
Christ's Victory in Ministry Brokenness

2 Corinthians 2:14-17²

Russ Kennedy

One of the powerful images of the Old Testament is that of the incense which filled the Temple of God, perfumed the servants of God and leaved the worship of God. It was rich and raw and fragrant. We in the West tend to like delicate and sweet perfumes with just a gentle hint of aroma. But the fragrance Paul speaks of here is not a dab of Estee behind the ear or on the wrists, but a life bathed in rich and powerful aroma of the character of Christ.

Paul has in mind in this text his own Apostolic ministry. This was a very difficult time for Paul. His last trip to Corinth had been troublesome. There had been division and opposition. His last letter had caused real pain. Finally he had sent Titus to get a report on what was happening in the church. They had planned to meet at Troas. We can see the agony of Paul's spirit in that a door of ministry is opened for him there (v.12) but he leaves to look for Titus in Macedonia (v.13).

In that life context Paul writes these words. In distress, change and difficulty he understands his life and ministry in these words. We can all identify with that. So what does Paul mean by this recurring allusion to the aromatic fragrance of the perfume of Christ?

What God Is Doing

(v.14)

Gratitude in the heart is the true evidence of grace in the life. Since Paul opens this paragraph with gratitude then grace is the ground for what follows. He is so careful, as in all his ministry, to acknowledge and affirm that it is God who is the source and supply and strength of any success. The subject of the sentence in verse 14 is God. God is the one who leads and manifests. So the focus is not on what Paul did, but on what God is doing.

¹⁴ 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.

Leading Us in His Triumph in Christ

Whatever had happened to Paul in life and ministry was:

For the Glory of Christ - It is Christ's worth and value which is to be magnified by whatever His grace accomplishes.

² Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

By the Victory of Christ - It is Christ's work and victory which is being manifested wherever His gospel is preached.

Paul sees himself as a sharer in the triumph enjoyed by God. Christ gets the victory; we share in it by being led about in its parade. I had the privilege of playing in Germany for one year on a team that won the Rheinland-Pfalz SV championship. I was a second substitute; but everywhere the team went I got to go. When we won the match, I got to celebrate. When we went victorious over the season, when we defeated our arch rivals, a village next to us and when we destroyed the opposition in the championships, I was a part of the thrills of their victory. This is the way it is with Christ. He has already triumphed; we are just members of the team. And everywhere we go, we are experiencing in our own successes the triumph of Christ.

This is what He *always* does, no matter what it may appear to be on the outside or by the circumstances. There may be good times and happy times. There may be low times and difficult times. There may be graduations and funerals, leaving beloved places and arriving at dreams. There may be times when converts are won and new churches established. There may be times when they are taken out and stoned, or whipped or run out of town. And there may be times when it is both. But Paul evaluates his life by the criteria of Scripture. In other words, Paul is interpreting history by the sovereign providence and saving purpose of God.

Manifesting the Fragrance of Our Knowing Christ

God, through His instrumentality, worked powerfully and gloriously, perfuming the world with the aroma of an experiential [personal, practical] knowledge of Christ. Note that the aroma comes from Christians who *know Christ doctrinally and practically*. The knowledge is not merely intellectual perception, but spiritual apprehension and recognition. It is the knowing of the Lord Jesus Christ in the sense of recognizing, loving and worshipping him.

This is what He does *everywhere*, no matter how multi-varied the responses may be. Our lives are spreading what we know of Christ, what we know of Him that has been turned into vital and victorious Christian living. If our experiential knowledge of Jesus is only little, then the fragrance is not strong. But if we know Christ in such a way that it is transforming our lives, then the fragrance is strong.

If this is true, then what is the impact? Perfume exists to be smelled, to be enjoyed. What is the effect of the knowledge of Christ?

How It Affects Others

(v.15-16)

Paul, as a minister of the gospel, shares the victory of Christ and spreads the knowledge of Christ. Therefore, his life has an effect on people he comes in contact with. Though his ministry heightened the effect, this is still true of us today. All believers share the victory of Christ and spread the knowledge of Christ.

