

+ 2 Corinthians 4:13-18 + Servants of Christ Seek the Unseen +
+ Third Sunday After Pentecost + 21 June 2009 +

Sometimes what you don't see makes all the difference. When America entered World War II in late 1941, young men across the country enlisted to serve. Many then had to make a days-long train ride to their first station of duty. Along the route was a brief stop at a small town called North Platte, NE. Every troop train stopped at the Canteen there for just ten minutes, but for those young, scared servicemen, it meant the world.

You see, in early 1942, ladies from North Platte had heard a train filled with Nebraska National Guard was passing through. So they decided to provide some treats for the soldiers, who turned out to be from Kansas. Eventually their labor of love grew to reach over 8 million servicemen as the ladies of North Platte and its surrounding communities served up to 32 trains a day.

Each train stopped for just ten minutes. The ladies provided sandwiches, cookies, cakes, hot coffee and cocoa for the soldiers as they ran into and out of the station. Total strangers stepped off every train and were greeted by the love of a small town. Those ten minutes of "home" lived on in the hearts and minds of the soldiers as they went off to war. The loving service of a few helped countless soldiers in unseen ways throughout the war.

Sometimes what you don't see makes all the difference. It was true for the ladies of North Platte and it's even truer for servants of Christ. You see, as believers in Christ, we are also his servants, each richly blessed with certain gifts, but to be a servant of Christ also means dealing with the unseen. At times that can be rather discouraging when our results seem meager, but Paul reminds us that **SERVANTS OF CHRIST SEEK THE UNSEEN.**

You can't seek the unseen unless you have a reason to do so. By nature, that's impossible. Last week Paul reminded us of what we really are—weak, insignificant jars of clay, who don't deserve God's loving attention because we're filled with the empty darkness of sin. In fact, we deserve God's punishment of death and hell because of that sin. In spite of that reality, God in his grace has filled us with the **"light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."** Christ Jesus left his heavenly home to take on our weak human flesh and become a jar of clay just like us to suffer and die for our sin-darkened souls. Now by God's grace we have a precious treasure to share in the light-giving good news of Jesus Christ.

In today's text, Paul reminds us that as servants of Christ we are actually motivated by the unseen. Paul quotes Psalm 116 as he writes, ***"It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence."***

Paul had suffered to proclaim the good news of Jesus. He had endured beatings and mobs and rejection from his own people—the Jews. He was even being rejected by some of his fellow Christians as "super-apostles" seduced them away from the truth. It was long and difficult labor to serve Christ, but time and again, the Lord delivered Paul. Above all, the Lord had delivered Paul from his greatest affliction—the affliction of sin by raising his Savior Jesus from the dead. Filled with the full confidence of faith in Christ, Paul could declare, ***"We also believe and therefore speak"***.

You see, Paul was motivated by the unseen promise of the resurrection. He hadn't seen Christ rise from the dead. Paul had not yet seen God raise all his servants from the dead either, but ***"with [the] same spirit of faith"*** in the unseen promise of deliverance that the Psalmist had declared, Paul could faithfully and tirelessly keep serving his Lord and speaking about him.

It's been 2000 years since Jesus Christ was born in a Bethlehem stable. It's been 2000 years since he walked the dusty roads of Palestine and carried a heavy, wooden cross up Calvary and was raised from the dead, and 2000 years since Paul wrote these words to the Corinthians, but the motivation remains the same. Servants of Christ are motivated by the unseen.

The Jesus who delivered Paul from his affliction of sin with a perfect life and an innocent death is the same Jesus who delivered us from our affliction of sin. The Jesus who took on human flesh like Paul and put himself in Paul's grave is the same Jesus who came as our substitute with human flesh like ours to put himself in our grave. The Jesus whom God raised to life from the dead for Paul's sake is the same Jesus with whom we are raised through the waters of Holy Baptism and before whom we will one day stand in the glories of heaven. That unseen reality of Christ's resurrection was Paul's motivation to serve and is our motivation as well.

What you don't see makes all the difference. Without Christ's perfect life, we would still be dark, empty jars of clay. Without Christ's innocent suffering and death, we would still be headed for the eternal death of hell. Without Christ's resurrection, we would have no hope of our own resurrection and no reason to serve. So the unseen reality of Christ's resurrection and our own resurrection motivate us to keep serving Christ and sharing him.

