

TRIUMPHANT LIVING

Taught by Bruce Bickel

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Father, we do pray that you will lead us this day. We thank you that we can stand on the promises of God and that you would be pleased to open our eyes once again that we might behold you more clearly for Christ's sake. May it be so for his glory. Amen!

Turn in your Bibles, please, to the Book of 2nd Corinthians. We are looking at our select passages over the next several months about Paul's defense of his authentic Christian living; what we are calling a study of the new covenant, the covenant of grace, for God makes it possible for us to fulfill all the things he requires of us as his followers as Kingdom citizens.

We are looking at a passage today beginning in Chapter 2, verse 12 and all the way down to Chapter 3, verse 3. You have your outline, which is part 2 of Triumphant Living.

We have been examining the five characteristics of triumphant or authentic living that Paul uses. Let me give you a brief contrast. Years ago when I was the vice president of ministry with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, I was going to a summer conference and I was traveling with a very close friend of mine who is an NFL coach and we were both younger at the time. We were in an airport waiting for our next flight and one of the Hare Krishnas came up to us, handed out some material, and wanted us to buy a book. My friend, who was an assistant coach in the NFL at the time, was young in his faith. He took the book, threw it in the trash and said, "I'm a Christian and I don't buy that stuff." Of course, people just looked around. He looked at me and asked, "Did I do the right thing in letting people know I'm a Christian?" [LAUGHTER]. I said, "Well, that's one way of doing it, [LAUGHTER] but it may not be the best way of doing it."

Now I only give you that as a radical contrast because how would you defend yourself if someone said to you, "Defend the authenticity of your Christian faith, how do I know as an observer that you are a Kingdom citizen? How do I know that you are a follower of Christ; you say that you love Christ and you are a follower, but how do I know that? What is the authentic realization of the fact that you make your life visible to me that I can say you know, it's really valid?"

Essentially that is what Paul is doing in this passage. Historically, Paul was confronted with the issue where several people, multitudes of people, were saying Paul could not be a true apostle.

It is just inconsistent that he is an apostle because before something happened years ago, he was the primary persecutor of the church, and now he is the primary preacher for the church. It seems to be inconsistent. How did that happen?" So Paul was confronted with a group of people who were questioning the validity of his conversion and the validity of his apostleship.

And Paul does a wonderful thing here and that is what we are studying today, at the beginning of our study. He says, "Why don't you just come and observe my life and then you make the determination as to whether or not you think I'm authentic. Just come and get to know me. Look at how I serve people, look at the results of people whom I serve; and then you come to a conclusion...is my life consistent with the message I'm preaching, is my life consistent with what I'm teaching, is there a consistency in my life that you see that is consistent with what I'm telling people?"

That is what we are studying. [UNCLEAR] We are calling this Triumphant Living in the new covenant, the covenant of grace. We are studying the triumphant life. Please look at your second handout.

We have examined four out of five characteristics of Paul's authentic Christian living, and how he defends himself. The first thing he says is that a life in the covenant of grace is a thankful life, it is a life of unquenchable optimism. That would be Chapter 2, verse 14. "But thanks be to God who always leads in triumphal procession." Now we are not talking about some phony, wishy-washy "Oh, thank you Jesus my car just blew up." We are not talking about some positive mental attitude. But we are talking about a deep-seated disposition and desire in your heart that you realize all of your life has really been [UNCLEAR] God's grace. And you have a different sense of attitude than other people of the world even though you are subjected to the same hassles as everyone else. But we go through it with a different mentality. That is because of the grace of God and the Holy Spirit in our work.

So what we see is that we have a life of what we are calling unquenchable optimism. This is not Hollywood-ish; it is not Mary Poppins-ish. There is a deep-seated realization that God is really in control of your life. So it quiets your spirit down in the midst of all the hassles of life.

