

## **The Aroma of Christ**

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 – p. 965 in pew Bibles

Except for maybe the church in Galatia, not one of Paul's churches of which he had apostolic oversight caused him to suffer more grief and anxiety than that of the church in Corinth.

As Acts 18 tells us, Paul's first visit to Corinth yielded converts from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. These were people from not only mixed backgrounds, but also mixed social standings. Paul frequently had to deal with dissensions and rivalry within the congregation at Corinth.

Besides all that, after Paul left Corinth to bring the word of God elsewhere, a theological and administrative vacuum developed. The vacuum became filled, first, with some of the more prominent and wealthy members, who began to question Paul's success as an apostle. On top of that, the church was later infiltrated with interlopers, those who claimed apostolic authority because of their philosophical wisdom and eloquent oratory skills.

In two letters, one of them being 1 Corinthians, Paul challenged important persons in the community for their ethical misbehavior and their association with idolatry. Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to deliver the letter which we now know as 1 Corinthians.

Unfortunately, the guilty parties did not accept Paul's discipline. His rebukes caused them to lose face and sparked deep resentment. They began to attack Paul by challenging his motives, methods, and even his person all in order to undermine his authority in the church. This resulted in some members who continued to be supporters of Paul, some wavered, and some put up a determined resistance to his leadership.

When Timothy returned with the bad news, Paul paid an emergency visit to the church in Corinth. While there Paul was the object of attack by someone in the community and Paul ended up leaving and going to Ephesus.

While in Ephesus, Paul wrote what he called the severe or sorrowful letter which called upon the Corinthian believers to take action against the offender, and to ask them for their support in the matter.

Paul probably sent Titus to deliver this letter, and Titus stayed in Corinth to insure their repentance and their renewed commitment to Paul. Paul then waited expectantly to hear back from Titus about the Corinthians' response, intending to meet Titus in Troas because he had an evangelistic opportunity there. When Paul learned that Titus was not on the last boat of the season before winter set in, he assumed that Titus would now have to travel by land through Macedonia. Paul left for Macedonia in hopes of meeting Titus there.

Upon finally meeting up with Titus, Paul was overjoyed to hear the good news about the repentance of the majority and their continued love for Paul.

Now, it's important for us to understand that Paul wasn't being self-promoting here. Paul's heart was for the success of the gospel and he desperately wanted to see the Corinthian church healthy and thriving, but he knew that wouldn't happen unless they accepted Paul and his authority and message. Paul knew that God had genuinely sent him to Corinth and that he was commissioned by God Himself to oversee the health of that church.

This is where verse 14 of chapter 2 picks up. After suffering all that he did from those who sought to undermine his authority and turn the Corinthian church against him, he praised God that his love and care for them in the gospel was not in vain.

*<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? <sup>17</sup> 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.*

I want to bring to your attention three points from our passage this morning which help us to see what should be expected of us who carry the gospel.

I. **Suffering is part of the gospel ministry.** (v. 14a)

*<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession,*

The idea of a “triumphal procession” is a metaphor used by Paul referring to something that the first century audience who lived in the Roman empire would have understood. When a Roman general returned home after being victorious in battle, he was awarded what was essentially an enormous parade through the heart of Rome. It was designed to bring honor to the victorious general and offer thanks to Jupiter, the chief deity of the Roman pantheon, for granting victory. The entire populace of Rome would turn out to take part in the festivities and to celebrate their victorious general.

In this parade, the conquering general would ride in a triumphal chariot drawn by four horses, or in some cases, elephants. The parade would also include wagons carrying the captured soldiers and leading officers of the enemy nations all arrayed in their native costumes. These captives were paraded through the streets with mocking taunts from the onlookers, while the conquering general received loud praise from the crowd. The captives were then put to death at the end of the processional as a sacrifice to the Roman gods.

Paul's exact meaning in using this metaphor is a bit more tricky than you might think. Commentators usually fall on one side or the other as to where Paul saw himself in this metaphor. On the one hand, some translations like the New King James Version render this passage, “Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ.” This view puts Paul, and by extension, us, with the triumphant party. The picture then would be that because Christ has triumphed over sin and the enemy of our souls, we also share in that triumph in Christ Jesus. And certainly that is a very biblical idea. I think of passages like what Pastor Rob just preached

on recently in Romans 8:37, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

But even in that passage, the verse before it states, “As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’” Which actually supports a second possibility in understanding this passage here in 2 Corinthians 2:14.

If we consider, as we must, the overall theme of 2 Corinthians which is God’s strength manifested in our weakness, and also consider other statements from Paul elsewhere, we may get a whole different picture here.

