

### 3. A Living Gospel

“We are now living in a time of faith. The Holy Spirit writes no more gospels except in our hearts. All we do from moment to moment is live this new gospel of the Holy Spirit. We, if we are holy, are the paper; our sufferings and our actions are the ink. The workings of the Holy Spirit are his pen, and with it he writes a living gospel; but it will never be read until that last day of glory when it leaves the printing press of this life.” --Caussade

<sup>1</sup>*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? <sup>2</sup>You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. <sup>3</sup>You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

<sup>4</sup>*Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. <sup>6</sup>He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

<sup>7</sup>*Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, <sup>8</sup>will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? <sup>9</sup>If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! <sup>10</sup>For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.<sup>1</sup>* --St. Paul



Chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians is especially interesting to me because it contains one of my favorite passages. In the Contemporary English Version, verses 14 and 15 read,

*I am grateful that God always makes it possible for Christ to lead us to victory. God also helps us spread the knowledge about Christ everywhere, and this knowledge is like the smell of perfume. In fact, God thinks of us as a perfume that brings Christ to everyone. For people who are being saved, this perfume has a sweet smell and leads them to a better life. But for people who are lost, it has a bad smell and leads them to a horrible death. No one really has what it takes to do this work.*

The background for Paul’s metaphor is a Roman victory parade. The Apostle could see warriors returning triumphantly from the battlefield. Perfume and flowers were

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<sup>1</sup> New International Version, 2 Corinthians 3.

tossed freely by the citizens in praise of their soldiers. Paul likens that to the victory Christ brings to human life in the spread of the Gospel. Just as the Romans attributed their victory to the gods, so Christians praised “the Lord of lords” for what Christ was doing in their lives in His triumph over sin and evil. Just think, we are vials of sweet-smelling Gospel perfume, having been touched by the risen Christ, and as such delivered from evil. It is a work of grace when the Lord says to us, “You are forgiven.” Yet He willingly paid the price and seats us now by His side in the kingdom. Just think, you are not only loved by God but regarded by Him as those leading others to a “better life,” a life in the kingdom.

### **Jesus, the Amen!**

Here is the strange thing about 2 Corinthians 2, some Christians in Corinth were complaining because they said Paul caused *them* pain by preaching the Gospel. Is this possible, a Christian being hurt by the Gospel? Apparently it was...or some Corinthians thought so. Yet Paul’s preaching was designed to make them happy, not sad. The Gospel frees people from their sins; it doesn’t bind them to a worse fate than they had before becoming followers of Christ. In this remarkable chapter, Paul says the Holy Spirit writes a *living gospel* on our hearts. For Jews, the Lord Jesus lifts the heavy burdens of the law from their spiritual shoulders. For the Gentile Romans, the Lord Jesus puts them on the right road rather than the road to judgment on which they were traveling. For you, whatever you are, the Gospel comes as the “good news” of freedom from sin. Now, how can Jesus work *against* you when his death on the cross worked *for* you? That is strange thinking indeed, that Jesus adds to our troubles rather than takes them away.

Some commentators say Paul has reference in 2 Corinthians to the promises God made to the Israelites through Abraham. You remember that Abraham’s story begins in Genesis 12:1, a story based only on the promises of God. *Leave your friends, your familiar life, many of your relatives, your investments...everything and go to an unknown foreign country. I will make you, old man, a great people,* says the Lord.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps Paul has reference to Israel at Sinai, where the people learned a tough lesson on obedience to the Lord. Later, Jesus did not come with new promises, say these commentators. Rather,

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<sup>2</sup> This is my general understanding of God’s call on Abraham’s life.

our Lord was the *Yea* and the *Amen* to the promises God had made a long time ago. If you want to see how God met and kept His promises to His people, read the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Hebrews. There you find Jesus as the *Amen*, as the *So be it!* What does this mean? It means that God had you in mind when He spoke to Abraham; that He had you in His heart when Moses went up the mountain at Sinai. Jesus is God's *Amen* in your life, the One who works for good, not evil for you. God is proving Himself faithful to you through Jesus. You can jump and shout like the healed man at the pool. You can bow before His greatness and healing power like the man filled once filled with demons. Yes, your Redeemer has come! Your *Amen* is now in your heart.