Then we saw it is successful living, a life of unvarying triumph. Paul says, "But thanks be to God who always leads in triumphal procession." Your life is a life of triumph not because of what you have achieved but because God leads. And the sense of that verse in the original text is, "God always, ALWAYS, always leads in triumph." In other words, you and I might go through some failures in life but God has the wonderful ability... because God always leads in our life to take those failures in our life and turn them into triumph, and that is only something that the grace of God can do. So the world looks at you and wonders how do you handle that

difficulty at work, how do you handle that difficulty in your family, how do you handle that difficult financial situation?" You see you and I handle those things differently because you know that God [UNCLEAR] which may be a temporary failure and he will turn it into a wonderful triumph. So we have this tremendous sense of a successful life of unvarying triumph because we know that God always, ALWAYS, always leads in triumphal procession.

Then we saw there is a consequential living. It is a life of unforgettable impact. So look at our passage and we come to the picture in Roman times of a military procession. There is an aroma given off by these marching feet in the city of Rome as the commanding general was given a military triumphal parade. The people would throw incense and flowers in front of the marching feet and an aroma was given off. There was one aroma, but two consequences. Present tense reality...he says you **are** one aroma, two consequences.

To some people you are the smell of death, to other people you are the smell of life and you do not control that. That is just the reality of who you are and who we are in Christ Jesus. Some people are turned off by us just because we are associated with the personal work of Jesus Christ. That is an absolute turn off to some people. To other people it is going to be a sign of fresh air, it is a sign of life and a new disposition because the Holy Spirit has been drawing them to himself. That is not something you and I can manipulate or control, it is just the consequence of your life.

You and I need to realize that being associated with the personal work of Christ, we have life and death consequences. Being associated with the personal work of Christ does have life and death consequences. Paul is basically saying that you and I will make an impact in life because it is going to be unforgettable. I am sure you can go back in your life and look at situations where the impact has been made and it is either positive or negative, depending on that person's response. To some people, as Paul says, it is a smell of death and to other people it is a smell of life, and that is not something you and I can control.

One of the last things we should ever be doing is being manipulators to try to get responses. We do not have to manipulate and we will see that in our next characteristic of authentic Christian living. That would be faithful living, living a life of unimpeachable integrity as it relates to the Word of God.

So I would take you to our passage today, let's look at 2nd Corinthians, Chapter 2, verse 17. "For we are not like many peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God." Paul is saying you and I have a life of unimpeachable integrity as we handle the Scriptures. In other words, we realize we do not need to manipulate it, we don't need to try to get results. God is perfectly capable of getting all the results he wants. The last thing you and I need to do is try to create a mechanism to get the results we want.

What Paul is saying is, he does not manipulate the Word, he is not a hocker, he does not use it for his own well-being; he preaches it and he teaches it and then allows God to have the results. So it is the degree of faithfulness that we have, a life of unimpeachable integrity, and Paul understands it because God is always in control and always leads in triumph. We do not need to use the Word of God as a gimmick to get a certain response. How many times have you seen people try to do things just to get the response that they want? So what happens? When you are sharing Christ, remember it will have an unforgettable impact and some people will be turned off and other people will be turned on.

We have to be very sensitive; it doesn't mean we're Bible bashers and that we go around beating people over the head with the Scriptures; the only person you can do that to is yourself, not anyone else. It means that when you share in Christ, you have the freedom to proclaim the truth, and let it do its work. What is the Holy Spirit's job description? It is to guide us into all truth that is his job description. So when you and I are proclaiming truth, we do it with grace and truth. Most of the time you see in the Scriptures that the word "truth" is associated with the word "grace." We need to be gracious in our delivery, gracious in our spirit, but truthful in our communication. We proclaim the truth with grace, we allow the Holy Spirit to work, to guide people into all truth and let the Holy Spirit produce what he wants. God does not need our help in getting responses, he is perfectly capable of doing that himself.

Paul says he doesn't "peddle" the Word. You will notice the expression there: "We are not like many peddling the word." Literally, that phrase means a hocker, it means to merchandise the Word, and it means to make merchandise of it. So we are not off selling little trinkets to get people to believe the Scriptures. Paul is just saying this, we are proclaiming the Word and letting God take care of it because we know this: "God always, ALWAYS, always leads in triumphal procession." When you and I proclaim truth, it will produce a response. It's just that we do not know which response, but it will produce a response.

