

“The Aroma of Christ”

The Second in a Series of Sermons on 2 Corinthians

Texts: 2 Corinthians 2:5-17; Genesis 8:13-9:1

The church in Corinth was a mess. Most of the Corinthians were new Christians, recent converts to Christ from Greco-Roman paganism. Like most Greeks of that age, the Corinthians were very impressed with speakers with strong rhetorical skills. This propensity to favor a speaker’s style over his content, made the Corinthians fair game for those eloquent men who appointed themselves “apostles,” and who took advantage of Paul’s absence from Corinth to establish themselves in the church, all the while criticizing Paul’s preaching skills and his less than charismatic personality. Ironically, Paul—the true apostle—was placed on the defensive, and is now forced to define and defend the true nature of apostolic authority, as well as remind the Corinthians of the fact that gospel does not create faith through flowery words, but through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we continue our series 2 Corinthians, we take up Paul’s comments about forgiveness in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, before we turn to the apostle’s discussion of the triumph of Jesus Christ in verses 12-17. Paul describes how the gospel of Jesus Christ was continuing to spread throughout Asia, including the city of Troas, across the Aegean Sea from Corinth. Despite the troubles facing the church in Corinth, Paul thought it important to take full advantage of the opportunity now open to him in Troas and Macedonia—Paul speaks of this as a door which had opened for him to preach the gospel. It is in this context that Paul introduces an interesting metaphor for the spread of the gospel, as the apostle likens the gospel to a pleasant fragrance, while he speaks of unbelief as the stench of death.

As we pointed out last time, Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians is really the third or fourth letter he sent to Corinth, but the others have now been lost to us. After sending the letter we know as First Corinthians, Paul made what he describes as a painful visit to Corinth, also sending Timothy and Titus to Corinth, as well as an additional letter (known as the stern letter and now lost) which was hand-delivered by Titus. As we learn throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul had been badly mistreated upon his return visit to Corinth—the anger toward Paul being generated by men whom Paul identifies as false apostles, who not only riled up the Corinthians against Paul, but some of whom were teaching false doctrine. Apparently, these men were eloquent public speakers, and Paul admittedly was not. It is after Titus met up with Paul with a report about what was going on in Corinth, and brought a substantial offering for the struggling Christians in Jerusalem, that Paul writes this letter (known to us as 2 Corinthians).

As we see in the first part of our text, verses 5-11, Paul discusses the false apostles and the damage they have inflicted upon the church. In the opening verses of chapter 2, Paul reminds the Corinthians of his earlier painful visit. This visit came after Paul had sent the letter we know as First Corinthians, and then heard back from Timothy about the fact that things were not going well even after Paul’s first letter and his painful visit. Writes, Paul, *“for I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”*

In verse 5, Paul addresses the difficulties in Corinth in terms of the damage done to the church by one (or

perhaps several) unnamed individuals. “*Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you.*” Although Paul doesn’t make the details of this explicit, he does allude to one of the main problems in Corinth. There is at least one individual in the church who has caused great pain to Paul in particular, and in the process inflicted great damage to the church as a whole. Although Paul is his primary target (verse 10), this individual (probably one of the false apostles Paul will mention later) has instead brought grief and pain to the entire church.

That the actions of one member can effect the whole reflects Paul’s prior point in 1 Corinthians 12 about the members of the church in Corinth also being members of Christ’s body (the church). When one part of the body is effected and suffers because of the actions of one, the entire body suffers. The individual who attacked Paul’s reputation (likely in making a case that Paul was absent too much, that he was not a great speaker), will not succeed. First of all, Paul is Jesus Christ’s appointed apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus is not going to give that same authority to some individual who seeks authority for all the wrong reasons. Second, such an attack on Paul brings fallout down upon the rest of the church. This was Paul’s point earlier—if one part of the body of Christ suffers, the entire body of Christ will likewise suffer.

Apparently, because of the efforts of Paul, Timothy and Titus, the church did in fact deal with this man through some form of church discipline. As we learn in verses 6-7, “*for such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.*” The punishment which Paul mentions is likely some sort of formal verdict rendered by the majority through the elders who represent the main body of the church, against the individual (and those who followed him—the minority) who, presumably, stirred up the group in Corinth which began to question Paul’s authority and directives. In other words, instead of excommunicating the entire faction which this man had formed, the elders in Corinth instead disciplined the leader of the faction—probably censuring him. It seems likely that this was a formal sanction and that the congregation (the majority) was not only aware of it, but endorsed it.

