

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

A Vision for Authenticity (part 1)

Study

#3

(2 Corinthians 2:12-17)

Introduction: The real deal...

In sports, we call a star athlete *the real deal*.

You may remember that when LeBron James made the transition from High School to the NBA, most everyone was saying that he was not a flash in the pan starlet. At eighteen years of age, LeBron was the real deal.

The same thing was said of Stephen Strasburg, a young pitcher with a one hundred mile per hour fastball who struck out fourteen players in his Major League Baseball debut this season. Sadly, Strasburg was sidelined with an injury for just about the entire season... We think he is the real deal.

In politics, a statesman who stands on principle is *the real deal*.

We may think of a Winston Churchill, a man who galvanized Great Britain's courage in the darkest days of World War II. Or a man like William Wilberforce, also of England, who fought for decades to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire, inviting ridicule and scorn from his detractors.

In 1955, John F. Kennedy catalogued eight US Senators - all of them *the real deal* - who courageously stood for principle against popularity in his Pulitzer-prize winning Profiles in Courage.

In politics and in sports, there are heroic *real deals* - and then there are *posers*. Posers play the game, but you don't count on them when the game is on the line. Posers may win elections, but they are really nothing but political hacks.

That kind of a distinction is present in many arenas of life - even in the arena of spiritual life. People who place their faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life face a daily choice of becoming the real deal or living as a poser.

We become children of God by placing our faith in Christ. Period! The transaction consists of bringing my need to God and taking His supply in return. I present to Him my sin and He gives to me His righteousness. I trust Jesus, the One who died and rose again, and He gives me the free gift of salvation. What a deal!

Following that all important faith step any of us might become the real deal.

To become the real deal is to travel the way of reflection, repentance, dependence on the Spirit, discipline, and whole-hearted commitment to Jesus. We learn to walk in the Spirit. We go through gut-wrenching life changes. We seek out a more mature mentor to walk with us and to guide us into a mature grace.

And this, the real deal, is the way of the abundant life!

But, as many, many believers have learned, it is also possible to go a different direction. We might live the life of a poser.

To be a poser is to be more concerned with appearances than reality, more concerned with reputation than truth, more concerned with ego than Jesus.

For the poser, there is no need to fight the good fight. No need to hassle with the pain of repentance. All the poser has to do is learn to put on a good face and pretend that all is well. Maintain respectable morality and mouth sound doctrine. Let fly with a few well-placed "*Praise the Lords*" - and folks will be impressed that the poser is the real deal.

Only he's not.

And in quiet moments he'll admit as much. The peace he sings about is only present when the sailing is smooth. The joy he professes flies away when troubles arise. He loves those who treat him well - but heaven help anyone who crosses him!

The poser may be saved, but he is not living the life he was saved to live. Yes, I'm saying that it is possible to believe in Jesus, to be truly saved and forgiven, and to have still not tasted much of the life-changing reality of life in Jesus.

Now, in the chapters that lie directly ahead of us in 2 Corinthians we find just about the clearest description of *the real deal* written anywhere in the New Testament. It is what I'm calling "Authentic Christianity".¹

Beginning at 2 Corinthians 2:14 and concluding in chapter 6, Paul describes the Christian life, lived authentically, lived as Jesus intended us to live it.

He presents himself as "Exhibit A" of authenticity. He gives us a peek at the inner workings of his own soul and shows us what is the secret to his inner spiritual strength.

Maybe today, even as I speak, you're recognizing that you've been living the life of a poser. Hey, maybe you've never really known that there is something more available!

If you've tired of not experiencing the real deal and are hungry to know the authentic life Jesus died and rose again to provide for you, the next several Sundays could be revolutionary for you as Paul describes the real deal and then prescribes how to experience it.

To review...

Thus far in our study of 2 Corinthians Paul has told us that God is big enough to turn our pain into gain AND that the church is to be a refinishing shop that puts broken and broken-down people back together.

¹ I'm indebted to Dr. Ray Stedman, now with the Lord and former pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in California, who coined the term and unearthed truth from 2 Corinthians about Authentic Christianity over a generation ago.

Before launching into the theme that will occupy us for the next several weeks - authentic Christianity - Paul returns again (but briefly!) to the theme of his travels.

He mentions spending time in the city of Troas, a major metropolitan center on the coast of the Aegean Sea.²

Paul, the Traveling Man 2:12-13)...

[12] Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened³ for me in the Lord, [13] I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.

This describes Paul on his Third Missionary Journey. He had traveled to Troas because there were ministry opportunities galore in that city.

Those words, "*a door was opened for me in the Lord*" prompt us to think of rich evangelistic meetings and disciple-making ventures. There would be chances to preach and teach, to strengthen the church, and more.