Paul says in Romans Chapter 1: "I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes." Now if we could figure out what the word "it" is then we would know the power that changes ministry. The word "it" refers back to the gospel. The gospel is the message. The gospel is not a play, we don't act out the gospel, we don't sing the gospel--we can have singing that would draw people to be warm to the gospel message--but the gospel itself is the communication of the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the person and the work of Christ, and repentance in faith. That's what the gospel is.

Paul is saying, it is that message that really is the power unto salvation. It is the communication about the personal work of Christ, and how God deals with man through the personal work of Christ. That is the power that we have and that is the proclamation of the Biblical gospel.

Unfortunately, in our church today we have what I would call a substitute gospel. What we have done is we have taken it because we want to make sure it is identifiable with society; we want to make sure we get the right responses because if we do not do that people will not give their contributions to what we're doing. There are all sorts of mechanisms why we do it.

But unfortunately, the church in my mind has created what I would call a substitute gospel. It is no longer God-centered but it is now man-centered. And we have turned it into what I would call an "MTD," a Moralistic Therapeutic Deity. A Moralistic Therapeutic Deity. In other words, we have made God out to be a therapist because the gospel presentation that we give so much of the time in our churches is that God is here just to help you feel better. That means you have turned him into a therapist. God is here to help you feel better. Would you like more fulfillments, would you like to have contentment, would you like to be satisfied, would you like to be free of worry? Then come to Jesus. We have turned him into a therapist because the emphasis has been on me and my needs, and me and my feelings and we have made the gospel into a Moralistic Therapeutic Deity because his design is to help make me feel better about me.

We need to be very careful about that because there is no power and ministry in that. You look at the results of that and you will notice why the church is in such bad shape, it is because the message is in such bad shape. You see, that message of the substitute gospel is not designed to create a deep sense of reverence, and it is not designed to create a deep sense of repentance. It is not designed to create a deep sense of the glory of God, but it is designed to make me feel better about me. The real issue is: I am the focus of what the gospel is about and the design is to help me feel better about myself. That is therapeutic. What we have done is we have turned our gracious, sovereign, loving Lord into a therapist. Because we say, his design is just to make me feel better about myself. So I go away feeling better because I now have a therapist who is going to help me do my thing. There is no power in ministry in that, and the end result is that you see the consequences.

That's why Paul is saying, we don't do that. We don't peddle the Word of God, we don't turn him into a therapist because we know this, God always, ALWAYS, always leads in triumph and when you proclaim Christ and when you do it with integrity, God will produce the results that he wants.

Yes, Don.

Don: *"I'll begin with a two-pronged question: (1) [UNCLEAR], and I am sure I speak for myself alone but, [UNCLEAR]. I guess what you are saying is a little bit foreign to me because [UNCLEAR]. Do you believe that is dominant and there are many churches today and [UNCLEAR]. (2) does that go back to Charles Finney?" [UNCLEAR].*

Good questions. I am very, very grateful that some of you are in churches where what I just said is foreign and I rejoice in that. However, I would say the majority of churches, as I travel around the country, are quite different from what I just said. They would be the ones that turn Jesus into a therapist.

So I rejoice in the fact that many of you men come from other churches and I rejoice that you have been to churches who have proclaimed Christ and Him crucified. But there are a majority of churches that do not. Look at your results.

All I am saying is where is the ministry that changes lives? Is it the message? The degree to which the message of the gospel of Christ is preached will be the degree to which their lives are changed. If you do not see changed lives, then you have to back up and ask what are they teaching or hearing. Part of my observation, just by traveling around the country, is that many churches are preaching or proclaiming a therapeutic Jesus because they put the emphasis on themselves.

Let me just give you a classic example. I was with my stepdaughter and her husband for Christmas in Los Angeles over the holidays; and she is married to a non-believer, he's a nice young man but he is not a follower of Christ. My stepdaughter said, "I know that you and Mom would like to go to a Christmas service the night before Christmas, so why don't you pick the church and we'll all go with you." So I got on the internet and looked around where they lived in Los Angeles and tried to pick a church that I thought would be the most conservative. It was a PCA church and I thought at least we will hear a good message. So we went to this church and it was a lovely church, there were probably 300-400 people there.