But now that punishment in the form of church discipline has been meted out upon this individual, Paul—the one who was on the receiving end of this man’s personal attacks—is now the same one to exhort the congregation not to be too harsh with the man, so that the person is not overwhelmed by sorrow, and, as seems likely, so that he does not leave the faith.¹ It is one thing to discipline someone—a necessary act. It is another thing not to restore the one who is being disciplined *if* they repent. The goal of church discipline is the repentance of the offender, and that he (or she) make whatever amends are necessary so that the individual is restored to the full favor and standing of the church. The purpose of church discipline is to seek the individual’s repentance—it is not revenge, or a public humiliation.

That said, there are cases, such as that in Galatia, where false doctrine is the issue, and the false doctrine is spreading like gangrene throughout the church. In these cases, the parties involved are to be excommunicated, and they are publically identified by Paul as false teachers, so that other Christians do not fall prey to their schemes (Alexander the Coppersmith comes to mind—2 Timothy 4:4). But although false teachers are identified, Paul does not mention this person by name (presumably the Corinthians knew full well who it was). Paul didn’t even identify the person by name sleeping with his father’s wife. The reason for this is to spare the person needless shame and to encourage them to repent.

This is exactly what Paul does here. This unnamed person has horribly wronged him. But the person has

¹ Martin, 2 Corinthians, 38.

been disciplined, and it is implied that they have either repented (or seem ready to do so), therefore, Paul does not want them pushed away from the church and cut off from the means of grace. And so as we read in verse 8, “*so I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*” Repentant sinners must be restored and not cut off from that which they need the most—the word, the sacraments and the fellowship of their brothers and sisters in Christ. But such people must remain cut-off until they repent.

In verse 9, Paul indicates that his exhortation has a pastoral purpose. “*For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything.*” As we have seen, it looks as though the leader of this faction (who had been attacking Paul’s authority and reputation) had been dealt with in a formal way—some sort of church discipline. Although we have to read between the lines a bit to see it, it also looks as though this discipline came about through Paul’s painful visit to Corinth, or through the efforts of Timothy and Titus to address this matter when they reached the city.

From what Paul says here, the majority of the members of the church had not only accepted this action, they approved of it. Now, Paul wants to see if the Corinthians are willing to follow his instructions once again, when the apostle exhorts them to restore this individual, now that he has been disciplined and likely shows a willingness to repent—note, I say demonstrates a willingness to repent, because it is very difficult to believe that Paul would give the Corinthians such instruction if the person was still unrepentant, or hardened in their ways. Now the question is whether the Corinthians are going to obey Paul and restore such a person, just as they had been willing to discipline this man. Paul even speaks of their willingness to do this as a test of their obedience, indicating that the issue here is the challenge to Paul’s authority as an apostle. If Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ, then he speaks with Christ’s authority. This is the very point the disciplined individual had challenged. And Paul now challenges the Corinthians on this very matter. Will they do as he instructs them and restore this man? Do they acknowledge Paul’s apostolic authority?

In verses 10-11, Paul brings this back to gospel. “*Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.*” In making this point, Paul reiterates the fact that Christians must be willing to forgive others who have wronged them. Paul is certainly willing to forgive. Unfortunately, it is commonly taught that unless we actually forgive others then we have no hope of being forgiven, because our own forgiveness by God is supposedly predicated upon our ability for forgive others—a kind of justification by forgiving others. But this is incorrect.

It is because we have been forgiven—Jesus has died for all our sins, and we are clothed in his perfect righteousness through faith alone—that we ought to always be willing to forgive others. In this command to extend forgiveness to others, we see how well we understand the implications of the gospel. We are unworthy sinners who can earn nothing from God. In his grace and mercy God sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins, and provide us with the perfect righteousness of Christ. If we truly understand that our salvation is a free gift which we did not (and indeed cannot) deserve, how then can we not, in turn, be willing to forgive others, who likewise may not be worthy, or able to merit our forgiveness. It is not as though there is a condition such that unless we forgive others we cannot be forgiven. Rather, it is because we have been forgiven by God that we must forgive others—there is a big difference between these two things. And this is what Paul exhorts the Corinthians to do, forgive others because of Christ’s forgiveness, especially in light of the troubles that have plagued that congregation. Paul expects that same willingness to forgive on the part of all of God’s people. Forgiving others is a fruit of the gospel.