I have found wide agreement from many commentators that Paul actually locates himself in this metaphor as not part of the conquering party, but rather as one of the conquered captives being paraded through the city. Let’s look at a few passages of Scripture:

1 Cor. 4:9 - <sup>9</sup>For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.

2 Cor. 4:7-12 - <sup>7</sup>But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup>We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup>always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup>For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup>So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Colossians 1:24-25 - <sup>24</sup>Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup>of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known...

The whole picture that Paul had in his mind is that just as Christ suffered for the salvation of His people, so Paul likewise was called upon to suffer in order to bring Christ’s message of salvation to them.

This is the paradox of the kingdom. As Christians living in this temporal age and in this sinful world, we are not called to rule and reign. On the contrary, part of our mission is to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus said in John 12:24, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

It’s a historical fact that the most fruitful times in the church’s history, the times when the church has seen the most people coming into the kingdom and has seen the most growth, have NOT been the times when the church has enjoyed worldly peace and prosperity. It’s been the times when the church has been persecuted and experienced great suffering.

And frankly, this is why the prosperity gospel is so sinister. What is it that the prosperity gospel preachers always focus on? Being successful in this world, being wealthy in this world, being accepted in this world, having a successful mindset in this world, having your best life now, in this world. Suffering is looked down upon. It's seen as weak. But you see, Satan knows that if he can make the church comfortable and focused on worldly, temporal prosperity, it will be rendered useless.

And maybe that's why God ordains suffering for His church in this present age. Maybe that's why God ordains the foolish things in the world's sight. Because it goes against the ways of this present worldly system. God has ordained weakness and suffering for His church because through that weakness and suffering, God is most glorified and we then bear the most fruit.

Paul tells us plainly how God thinks about this in 1 Corinthians 1:20-29.

*<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

*<sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

Paul then goes on in the very next section in chapter 2, verses 1-5 to say:

*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, <sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

The bottom line is this: Suffering is part and parcel with the cross. It is the very thing God uses to make Himself known. Therefore, Paul's driving point is that suffering and weakness, pictured here as being led to death in the Roman procession, is the means through which God has chosen to make himself known. And it's in making Himself known in the cross that He saves people.

For Paul, and for us, success is defined by spreading Christ everywhere we go. By making the Word of God fully known no matter what the cost to us. It's the Word of God that reveals the way of the cross. And it's the way of the cross that brings eternal life. And that brings us to yet another aspect of this triumphal procession...

II. **Believers are called to spread the aroma of the knowledge of Christ.** (vv. 14b-16a)

*and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.*

*<sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.*

One of the features of the Roman Triumphal Procession involved the use of incense. During the parade the temples would be open and filled with incense, and they would often have priests bearing incense in the parade itself, being offered to the gods such as Jupiter who helped them win the war.

Paul continues this metaphor by likening his suffering and work in the gospel to that of incense, spreading the aroma of the crucified Christ to those around him. Notice this aroma is both “to God” vertically, as well as affecting people he comes in contact with horizontally.

Embedded within the imagery of the triumphal procession, Paul alludes to the Levitical sacrifices of the Old Testament, referring to a sacrificial “aroma pleasing to the Lord.”

What we have to see here is that Paul portrays his apostolic suffering as an extension of the suffering of Christ. Again, Paul will say in chapter 4, verse 10, “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” This was Paul’s calling. And it’s the calling of all believers as well.

We are not called to spread the aroma of the world by becoming like the world. On the contrary, we are called to live our lives and preach a message that is contrary to the ways of the world, spreading the aroma of Christ through our becoming more and more Christ-like and through the proclamation of the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ.

But what we find is that not everyone will respond to the aroma of Christ the same way. The aroma will affect those who are being saved differently than it will affect those who are perishing. Paul says in verse 16, “to one [it’s a] fragrance from death to death...” In other words, to those who refuse to believe, those who are perishing, the cross is repulsive. But not only repulsive, it is telling them, whether they realize it or not, of an eternal death which will most certainly be their future if they don’t repent.

But the world hates talk about repentance. It hates talk about the cross. People in the world want to do whatever they wish. They don’t want to be accountable for their actions, and so they reject the word of the cross. To them the aroma of Christ is the smell of death. Because the day is coming when they will absolutely account for every action they do. And if they haven’t repented of their sin and trusted Christ, eternal death in Hell will be their wages.

But, Paul says, “to the other,” that is, to believers, those being saved, the aroma of Christ is “a fragrance from life to life.” That is, to believers, the word of the cross is a joyful word to hear because it is in the cross that we have our salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:18 – “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

I think too often the church seeks to smell of cultural relevance rather than carry the fragrance of Jesus Christ. Far too many Christians want to be hip with the times instead of being filled with the Spirit.

