

2 Cor 2:12-3:6
Jeremiah 17:1-18
Psalm 1

“The Fragrance of Christ”

March 13, 2016

Jeremiah talks about these two trees:

The cursed shrub of the desert – the man who trusts in man –
whose heart turns away from the LORD.

And the blessed tree planted by the water – the man who trusts in the LORD –
whose trust is the LORD.

What sort of tree are you?

How do you respond when heat comes?

How do you respond when trials and difficulties arise?

How do you respond when others sin against you?

It can be really easy to blame other people for our sins.

But blaming other people is simply what happens when we put our trust in them!

When we put our trust in man –

when we put our trust in someone other than the Lord Jesus,
then when they fail us –

we react with bitterness –

we react like a desert shrub dwelling in the parched places.

We get all prickly.

The problem is that our hearts are deceitful.

As Jeremiah says:

“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

As we’ll see in 2 Corinthians,

Paul is dealing with people who are putting their trust in man.

In 1 Corinthians Paul had warned against party and faction –

“I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas – or even – I am of Christ!”

But Jesus came to establish ONE body.

Jeremiah says that the blessed man is like a tree

that does not fear when heat comes,

for its leaves remain green,

and is not anxious in the year of drought,

for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

How can a tree produce green leaves and fruit in a drought?

It must have a source of water at its roots!

This is why Jesus is the truly blessed man.

He is the one we sing of in Psalm 1.
Because *he* is rooted by streams of living water at the throne of God,
therefore we find refuge in him.

Sing Psalm 1

Chapters 3-6 of 2 Corinthians are Paul's extended reflections on the Christian ministry,
set in the context of the particular situation of his own ministry in Corinth.
The end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 7 bracket this discussion
with an account of Paul's encounter with Titus in Macedonia –
all of which is wrapped up in Paul's words about comfort and affliction.

The only way to do this right is to read the whole passage!

Read 2 Corinthians 2:12-7:9

In most of Paul's epistles, he focuses on the *message* of the gospel,
and spends only a very little time reflecting on the *messengers*.
But 2 Corinthians is an extended discussion of what makes for a faithful Christian ministry.

It's appropriate that we are discussing this right now,
as we are about to begin a new round of officer training.
While Paul's discussion of the *ministry* focuses on the ministry of the word,
it is undoubtedly the case that elders and deacons share in that ministry as well.

We'll spend the next several weeks working through this whole passage –
but today we focus particularly on the God-directed nature of Paul's ministry.

The only way that you can minister effectively
(and this is just as true in the home and at work)
is if you are drawing on the same fountain of living water
that Jeremiah 17 spoke of.

In our passage for today, from 2:12 to 3:6
Paul speaks this way at least 5 times in these 11 verses:

- “a door was opened for me *in the Lord*” (v12)
- “thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession” (v14)
- “and through us God spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ” (v14)
- “as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (v16)
- “our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent” (3:5)

God is the source and strength of our life together.

Introduction: Paul's Account of His Travels (2:12-13)

¹² *When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord,* ¹³ *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.*

I want you to think about what these two verses mean.

How important is Corinth to Paul?

How important is his relationship to the whole church at Corinth?

When Paul comes to Troas “a door was opened for me in the Lord”
in order to preach the gospel.

And yet, Paul cannot rest there.

It would be so easy to say, “My job is to preach the gospel,
so I won’t worry about Corinth – I’ve got to preach the gospel here!”

But that’s not the way Paul thinks.

“My spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there.”

As we just heard from chapter 7, the reason why Paul was so eager to find Titus
was because Titus was bringing news from Corinth.

Nowadays, if you want to know what is happening in Corinth,
you simply pick up the phone and call.

In the first century, it can take weeks – or even months – to get information from a distant city.

And obtaining information would be expensive!

From Troas to Corinth takes eight days by ship – assuming you can afford the fare.

If you go by land, it would take more than a month.

So Paul leaves Troas (on the west coast of Turkey) and crosses the Aegean Sea
over to Macedonia (Philippi or Thessalonica).