Paul also knows that Satan thrives on unforgiveness in the church and just waits to exploit it. When

Christians are too harsh with fallen sinners, or when God's people are not willing to forgive one another, Satan gains a foothold from which to cause further damage and harm to the cross of Christ. Paul has already rebuked the Corinthians for being unwilling to discipline an erring member (i.e. 1 Corinthians 5, the man sleeping with his father's wife). Now Paul exhorts the Corinthians to restore the man who has wronged him, to extend forgiveness to him, as well as to anyone else whom the Corinthians may feel have wronged them. Paul's point is that Satan uses division in the church to undermine the message of the gospel, and the forgiveness of sins which stems from the gospel. Christians should realize this, and do possible to forgive one another so that disputes do not fester in the body.

In verses 12-17, we come to the second part of our text, Paul's discussion of the triumph of Christ and the fragrance of the gospel. Paul now addresses his present circumstances and his reason for writing this letter. In verses 12-13, we learn from Paul that "*when I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.*" Troas is a port city in northwest Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) which was the jumping-off point from which ships crossed the Aegean Sea to Greece and Macedonia. Paul's comment indicates that this journey occurred after whatever trial it was that left Paul despairing of life itself. As we will see, the timing of this trip is important to keep in mind.

For starters, Paul is aware that God has opened a wonderful door for him to preach the gospel first in Troas, and then in Macedonia. This is why he writes another letter to the Corinthians, and explains why he is not planning to come to Corinth at this time—although after getting more distressing news as mentioned later on this his letter (chapter 13 especially), Paul informs the Corinthians not to get complacent because he just might be forced to change his plans and show up in Corinth yet again!

Paul also informs the Corinthians that he had expected to meet Titus in Troas, but when that didn't happen, Paul was not able to be at peace. Obviously, Paul was worried about Titus, and in chapter 7, Paul recounts that it was a great joy when Titus finally caught up with him in Macedonia. In any case, with the door wide-open to go and preach Christ, Paul boarded ship in Troas, and sailed for Macedonia, several hundred miles to the north of Corinth.

Yet, despite his worry about the whereabouts of Titus, Paul gives thanks to God while informing the Corinthians of the success of his mission. In verse 14, we read, "*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.*" Even though Paul is weak, and was previously brought to the point of despair, Paul now describes his trip to Macedonia as a triumphal procession. This is important for several reasons.

For one thing, this reminder completely knocks the wind out of the argument from those self-appointed false apostles in Corinth who had opposed Paul's ministry, by arguing that he was ineffective and less eloquent than they were. It didn't matter whether Paul was physically weak and lacked their eloquence. What mattered was the power of the gospel which Paul preached in both Troas, and then in Macedonia. It is through the preaching of Christ crucified that the Holy Spirit demonstrates his power as unbelievers are called, regenerated, given faith, and then justified and sanctified.

Since Paul trusts in the purposes of the sovereign God, he knows that Jesus allowed him to reach the depths of despair so that Paul could not do any of this evangelistic work in own strength. Although Paul was weak, nevertheless Jesus opened this door to Paul, leading him to preach the gospel in new regions in such a way that Paul now describes this mission in terms of the triumphal procession of Christ.

Although Paul is weak (just as his opponents had accused) that did not stop the power of the gospel. Through the message of Christ crucified (the gospel), Jesus Christ triumphed over unbelief.

Indeed, as Paul points out, the preaching of Christ crucified brought about the saving knowledge of God. Wherever Paul went, he preached the gospel, which he describes as being like a wonderful fragrance which spread everywhere as a sign of Christ's triumph. Not only does the metaphor of a pleasing fragrance bring to the mind of Paul's first-century reader the image of the triumphal procession of the Roman emperor, whose path was often lined with flower petals and accompanied by the burning of sweet incense, but it also explains Paul's use of the metaphor of the stench of death as an equally powerful image to first century folk.

Anyone who had seen a royal procession was aware that after the emperor passed by in triumph, those poor souls who were defeated in battle brought up the rear of the processional—under armed guard, often in chains or leg-irons, and covered with the filth of battle and defeat, and no doubt wreaking of bodily stench.² The emperor passed his subjects leaving a fragrant smell. The captives stunk. To be blunt, the first century world was filled with smells that would cause most of us who are used to decent sanitation and indoor plumbing to lose our breakfast. So this is a powerful and relevant image for Paul.

