

The Scent of Christ – 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Smells of Holiday*

1. It's that time of year when we look forward to certain *smells*.
 2. Thanksgiving & Christmas just wouldn't be the same without the smell of turkey or ham,
 - a. Cinnamon, Pumpkin, Apple cider & apple pie.
 - b. As more people buy artificial Christmas trees, they miss the fragrance of evergreen, so they buy a bundle of pine branches & set them out.
 - c. They get an evergreen air freshener or candle.
 3. We look forward to the smells of the holidays because of the *rich memories* they recall.
-
4. The smell centers of our bodies are part of the *limbic system*, hard-wired to both memory & emotion.
 - a. For most people, holiday smells are tied to warm childhood memories.
 - b. So when we smell them as adults, it elevates our mood & makes us happy.
 5. Realizing the powerful force of emotion, certain industries have begun using scent as a marketing tool.
 - a. Years ago, real estate agents realized if they baked a pie in a house they were showing, it had a much better chance of selling, because buyers equated the smell with the feeling of "home."
 - b. But they couldn't bake a pie at *every* house they showed, so a company started making baked pie scent agents could place in their listings.
 - c. Scent marketing has become big business as stores now use it to create the right emotional vibe for their customers.

B. *Today*

1. Paul speaks about the *effect of scent* in our passage today;
2. *Our* scent – the influence & effect we have on those around us.
3. Is ours a *fragrance*, or an *odor*?

II. TEXT

A. *V. 14*

14 Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.

1. Paul's use of *one* word here is the key to understanding what he means – it's the word "***triumph***."
2. He's referring to the parade Rome threw for their victorious generals.
3. Think of that ticker-tape parade New York threw for the GI's returning from Europe at the end of WWII.
 - a. The whole city turned out.
 - b. People tossed confetti out of the skyscraper windows onto the crowded street below.
 - c. It was a time of ecstatic euphoria because the long ordeal was over & we'd

- won.
4. The Romans honored their greatest generals with the supreme prize – a victory parade called a Triumph.
 - a. The requirements were high; The general had to have been the actual commander on the field.
 - b. The campaign had to be finished & the troops brought home.
 - c. At least 5,000 of the enemy had to have fallen, & the empire was enlarged.
 - d. If all this had been accomplished, the Senate voted to give the general a Triumph.
 - e. The day was declared a holiday & all Rome would line processional route.
 5. Each Triumph followed the same order
 - a. First came the Roman Senate, then trumpeters to announce the parade.
 - b. Next were the spoils & loot, including thousands of slaves.
 - c. After them came the captive nobles & leaders, bound in chains, destined to be victims in that afternoon's games. [\[1\]](#)
 - d. Then came the high point, the victorious general, dressed in a special toga embroidered with gold stars, carried in a majestic chariot drawn by 4 white horses.
 - e. Behind him was his army, dressed in their finest, carrying their own trophies of war, waving to the admiring crowds.
 - f. Marching *alongside* this entire procession were the *priests* of Rome, carrying incense censers filled with sweet incense, sending up thick clouds of fragrant smoke.
 6. This is the idea behind Paul's words here.
 - a. Jesus is our victorious general Who's met all the criteria for a Triumph.
 - b. His victory is complete. He's extended the boundaries of the Kingdom of God.
 - c. He's returned safely home & will make sure we arrive there safe as well.
 7. The difference between the Roman Triumph & Christ's is that Rome's only lasted for a couple hours; Jesus' goes on & on. Paul says -

Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ,

 - a. Christ's triumph never ends – it's a continual procession of victory,
 - b. Moving from day to day & place to place.
 8. Notice *where* we are. We're not on the sidelines cheering. We're *in* the parade, *being led* by our Victorious, Glorious General.
 - a. The only ones *following* the general in a Triumph were his faithful troops.
 - b. The captives were in *front* of Him.
 9. In one sense, we *are* the spoils of war, we *were* captives.
 - a. But Christ's victory *liberated* us from sin & death.
 - b. When we were born again we enlisted in His army.
 - c. We join His royal vanguard, carrying high the banner of His Name, clothed in the armor of God.
 - d. Though the *decisive battle* in the long war between God & Satan was fought & won at a hill called Calvary 2,000 years ago, the enemy has yet to concede.
 - e. So we fight on, pressing the border of Christ's Kingdom *deeper* into enemy

- territory.
- f. In every battle & each new campaign, we are *more than conquerors* thru Him who loves us.
 - g. ***He always leads us in triumph.***
-
10. Paul draws *another image* from the Roman Triumph in the smoke that rose from the priests' censers as they walked beside the processional.
- Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place.**
11. The smoke of the incense was a *religious symbol* – that's why priests carried censers.
 - a. The smoke *represented* the prayers & praise of the people going up to their gods for the victory Rome had just enjoyed.
 - b. But the smoke was *also* a powerful way to ***bring the spectators into*** the parade.
 - c. Not only could they see & hear the majesty of the triumph, the *smell* of the sweet incense allowed them to *emotionally connect* with the victory.
 - d. When the scent of the incense reached their nostrils, the day was cemented in their memory.
-
12. Here's what Paul is saying –
 - a. Though Jesus defeated sin & death 2,000 year ago,
 - b. The *reality & potency* of that victory *lives on* & is demonstrated in us.
 - c. We *continue* to walk in the train of His Triumph.
 - d. As people watch, they *witness* the change ***He's making*** in us.
 13. ***Where*** are they watching & listening? – “. . . in every place.”
 - a. At home, at school, work,
 - b. At Target. Starbucks, & the Mall.

