

## The Aroma of Christ 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

When my son was small, his grandmother nicknamed him “hound dog.” When we would visit, he would climb in her lap and, as everyone else in the room could usually testify, her love of perfume would intrigue the nose of our 3-year-old. I wouldn’t describe other responses as *intrigue*—nose *fatigue* may be a better designation. The scent of Chanel No. 5 is forever carved into my olfactory senses, and perhaps Isaac’s also. It was a distinguishing mark of my mother, Carol, and what I wouldn’t give to be stifled once again in her presence. Like some of you, I miss my mom and would gladly endure her cheap perfume for another hug, another laugh, and another conversation.

In our text this morning, Paul writes that believers emit a kind of fragrance that has little to do with the physical senses. To rewind and tie together the last few weeks, as Matt finished the book of Jonah last week, the challenges that rose from that book will never end for the believer on this short side of resurrection life. Now that we’re new creatures in Christ, the Spirit is ever the excavator—unearthing, pinpointing, de-weeding what is harmful, and planting what makes for health and beauty. Through Jonah, we learned that we’re not beyond running at cross purposes with the character of God. We hopefully heard the challenge to lay down our lives in submission to those purposes and in concert with God’s missionary heart. And more, when we understand with faith what God has achieved in Christ, we come to learn that Jesus absolutely wins in the end. In our text this morning, Paul writes of the first fruits of Christ’s triumph in and over His church. And what Jesus is working through that triumph is intended to have an effect upon others. This effect, Paul calls, an *aroma*—a pleasing one to some and not so much to others.

In fact, there were adversaries of Paul who thought very little of him. The list of criticisms and personal attacks Paul addresses throughout the book of 2 Corinthians is lengthy and multifaceted. In chapter one, he asks rhetorically if the move to visit the Corinthians was based on some fleshly motive on his part. In chapter four, he defends his character and ministry from charges of being underhanded and cunning. In chapter seven, he addresses being accused of corrupting others. And, to round out the sampling of the indictments levied against Paul, he even defends his salvation status in chapter ten. He’s on the defensive because if he’s compromised in any way, then his message would be discredited, even maligned. The light of truth needed to be cast on this shade thrown by Paul’s naysayers, whom he tongue-in-cheek called, “super-apostles.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, this letter to the Corinthians is not merely about Paul’s defense. By the Spirit, this apostle would write for the overall good of the church. He defended the faith, but his writings also served to arm the flock of Christ for difficult days. The whole Pauline corpus conveys that the life of faith in the Son of God is not a walk in the park, but more like a labyrinth requiring trust attachment to all that Christ is and has done. Sometimes this labyrinth of sanctification required the life-or-death language he employs in our text. The Corinthians needed to comprehend some crucial things—how their union with Christ fleshed out day by day, how they would be viewed as a follower of Christ, and what should mark them as they stood their ground for Christ.

### I. The triumph of Christ in His work

***14) But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.*** As the imposter apostles and their followers possessed skewed views of what Christianity entailed, their personal and public views of Paul were far from five stars. At this point, Paul had spent a considerable amount of time with the

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<sup>1</sup> He calls them this in 2 Cor. 11:5, 12:11.

Corinthians. The LORD worked around 18 months to establish a viable fellowship in Corinth. As he wrote this specific letter from northern Greece, he was planning to visit them a third time. He was no stranger to them, but he knew that some of the gospel's opponents were seeking to insert a wedge between him and these Corinthian believers.

In 2 Corinthians 10-11, we notice that Paul is not ashamed to address his unimpressive manner, alluding to the charge of him being meek face-to-face and bold while away, and topping this self-deprecation off with a nod to being unskilled in speaking.<sup>2</sup> In a manner that counters the prevailing winds of our own day, Paul then addressed the charge of being weak the best way anyone could possibly do so—by admitting his weaknesses! To these “superior” teachers, seeking to sway the Corinthians with their sermons of self-sufficiency, Paul was a defeated figure reflecting the folly of his own message based upon a weak, crucified Messiah.<sup>3</sup> These bloated instructors were blinded to and/or ignoring the Law and the prophets that declared such a Deliverer. Yet, Paul doesn't completely ignore his strength or its source, and he does this by explaining some nuts and bolts of sanctification in Christ. And the images he employs to teach the Corinthians are charged with the ideas of *death* and *life*.