They had a marvelous pageantry of the birth of Christ, with probably about 50 people from the congregation participating. They had children dressed as angels, and they had sheep and goats, and they had the animals, they had the shepherds. It was really very well done, [UNCLEAR] reading the Scriptures of the birth of Christ, [UNCLEAR]. And while that was going on, the pastor had on a Santa Claus hat and he had on a white beard and a red vest. The choir all had Santa Claus hats on, and that was the birth of Christ's pageantry. They had a choir of about fifteen people and they whipped out their ipads and they were playing on their ipads, and they were singing "White Christmas" and "Here Comes Santa Claus" and "Jingle Bells," and so that is what was going on.

Audience Participant: *In a PCH Church!*

Now on the way out, my stepdaughter's husband, who is of Jewish background, says, "You know, Bruce, I really enjoyed that pageantry about the birth of Christ that was really terrific; I really enjoyed that, but it seems to be inconsistent to mix Santa Claus with the birth of Jesus." Now right there...look at that, we have a non-believer who saw the difference between the

birth of Christ and Santa Claus, and we had 400 people in the church who are professing Christians who did not see it! To me that is tragic.

I was thrilled that my stepdaughter's husband recognized the difference in the inconsistency of the birth of Christ and all of his glory and the pageantry that was put on at the same time you are talking about Santa Claus...same time...and at the same worship service! You see, I am thrilled that he saw the difference and we had some conversation about that. It opened up a door for me to talk to him about the inconsistency. The tragedy for me, folks, was there were 300 people, confessing believers of Christ, who did not see the difference between the two things and they just thought it was wonderful.

All I'm saying is, that is what is going on in the majority of our churches. That seems to be somewhat the norm because we have made Santa Claus a part of Christmas. All I'm saying is, Don, I think you have to look at the results and that's what Paul is saying.

Remember, there is consequential living when you proclaim the personal work of Christ and you have to look and ask where is the ministry that really changes lives? Is it in the ministry of the church where the gospel of Christ is preached with clarity, with conviction and with grace? Now when you have other things, Paul says you are manipulating the Word. We don't hock it, we don't meddle with it; he's saying he doesn't do that because that's a ministry that doesn't change lives, and I think you have to go back and take a look at what does it produce. That's what we're going to see next. What does it produce?

Now Don's other question goes back to what is the genesis of this. I will give you something in the next couple of weeks, Don, because when I did my doctoral work on the Puritan's view of the pulpit, "Light and Heat." I contrasted the message of the gospel from 1850 to 1984. I contrasted that with the gospel of the Puritan period. The Puritan period from 1850 to 1984 was the heart of the neo-Finneyism, Charles Finney, who used the invitation system. So what I did is that I contrasted the content of the message that he preached, and I called that the Modern Day Message, the neo...being new...neo-Finneyism, and I compared that with the gospel of the Puritan era for some great evangelistic events that occurred. So I contrasted... I will give you a summary of that because the summary is this, one is very man-centered and the other is very God-centered.

I do think it has its roots back to what I am calling neo-Finneyism. So you go back and you begin to see the watered-down version because you are [UNCLEAR]. The real emphasis is how you evaluated it and by the response you got. If you say many people came forward, that is a good response. If many people did not come forward, then that is a bad response. How do I change it so I get the response I want? Paul is saying you don't do that. Paul said we don't need to do that. We live a life of unimpeachable integrity when it comes to preaching the Scriptures. I will give you a quick summary of that, I have got a couple pages outlined in the book...I can do that.

Yes, Tom.

Tom: *I like the translation of the NIV, where Paul says we do not have the words for profit. In other words, he didn't preach to live, he lived to preach.* **Bruce:** Amen to that. That's a contrast.

