**WE ARE THE AROMA OF CHRIST**

November 9, 2014

2 Corinthians 2:1-17

Key Verse 2:15 “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”

Last week we learned that God is the God of all comfort, who can comfort us in any trouble whenever we come to him. When we are comforted by God, we can become a source of comfort to others. In the Bible, God is sensitive to smell. When Noah sacrificed burnt offerings, the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man.” (Gen 8:21) On the other hand, sin is compared to a stench or stinking odor to him. The New Living Translation of Isaiah 65:5 says that the rebellion and disobedience of God’s people is stench in God’s sight: “These people are a stench in my nostrils, a foul smell that never goes away.” The Holy Spirit suggests this same idea in 2 Peter 2:20 when it likens the Christian who goes back to sin to “A dog that returns to his own vomit.” Such is how sin smells to God. This is how God views our sin. How easy it would be to get some garbage tossed into the fires of our lives, and how the aroma changes. They say that the human nose can distinguish around 10,000 different aromas. As they reach us, some of these smells can have a significant effect on us. A certain smell brings back past memories, either pleasant or unpleasant. In today’s passage, Paul says that we are the “aroma of Christ.” We should smell like Jesus. We should not stink like sin. Let’s learn what it means to us to be the aroma of Christ.

Look at verse 1. “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.” After Paul left Corinth, some people arose who did not acknowledge Paul’s spiritual authority as an apostle of Christ. So they planted doubt about Paul’s integrity and confused the whole church (11:12-15). Paul made an urgent visit to Corinth. Yet he could not solve the problem and left with sorrow and anxiety. He called it a “painful visit.” Paul decided not to make another painful visit. He did not want to grieve the Corinthians by rebuking them again in person. He did not want to escalate the conflict. Rather, instead of visiting them, he wrote a letter. He hoped that they would repent through the letter. Then, when they met in person, they could share joyful fellowship together and mutually encourage one another. Here we see that Paul shared both sorrow and joy together with the Corinthians. He cared for them from his heart as a good shepherd.

Look at verse 4. “For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.” This verse reveals Paul’s shepherd heart all the more clearly. Paul wrote a letter out of anguish of heart and with many tears. It is called “the severe letter,” or “the letter of tears.” Unfortunately, this letter was lost. Here we can see that Paul was a man of tears. Stoic philosophers say that tears are a sign of weakness and despise men who shed tears. But when we shed tears out of anguish and sorrow in the course of helping Bible students, it is beautiful in the sight of God. Paul was a man of such tears. Acts 20:19a shows us how Paul shepherded the Ephesians for three years. Paul said, “I served the Lord with great humility and with tears....” Here we learn that Paul’s philosophy of shepherding was “humility and tears.” Humility is to consider others better than oneself and to honor and respect and serve them (Php 2:3). Tears refer to a broken shepherd heart. Paul had a broken shepherd heart for God’s flock. When we shed tears for God’s flock, God is pleased. God values these tears and surely blesses us. At this moment, I realize that my tears are drying up. O, Lord, please have mercy on me and restore tears in my heart for your flock.

Look at verses 5-6. It seems that someone in Corinth opposed Paul’s apostolic authority by criticizing his integrity. This grieved not only Paul, but all of the Corinthian believers. Paul and a majority of Corinthian believers agreed to punish him. Then the man realized his sin and repented. However, there might have been some people who doubted the sincerity of his repentance. Some may have insisted that his punishment continue. They did not want to forgive him easily. But Paul said in verses 7-8, “Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” The purpose of punishment is not to destroy one, but to establish him. Therefore, if a brother sins, we should help him to repent based on the truth.

Verse 11 tells us why we should forgive others. It is in order that Satan might not outwit us. When Christians hold grudges and bitterness toward one another in their hearts, they open the door for Satan to work. Satan’s scheme has always been the same from the beginning. It is to plant doubt about God’s love, and fear in men’s hearts. In this way Satan destroys the relationship between God and men, and between fellow Christians. Satan especially wants to divide and destroy the church. But when Christians forgive each other and love each other, Satan has no place to stand and must flee from the church of God. When Paul served gospel work, he was aware of invisible Satan who was working in subtle and deceitful ways. We also must be aware of Satan’s schemes. Ephesians 6:12 says, “...our struggle is not against flesh and blood...but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” A good shepherd like Paul is aware of Satan’s schemes and fights with Satan, not with brothers and sisters. Let’s learn to forgive others as Jesus forgave us.