However, Paul tells us that he stayed in Troas for only a very brief period of time, and left because he "*had no rest*" for his spirit. And why that lack of rest? It was because Titus - his "*brother*" - wasn't in Troas.

He had gone to Troas, eager for fruitful ministry. But he also longed for the partnership he would enjoy with Titus. The great potential for ministry impact in that city was outweighed by the personal loss of not finding his friend. So, Paul left Troas and pressed on into Macedonia, going to the city of Philippi.

So, what kind of a picture do we get of Paul here?

His travel plans and ministry plans were frustrated. Did that translate into a frustrated apostle?

² Troas was located on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea. Very important city.

³ Other passages that mention open doors: 1 Cor. 16:9; col. 4:3; Acts 14:27; Rev. 3:8.

He clearly would have preferred to have found Titus in Troas. Was he panicky about NOT finding him there? Was he insecure?

After all that he has been through in his life as an apostle, can we imagine that he is bummed? Is he scared? Does he ever have moments when he's ready to call it quits?

That is the kind of impression we might have of Paul as he tells us of plans that weren't coming together, disappointments, frustrating life events, and being let down by churches and individuals.

But, that was not what at all what was going on inside of him. He assures us that, despite not having every ball bounce his way, his heart is full of praise and thanksgiving to God.

A Thankful Life (v. 14a)

[14a] But⁴ thanks be to God...

The Biblical “norm” (Gratitude)

We're not surprised by those words. We expect apostles to be grateful people. After all, the Bible says Christians should always give thanks, and apostles should, at the least, do what is expected of Christians.

There are lots and lots of places in the Bible where we are told to give thanks to God. Among them are these from the New Testament -

- *[Ephesians 5:4] and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.*
- *[Ephesians 5:20] always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father;*
- *[Colossians 3:17] Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.*
- *[1 Thessalonians 5:18] in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

- *[Hebrews 13:15] Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.*

We could multiply verses like these that tell us to give thanks. The Bible places upon God's people the expectation that we will lead lives marked by gratitude to God.

But however much it may be expected, a grateful life is a remarkable, unusual life. It may be the biblical “norm” but it is not the human “average.”

The Human “average” (INgratitude)

Examples around us

In most organizations, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. And there seems to be no lack of squeaky wheels. The squeaky wheels are the people who see problems. They talk about the problems. The gift of seeing problems is widely distributed. Many have that gift, and most who have it exercise it regularly.

And I'm tired of it. I'm sick and tired of complainers. Always whining about something. Man, complainers just get my goat. Why are there so many complainers? (Wait, was I complaining...?)

Complainers are everywhere. And if your house is anything like my house, you know of at least one person who has a problem with complaining. Yep. The person you look at in the mirror every morning.

It is a challenge for me to remember to be grateful to God for His many blessings. Complaining comes naturally. Giving thanks comes super-naturally.

But it's not as if we can hide behind a, “Well, everybody's not doing it” and got off lightly. According to the Bible, not giving thanks is a very big deal.

⁴ “But” is intended to contrast with the spirit of vv. 12-13.

Biblical examples

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul says that the first step on the road that leads to total depravity is neglecting to give thanks.

Jesus once cleansed ten lepers - and got a one in ten return of thanksgiving on that investment.

Of course, we come by our complaining honestly. The first man, Adam, complained to God about his wife, Eve. And that was after she had already complained to God about the serpent!

The famous grumblers of the Old Testament have made their way to the New. God put up with complaining Jews in Israel, and He now has complaining Christians in the church to deal with.

Given the prevalence of ingratitude, it is impressive to see a truly grateful person. Especially if that person happens to have lived a life like the Apostle Paul lived.

The Authentic Thankful Life

Paul, the grateful

We know that Paul was the target of at least three assassination attempts (one in Damascus and two in Jerusalem). He was stoned nearly to death in Lystra. He was targeted by a mob in Ephesus and was beaten and then jailed in Philippi.⁵

And as he just mentioned, he didn't find his brother, Titus, when he came to Troas and is still smarting from that disappointment.

After all this, Paul was thankful to God.

The truth is that wherever we find authentic Christian spirituality, we will find a thankful heart.

Great believing "thankers"

In the book of Acts, the disciples are repeatedly shown rejoicing and filled with gratitude to God - even when the situations in which they find themselves are pretty tough.⁶

For instance, some of the disciples were beaten for refusing to keep quiet about Jesus. When the Jewish authorities let them go, *[Acts 5:41] they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.*

The writers of the psalms (like King David) gave thanks to God even in the darkest moments.

And some of the greatest "thankers" in history have been those who are persecuted and are suffering for Jesus.

REFLECTION POINT:

Believers who are living authentically are thankful to God, period. They express thankfulness to God even when facing tough times, pain and pressure, danger and hardship.