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. Who is sufficient for these things?

The Effect upon God

In verse 14 it was the truth of Christ known and experienced which is a sweet aroma to others always everywhere. In these verses, the Christian is the fragrance, and it is the aroma of Christ Himself to God. It is a God-ward effect. My wife loves certain perfumes and wears them with certain clothes that I find particularly attractive. Sometimes the fragrance lingers on the clothes long after she is no longer in them. So the fragrance of Christ lingers on Christians who are often in His presence.

And this aroma is first directed God-ward. This is so important. Your life must first be lived with the vertical dimension in view. You must live *coram Deo*, before the face of God before you can live in the eyes of men. You must be pleasing to God, whether or not it is pleasing to man. Is your life fragrant with the holy aroma and incense of the glory of Christ? It your living, your praying, your spending, your loving, your serving all fragrant perfumes of Christ to God?

The Effect upon Others

A Christian's perfume for others is His knowledge of Christ. This begins as truth and doctrine – it is what we know to be true of God. It comes into the soul as the Word of God. It gains sweetness and vitality in meditation on Christ. It is nurtured and flavored by communion with Christ. The sweet aroma of a Christian arises to God in His prayers. It wafts forth from the Christian as the distinctive fragrance of His Savior. It is borne about by our attitudes, our actions and by our words. It is quite evident when a Christian's life is perfumed by long and loving communion with Christ.

The fragrance of Christ to God is being wafted among those who are saved and those who are perishing. The knowledge a Christian has of Christ will perfume wherever he is. This is the context, the setting, the backdrop against which we are spreading the knowledge of Christ and Christ Himself. We do so among those who are being saved and among those who are still perishing in their sins.

But notice how different the effect is. To those who are being saved, it is an aroma of life to life. To those who have experienced the life of Christ your life comes as life itself. The Christian smells the perfume and it is life for it is Christ. Here is the glory and joy and happiness of our fellowship. The smell of one rose is sweet; but gather 10 or 15 or 50 or 300. The effect is powerful. There will be no doubt. This is ROSES. So it is with Christians. The multiplied effect of the life of Christ in fragrant Christians leaves no doubt – this is CHRIST.

But to the perishing, that same fragrance is the stench of death. Paul is not here saying that some Christians have a fragrance of Christ to life and others have no fragrance of Christ which results in death. No, the difference is not in the fragrance, but in the one who is smelling. Do you see? To the one being saved it is life. The knowledge of Christ brings life. The fragrance of Christ becomes an effect of life in the one God is saving.

And that very same fragrance is the stench of death to the one still perishing in their sins.

Now we have to stop and think deeply about this for a moment. What Paul is saying is that the very same witness to life in Christ brings life to ones God is saving and will be the stench of death to ones He is not saving. Here the doctrine of election is once again peeking out at us. Do you see it? Whether the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ is life or death depends on whether God is saving or not. This is Paul's perspective on his ministry and ought to be our perspective on our witnessing. We are to share the knowledge of Christ with all those among which we move. And to those whom God has purposed to save, it will come from your life into theirs and produce life—that is to say, your telling and living the truth of Christ will bring life to some. But to many others, that very same telling and living only produces a rotting corpse.

So, no matter what the effect, we are to share the triumph of Christ by spreading the knowledge of Christ. That is our responsibility. Whether it is life to one and death to another is in the sovereign disposal of God. *But we must be spreading the knowledge of Christ? Are you?*

The Effect upon Himself

Well then, this brings us to what appears to be the most natural response: I cannot do this. I am insufficient for this. Who is adequate for this? Some have thought this to be an expression of inability. Others hear true Christian humility. Now it is true that we, in and of our ourselves are inadequate and insufficient bearers of the beauty of Christ. And humility is the fertile soil in which flowers the fragrance of Christ. These are true statements and have the support of many Scriptures. But it is not what Paul has in mind here.

