

The Fragrance of the Christian
II Corinthians 2:12-17

INTRODUCTION

A Christian gives off a fragrant odor wherever he goes. His presence will make a difference in any crowd for good. God uses this fragrance as a source of encouragement to other Christians and as a basis for condemnation for the unsaved.

This truth is set forth by the Apostle Paul in our text. He uses imagery that grew out of the Roman practices related to war. Even though we are not Romans, the message is still applicable to us. The sobering reality is that many modern Christians have a fragrance, but it is not a-pleasing odor. It is not pleasing to God but to our fellowman. Since each of us wants to make the maximum of our opportunity to influence others for God, let's study this passage carefully.

I. THE SOURCE OF THE FRAGRANCE

This favorite verse makes clear the source of the fragrance: "But thanks be unto God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place." The thanksgiving comes to Paul as he reflects upon the manner in which God has used every difficult circumstance to demonstrate His victory. He has not, nor will He, allow His servant to suffer defeat. The word has been "victory!"

The translation of the King James clouds the issue a little. It reads, "Causeth us to triumph. . . ." The newer translations reflect the force of the verb more accurately by rendering, "leads us in triumph. . . ." The victory is God's victory - not man's. The figure is a familiar one in the Roman world. When a Roman general returned from a victory in war, he would be given a triumphant entrance into the city. In the victory parade, he would be preceded by the priests who would burn incense and give chants of victory. He would also be accompanied by the evidence of his victory. Valuables taken in the victory would be put on display. A regular feature of such a parade would be a company of captives who would be dragged along by the chariot of the general. They would usually represent some of the leaders of the nation he had conquered. Their hands would be bound and their heads bowed in the shame of defeat as they marched along reluctantly. Usually, they would be put to death when the march was concluded.

The application Paul is making is that we are the captives in this march. This figure surely gives us fitting reflection of the Christian experience. The victory that we know in the Christian life comes to us through our defeat. Paul would never forget, how it happened in his life. He was a proud, determined man, set in his enmity to the purpose of God as he traveled toward Damascus. But there in the dust of the Damascus Road, he made a surrender of his life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. God's victory was total. From that day forward, Paul would be led

through life as the devoted captive of Jesus Christ. Unlike the Roman general, Christ does not conquer men to destroy them, but rather to save them. When they become His captives, they begin to share in His victory.

The image of the fragrance comes from that same background. The city would be filled with the sweet odor of burning incense. It would be burning on every altar in the city. It was the smell of victory.

So, the source of the fragrance of our lives is this relationship that we have with God through Jesus Christ. We are now the willing captives of the victorious Prince of Heaven. Because of His victory, we benefit. There is about us a fragrance that comes from Him.

It needs to be emphasized that this fragrance of victory is imported to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. We are led in triumph always "in Christ." This refers to the vital union that exists between the believer and the living Christ. Through Him we are participants in the triumph of God.

II. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE FRAGRANCE

This fragrance is of a particular kind. It is not just Christian influence in general that is referred to here. Note the language of our text carefully. And maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place." God is the subject of this clause. He "makes manifest. . . ." This means to spread abroad, to make known. We are the channel - it is "by us" or "through us." But the thing manifest is the "savour of his knowledge. . . ." The thing made known is the reality and the wonder of knowing the Lord God. When you have this relationship with God and have been made His Personal, captive, the personal knowledge of Him that grows out of this experience gives off a sweet aroma. It just so affects the life that others will notice.

There is another aspect of the substance of this fragrance. "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ. . . ." The emphasis in that clause is upon "of Christ." Paul placed it first in his construction for emphasis. What does he mean? it is obvious that he means that Christ is ultimately responsible for this sweet fragrance, but he means more. The construction could mean that Christ Himself is the substance of this fragrance. Through this union which we have with Christ, it is now possible for Him to be manifest through our character and our deeds. He can influence others through us. He can demonstrate to others His glory through our humanity. It is a staggering thought, but very consistent with what Jesus Himself taught. He declared, "I am the vine, ye are the branches." The fruit that appears on a branch is really a manifestation of the vine. It reveals the true nature of the vine. So with us - in our character and deeds, the true nature of Christ is revealed.

Do you see the application of this? It becomes clear when you consider what the passage says about the spread of the fragrance.

III. THE SPREAD OF THE FRAGRANCE

There are two definite directions in which this fragrance spreads. First, it spreads upward bringing pleasure to God. "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ." The fragrance given off from the burning incense of the pagan priests was intended for the pleasure of their idols. They were seeking to please Jupiter, the god of war. The fragrance that brings pleasure to our God is not that produced by burning incense, but rather that produced by a life being lived out under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Our God rejoices in such.

Then there is the outward spread of the fragrance which is for the salvation of man. "In them that are being saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?" This is a glorious truth! God uses our lives and our words to spread the saving fragrance into every place. Paul emphasizes this "every place" as part of the fragrance.

This "every place" includes your home. Your being in that home should make it easier for the unsaved members of your family to believe in God. There should be enough of the fragrance of Christ Himself coming through to odorize your home. "Every place" includes your place of employment. Those who spend more time with you than your family should surely catch the smell of the fragrance. Have they noticed the presence of Christ in your life. "Every place" includes the campus, the dorm and the classroom at the university. Is there enough of the fragrance to attract those you meet to the Lord?

Not everyone will be attracted to Christ. Some will not like the fragrance. Those who do not like Christ will be repelled by this fragrance. This will be sure evidence that they are perishing. But others will be responsive. They will be drawn to the Christ being manifest through you.

When one young man came to the Lord after some rotten, severe struggles, the pastor was overjoyed. He thought that he had really removed the barriers to faith through some of his carefully prepared sermons. He asked the young man, 'which of my sermons convinced you?' The young man said, "I am sorry, Pastor, it was not your preaching. It was my mother's practicing." The fragrance of a Christian life had touched him.

A beautiful thing about this fragrance is that it can really go "every place." Not everyone will come to hear our proclamation of Christ, but Christ can take our fragrant lives "every place."

CONCLUSION

Has your life lost its fragrance? Then you need to revitalize the relationship with

the Lord. The fragrance is not really the product of our efforts for the Lord as much as it is an expression of His life in us. Are you His captive? Does He really have control? Then you will share in His victory and express His fragrance in "every place."