It's not just a "grin and bear it" stoicism, like Eyore's, "Well, I guess it could always get worse." Nor is it a denial of negative emotions. Believers living authentically feel the hurt and pain of the tough stuff as much as anyone else.

But, they understand that no matter the trial, the blessings are weightier. No matter the suffering, God's grace is sufficient. No matter the challenge or the heartache, sins are forgiven. So, they give thanks!

Paul continues, filling out the picture of authenticity with a statement that may appear preposterous.

⁵ And in the Philippian jail he and Silas famously sang hymns of praise to God at midnight.

⁶ See Acts 5:41; Acts 8:8; Acts 8:39; Acts 11:23; Acts 12:14; Acts 13:48; Acts 13:52; Acts 15:3; Acts 15:31; Acts 16:34

Always in the Winner's Circle (v. 14b)

[4b]...who always leads us in triumph in Christ⁷

Winning/Losing Depends on the Game

Winning and losing always depends on how we define whatever game we're playing.

Maybe you've played the "hitting game." Two guys (who else?) will agree to hit each other on the shoulder as hard as they can until one of them calls it quits. As the rules of that game make clear, the quitter loses.

But have you ever seen the game played with the rules reversed? In this version the winner is the one who hits the softest. And what happens here, of course, is that the one who proposes THAT game lets the other guy go first, receiving a very light tap on his shoulder. He then hauls off and slugs his friend, adding, "*I lose!*"

See, it all depends on the rules of the game. If we could just reverse the scoring system, I'd be on the pro golf tour AND the pro bowling tour.

Paul says that God is always leading him in triumph in Christ. Well, we've looked at Paul's life. So we wonder, "Paul, what game are you playing?"

He can't mean that he always wins at the tame of getting his own way. He can't be saying that life always comes up roses for him.

The Biggest Game is the Advance of Christ's Kingdom.

He definitely doesn't mean that he always succeeds in whatever goals he sets for himself, or that God always makes him successful.⁸ (We've seen that!)

He is saying that everything that comes his way, from beginning to end, no exceptions, is one great, grand, and glorious victory FOR GOD.

⁷ The Message: In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade.

⁸ Nor, as some have translated, "God triumphs over us."

He is triumphing along with God. He's just along for the ride, but he, Paul, gets to participate in God's victory.

One of my favorite Paul stories is about the time he found himself in a Roman jail (actually house arrest awaiting trial before Caesar Nero). No, that's not the setting for a great success story. But...

Every six hours a new soldier (or possibly a pair of soldiers) from the elite Praetorian Guard was sent in to guard this dangerous prisoner.

In other words, every six hours the Apostle Paul was given an opportunity to share the story of Jesus with someone new.

And the upshot of that opportunity was that a number of those soldiers trusted Christ for salvation.⁹ Paul's tribulation became the gateway for God's triumph! And he reveled in God's triumph rather than focusing on his trial.¹⁰

Paul knew that the biggest game in town wasn't what was happening to him. It was the advance of Jesus' Kingdom. And he trusted that whatever was happening with him was going to be used by God to move Jesus' purposes forward. Result? He was always in the winners' circle.

What's Your Game?

There have been times when I've taken that attitude into situations I've faced. And there have probably been those times for you, too.

⁹ See Philippians 4:22, where those of Caesar's household send their greetings. This is almost certainly a remark intended to say that the Praetorian Guard soldiers - who were assigned to guard the Emperor and his family and staff - had taken the Gospel to the palace!

¹⁰ Luke skillfully crafts the book of Acts to show that it was the persecution of the church that led to its scattering, which led to the Gospel being taken to all Judea and Samaria and the remotest part of the earth. And all the way back in Genesis, Joseph reflected on his brothers' harsh treatment of him when they sold him into slavery and said, *[Genesis 50:20] "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."* That is the Old Testament version of the New Testament's *[Romans 28] And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*

We walk into a situation charged with tension and realize, in the moment, that if God doesn't do something, this is gonna be a real mess. We trust. We wait. We watch as God does His thing.

But I'll have to admit that there have also been those times when I've been more attentive to my success than to the advance of Jesus' kingdom. I've lived as if the game was about how many points I could score. I've lost sight of the big picture, the God picture.

When I do that, I'm being just like the guy who hits a "sacrifice" bunt in baseball who whines about getting put out at first, forgetting that the point of his "out" was so that the runner already on base could advance.

REFLECTION POINT:

Christians who are growing in authenticity are learning to revel in the idea that they always get to participate in Jesus' victory, no matter what. We have been invited to play in a game we cannot lose! The final score is certain: God wins.

So, with increasing consistency, we take into the situations of our lives the confidence that one hundred and fifty years from now, we'll be able to look back on THIS particular trial and say, "*Oh, so that is how God 'Romans 8:28'd' that for me!*".

It's all a matter of trusting that God knows full well what He is doing, even when I have no idea what He is doing.