The question he is asking is this: who is qualified to be adequate dispensers of the knowledge of Christ? The adequacy here is a test of qualification, not an admission of limitation or expression of humiliation.

That this is so is evident in the next verse. For Paul effectively says that we are adequate. We are qualified. We are sharing Christ's triumph and spreading Christ's knowledge. We are a fragrance of Christ to God among those being saved and those perishing. How?

What It Means to Us

(v.17)

See the connective "for" at the very beginning of this sentence. Paul is saying we are qualified for all that we have discussed because of how we handle the Word.

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.

We are different from others. We are qualified to spread the fragrance of Christ because of our:

Integrity in the Studying of the Word

In Paul's day, the bar keepers and inn keepers often watered down their wines in order to increase their profits. It was widespread and common practice. So much so that the culture coined a word for this. That word occurs here in verse 17 and is translated *peddling*. The word here must not evoke images of the man in the olden days who went around with a wagon or truck filled with all sorts of things for sale. Paul does not have in mind people who are peddling the Word of God for profit.

What he does have in mind is the corrupting of the Word by mixing in foreign elements and the watering down of the Word to broaden its appeal. This is what the Greek word referred to. It was the watering down and corrupting effect of what they were doing. In contrast, Paul saw himself as being those who offered the genuine article. Their preaching and witnessing the knowledge of Christ was not mixed with any element foreign to it nor was it watered down. The fragrance of the knowledge of Christ coming from their lives and ministries was the strong, heady perfume – it was genuine.

In this sense, there is a terrible peddling of the Word today.

It is being watered down by diluting it so that it is palatable to everyone. The great strong doctrinal preaching of the Word today is rare. Pastors more often than not have become bottle warmers not chefs. There is tendency today to want warming, affirming messages of general truth which leave us with the impression that we OK.

It is being corrupted by mixing it with elements foreign to it. Frankly, this is the most dangerous of the two. The Bible is forced through a grid, a sieve so that what comes out on the other side fits our framework. The Bible is treated as an incomplete and insufficient truth which needs to be interpreted and supplemented by the truths of philosophy or science or sociology or psychology. The end effect is to corrupt the Word.

Paul says that we are not like that. In our approach to studying and preaching the Word, we do not water it down and we do not corrupt it. We approach it with integrity. We understand that it is pure and sufficient (albeit, it is not exhaustive). Since this is what we believe it to be, that affects the way we handle it.

We are qualified in our sharing in Christ's victory and spreading of Christ's knowledge not only by our integrity in handling God's Word, but also by:

Purity in the Living of the Word

In Paul's day, acting in drama was much different than it is today. Actors held up masks in front of their faces to represent the character they were portraying. The word for this came to be used of anyone who was acting out before others behind a mask to hide what they really were. The word we know today as hypocrisy. A hypocrite is someone who wears a mask to play a part whose real life is very different.

The word sincerity is the just the opposite of being a hypocrite. It pictures one whose life is just what it seems to be. It is the opposite of saying one thing and living another, of being one thing at church and being something else away from church.

Paul was genuine and sincere in living out the Word. It was not whether he was simply genuine and sincere *all by itself*. Sincerity and genuineness are not virtues alone. Many people are sincere and genuine, just sincerely and genuinely wrong. Paul was sincere and genuine *in relation to the Word*. What he taught and preached and exhorted to others were realities in his own life.

We need to hear this message today. We need to affirm Biblically genuine and sincere people. We need people whose talk is about things that are realities in their lives. We need preachers like this. In my contacts over the years with other preachers, we are often talking much about studying, praying, giving, serving, loving and sacrificing while doing precious little of it ourselves. So our ministries do not arise out of realities we are experiencing first hand.

Those whose lives are pure and sincere in living out the Scripture are the ones who are qualified to spread the knowledge of Christ. For their life is fragrant with aroma of truth transformed into life.