Take a look at 2nd Corinthians, Chapter 4, verse 2. "We have renounced secret and shameful ways, we did not use deception nor do we distort the word of God." There is your contrast. What goes through your mind, friends, when you have a chance to share your faith in Christ? Do you think, "Oh, I didn't get the response that I wanted, so next time what am I going to do? Am I going to change it to get the response I want?" See, those are the subtleties that sneak into us. We have to be very careful. What Paul is saying is, when you understand the covenant of grace, you don't have to do that because God always leads in triumphal procession, and when you are representing the Word of God with clarity, truth, and grace, God will produce the results that he wants. You don't have to be a manipulator; you can have a life of unimpeachable integrity as it comes to handling the Scriptures. Any questions on that?

Yes, Sir?

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: *Why did you use 1984 to end it?*

That's when I finished my doctorate, that's when I finished it. That was the period...that is when I did it.

Any other questions? Do you understand....

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: *Will you provide us with a list of what the world says and what God says?*

I think we do have that. [UNCLEAR].

AUDIENCE PARTICIPANT: *I can [UNCLEAR]... some copies of that and post it.*

OK, can you do that because I think I gave that out a couple of years ago. But it is a good contrast just to see. The question that Don was asking [UNCLEAR]. I call one "Truths in Evangelism" and the other one "Neo-Finnyism." Those are the two contrasts, and it is worth just looking at the contrast because then you can just make your own evaluation as to what is going on in our culture. But I am thrilled to hear that some of you know what I am talking about and this therapeutic Jesus is foreign to you because you are in churches where God is really glorified because of his sovereign grace.

Yes, Brian.

Brian: *You gave the comment last week that really summed this up because it is very difficult to tell the difference; but last week, just off-handed...you said that Moralistic Therapeutic Deity is that you offer the results of salvation where God helps mankind as opposed to offering him the glory of God which strives to repentance and the redemption of sin. So, I mean, it's very, very subtle but that has really helped clarify it for me. I mean, do I focus on the results or do I focus on God?*

You see, often times in our evangelism, we focus on the consequences of the gospel rather than the character of the gospel. The character is about the personal work of Christ, it isn't about your

contentment, it's not about your fulfillment or your satisfaction, peace and joy. Those are consequences of coming into a saving relationship when you have peace with God.

Look at Romans, Chapter 5, verse 1. "Therefore, since we have justification by faith alone, we have peace with God." Now peace with God is the result of salvation, it is not the offer of salvation. Justification by faith alone is what produces the peace with God. Often times we say, "Would you like to have peace?" We are offering the consequences of the gospel rather than the character, which has to do with the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, the personal work of Christ, and repentance in faith.

That is what Paul is saying. You can be a person of integrity when you are handling the Scriptures; just be a man of integrity. You can do that with grace, you can do that with compassion, you can do that with conviction, you can do that with clarity because you know this: "God always, ALWAYS, always, leads in triumph." You can have great confidence in the fact that he is leading you through the Holy Spirit to proclaim truth, because what is the Holy Spirit's job description? Is it to manipulate to get a response, to get people excited and to jump up and down? No. It has to guide them in to all truth. What you and I do is...we are proclaimers of truth and allow God to do his work. That's the great power of the ministry of the gospel. That is why Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of it." "It" is the power of salvation unto all who believe. You see, it's about a message, it's about the personal work of Christ. That is why a pastor should never have any difficulty creating a sermon because it is always about Christ and Him crucified. That is really what we do. That's what Paul is saying.

Now notice there is another consequence. When you have that type of living, you have a life of faithful living, a life of unimpeachable integrity, see verse 17; then you go to Chapter 3, verses 1 to 3, and he says the last characteristic that he offers to defend his own life-style will be what I am calling Authentic Living. It's a life of undeniable reality.

Let's look at 2nd Corinthians, Chapter 3, verses 1-3. Paul writes, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again or do we need as some letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter written on our heart, and known and read by all men, and manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tables of human hearts." Paul is basically saying that your life becomes a life of undeniable reality, it's authentic.

Now what does he mean by that? The question is, how do you evaluate ministry? Paul is answering that question for us when he describes those verses. He basically is saying it changes lives. The way you evaluate ministry changes lives. That's why I'm saying that when you take a look at what message is being preached in the church today, you do not see changed lives. There is a ministry that does change lives and there is a ministry that does not change lives. The ministry that does change lives is about the personal work of Christ. It's about the gospel, it is the "it" in Romans 1:16.

