrance of Christ around us. Wherever we go, we should be diffusing the knowledge of Christ. Our commitment to Christian truth should be evident to everyone around us.

App: How do you smell? Is there a fragrance about you? What fragrance do people associate with you? What should be evident about us is the fragrance of Christ. That is, we should be like Christ, and we should be spreading the knowledge of Christ around us. When people think about us, they ought to associate us with Christ and his teachings.

- C. .15 Notice that “we are” that fragrance of Christ. Those who proclaim the Gospel message are the means by which that message diffuses or is spread around.
- D. .15-16 That fragrance/knowledge extends to two different groups:
 - 1. .16b It extends to the saved. For saved people, the knowledge of Christ is very pleasing. It’s Channel #5. It’s the smell of baking bread or of cinnamon rolls. Or bacon. Or cookies.
 - a) For the Roman army, the sweet smells accompanying the parade were associated with victory. The army had won the battle, and now it was time to celebrate.
 - b) .16b He describes this aroma as “life leading to life” for the saved. I think the sense is “life (now) leading to (fuller) life (in the future).” Or maybe “life to the fullest.” Saved people have eternal life now, and in the future, they will enjoy far greater privileges. Cf. 1 Cor 2:9.
 - c) In heaven, there will be no unpleasant smells.
 - d) .15 We should notice the present tense aspect of these verbs—those who are being saved, those who are perishing. Every person is right now in the process of being saved or being lost. That describes a present-tense condition of your soul. God is either saving you or damning you. You are either part of God’s family or you are experiencing the condemnation of God.
 - 2. .16a It extends to the lost. For unsaved people, the fragrance of Christ is very *displeasing*. It’s the smell of the sewer or the slaughter house or the dirty diaper.

- a) If you were one of the prisoners in the Roman triumphal parade, those pleasant smells had an entirely different meaning. Often times, prisoners were executed or sold into slavery at the end of the parade. The nice smells of the parade were followed by death or slavery for the prisoners. So that sweet smell of victory had an entirely different meaning if you were a prisoner. It meant disaster awaited you.

E.g., the smell of bacon to a pig; when you smell bacon, it means that a pig has died.

- b) .15end Paul describes the lost as “perishing.” The word literally means “those being destroyed” (ἀπόλλυμι). That’s literally what would happen to many of the prisoners captured by the Roman army; they would be killed at the end of this triumphal parade.

- c) Likewise, the unsaved will perish; they will suffer eternal spiritual death—“death leading to death”—“death to the fullest degree.” They are under God’s condemnation. They are perishing right now, and they will perish/be destroyed for eternity in the future.

The unsaved are spiritually dead right now—dead in trespasses and sins—but the Bible warns of a second death—an eternity of punishment in the lake of fire/hell.

- d) The same smell that means victory for the conquering army means slavery or death for the prisoners. The Gospel that means life for the saved means death for the lost.
- e) In hell, there will be no perfume, no pleasant smells.

The same Gospel message is for one group a sweet fragrance and for the other group a foul stench. Paul says basically the same thing in 1 Cor 1—the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but unto the saved, it is the power of God.

Quote: The proclaimers of Christ are a “life-giving perfume” to those who believe the gospel and so are being saved and at the same time a “death-dealing drug” to those who repudiate it and so are perishing.³

Trans: It’s a great privilege to diffuse the knowledge of Christ. I hope that you are involved in this great work. Evangelism is both a privilege and an obligation. Perhaps some here today will take on this great work and privilege as a full-time occupation/vocation.

III. It’s a privilege to enjoy God’s enablement for ministry.

- A. Paul asks the question, “Who is sufficient for these things?” He doesn’t answer the question, but the answer is obvious—“no one.”
- B. We are frail and fallible people, yet we are responsible to communicate the profound Gospel message to others. Anyone who participates in Christian ministry should have a profound sense of inability and inadequacy.
- C. Since no one is sufficient, we have to rely on God to enable us to do this work. Later in the same book, Paul says very clearly, “Our sufficiency is of God” (3:5). God makes us sufficient ministers; that’s the only reason we can be involved in this great work.

App: One of the greatest dangers in Christian ministry is pride, the thought that you can fulfill a ministry without God’s enabling grace. Self-sufficiency is the great enemy of genuine Christian ministry. We must approach the task of Christian ministry with humility and with trust in God to enable us to do anything.

That’s true no matter what your area of service. If you are a SS teacher, you need to rely on God to enable you to teach. Same with music, nursery, VBS, etc. Any aspect of Christian ministry must rely upon God’s grace for enablement.

Trans.: Every Christian should be involved in Christian ministry in some way, and every person involved in ministry must rely upon God’s enablement for ministry. No one is sufficient to do these thing, but ...