B. Vs. 15-16

15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?

1. There's 2 different words for smell here.
 - a. In v. 15, it's a word that means a “sweet scent”
 - 1) As in the *pleasant* smell of flowers or fruit.
 - 2) This word was used to describe a premium perfume
 - b. In v. 16, the word “aroma” means “smell” & could be either good or bad.
2. Paul says as we follow Christ, living among both the lost & saved, to God we are like a sweet perfume.
 - a. Throughout history until modern times, perfume was made by pressing & crushing the pedals of flowers.
 - b. In our lives, the sweet fragrance of Christ can only come forth when *we* are pressed & broken
 - c. It's as we die to self that Christ lives through us & brings delight to God.
3. But here's the thing – as Paul says in v. 16, as we do that, ***other believers*** rejoice in the evidence & presence of Christ they see in us.

- a. Our lives are to them a *sweet aroma*, the fragrance of grace.
 - b. But to the lost it's an *odor*, an *odious stench*.
4. Have you noticed how 2 people can have such different reactions to the same smell?
- a. I love incense. My wife hates it!
 - b. There are hundreds of different perfumes & colognes because people have different affinities for different scents.
-
- c. John & Jane weren't married long before they discovered they had very different reactions to the smell of *bleach*.
- 1) John abhorred it. Jane liked it.
 - 2) Their different reactions prompted a long discussion that proved enlightening.
 - 3) Jane's first memory of smelling chlorine was in the Summer at the community pool when she was just a kid.
 - a) Some of her fondest childhood memories were of those long, hot days playing with friends for hours in the pool.
 - b) Then on the way home they always stopped at a *Dairy Queen* for an ice-cream cone.
 - c) So whenever she smells chlorine bleach, she gets a warm feeling of belonging.
 - 4) John's first experience with bleach was very different. When he was only 6, his mother was bed-ridden with a serious illness.
 - a) A housekeeper came in to help around the house & take care of his mother.
 - b) Because any sickness would complicate his mother's condition, the housekeeper used a liberal amount of bleach when cleaning; its scent could often be smelt for days after she cleaned.
 - c) Despite all the help after a year & a half his mother died.
 - d) So the smell of bleach is forever etched in John's memory as part of the worst time of his life.
 - 5) While Jane is emotionally *lifted* by the smell of chlorine, John becomes dark & down.
-
5. Paul says as we follow Jesus, people will react to us in 1 of 2 ways,
- a. To those who share new life in Christ, we'll be a cause of joy & encouragement.
 - b. But to the lost, we're a bummer.
6. Why? Why is the man/woman faithfully following Jesus such an odious stench to the lost?
- a. That's not such a reach – Paul says to the lost the believer smells like *death*.
 - b. If you've ever smelled death, there's little more repulsive.
 - c. Talk about causing an emotional reaction! It's visceral!
7. The reason those destined for destruction are repulsed by the follower of Christ is because every lie & deceit, every excuse & rationalization they cling to is challenged. Laid bare, & stripped away.
8. They're reminded that when this life is over they'll stand in judgment before a

- holy God whom all their lives they ignored & blasphemed.
9. It infuriates them that Christians *take their faith outside* the walls of their churches & live it in the public square.
 10. That's why some have gone so far as to say Christian *parents* can't live out their faith in raising their kids.
 11. Atheists have become quite vocal lately in saying religious education of children is child abuse!
-
12. The last 2 weeks here in CA have seen just how odious the pro-homosexual community finds those who believe following Jesus means defining marriage as God does.
 - a. Evangelical churches have been vandalized & burned.
 - b. It's been interesting watching the way the media covers the hatred & violence.
 - c. They convey the sense that the perpetrators' actions are *justified*.
 - d. That the vandalism may not be *strictly legal*, but it's certainly *excusable*.
 - e. What would be the reaction, do you think, if a homosexual-activist center burned down?
 - 1) Now, that's *not going to happen* because such an act is completely contrary to what it means to follow Christ.
 - 2) But if it did, the hew & cry from the world would be huge!
 13. As our culture continues to lose its Judeo-Christian moral center & becomes increasingly secular, those who faithfully follow Jesus *are going to become more & more odious* to the lost.
 14. That was the situation the Church in Paul's day faced.
 - a. The Roman Empire was steeped in paganism.
 - b. The Church existed in the midst of tremendous hostility.
 - c. What Christians considered virtuous, the world despised.
 - d. And what the world valued, Christians found repulsive.
 15. It was the power of Christ, the reality of God's grace & truth transforming the lives of His people, that eventually prevailed.
 16. What was true then is true today.