The ladies of North Platte made a huge impact on millions of military personnel. Stories are told of soldiers hunkered down in fox holes under fire in the middle of the night calling out to each other, “What I would give to have five minutes back at North Platte.” The love those ladies showed made an impact on countless soldiers in unseen ways long after the coffee and cake were served. Servants of Christ motivated by the unseen also make an impact on the unseen as Paul points out, **“All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”**

Why was Paul so willing to endure suffering and persecution and even death as he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ? **“All this is for your benefit...”** Paul was willing to endure all that so the Corinthians would have eternal life in Christ. We see Paul’s shepherd-like heart of love for his hearers here. At the same time, Paul was willing to endure all that to bring glory to God as the good news of God’s grace in Jesus was proclaimed to **“more and more people”**. Paul didn’t know all of them, but he knew his faithful service to the Lord would have an impact on many unseen people through the Gospel he and others proclaimed.

Now you might be sitting here thinking, “How can I as a servant of Christ make an impact like that?” Really it’s not that difficult! It’s true the Lord may not use you or me the way he used Paul, but he does use us to impact the unseen. Remember what Paul was willing to give up for the sake of the Gospel and God’s glory? His own life—so others could have eternal life.

As servants of Christ, what are you and I willing to give up for the sake of the Gospel and the glory of God? Maybe it’s your time—a precious gift of God’s grace that can be used to get to know better a neighbor who’s struggling and who needs to hear the good news of Jesus, a gift that can be used to teach little ones or big ones about their Savior, a gift that can be used to support our work here of connecting people in our community to Jesus.

Maybe it’s your talents—wonderful gifts from God that you can use in service to him, whether it’s working with your hands, praying for others, using technology to design or advertise, participating musically, teaching, simply talking to people, or using some other skill God has given to bring him glory.

Maybe it’s the treasures God has so graciously given to you. In many ways through our treasures, we can make an even greater impact on the unseen. You see, when we give our offerings to the Lord out of grateful thanks for what he has done, he uses us to make an impact on the unseen. Through our treasures the Gospel goes out to the people of our region and the people of the North Country. With our treasures, God makes it possible for us to support the work of our church body in training young people for the public ministry and in reaching people in places from North Carolina to Kansas to China to Pakistan and beyond. By giving up all these gifts in service to the Lord, God uses us to make an impact on souls we may only see in heaven.

Servants of Christ motivated by the unseen make an impact on the unseen, but all the time, we seek the unseen. Paul was eager to faithfully serve, but serving Christ was hard. Still Paul wouldn’t give up. **“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”**

So often as servants of Christ, we work hard and long and faithfully only to receive what appears to be meager results. Few people show up for an event into which you poured much effort and time. A friend grows more distant after you’ve shared the good news of Jesus. People slam doors physically or mentally to your invitations. The world seems to get worse and opportunities seem to be lost as our ability to reach more people with the Gospel is hampered by financial challenges. Temptation abounds and we start to wonder if it’s all worth it. As servants of Christ, we get discouraged. Even Paul felt that way on occasion, but he sought the unseen. He fixed his eyes on the unseen glory of heaven and it was all worth it again.

Paul’s words remind me of the hymn, “For All the Saints”, where we sing, **“And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph-song, and hearts are brave again and arms are strong.”** Servants of Christ, the struggle is hard. Serving Christ is a difficult task and will grow even harder as we near the Last Day. We will continue to deal with challenges and afflictions and sorrow, **“yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day”**. We hear the distant triumph-song again and again, so **“we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.”** Such a focus gives us a new and proper perspective about this life. We see that even the troubles in this life either help us to better see the unseen or make us long to reach that unseen, eternal glory of heaven. Then the unseen Christ motivates us once again to go out and reach the unseen.

Sometimes what you don’t see makes all the difference. A group of loving ladies impacted over eight million military personnel in countless unseen ways, but that impact was only temporary. Servants of Christ, we seek a far greater unseen goal—the unseen, eternal glory of heaven. So don’t lose heart, because one day by God’s grace you will see the unseen. Amen.