So Paul says the only way you can really evaluate the authenticity of my ministry is to take a look at people whom I serve, what is happening in their lives? He goes through a wonderful process where

Juda-izers, the people who came behind Paul, and who were stressing the regulations and requirements of the law. They followed Paul around in the churches where he preached in Asia Minor. They would get letters of commendation or referrals in order to peddle their merchandise associated with their own message. They would say, "Would you write me a letter, give me some letters of commendation, give me a recommendation, so when I go into this church where Paul just preached I can do my thing and sell my wares." You see these were Juda-izers who were stressing the regulation of the law and they were combating Paul's message of truth.

What Paul is saying is, "I don't need letters of commendation, and I don't need letters of referral about my ministry" because he says this: "You are my ministry, you the people are." He said, "You're my reference, you are the proof if anyone who wants to know how authentic my ministry is." [UNCLEAR]. He says, "Your authentic life, the life of undeniable reality is really the means of how ministry is demonstrated as being valid." That is from God because God is the only one who can really change a life to be consistent with his own character. God is the only one who can change a life to be consistent with his own character. Paul says, "Take a look at the churches where I'm working and you make a judgment as to whether or not it's authentic. You will see changed lives."

He goes through a wonderful description and I want you to follow this. He gives us five outlines as to the validity of an authentic ministry based upon the Scriptures. Notice verse 2. "You are our letter written in our hearts; known and read by all men." There is the proof of the authenticity of the ministry of what I am about; it changes lives.

Notice the sequence here. First of all, the proof is written on unvarying material, on tablets of human hearts. That is where the message is written, written on the hearts of people that Paul served. Christ puts his name on his people, not on tablets of stone as in the old covenant but on tablets of hearts as in the new covenant.

See, now the message of Christ is written on people's hearts and that changes the disposition, it changes the desire of ministry [UNCLEAR] the choices they make in their life. Paul says that is how you know if I'm authentic; take a look at them. Don't look at me, take a look at them. You'll see that Christ has written these things on them and in their hearts; not on tablets of stone as in the old testament, but on tablets of their life, their human hearts, so the very first thing is that the proof is written on unvarying material.

Secondly, it is the expression of the author or the writer, and Paul says, "You are a letter of Christ." You are a letter of Christ. It bears the signature of the author. Christ himself is the author. Every true believer is an expression of the character and the mind of Christ. Paul says, "Take a look at the people. Are they the expression of the character and mind of Christ? If so, then you know I'm authentic because there has been a message that has changed lives." So you see, the proof is written on prepared material, the proof bears the expression of the author or the writer.

And thirdly, the proof bears a signature of the writer. With the Spirit of the living God, Christ puts his name on his people. You see, who is the one that does the writing? It is the Holy Spirit who writes the message on the human heart, it changes the disposition, and it changes their desire, and that's reflective

in their conduct. So Paul is saying here is the way you evaluate ministry: it is that you see changed lives. There was a message that changed their lives.

Number four is: the proof should be legible. The proof should be legible, known and read by all men. It is obvious; it is obvious that God did something in your heart because it is legible, it is readable, and it is discernable.

When you contrast [UNCLEAR] and evangelism with modern evangelism...the way that the Puritans would evaluate their ministry of evangelism or revival is that they would come back into the area after they had preached three to five years before. Not the day after they left, but they would come back after three to five years, and they would look for three things: first would be increased righteousness. In other words were there changed lives that were discernable and recognizable because God had written his name on their hearts. Was there increased righteousness in individual people? Secondly, were there more churches started? And thirdly, was there greater attendance in churches?

Then they would go back and see and then we would have revival. Now we have revival. Just because we have preached and offered Christ to the people does not mean you had revival, you had to go back and take a look at the results. This is what Paul is saying, there is a ministry that changes lives and there is a ministry that does not change lives. The difference is the gospel that is preached, what is the content of the message that is preached? That's why you have a faithful life of unimpeachable integrity with the Word. The final result is a life of undeniable reality.