Do you remember what it was like before cell phones?

If you were going to meet someone at a certain place –

and they were delayed –

what do you do?

Do you wait for them – or do you try to go find them?

This is what Paul is doing – trying to anticipate what route Titus will take –

and hoping that Titus is not crossing the Aegean the opposite direction at the same time!

Paul is not willing to set aside the troubles in Corinth and just focus on other ministry.

Instead, he sets aside other ministry and devotes himself to seeking reconciliation in Corinth.

Now, again from chapter 7, we know that he met Titus in Macedonia,

and was comforted by the news that Titus brought.

But before we get to that,

we first have four chapters of Paul’s reflection on what Christian ministry is all about.

And he starts, appropriately enough, by giving thanks to God for what *God has done*:

1. “The Aroma of Christ” – What Are You Smelling? (2:14-17)

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

The triumphal procession was a familiar sight in the Roman world.

When a Roman general won a great victory,

the Senate might grant him the right to a triumph.

The General would enter Rome with the spoils of war before him –

“weapons, gold, silver, and jewelry –

but also pictures of battle-scenes, of towns conquered...”

All the senses were employed:

besides the visual spectacle,

there would be the blowing of trumpets and shouting of praise,

and there would be sweet aromas of flowers and spices and the burning of incense.

It is particularly interesting to note that the spoils of war (including slaves)

went *before* the triumphant general.

After the triumphant general would come those Romans who had been freed by the battle,

and at the rear came the soldiers in the army.

So what is Paul saying by using this imagery of the “triumphal procession”?

Well, look at the two parts of the sentence:

What are the two things that God does in Christ?

He is the one “who [in Christ] leads us in triumphal procession”

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

Notice how the two parts are connected:

God triumphally processes us in Christ

God manifests the aroma of the knowledge of Christ through us everywhere

In other words, Paul sees his wanderings as a triumphal procession!

Not the triumphal procession of *Paul* – Paul is not the victorious general!

Rather, Paul sees the proclamation of the gospel

as a participation in the triumphal procession of King Jesus.

So wherever Paul and his traveling presbytery may go,

they are in the entourage of King Jesus.

But also we need to see *who* is spreading – or manifesting – the fragrance of Christ!

God is the one who leads in triumphal procession –

and God is the one who continually makes known

the aroma of the fragrance of Christ

through us.

Now we are better prepared to see who we are in the parade!

Who are the people in a triumphal procession who “spread fragrance”?

The incense burners!

Paul and his fellow ministers – Paul, Silas, Timothy, Titus –

are incense bearers burning incense in the triumphal procession of King Jesus.

Jesus has won the great victory over death in his own resurrection.

And now the ministers of the gospel preach the good news of Jesus,
as God spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus through us.

But notice what Paul says in verses 15-16:

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 triumphal procession of a Roman general was *good news* for those who loved Rome.

The triumphal procession of a Roman general was *bad news* for those who hated Rome!

And particularly the sweet smell of the incense
would have smelled like the aroma of death to the enemy generals!
Defeated leaders would usually be executed at the end of the procession.

To those who hate God, we stink.

Brothers and sisters, you are called to love God with all your heart –
and to love your neighbor as yourself –
and even to love your enemies!

But to those who are perishing –
to those who do not know God and hate his ways –
you smell like *death*.

I think Paul would approve heartily of C. S. Lewis's comment
that the wicked will prefer hell to heaven.

Paul's point here is that *the same smell* – the same aroma –
can prompt two very different reactions.

When I was a boy I used to love raspberries.

Then one day I got sick shortly after eating raspberry pie.
For *months* after that, every time I smelled raspberries I felt nauseated.

It's a fragrant aroma!

But to my mind it was the smell of sickness.

The gospel of Jesus smells sweet to those who are being saved –
but it smells rotten to those who are perishing.

The very thing that would save them becomes hateful to them!

Because "salvation" is commonly used in Roman triumphal processions
to refer to the great victory of the general
which "saved Rome" (or other important cities) –

liberating them from their enemies.