Finally, Paul uses a cluster of phrases which point to his qualification by his:

Authority in the Giving of the Word

Why do I use the word *authority* here? Because Paul mentions three things which seem to point to the idea of authority in preaching and witnessing:

From God - The knowledge of Christ from the Word he treats with integrity and lives with reality because it is from God. The Bible is not man's record of his experiences of God; it is God's word in the words of men. The Bible is not man interpreting God; it is God disclosing or revealing Himself. It is not man's opinions about God; it is God's truth about Himself. Do you see the difference? The authority of preaching and witnessing is not in our selves, nor in our office but in the Word. And it is because the Word is the Word from God. Here is my authority – this book is from God.

In Christ - The knowledge of Christ is Christ-centered. Not at first we might say that is obvious. But it is not so obvious to many religious groups. They say Christ is the center while spending their time talking about the Holy Spirit, or Mary, or their denominational great white fathers, or their therapeutic insights. Listen, loved ones, the whole Bible is Christ centered. If absolutely anything, no matter how true or good or profitable it may be, drifts into the center instead of Christ then we have lost our authority in preaching, witnessing and living.

And we must be specific. It is never enough merely to say, "Christ is the center of our movement." Because I want to know which Christ? Is it the false-Christ, the anti-Christ of Satan? Or is it the second person of the Godhead, the Son of God, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father, the exact representation of God's nature and sharing in all the Divine attributes and being in the Divine essence, the very

outraying of the glory of the Father who created and sustains and rules the cosmos; who became forever a real man in true union of the human and divine yet not in such a way as to make the humanity divine or the divinity corrupted, being born of a Jewish virgin in Palestine; who lived a life wholly without sin totally pleasing the Father and revealing the grace and truth of God to the world and particularly to His followers; who was unjustly put on a Roman cross as a substitutionary sacrifice bearing the transgressions of sinners chosen from the foundation of the world and suffering the awful wrath of God in both spiritual and physical death; who was raised from the dead in a glorified body, appeared to His followers commissioning them to preach the good news of the glory of the blessed God, ascended into heaven bodily and now is seated in heaven as the Mediator, High Priest, Savior, Husband and Head of the church and glorified Sovereign of all the universe from whence He will come with all pomp and majesty to be marveled at in the redeemed and glorified in the outpouring of His wrath on sinners forever, beginning on the earth and continuing in the lake of fire. IS THIS YOUR CHRIST? If not, your ministry, your movement, your preaching, your witnessing, your very living has not the authority of genuine Christ centeredness.

In the sight of God - Our authority is both derived from, motivated by and tempered in the knowledge that we are accountable to God. What we are doing, how we are living and what we are preaching, teaching and witnessing are open to God. This means that we must tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth. We can do no less and must do no more. Though all of this is done in the presence of men, it is the fear, that is, the reverential respect of God and the love for God that drives an authoritative ministry.

All true ministry gains its authority because of its God-centeredness. We need to understand this in evaluating ministry around us. Our tendency, and I believe it is a natural, that is, sinful tendency, is to evaluate ministry on how it relates to man. The fragrance of the knowledge of Christ goes up to God because it comes from God, is centered on Christ in the sight of God. And the vessels, the clay pots that hold this perfume, release their fragrance among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

Reflect and Respond

All Christians, and particularly those who are actually involved in ministry, must see their successes in terms of Christ's victory.

All Christians are spreading the fragrance of their knowledge of Christ. Now your knowledge may be that of the imitation sprays that are supposed to be just like the real thing, but aren't. Or it may be of the watered-down cologne type which gives the aroma of the perfume while not demanding the price. Or it may be the genuine, pure fragrances that are priceless and costly.

O how we long to be the fragrant aroma of Christ God-ward. How this ought to affect our praising, our singing, our praying, our studying, our living, our loving, our serving our sacrificing and our dying.

The fragrance of Christ is spread in a limited way by just how we live. But we must all spread the knowledge of Christ, the truth about Christ by more than living – we must be telling.

May the fragrance of Christ rise up from this church to God as a sweet aroma of Jesus to others in this community and city for the glory of Christ.