### **Other Living Gospels**

As long as there are people on this earth, the Holy Spirit of God will be writing this *living gospel* of our Lord. I have found that God is at work in the lives of many people, imprinting His will on their hearts and giving them His Spirit to encourage them to follow Him faithfully. Caussade says this ought to make us look at other people differently than we used to do. When you pass someone on the street or see someone in the car next to you, you can be sure that in one way or another God is active in that person's heart. That person may be praying, rejoicing, or repenting—at that very time. You cannot know what is being written on their hearts; you can barely know what is being written on your own heart. But it is not important that you know the content of their hearts, just that you know God is at work.

I know there are people who are living anything but the Gospel. They are on the wide path to destruction, not the narrow one to eternal life. But that does not mean that God is not at work in their lives. They may not know it now and might resist it if they did, at least at first. We can be sure, however, that their Creator is trying to communicate with them, and many will eventually hear the Spirit and turn to the Lord. It is sad to think of Paul's desperate words about the hard hearts of some people, that they are so opposed to goodness that they do anything they can to resist its impulses. Their love is wickedness, not righteousness.

It would be helpful right now if you read Romans 1, Psalm 37, and the little book of Jude. These passages help us understand how some people think and how desperately

they need prayer. Just think how your life was before you met the Lord and how much you needed Him. Had you continued on the same path it would have taken you far from God. But someone was praying for you. Someone, somewhere, maybe a relative, a friend, another Christian who knows you, like a spouse, and desperately wants you to turn from your ways and seek the Lord. You can be sure that your faith stands on the shoulders of others who love you and want you to be saved.

Please reread the quote from Caussade at the first part of this meditation. What the Holy Spirit places in our hearts we live every moment of our lives. We who seek God are His paper, the Apostle says; what we do and suffer is His ink. The Holy Spirit is God's pen. The Spirit is writing a living Gospel in us, a Gospel which will never be wholly completed until our story is published in heaven. And what will others read that the Spirit has put in our hearts? Will it show we tried or that we failed? Do you remember the brief prayer Caussade used in counseling others?

**For all things and in all things may God be blessed.  
Lord, may your holy will be done.**

Will the Spirit write that we kept this prayer—or one like it—before us in our dealings with others? Will the Spirit show that we tried to help others live out this prayer in their lives? Now, think of yourself. What is the connection between “all things” and God's “holy will” in your life? Has the Holy Spirit enabled you to reunderstand the bad things that happened to you as God's grace rather than as god's punishment?

### **Spiritual Truths for You**

In this short quote from Caussade he highlights two deep spiritual truths. We would do well to pay attention to these truths. **First, we will never be able to know what God is doing in the hearts of others.** I mentioned this earlier in this meditation. I regret to say that I fell into this trap not long after I started preaching. A young man in my parish was known for his bad reputation. I saw him at a store one afternoon and decided to speak with him about the Lord. In our conversation he asked me if I thought he would go to heaven. Frankly I did not think so and that's what I told him. After all, he asked for it! As I drove away from the store the Lord impressed me that I had done something really stupid. My answer, whatever it was, yes or no, would have to be explained and I was not

ready for that. I thought, “Mercer, you are a fool for getting caught that way. You have no way of knowing what was in his heart, and yet you gave him a frank answer to his question. You did more harm than good.” I should have said, “It will be as you wish.”

This was a matter totally up to the Lord. Jesus said those who give mercy will receive mercy in return.<sup>3</sup> This is the first beatitude in Matthew 5 that is specifically directed at others. We are “happy” (“satisfied”), Jesus said, if we are merciful. In a recent war zone people were driven from their homes and force-marched to a strange place. One aged man begged for the life of his ailing wife. She could not make such a trip. “What is she to me,” the soldier said, and moved them out. The day is coming when that soldier will ask for mercy from God...and it may be withheld. To be merciful is sometimes risky, but it pleases God.

We are merciful precisely because we do not know what God is doing in someone else’s heart, and our Lord was merciful precisely because He did. We do not know how close to the kingdom other people are, or what hidden graces have been given them. For example, I am amazed at how many psalms of complaint there are in the book of Psalms. They largely outnumber Psalms of praise. This tells us life can be harsh, even for those who want to follow God. Sometimes in these psalms of complaint the writer lashes out against his persecutor...and rightfully so. In almost every instance the writer calls on God to bring justice. God was looked on by Hebrews as an arbiter in matters of hostility, an arbiter with authority to judge and do what is necessary to bring justice. I am saying that it is God alone who can break the cycle of hostility in the world and bring lasting peace.