So Paul and his traveling presbytery are incense-bearers
in the great triumphal procession of Jesus
and their preaching – their ministry of the Word –
is an aroma of life to those who are being saved,
but the stench of death to those who are perishing.

The preaching of the gospel draws a dividing line down the center of humanity.
Either you will believe the Word and be saved.
Or you will reject it and perish.

As C. S. Lewis said it so well,
“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal...
It is immortals who we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit –
immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.” (quoted in Guthrie, 174)
It is something that I tremble at.
My words – which are to be the fragrance of Christ in my preaching –
will also be the fragrance of death to those who are perishing.

That’s why Paul asks at the end of verse 16:

Who is sufficient for these things?

Who is competent?

Who is qualified to do this?

Paul will say in 3:5 that “our sufficiency is from God.”
In ourselves we are *not* sufficient for this amazing task!
But our competence is from God.

And in verse 17, Paul starts with a crucial qualification:

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.

In Greek literature the “peddler” or “huckster” regularly cheats people for his own profit.

Paul says that he and his traveling presbytery are not peddlers.

They are “men of sincerity” – what you see is what you get.

Think back to 1:12 –

“the testimony of our conscience [is] that we behaved in the world
with simplicity and godly sincerity”

People today crave authenticity and transparency.

Paul says that’s simply what we are – and what we are to be!

Our goal as elders is to be simple and straightforward and honest with you.

And Paul goes further to say that his commission is *from God*.

Who sent you?

God did.

We are here because God has commissioned us –

and so, “in the sight of God we speak in Christ.”

Now, that may sound a little brash!

Paul realizes that his words may come across as being rather full of himself!

“as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ”!

And so Paul asks in chapter 3, verse 1:

2. “You Are a Letter from Christ” – The Spirit’s Writing on the Heart (3:1-3)

3:1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?

The practice of using letters of recommendation goes way back.

If you were going to a new city,

you would often take letters of recommendation with you,

in order to demonstrate who you were – and who you knew.

Paul’s point here is to say that his relationship to the Corinthians should be beyond that!

Why are we commending ourselves to you?

Aren’t we past that stage?

² *You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our^[a] hearts, to be known and read by all.* ³ *And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

The gospel has taken root in you.

Why?

Because Paul and his traveling presbytery labored among you!

Paul and Silas and Timothy and Titus have labored among you.

But even so, Paul does not lose sight of who is the author of this letter!

Paul is *not* the author of this letter of recommendation.

“You are a letter from Christ delivered by us.”

The words translated “delivered” is the word “diakoneo” –

‘ministered’ (the word can be used for a wide range of rendering service or help of some kind).

Paul and his traveling presbytery are the ministers –

the servants, the agents, the instruments

through which Christ has written his word upon their hearts.

Jesus is the great King.

Even so, Jesus is the author of the church in Corinth.
Paul and his traveling presbytery are but the instrument through which Christ did this.

It's not the words of Paul inscribed upon the hearts of the Corinthians,
but the words of the Spirit of the living God.

In Jeremiah 17 we heard that the sin of Judah was written with a pen of iron,
engraved on the tablet of their heart."

What God has done in Jesus
is write upon the hearts of his people using the ink of the Holy Spirit –
which is a very clear letter of recommendation,
demonstrating that Paul is who he says he is.

So, it is true that Paul should not be commending himself.
But the reason is because the *Corinthians*
should be the ones who are commending him.

As John Chrysostom put it,
"What letters would have done to gain respect for the apostle,
the Corinthians achieve by their life and behavior.
The virtues of disciples commend the teacher more than any letter.
They are an epistle of Christ, having the law of God written on their hearts.
God wrote that law,
but Paul and his companions prepared them to receive the writing."
(quoted in Guthrie, 188)

But also note what else is written.

Paul says in verse 2,
"You yourselves are our letter of recommendation,
written on *our* hearts, to be known and read by all."