In verse 14, Paul expresses to the church, and in a round-about way to his cynics, how strength and life are attained—*But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession*. There are few more vivid scenes penned by Paul throughout his writings. Yet, things may not be what they seem with a cursory look at what Paul is saying. The questions that rise to the surface: Who is being led here? Who is doing the leading? Who has triumphed, in what way has the triumph taken place, and what does Paul intend to communicate to believers about how this triumph matters day by day? Some of that is not blatantly obvious in a read-through. As I read this past week, “metaphors speak powerfully, but not always clearly.”<sup>4</sup>

What is clear here is that Paul has in mind a Roman *triumphal procession* that actually dated back before the dynasties of Rome.<sup>5</sup> The picture painted is the Roman practice of a powerful military general leading a train of conquered foes through an important Roman city, and doing so with great fanfare and theatrics. Beyond binding the conquered soldiers, this minister of defense, ever serving the cause of the Emperor and empire, would include as much in the train that would bring the maximum measure of shame to Rome's enemies—their riches, their artillery, their native animals, other displays of their culture or customs. On top of these, the victors would pompously display their own celebratory musicians, costumes, and even thematic floats similar to what one might find at a modern-day parade. These *triumphal procession* events weren't only humiliating to the defeated, but they often ended in execution.<sup>6</sup> With the world being dominated by Roman powers in Paul's day, the processions would have played out hundreds of times throughout the empire. Perhaps some Corinthians would have been eyewitnesses to one or more of these Roman festivities of conquest.

Some have understood verse 14 to echo the meaning of Colossians 2:15, that, being in Christ, who defeated His enemies at the cross, we too, can know the magnificence of that triumph.<sup>7</sup> Being a child and soldier of this King of kings, we now share in what is His—a glorious victory over His enemies and ours! Thankfully, all that is beautifully true. This was the interpretation of reformer John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and other respected interpreters since. Yet, others have sought to take the verb *leads*

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:1, 11:6

<sup>3</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, 52.

<sup>4</sup> David Garland, *NAC: 2 Corinthians*, 140.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Hafemann, *The NIV Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, 95 (as quoted in Kent Hughes commentary on 2 Corinthians).

<sup>6</sup> Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 2:15, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”

at face value, which is a verb form that flips this interpretation in an unsuspecting, and perhaps surprising way.<sup>8</sup> Paul gives *thanks...to God*. He is the prime mover of this *procession*. Then Paul writes, *thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us...* God is leading *in Christ*, but leading who? Us. Paul is portraying himself and God's people as those who have been captured. Paul, and all of us, once enemies of God, are now God's captives.<sup>9</sup> He has gloriously *defeated* us by a conquering grace. Paul and the Corinthian believers have been "handed over" to pattern the whole of their lives after a crucified Christ. What do we have here if not the paradox of the Christian life on display: Resurrection living only occurs when we die to sin and self.<sup>10</sup> We are God's captives, and just like Christ, this cross-bearing life is the path to triumph and glory.

This was one of Paul's ways of explaining our union with Christ. Jesus didn't just tell us to take up our crosses, or to lose our lives for the gospel's sake—He led the way. This is what Paul meant in Philippians 3:10, "...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death." We could never bear the sin of the world. That's not what Paul means or how we become like Him in His death. But we can learn and grow to live selflessly, to lay aside self-preserving ways and motives, and live for the glory of God. That's how. Christ led the way. He forsook sin and died to self, and we follow in His steps. God, in Christ, by way of the cross, by way of suffering, by way of daily dying, ushers us down the path of difficult, cross-bearing discipleship that culminates in final victory. Like this procession, our lives look like death, but could we be more alive as we follow the LORD Jesus?

Today, many of you will seek to honor a mother or two. Some of you will receive gifts and kind words, but the reason that the honor is due, in part, is because having and raising children is uniquely difficult! And as we consider from this text what it means to be a disciple, the subject matter couldn't be more applicable. Every mother knows what it means to lay aside her own desires for her children. Some of you have even halted life goals and dreams to feed mouths, educate minds, and you're laboring to give understanding about the basics of life, of wisdom, of God, and of the gospel. You are dying daily, and in many ways, you're following Christ down the road of struggle that leaves you exhausted by day's end—for the good of those you love. You're learning that the promises of perfect motherhood are empty. But if you are seeking to mirror Jesus, you're also learning that His commendation and reward are yours, even in ways that you might not understand or yet see. Paul would want you to learn, for all of us to learn, that life in its fullest form comes through the discipline of dying to our sin and its desires.

These super-apostles were seeking to slander Paul into ineffectual fruitlessness. And Paul uses the occasion to help the church at Corinth understand that the charges against God's people won't ultimately stand. The worst things, the worst circumstances serve the eternal good of God's people, and that's grounded in their immovable standing in Christ. Further, the Spirit wants us to know how we will be viewed as we stand in Christ.

