

## **God's Perfume: Spreading the Sweet Spices of the Knowledge of Christ**

**2 Cor. 2:14-17**

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In this lesson, the second in a series, continues a study of the early chapters of 2 Corinthians. I want you to see where we are going, the great plan message of the first part 2 Corinthians.

**God's Positive: Living in God's Yes (2 Cor. 1)**

**God's Perfume: Spreading the Sweet Spices of the Knowledge of Christ (2 Cor. 2)**

**God's Presence: Removing the Veil to See Christ Clearly (2 Cor. 3)**

**God's Proclamation: Jesus is Lord--Shining the Light of the Glorious Gospel (2 Cor. 4)**

**God's Promises: Seeing the Unseen (2 Cor. 4-5)**

**God's Power: Revealing His Glory (2 Cor. 4)**

**God's Point of View: Seeking the Lost (2 Cor. 5)**

**God's Purpose: Sharing the Hope of Reconciliation (2 Cor. 5)**

**God's People: Relationships Restored--Hearts Shared (2 Cor. 6-7)**

The section focuses on God's involvement in the lives of his people, his leaders, and his church. Paul makes clear his authenticity as an apostle. Along the way, we see the marks of authenticity for Christians. James Thompson's little work on this passage is entitled "Marks of a Christian."

An introductory note: one doesn't read long before one notes that Paul is telling the Corinthians why he changed his plans to visit them, 1:12-2:13. The NIV Study Bible notes, "At this point Paul breaks off the narrative of his itinerary and in a characteristic manner begins a lengthy digression (the narrative is not resumed until 7:5)."

I don't want to belabor the point in introducing the book, but the outline suggested in the NIV Study Bible reflects Paul's unwieldy outline:

- 1:1-11 Introduction (which ends with thanksgiving)
- 1:12-2:13 Personal note about changed plans
- 2:14-17 In Christ we are aroma, and insufficient to the task
- 3:1-6 In Christ we are ministers of something new, which is not of ourselves
- 3:7-18 In Christ, we are transformed to his likeness
- 4:1-5:11 In Christ, we have a ministry that causes us grief and pain
- 5:12-6:2 In Christ, we have a ministry of reconciliation
- 6:3-7:4 In Christ, we have a ministry of integrity
- 7:5-16 More about changed plans

Paul's purpose is summarized in the two sections above marked (→). His defense of his ministry reminds the Corinthians of a new covenant, a transformed life, a new ministry, a fresh gospel, challenges and hurts, and renewed relationships.

To build a house requires that one begin from the ground up. That is how Paul constructs his apology/defense of his apostleship. That which qualifies God to be God is being—his eternal existence. He is the "I AM." He is the ultimate expression of existence, existing simply because he exists. That which qualifies a Christian as a Christian is in a sense parallel—what we are, that is, what we have become or are becoming. Being is a principal part of the life of a Christian. Who are you? What is your identity?

For God, his nature is seen in what he does, cf. Exodus 2-6. For a Christian, it is no different. We are Christians because of what we do.

In a sense, this is God's manual on "How to spread the fragrance of Christ everywhere," and it begins with an injunction: You must first BE. Note the "to be" verbs which follow.

- We are the aroma of Christ
- We are not peddlers of God's word.
- You are our letters of recommendation
- You are a letter from Christ.
- We are not sufficient of ourselves.
- We are men of sincerity
- We are commissioned by God
- Our sufficiency is of God.
- He has qualified us to be ministers.

God only has one plan for spreading the Good News of Christ, and it has to do with our identity and the identity to which we call the world. It does not first have to do with what we do, it has almost nothing to do with what we have/possess, it begins in who we are. Who are we?

Matt. 28:18-20, we are the presence of God in this world. The commission which Jesus gave, and the promise included, is summarized in Acts 1:8. The plan is God's purpose, and God provides also the power (Eph. 1:20-23). The promise is always future, and never a reality, unless Christians become what God calls us to become, enables us to become, wants us to become.

This is the situation about 25 years after Jesus gave the Great Commission. Paul is writing to a church he helped establish, the plan has been implemented, it is working, churches are being planted, souls are being won, Christian communities are coming into existence. Why is it working?

## **I We are following the leadership of Christ.**

Thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumph...