But Paul has yet another basis for using the fragrance metaphor in connection to the gospel. Throughout the Old Testament, sacrifices made to God for the forgiveness of sin, as well as offerings given in thanksgiving for God's deliverance, are often spoken of in terms of their aroma, which is described as pleasing to God. We see this in a number of places in the Old Testament, including our Old Testament lesson this morning, (Genesis 8:20-21) when we read that after being delivered from the waters of the flood, "*Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done."*" This same thing can be seen Exodus 29, Leviticus 1 and Numbers 15.

At first glance it sounds like God enjoys the smell of BBQ. But the imagery associated with the pleasant aroma arises from the fact that God is pleased with the nature of the sacrifice being made, and so accepts it. When Paul uses the metaphor in connection with preaching of Christ crucified, he can speak of the spread of the gospel as a pleasing aroma, also on theological grounds. Because Jesus has offered the final, once for all, sacrifice for sin, God is pleased when the gospel is preached. In that gospel, sinners hear of that one sacrifice which turns aside God's wrath toward sinners, and which summons men and women to faith in Christ. Being the perfect sacrifice, and in light of the Old Testament background, Paul can speak of the gospel as though it were a pleasing fragrance just like the Old Testament sacrifices.

Because of the death of Jesus, in verses 15-16, Paul can state that "*for we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.*" We can now add yet another reason for Paul's use of the fragrance metaphor. Jesus is God's anointed one, not Caesar. Throughout the Old Testament, anointing with fragrant oil is both cosmetic, as well as symbolic of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

While we don't want to press the point too far, Paul may be implying that as Caesar's processional is

² Martin, 2 Corinthians, 47.

made fragrant, so too all those indwelt by the Holy Spirit also possess a spiritual aroma, precisely because we are being saved by our triumphant captain—Jesus Christ, who is much greater than Caesar. Although we too were once enslaved to sin and death—which led us captive and which carries with it the stench of death—we now carry upon us the fragrance of life. This does not mean that Christians smell better than non-Christians. But the point of the metaphor is that the spiritual stench which results from our enslavement to sin, has been replaced by the fragrance of the gospel, because of the sacrificial death of Jesus and through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

At the end of verse 16, Paul asks, “*who is sufficient for these things?*” The obvious answer is “no one,” a point Paul goes on to make in verse 17. “*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 knows he is not “sufficient” (or worthy) to participate in the triumph of Christ because of his eloquence, preaching skills, and charismatic personality. Unlike his many opponents in Corinth—men whom Paul now calls “peddlers of God’s word” (gospel salesmen), Paul has been commissioned to his office by the Risen Christ. His willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ is the proof of his sincerity and the confirmation of his divine call. Paul does not sell the gospel through the use of compelling rhetoric. He preaches the gospel as the fragrance of the crucified and risen Christ. As he puts it, in the sight of God, “*we speak in Christ,*” unlike the gospel salesmen who, it is implied, preach “in themselves.”

What do we say by way of application?

Paul’s metaphor of the gospel as a pleasing aroma brings to mind the lyrics of a old Lynyrd Skynyrd song, “That Smell” written in reference to the look, feel, and appearance of someone using hard drugs. “The smell of death’s around you,” is a pretty graphic image of someone destroying their life through self-indulgence. This is an image not unlike that of a defeated soldier being led along in chains behind the emperor. Literally as well as metaphorically, such people smell like death, and are doomed to die.

It is not a stretch to read this account and conclude that the same thing holds true for a church. Does a congregation have the smell of legalism?—that stifling odor of self-righteousness coming from people who think they have their act together, and despite their smiles and feigned greetings, want you to know that you do not have your act together like they do. And then there is the smell of “church lite” which conveys a cheery air that all is right in the world, reminding everyone that no foul smell has even been in the place, and intended to convince everyone that life is like tea time in an English garden. If you think pleasant thoughts, and do pleasant things, then everything will be alright.

But Paul points us to the aroma of Christ because the death of Jesus is an aroma that pleases God. The aroma of Christ’s sacrificial death rises to the heavens as that only sacrifice which satisfies God’s holy justice, and which now conveys to all that sinners are welcome. As Paul puts it in the fifth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, “*therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*”

Beloved we have been washed by the blood of the lamb. We are now spotless before God and the stain of sin and the stench of death is long gone—washed from us by the blood of Christ, and now sealed unto us in our baptism. Now, where once there had been the stench of death, now there is the aroma of Christ, pleasing to God, and attractive to sinners, and a glorious consequence of the triumph of Jesus Christ.