## II. The aroma of Christ in the world

**15) For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing,** In some sense, in our bolder moments we might be tempted to say, "Who cares what

<sup>8</sup> When I evaluated what Paul was saying carefully, I sat up straight in my seat with surprise. I came to the text with an interpretation last Tuesday and left that evening with a different one. Paul's image took me to task.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 6 calls believers "slaves of righteousness"; NT scholar Thomas Schreiner describes this verb slave as a divine passive. God is the One who has delivered us from one power (sin) and placed us inside of another power (righteousness). And we rejoice in this handover! Jesus is LORD. He does as He pleases, and He has done much with us that is kind beyond words.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 10:38–39, "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. [39] Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

others think?” At other times we fear man and live too reflectively on the opinions of others. And, considering what’s been said thus far, it makes sense that Paul uses a metaphor from the world of offerings and sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> It also makes sense in that he hasn’t completely come off of the Roman processional in which odorous flowers thrown about and incense bearers would dispense perfumes into the air as a part of the celebrations. The sweet smells galvanized the senses of the onlookers.<sup>12</sup> Christ’s triumph for us by His selfless death will have an effect on others around us. By the nature of God’s work in us through the Spirit, our lives have a kind of scent that is caught horizontally, but also vertically.

#### A. *Its primary direction*

Verse 15, ***For we are the aroma of Christ to God...*** In the original, that little word *to* can be translated as *for*, meaning that either Paul is stating that the aroma of Christ we have in Him is offered as a gift to God, or it is offered to others for His advantage, or his honor.<sup>13</sup> Either way, the imagery draws upon Israel’s history and the worship scene from the tabernacle. In Leviticus, there are at least 16 occasions where the sacrifices were said to be a *pleasing aroma*. And who were those sacrifices offered to and for? The LORD. Same idea here by Paul. Our lives rise to God as a pleasing aroma. Yes, God knows the stench of our deeds, our desires, and our motives. Yet, we’re grateful that the dominant scent which God forever picks up on in the gospel reigning in us is the person and work of Christ, ***we are the aroma of Christ to God***. Christ’s life laid down at the altar of God’s judgment for our sin is our acceptance with Him. But Christ’s work is meant to exhibit itself through us, and God is pleased with that exhibition, that aroma. Unlike other odors, this aroma isn’t defined by time and heat, in accordance with physical laws at play in the millions of sacrifices in the Old Covenant. Christ’s death was a spiritual offering, and our sacrificial lives offered to God are spiritual offerings as well—*reasonable acts of worship* Paul would express to the church at Rome. We are “*living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God*.”<sup>14</sup> And there’s the paradox again—we live by dying. The death of all those millions of animals foreshadowed not only how we would be justified in Christ, but also how we would be sanctified in Christ.

#### B. *Its piercing division*

***15) For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16) to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life...*** The reason the world opposes Christians is because, knowingly or unknowingly, the source of the aroma is the world’s problem. Christ in us is a stench to His enemies, to ***those who are perishing***. Paul’s opponents, at some point, adopted the longstanding worldview (born in our first parents) that aggression, pride, independence—all bound together by self-rule—would win the day. People exert these behaviors and attitudes to get ahead, to gather a following, to appear strong and in control. While the cross-bearing disciple seeks to battle these dark temptations and realities, the cross-less world champions such postures. Therefore, when the flesh-driven ministers, who were likely undercutting the gospel of grace alone—when they attempted to size up the humble, Christ-confessing, Christ-following Corinthian, their conclusion was that of being repelled. To them, the apostle and the believing community were ***a fragrance from death to death***.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Kistemaker, *NTC: II Corinthians*, 90.

<sup>12</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament: Vol. 4*, 218 (as quoted by Robert Gromacki, *Stand Firm in the Faith*, 40.).

<sup>13</sup> Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 12:1

To the world at large, spiritually speaking, we don't smell very good. The church at Corinth, situated in a hub of paganism, needed to temper her expectations. It's odd and rightly raises suspicions when the world tries to court the church, and when the church attempts to court and befriend the world, then she has fallen prey in some way. Why? Because at root, the gospel message is revolting, challenging the core operative of pride; the Savior we declare and represent is repelling, calling for death to one's sense of self-importance and self-rule; and, irony of ironies, our lives often bear a stench that nauseates those who are actually dead in their sin.<sup>15</sup> Octavius Winslow, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist pastor near Bristol, England, insightfully wrote, "Bring the fleshly minded to the test. Address to them things that are [agreeable] with their nature, and they are all life and animation. Converse with the scholar [about] Homer; come to the philosopher with Newton, talk to the poet of his musings, the astronomer of his stars; the banker of his [gold]...the merchant of his market, the farmer of his cattle...the sensualist of his pleasure...and you have awakened [an] enthusiasm of the heart in favor of its fond and worshipped idols. But alas! Change your theme. Speak to them of Jesus; breathe that name which fills the church below with its fragrance, and the church above with its music...and there is no echo. No responsive chord vibrates to your touch. It is as though you had told your story to a senseless automaton or chanted your music into the ear of a corpse."<sup>16</sup> Be reminded, that if the world finds you offensive and you've been nothing but kind and servant-hearted, then things are quite normal.