Let the Holy Spirit write “mercy” on our hearts. That will be of immense help in dealing with people. There are so many different kinds of people, with different experiences and values. Yet everyone understands mercy, perhaps except the psychopath. It is fair to say that to be treated mercifully is a very deep desire in most of our hearts.

The **second** spiritual truth mentioned by Caussade is the fullness of heaven. Do you remember: “The workings of the Holy Spirit are his pen, and with it he writes a living gospel; but it will never be read until that last day of glory when it leaves the printing

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:7.

press of this life?" In my readings on heaven I have come to several conclusions, one of which is that there are no secrets in heaven; there is no need to try to cover up these. If we want to go to heaven, then we want to go to a place where our secrets are uncovered for all to know. The humility of heaven desires to be fully transparent. While I certainly agree with what he has said, I think we will be so overcome with the splendor of heaven and of Christ Himself that what gave us pain in this life will fade away. But I could be wrong too.

Maybe some wrongs are so monstrous that a full accounting is required before the Judge of the whole earth and those who belong to Him. For me, the sins of the Nazi party stand out glaringly as sin that requires a public accounting. Even here we can pray for mercy on the souls of those Nazis who were not party to genocide. It was Jesus who taught us to pray for our enemies and became himself an example of what He taught.

Now we live by faith, trusting God to make sense of our lives and the lives of others. But we do not always understand why some very bad things happen to very good people, and try as we might, we cannot make sense of it.

### **All for Nothing**

Above my desk in my office is a small painting of the devil trying to hand Jesus a stone. The Lord is refusing it and, with a free hand, He points to heaven. The message is clear: I am not going to give *God's everything* for the *devil's nothing*. Do you remember this account. It's in two of the Gospels.

<sup>1</sup>*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."*

<sup>4</sup>*Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

<sup>5</sup>*Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup>"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:*

*"He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."*

<sup>7</sup>*Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

<sup>8</sup>*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup>"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

<sup>10</sup>*Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"*

*<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.<sup>4</sup>*

Only a person with a hard heart would choose to follow the devil, with his false promises, rather than the Lord God who can fulfill His promises. “Take this drug;” Satan says, “it will make you feel wonderful.” So you do...and get hooked. Then life becomes a wild trip trying to get what you need, and all the while you are ruining your health and dealing with criminals until you become one yourself. “No, let’s go for some quick money. Only fools work hard for their pay.” Robbery? That sounds like a good plan... until you get caught. You can embarrass your God, family, what good friends you have, as you stand before the court while the judge puts you in prison. And the Great Judge puts you in hell unless you plead for His mercy.

Our Lord’s temptation was real. “Take a short cut,” the devil says. “Follow me and be popular,” the devil insists. “Follow God, use my plan,” the devil urges. The Lord says, “Get behind me Satan; get out of my sight!” And heaven’s angels come and rejuvenate the Lord. Our Lord followed God’s plan for His life. It was filled with good feelings as he healed people, mixed with the common folks, even raised at least three people from death. Yes, He had tough going at times: people lied about Him, accused Him of being in league with the devil, treated His poor body rudely, put Him on a cross (for you and me) where He died. But...but...don’t forget. He was raised from death by His and our Father God. He lives at God’s right hand and will come back to get His church and save it from death.

I should think it the better part to follow Him, don’t you think so as well? It is better, much better, to say with Isaiah, “Here am I, Lord. Send me.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Today’s Agenda**

1. We are a living Gospel, known and read by others. Some people judge the Lord Jesus by what they see in us. Jesus loved His Father God and served Him without question or complaint. We are called to do the same.

2. The Apostle Paul said we are a letter written by the Holy Spirit. We are told that the Holy Spirit knows the depths of the mind of God. If we are to “have the mind of

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew’s Gospel 4:1-12, NIV.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 6:8, NIV.

Christ,” we need to be filled with the Spirit. Let us pray for the presence of the Spirit in our hearts so we can properly influence others.

3. Do you think the following insight by Thomas Merton is true? If so, is it then true for you? Merton says: “Because we love God alone, beyond and above all things, and because our love shows us that He infinitely exceeds the goodness of them all, we become indifferent to all that is not God.”<sup>6</sup> Christ is the greater good and He dominates our lives, and we are happy that He does. He has made it possible for us to be living Gospels...little stories of the Great Story.

Jerry Mercer  
November 12, 2009

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Merton, No Man is an Island, p. 103.