Philippians 4:13 *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

³ Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 332.

IV. .17 It's a privilege to speak for God.

The essence of Christian ministry is speaking for God. God has given us his word, and it is our obligation to “preach the word.” Cf. the Great Commission. All Christian ministry is somehow related to communicating God's Word to others. But we have to do it the proper way.

A. .17 Don't speak like hucksters or peddlers.

1. Unfortunately, even when Paul was alive, there were “many” who were “peddling” the word of God.
2. The word “peddling” (καπηλευω) means “to engage in retail trade, to sell as merchandise to make a profit.” But the sense of it is to sell deceptively, to huckster or corrupt. To peddle something was to profit from a fraudulent sale.
3. Even in the early church, such hucksters and peddlers were well known. Perhaps some hucksters were in the church at Corinth; they were selling the Gospel as a means of financial gain.

App: We still have hucksters and peddlers among us today. Many of the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers are guilty of this very sin—peddling/huckstering the word of God.

E.g., Kenneth Copeland is worth about \$700M. Benny Hinn enjoys a fabulously luxurious lifestyle on the offerings he receives from gullible followers. They are making loads of money through their corruption of the word of God. The word “huckster” is a perfect word to describe them.

4. .17 Paul emphatically denies that his ministry is anything like that—“we are not...” Notice the two uses of the word “but.” Paul is forcefully contrasting himself and his colleagues from those who were peddling/huckstering the Gospel.
5. He was not interested in making money. He was interested in winning souls to Christ and helping them to mature in the faith.
6. We know that those who proclaim the Gospel as a vocation should make their living from that work (1 Cor 9:14). The Bible supports the idea that vocational Christian ministers should enjoy financial support from those who benefit from their ministry. But peddling the word of God should never be part of that work.

App: The last thing you want to do is pursue the ministry as a means of making money.

B. .17b Speak sincerely—“of sincerity”

1. Paul used this same word (εἰλικρίνεια) before (1:12). It means “judged by the light of the sun.” In other words, able to withstand close examination under a bright light.
2. To speak “sincerely” in this case means that there is no hypocrisy, corruption, or impurity in his communication of God’s word. He was sincere, the very opposite of a huckster.
3. Anyone who teaches God’s Word must speak humbly and reverently, without thought of selfish gain or of self-confidence.

C. .17c Speak “as from God.”

1. The message we speak is from God, not from ourselves.
2. Paul tells Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2). That’s the most important part of Christian ministry—the proclamation of God’s Word.
3. One of the marks of a peddler/huckster is that he does not speak God’s words; he speaks his own words.

These peddlers always seem to have fresh revelations from God, new insights that no one else has ever thought up.

“If it’s new, it isn’t true, and if it’s true, it isn’t new.” We proclaim the same old Gospel message.

D. .17end Speak “in the sight of God in Christ.”

1. Most of us know what it’s like to work within the sight of your boss. If you were speaking for your boss, and he were standing right there next to you, you would be very careful to say exactly what he wants you to say—and nothing else.
2. Paul was an apostle. That means that he was an authorized spokesman for Jesus. His words carried the same weight as the words of Jesus. He spoke the exact message God had given him; nothing more and nothing less. That gave him great authority.
3. But that also made him highly accountable. James tells us that those who teach will be held to a higher degree of accountability. We dare not say anything that would be false or inappropriate as we communicate the message.

App: One of the greatest privileges in Christian ministry is the blessing of proclaiming God's Word. If you have opportunity to teach the Word of God, the goal is always to speak God's Word clearly and accurately, without diluting it or corrupting it.

Perhaps some from our own church would take up the challenge of proclaiming or teaching God's Word as a vocational ministry. It's a great privilege to take up the vocation of communicating God's Word.

Those who are involved in Christian ministry enjoy many privileges.

- It's a privilege to march in Christ's great triumphal parade as one of his soldiers. Are you a soldier in Christ's victorious parade?
- It's a privilege to diffuse/spread the knowledge of Christ. We ought to be actively engaged in diffusing the fragrance of his knowledge. Wherever we go, people should sense that we are Christians.
- It's a privilege to enjoy God's enablement for service. "Who is sufficient for these things?" No one is, and that's why we must trust God to enable us and equip us for ministry.
- It's a great privilege to speak for God. The only way to diffuse/spread the knowledge of God is for Christians to speak up, to proclaim the Gospel. We have the privilege to speak "as from God."

All Christians have these privileges and obligations. Some Christians take up the task of Christian ministry as a vocation. I hope that some in this room will do that. But whether you are doing it as a vocation or as a volunteer, I trust that all of us will make use of the privileges of Christian ministry.