Now, those kinds of remarks need their own tempering. Has every lost person avoided you like the plague when you have served them and loved them by the help of the Holy Spirit? Of course not. I can't think of a more appropriate place to think about the believer living in close quarters with an unbeliever than in many of our homes. The life-giving, life-altering effect that you mothers have on your children can't be overstated. This verse sheds light on the resistance of your kids to the gospel or their persistence in going against the grain of the spiritual disciplines you're trying to establish. Yet, at the same time, we should take the balance of other statements by Paul in 2 Corinthians that are encouraging. In 4:6, God has the power to shine the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Christ to our children. In 5:17, God fashions new creatures in Christ through our appeals to trust Christ. In 12:10, God uses those aware of their weakness to endow His strength for witness and ministry. Mothers, yes, the little hearts in your home may be repelled for the moment, but keep praying, keep dying to sin and self, keep speaking about the gospel of God's grace at the cross, because the Lord is working to scent this world with *life*.

If you've been in Christ for any length of time, this *fragrance from life to life* is something you've experienced. You begin talking with another believer and there's an immediate kind of unity that would otherwise be unexplained. Even when basic forms of communication are absent, such as in cross-cultural contexts, being with fellow Christ-followers has an energizing effect, and it does because they carry with them the fragrance of Christ.

### III. The sufficiency of Christ in the Word

Who can live this kind of death-life, or bear the weight of the fruit of that kind of life in other people's lives? None of us can. But, as Paul would go on to express in the next chapter, "*Our sufficiency is from God.*"<sup>17</sup> And that's what is promising! When we lay down our lives, when we die to our own agendas, when we depend on God with trust, in prayer, and wielding what He's provided as means of grace, then we can move forward—not seized to inaction but animated for faithfulness and dependence.

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<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 2:1–2, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked..."

<sup>16</sup> Octavius Winslow, *No Condemnation in Christ: An Unfolding of the Eighth Chapter of the Book of Romans*, 68-69.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:5

Verse 17 both creates such dependence and shows us what we are to depend upon in the face of opposition and difficulty—the Word of our LORD. The super-apostles and Moses-men were twisting the scriptures to serve their own ends, often hiding those aims from others. And we see by Paul’s use of the word *peddler* that a portion of his opponent’s motives was financial profit. However, Paul lays open the kind of accountability that carries with a superior profit, ***For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.*** Paul sought to convince the Corinthian church that not only was his ministry free of tampering with God’s word, but that it was marked by honesty. That honesty grew out of the truth that God was always aware of his ministry actions and motives. See how practical the doctrines of omnipresence, biblical inerrancy and inspiration are? It made for an honest man and a people who could simply trust him with anything. When God’s people depend on God’s Word in God’s way, God has a way of bushhogging away some of the mess created by secret cunning and ulterior motives. And, He has a way of preventing those unhealthy growths from happening in the first place. That’s the kind of aroma we’re to exude—one of dependence—we follow Jesus by daily dying and we pursue His glory by being people who live on and by His Word.

## Conclusion

Through this procession of triumph, my brothers and sisters, Christ shines—not through displays of self-sufficiency, nor through the pursuit of leger-exacting goodness; not through loud lives of self-branding, nor through strategies to be noticed by the masses, nor through stepping on the head of others on the way up—but through making our way through life with a nearness to a selfless Jesus. He’ll shine through childlike trust in Him in success or failure and through learning that the Spirit-driven life is happening when we lay ourselves down to die. When we gladly learn to fold up our pitiful, tattered tent-castles that we tend to proudly erect each day—through that kind of *death-life* will God’s glory and power shine forth. God wields such lives to ***spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere.*** Will you follow the cross-bearing Jesus with your life? For those who do, at the end of that journey we’ll reign with Him.<sup>18</sup> And there is no smell of victory that even faintly comes close.

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<sup>18</sup> 2 Timothy 2:11–12, “*The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him...*”