Some manuscripts read "your" hearts –
but in chapter 7, verse 3, Paul says that "I said before that you are in our hearts" –
precisely at the point in his epistle where he is wrapping up *this discussion*.

What does Paul mean that the Corinthians are "written on our hearts"?

Remember what we keep seeing in Paul's writings!
Our union with Christ also unites us with one another.
If Christ inscribes himself on our hearts by his Holy Spirit,
then Christ also writes one another into our hearts –

"to be known and read by all"!

In those days, people generally read out loud.
So the idea is that these letters are read out loud in front of everyone.

As George Guthrie puts it,

“The fruit of genuine ministry, initiated by God,
is that it is transparently authentic before the world
and understood for what it truly is.” (189)

This needs to be the way we live as the people of God.

We need to be a people who live our lives openly – with sincerity.

3. “Our Sufficiency Is from God” – The New Covenant of the Spirit (3:4-6)

⁴ *Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.* ⁵ *Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,*

As you can see, Paul is supremely confident –

but his confidence is not based on himself – or anything that comes from himself.

“Our sufficiency is from God”

⁶ *who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

Next week we’ll focus on the relationship between the new covenant and the old covenant.

But Paul thinks of Moses because when God appointed Moses as spokesman,
Moses said “I am not qualified.”

And now Paul says we are *not* qualified (the same word) in ourselves,
but our qualification is from God.

And even as God had said to Moses, “Who gave a mouth to man,
or who makes a person mute or deaf or seeing or blind?

Is it not I, the LORD?

So now go, and I will be with your mouth and will teach you what you must say”
(Ex 4:11-12).

God takes the inadequate and the unqualified and he makes them adequate and qualified.

But Paul does not want us to think that the new covenant is exactly like the old covenant.

The new covenant is *not* of the letter but of the Spirit –

“For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

The letter kills.

What does Paul mean?

The “letter” refers to an attempt to minister or preach the Scriptures
apart from the new covenant work of the Spirit.

The letter of the Law – without the Spirit – can do nothing but bring death.

Think of the history of Israel.

What did the Law accomplish?

The Law condemned Israel.

Israel failed to keep covenant with God –

and so God sent Israel into Exile.
Jeremiah 31 pointed out the need for a *new covenant*.
Ezekiel 36 pointed out the need for the *Spirit* to be poured out on God's people.

Because only the Holy Spirit can bring life.

But notice this!

When Paul distinguishes between letter and Spirit
he is *not* merely distinguishing OT and NT.

His point is that it is *just as easy today* to have a ministry of the *letter*
as it was in the OT!

The letter kills (present tense).

Those who experience a "letter-based ministry" are perishing
until the new covenant life-giving Spirit
breaks through in the gospel of Jesus.

Paul's opponents in Corinth had been making a big deal about their status.

Hucksters and peddlers will always make a big show and a big splash.

They will count their credentials by how many people follow them,
or how much money they bring in.

But the true test of the ministry is in the testimony of the Spirit of God.

Notice again, that Paul does not appeal merely to his own conscience.

He doesn't say, "Who cares what you think – I know I'm right!"

Rather, he points to his fellow elders (he keeps saying "we"!)

and he points to the hearts of the Corinthians themselves!

You are witnesses to our ministry!

The Spirit has written this on *your hearts*.

Our hymn of praise is taken from Psalm 68.

Psalm 68 speaks of the triumphal procession of the LORD,
as the LORD returns triumphant from the battle.

Psalm 68 speaks of how the glory of the LORD fills his temple –
the glory that had appeared to Moses at Sinai,
now fills the temple in Jerusalem.

We sing Psalm 68 as those who see more clearly what this means!

Because now the glory of the LORD that appeared to Moses at Sinai
has filled the *heavenly* temple – as Jesus sat down at God's right hand.

And because Jesus has poured out his Spirit upon his church,
therefore we sing the praises of our King Jesus –
the mighty warrior who leads us procession
into the Heavenly Holy of Holies!

Sing Psalm 68 (stanzas 1-2, 5, 7, 9)