John Piper – “The world does not need cool Christians who are culturally saturated. It needs exiles with the scent of heaven and the aroma of Christ.”

This will require of us much sacrifice. Faithfulness to the true and pure gospel in this world often draws scorn. You will be outcasts. You may be shut out from your family. You may lose your job. One day we may be called upon to lose our very lives for the gospel. But our calling is to bear the aroma of Christ. To be people of the gospel, no matter what the cost, and to live our lives accordingly. Such is the life that gives off the aroma of Christ wherever it goes.

I don’t know about you, but I feel the weight of that calling. I live with it every single day and it is a very serious and weighty calling. But it is also a wonderful calling because we get to be used by God to change people’s lives! We get to see lives transformed by the gospel!

But that also reminds us that we cannot do this without God’s help.

### III. **God supplies strength to those whom He commissions.** (vv. 16b-17)

*Who is sufficient for these things? <sup>17</sup> 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.*

In light of the call to follow Christ in His triumphal procession, which comes with it the call to suffering and weakness, and in light of the life-transforming power of the gospel through the message of the cross, Paul asks the question, “Who is sufficient for these things?” To which the only reasonable reply would be, “No one!”

Paul would never claim any self-sufficiency. He knew that although he worked hard in the ministry, nothing could ever be accomplished eternally unless God did it. As he stated in 1 Corinthians 15:10 Paul says that he, “worked harder than any of [the other apostles], though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

Paul would go on to state later in this letter in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 5: “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.”

So in our passage, Paul affirmed his sufficiency both negatively and positively.

Negatively, Paul declared in v. 17, “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word.” In saying this, Paul was pointing his finger squarely at his detractors who actually were “peddlers” of God’s Word. The word “peddler” references traders who would dilute their wine with water or use false weights—all suggesting tampering with the Word of God or watering it down for personal gain.<sup>1</sup> Too often I think the church worries too much about being unpopular with the world and so they tone down the message, preaching less and less about sin and the necessity of the cross and more and more about “comfortable things” and “happy things” that the world finds more palatable.

Leonard Ravenhill – “If Jesus had preached the same message that ministers preach today, He never would have been crucified.”

As R. Kent Hughes says in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, “Paul never watered down God’s Word to make it more palatable. He never looked to see which way the wind was blowing. He never practiced the homiletics of consensus. He never held back.”

And he suffered for it. And so will we.

In fact, Paul’s suffering came from the positive elements of his sufficiency in Christ in verse 17.

First, it says that Paul and his fellow ministers preached the Word of God “as men of sincerity.” Whenever Paul spoke, he was wholly sincere. He didn’t have any ulterior motives. He truly believed in what he preached. Whatever he lacked in eloquence of speech, he made up for in sincerity of heart.

Second, Paul spoke “as commissioned by God” – literally “as from God.” In other words, he truly was sent by God to be the apostolic authority over the church in Corinth. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ. That means that his commission came directly from Jesus Christ Himself. And that is how he preached. And although we aren’t apostles, we have a similar commission from Christ. We are truly commissioned to carry the message of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Third, Paul preached the Word “in the sight of God” – literally “before God.” There’s a Latin phrase, *Coram Deo*, which means “before the face of God.” Paul was never underhanded in his ways. He did what he did truly for the glory of God alone. He did it humbly and with trembling and with no thought of receiving praise. He wasn’t like the hypocrites whom Jesus described in Matthew 6 who display their giving and prayers and fasting for a pretense and for all to see. God alone was Paul’s audience.

Fourth, Paul preached the Word “in Christ” that is, in union with Christ. Depending upon and drawing upon Christ’s strength to do what God had commissioned him to do.

All of this produced a sufficiency that was from God, not from himself, and it set the standard for all who would minister the gospel, including us. And when we do, we keep in mind that we will all stand before the throne of God one day to give an account of not only what we do, but the

---

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, 58.

heart motives behind what we do. But God also promises to give strength to those who are faithful to being the aroma of Christ in the world.

All this reminds me of that famous poem by the English missionary C.T. Studd, written back in the 1800's:

"Two little lines I heard one day,  
Traveling along life's busy way;  
Bringing conviction to my heart,  
And from my mind would not depart;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, yes only one,  
Soon will its fleeting hours be done;  
Then, in 'that day' my Lord to meet,  
And stand before His Judgement seat;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Give me Father, a purpose deep,  
In joy or sorrow Thy word to keep;  
Faithful and true what e'er the strife,  
Pleasing Thee in my daily life;  
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, 'twill soon be past,  
Only what's done for Christ will last.  
And when I am dying, how happy I'll be,  
If the lamp of my life has been burned out for Thee."