Therefore, we have the proof that is written on prepared material. The proof bears the expression of the author. The proof bears the signature of the writer. The proof should be legible, known and written by all men. You see, what's the use of a proof if it cannot be understood or cannot be seen? Finally, the proof reveals the author being manifested that you are a letter of Christ. He uses the imagery here of a letter and he said the final proof is this; the ministry I have changes lives and it reveals the author of the note.

Now in my office at home, I have a framed picture of a handwritten letter by Charles Spurgeon in 1856. When I finished my doctoral work in England, one of my mentors gave me this and he said, "There are twelve of these known to be kept that are valid. I have two of them and I want you to have one." I said "But that's so valuable." However, he said, "No, the value is that you give it away." So I have in my office, right beside a picture of Charles Spurgeon, this hand written letter in a vacuum-sealed frame so it won't deteriorate and I had it authenticated; they did that for me in London to authenticate that, yes, this is the handwriting of Charles Spurgeon and it is recognizable. You can see that Charles Spurgeon wrote this note. I have it right beside a picture of [UNCLEAR] and I have this wonderful picture of Westminster [UNCLEAR], and I have it right beside this handwritten letter of Charles Spurgeon. Two of my most treasured possessions.

You see there is proof that this was written by Charles Spurgeon, its discernable, it's legible, it's readable. That's what Paul is saying. It is a life of undeniable reality because Christ has written the message through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not on a tablet of stone but on the tablet of your heart,

you are a visible letter to the world. Paul was saying that there is a life message that changes your life and that is the gospel of Christ. Your life then becomes a life of undeniable reality.

How can you evaluate ministry, folks? It is truth proclaimed because that's the only message that is going to change lives. So Paul says this, you are going to have a life of undeniable reality because people will be able to recognize it. The undeniable reality of a triumphant life is that it reveals Christ. That's how you measure a life of ministry, because it changes lives.

How do you evaluate your ministry? Is it by the externals, or is it by the altered conduct of those people whom you serve? Do you realize what Paul is saying? He is saying that if you are in Christ today, you are a letter written by the Holy Spirit to show the character and nature of God to the world. That is what it means to be in Christ. You are a letter written by [UNCLEAR] hearts that is discernable for the world to see, and you are a personalized handwritten letter to the world so that they can see the character and nature of Christ. That's who we are.

That's why God always, ALWAYS, always leads in triumph. That's why your life is a life of unquenchable optimism. That's why your life is a life of unvarying success. That's why your life is a life of consequential living. That's why your life is a life of faithful living. That is why your life is a life of authentic living. Because that is the life of grace when you live in the grace of God, that is what happens to your life. Your life becomes a triumph because God always, ALWAYS, always leads in triumphal procession; and it spreads everywhere like a fresh aroma of the knowledge of God to the world.

Brothers, you are a letter, a handwritten letter of Christ and his character to those in the world. [UNCLEAR], because that's who you are.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the clarity of Paul's message to us and how much we can learn and discern from this. Father, in our human senses we always want to be thought well of, and that's normal. We need to be thought well of because we are associated with the personal work of Christ rather than our reputation. But sometimes that just doesn't happen. So Father, when those times do not happen the way we would like, help us to fall back upon the truth of your Word: that you always, ALWAYS, always lead in triumphal procession. Sometimes, Father, we need to have the discernment and spiritual eyes to see that sometimes your triumphs are not what we would define as a triumph; but yet, Father, you tell us that is who we are.

But most of all, Father, we just thank you for the fact that in eternity past you wrote our names in the Lamb's Book of Life, so that in 1984 or whenever we each became a Christian, you would now be pleased to draw us to yourself for whenever that time may be, and when you began to write a letter of yourself to the world, demonstrating your character to a lost world through such a person as us. Father, we just pray that we would live out the calling that you called us to be, the means by which you demonstrate to the lost world that you are holy. Father, thank you that we live a life of unquenchable optimism, that we live a life of unvarying triumph, we live a life of unforgettable impact, and we live a life of unimpeachable integrity with the Word, and that we live a life of undeniable reality. May it be so for Jesus' sake. And all the Brave Men said, "Amen!"