17. As Paul ponders what he'd just written about the *effect our lives have on others*, he asks –

And who is sufficient for these things?

- a. Who really can live the life we're called to?
- b. The answer comes in v. 5 of ch. 3 –

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God.

- c. We don't live the Life in our own strength.
- d. Christ lives His life **IN US**, *then* → thru us.
- c. That's where the real fragrance comes from – It's Him living *thru* us.

C. V. 17

¹⁷ For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

1. Religious hucksters aren't a new phenomenon. They were a problem in Paul's day.

2. Even though the Church wasn't even a hundred years old, there were guys trying to use the Gospel as a means to accumulate either wealth & power.
3. There were some in Corinth.
 - a. They were dispensing the Scriptures with an eye for how they could attain position.
 - b. They didn't teach & preach out of a love for God, His Word, or His people.
 - c. They did it out of a lust for gain.
4. In contrast to such self-serving ends was Paul, whose faithful ministry of the Word had cost him dearly.
 - a. He'd been repeatedly beaten, shipwrecked, & run out of town.
 - b. He worked with his own hands to provide for the needs of both himself & his assistants.

5. Paul said this right after his remarks about "fragrance" because he wanted the Corinthians to realize the connection there has to be between *what we say we believe & how we live*.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Connection

1. If we claim to follow Christ, then in *some ways at least*, we ought to *look* like Him, *sound* like Him, *smell* like Him.
2. If He's *truly* leading us in victory over sin & death, then holiness & life ought to be in evidence.
3. And the *longer we follow*, the *more* like Him we ought to look, sound & smell.
4. A group of missionaries were in language school, preparing to go to China.
 - a. The first day of class, the teacher began by walking up & down between the rows w/o saying a word, then she left.
 - b. A few minutes later she returned & asked, "Did you notice anything *special* about me?"
 - c. There was silence for a long time. Then one woman said, "You have a very lovely perfume."
 - d. The rest of the class chuckled but the teacher said, "That's exactly the point. It'll be a long time before any of you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to preach the gospel, but even *before* you're able to, you can minister the sweet fragrance of Christ to people by the *quality* of your lives."

5. Our spiritual influence with others is directly proportional to the vitality of our intimacy with Jesus.
6. Dr. Howard Kelly had a unique way of sharing Christ with others.
 - a. He always wore a beautiful pink rose in the lapel of his suit.
 - b. When someone would say, "That's a lovely rose, Dr. Kelly."
 - c. He'd say, "Thank you. It's a *Christian* rose!"
 - d. They almost always asked what he meant & he would then turn back his lapel & reveal a tiny water bottle attached to the stem keeping it fresh.
 - e. He explained, "It's a Christian rose because it has a hidden source of life & beauty. When Jesus pardons our sins, He unites us with Himself to nourish & strengthen us. He becomes the secret reservoir of our joy, & any

fragrance we exhibit comes from Him.”

B. How Do We Smell?

1. All of us leave behind us some kind of aroma - what's yours?
 2. One day President Woodrow Wilson was having a hair cut & shave
 - a. As he sat in the chair with his face covered by towels, another man came into the shop.
 - b. Wilson sat & listened as this man had *his* hair cut.
 - c. Every word he uttered showed a keen interest in the other men in the shop.
 - d. It was DL Moody & Wilson said he felt like he'd witnessed an evangelistic service.
 - e. He purposely waited till *after* Moody left & noted the effect his visit had brought on the barbershop.
 - f. The others didn't know who Moody was but they knew something had lifted their thoughts.
 - g. Wilson said he felt when he left that barbershop he was leaving a place of worship.
 3. Many of the people you meet daily will never go to church. ***Take church to them.***
-
4. Have you noticed that you tend to pick up the smell of where ever you've been spending time?
 - a. Years ago you could always tell when someone had been bowling because they had the unique odor of stale cigarette smoke & the oil they use on the lanes.
 - b. If you barbecue, the smoke gets in your clothes & hair.
 - c. If you go fishing, you smell fishy!
 - d. For years I worked in fast food & couldn't wait to get home to take a shower so I could wash the smell out of my hair.
 - e. As I shared a few weeks ago, the woman at the perfume store at the outlet center told me that long after she's left work, others tell her how they enjoy her fragrance – though she doesn't use any personally – it's just gotten into her clothes.
 5. What scent do we leave with others? Is it a fragrance or an odor?
 7. Well, ***where*** have we been spending our time?
 8. If we would be the fragrance of Christ, we must spend time with Him.
 9. And we must continue to follow as He leads us into new realms of victory.

[1] Behind the leaders came the Roman executioners carrying a bundle of rods wrapped around a sword, which was the Roman symbol of official punishment.