We don't hang our hopes on our victories (which are ify, at best), but on Jesus' victory, which is guaranteed!

So, authenticity consists of a God-centered gratitude and a confidence in our unvarying success in Christ.

We are going to look at one more mark of Christian authenticity this morning. Paul highlights two additional marks that we'll see next Sunday. But this third one we'll see today is powerful.

All of our physical senses are wonderful gifts of god - sight, sound, touch, hearing, and smell. To a very remarkable degree, the mind associates experiences with aromas.

In my own life, the smell of a fresh tomato on the vine brings back really sweet memories of walking with my grandmother through her vegetable garden when I was very young.

I love Mexican food. But there is one dish I can hardly stand to smell because of an unfortunate experience south of the border involving my own south of the border. All it takes is a whiff and I almost get nauseous.

In what follows, Paul refers to the sense of smell to say something about the impact that God makes for Himself through him.

"You have that 'air' about you..." (vv. 14b-16a)

[14c]...and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. [15] For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; [16a] to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life...

A Lingering Aroma...

It is almost certain that Paul was picturing here a typical Roman parade following a successful military campaign.

When a Roman general returned to the capitol city victorious, the Senate would throw him a parade. Among those who helped in the parade were people assigned to walk alongside the victorious soldiers and beside the chariot of the conquering general waving pots of fragrant incense.

Wherever the parade went, you could smell it. The air of Rome was saturated with the smell of incense.

In the same way, Paul says that wherever he has gone, he has left behind the aroma of Christ. Nobody watched Paul walk off the scene and remarked about what a great guy he was. No, the fragrance Paul left behind was the aroma of Jesus.

The language of fragrance is helpful. It gets us to thinking about a saturating influence. And this illustration walks on all fours.

Included in the ancient military parades were several groups of people. There were the commanding officers and the foot soldiers, of course. But there were also the captured, conquered peoples. And, there were two categories of captives.

On the one hand, there were the prisoners who were going to be allowed to live. They would return to their own now defeated country to govern or be governed by Roman.

And then, there were other prisoners, following behind the chariots dragging heavy chains. These were the captives the Romans couldn't trust, and they were destined for execution.

As the procession wound through the city streets and past the cheering crowds, the incense pots were said to be to the first group "*a fragrance of life unto life*" while the same aroma was to the second group "*a fragrance of death unto death.*"

Those receptions were exactly what Paul got when he spread the Gospel of Jesus. And it is exactly what all those will get who broadcast the fragrance of Jesus.¹¹

One Aroma, Two Receptions

A deadly stench

Sometimes, you will tell our friend about Jesus and get a cold shoulder response. There will be times when you will say it just as right as you know how - and you will still lose the friend with whom you are sharing the message of Christ.

More than once, that happened to Paul. In Lystra, he was pelted with rocks. Why? Because he witnessed to some people and shared the Gospel.

¹¹ Cf. 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Thess. 2:10 for the either/or effect of the Gospel message. Several passages in the rabbinic writings describe Torah as both healing and poisonous. "As the bee reserves her honey for her owner and her sting for others, so the words of the Torah are elixir of life for Israel and a deadly poison to the nations of the world." Peter says, within the space of a few verses, that Christ is the rock of our salvation and the stone of offense (1 Peter 2:6-8).

In Athens, most of the philosophers on Mars Hill sneered at him as if he was some country bumpkin selling snake oil. In Ephesus, a riot broke out when he spoke about Jesus.

Some people smelled Paul's scent a mile away and ran away as fast as they could. When they heard Paul they smelled Jesus, and thought death.

An enticing fragrance

But there were other times for Paul. He led a Bible study by a river in Philippi and the Lord opened the hearts of the people who came to respond in faith.

In city after city, he faithfully proclaimed the Gospel in synagogues and meeting halls and saw people trust Christ, saw their lives changed, and watched as vibrant faith communities were established.

And there will be those times for you and me as we proclaim the message, too. At the most surprising, unexpected times, someone we least expect to respond, will respond. A person you have prayed for and witnessed to over the years will trust Christ as their Savior. A few, here and there, will sniff that scent of Jesus you are leaving behind, will recognize it as life, and will believe.

REFLECTION POINT:

Paul is telling us that when we are living authentically, we leave behind an unforgettable impression - of Jesus. Leading an authentic spiritual life we are becoming a fork in the road that lets people see Jesus - with His claims and offers - and points them to a decision about Him.

Conclusion:

Christians who are living authentically do more than maintain doctrinal purity and abide by respectable morality.

They manifest the LIFE of Jesus as they:

- GIVE THANKS to God in good times and bad.
- revel in the glory of SHARING IN THE SUCCESS of Jesus' advancing kingdom.
- leave behind an UNFORGETTABLE IMPACT by spreading the fragrance of Christ by the way they live.