It perhaps is astounding, but some churches are not committed to following the leadership of Christ. Some churches are not about what Christ was about. Some churches do not have as their mission the mission of Christ, seeking and saving the lost. Some churches exist only for themselves, but claim to follow the Christ who came to give himself (Matt. 20:28).

A Christian is one who follows Christ. Disciple is the official Bible word. It signifies a learner, an imitator, one who is becoming like the Master (Luke 6:40).

Paul's picture here is an interesting one – a triumphal procession of a returning army, victorious, cheering, celebrating. Such created a festive occasion, a tickertape parade if you will. Paul's picture includes the incense burned on such occasions. The priests of the Roman gods would offer incense in celebration of the victory, and the aroma would fill the air, an indication of victory, the sweet smell of victory.

## **II We are God's incense.**

We are the evidence of the victory. Our Christian lives are evidence that God's power is supreme. That we have been rescued from darkness, that we have been saved, that we are God's glory, that we stand firm, that we have received the Holy Spirit, that we have been sealed as a mark of ownership, that we are guaranteed the future – these may all be in mind as we read this simile.

The aroma of victory, the incense, did not signify victory for all – some were among the losers. Paul expands this idea; some will smell the incense of our lives and think about life that leads to life. Some will smell the incense of our lives and think thoughts of death leading to death. How people respond will differ – some to salvation, some to destruction. But the response of others does not change the truth, we are the incense or aroma of God.

## **III We are God's method of spreading the fragrance.**

God spreads the fragrance among all – among those being saved and among those perishing.

The word here simply means an odor, so it is a fragrance to one and a smell to the others. How will God spread the fragrance/smell if we are isolated and cooped up in our church buildings? How will God spread the fragrance/smell if we are not willing to uncap our vials except when we are assembled together?

Paul doesn't expand this idea, but you and I can easily think of all it means to you and to me. It means that we must be God's aroma everywhere we go. It means that we can never stop being disciples. We can never stop learning, imitating, growing. It means we can never let us.

#### IV We are examples of what it means to know Christ.

The fragrance is of the knowledge of Christ. The fragrance is present only in the lives of those who know Christ. Someone says, "I don't feel very fragrant today." What does that mean? Possibly not enough knowledge of Christ.

Here we should distinguish knowing Christ and knowing about Christ. These are different ideas. You can know a lot about a person and not know that person. You can read the dictionary, encyclopedia, biography. You can learn about the person. That is not the same as knowing the person.

God is revealed in his word – the written word, the living word. The written word is the story of the living word. The intent of the written word is not that you might know about Christ, but that you might come to know Christ. Paul wrote, I want to know Christ....

- So, we are led by Christ
- We are the aroma of Christ
- We are God's method of spreading the fragrance
- We, as aroma, are examples of what it means to know Christ.

Paul begins his handbook on Christianity, his handbook on being authentic Christians, by urging us to acknowledge, accept, and live out this identity.

This aroma thought is not limited to the apostles or to ministers. It is unreasonable to restrict the Great Commission to preachers and elders, and it is unreasonable to restrict the aroma of Christ to church leaders or preachers. The sad fact is that because we have limited to aroma to the specialists, the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ has not spread everywhere.

I like the way "*La Biblia: La Palabra de Dios para Todos*" translates this section: "Who is qualified to finish the work of spreading the knowledge of God?" Who is sufficient? Paul will get to that – fortunately our sufficiency is not of ourselves, it is of God.

Paul mentions in our text three more things.

- We are not peddlers of the word of God. Ministry is not to advance self, not to advance this church, not about us. See something must grander. We must never be self-serving.
- We are sincere.
- We are sent from God.

This text provides an interesting counterpart to the Great Commission. Note the parallels:

|                           |  |                                  |
|---------------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| I will be with you always |  | God leads us always in triumph.  |
| Go into all the world.... |  | The knowledge of him everywhere. |
| Saved/condemned           |  | Saved/perishing.                 |

#### Conclusion

Always we need practical applications. Here are two "takeaways."

Aroma, suggests two items as we summarize:

We must be **authentic**, sincere, guaranteeing consistency – smelling like Christ everywhere. What do you smell like? Do you have the same smell among the lost and the saved? Only authentic Christians are capable of this.

We must be **authoritative**. Commissioned by God, sent by God, sincere.