Look at verses 12-13. “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia.” When Paul went to Troas to preach the gospel he found that the Lord had opened the door for him. Usually Paul went through an open door and did great work. But this time he could not. His heart was too troubled. His letter contained such strong rebuke that he feared the Corinthians’ response. Did it damage their relationship permanently? He regretted writing the letter. While he was preaching the gospel in Troas, Paul anxiously awaited report of their reaction through Titus. One can imagine Paul rushing to the dock as ships from Macedonia came to unload, desperately trying to find Titus. Unable to find peace of mind, he left his fruitful ministry in Troas to seek out Titus in Macedonia.

This is one of the most important passages in the Bible. This shows Paul’s priority in serving God. It is amazing that Paul would leave the open door of opportunity to go and find Titus. Is it a right thing to do? It appears that to Paul, Titus was more important than the entire city of Troas. Paul knew that if something had happened to Titus, his ministry would have suffered a serious setback. Titus had just visited Corinth and Paul was eager to know their spiritual condition. Titus held the key for the work of God in Corinth. One man is the key to reaching the crowd. This is very important to us in our discipleship making ministry. Raising one disciple is the most important task because it holds the key to preaching the gospel in the entire city.

Paul was restless, and probably he was second-guessing his decision to leave the opportunity to preach the gospel in Troas. Was it right to leave Troas? Usually people lose spirit and give up when things don’t go well. Many start well in the mission of feeding sheep. But when problems arise that are not easily solved, they finally lose heart and give up. Then they lose spiritual desire and withdraw to live a family-centered life. But Paul was different. In spite of his hard situation Paul was filled with triumphant spirit in his heart. Look at verse 14. “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” In these verses, Paul gives the analogy of the triumphal procession. After warfare, the victorious general, together with his troops, would return home to a victory parade. They, together with some spoils and prisoners of war, would march through the city. Jubilant crowds would cheer them on. They spread large amounts of flower petals. As the people crushed them, their smell would fill the air. Others would burn large quantities of incense. The perfumed odors would spread throughout the city. The only ones who didn’t celebrate would be political adversaries of the conquering general. They weren’t thrilled by the aroma of incense and flowers. Or if you happened to be from the nation conquered - the fragrance, the sights, the sounds were downright heartbreaking, a reminder of what you have lost.

Apostle Paul went through many hardships in order to preach the gospel. However, he was not crushed. He was filled with a spirit of triumph; he never lost his spirit. How could he be this way? It was because he was united with Christ. He shouted many songs of victory: “‘Where, O death, is your victory?’...thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Co 15:55-57). Again he cried out: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Ro 8:37). We may seem to fail, but in the end, there is no defeat in God. We win the victory in Christ Jesus. Even if we fail, God will change our failure into victory (Ro 8:28). God always gives us victory in Jesus Christ! Praise God!

Look at verse 15. “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.” Are you a believer? Then you are part of a victory parade. Jesus is the General, and he has conquered evil, death, the devil. He is in command, and he is on his way home. You are traveling with him. And, as in the ancient victory parades, the feet of the soldiers would tramp down the flower petals and release their fragrances; and as those celebrating the victory with them would burn sweet smelling incense to let everyone in the city know of the victory. So in the same way, you are living lives that send out signals as powerful as aromatic signals; your lives are sending out signals which let everyone know that Jesus is alive, that he is the conqueror, and he is coming home for the victory celebration! Not everyone is going to be happy about it. There are going to be those who find the whole thing a stench. They are the ones who refuse to ally themselves with the conquering General. Maybe they even rather blatantly ally themselves with the enemy, and mourn his defeat. But let the home-coming parade go on. Continue to throw the flower petals. Continue to burn the incense. Don’t quit letting the aroma fill the city. Spread the sweet fragrance of Jesus wherever and however you can.

We are to God the aroma of Christ. Not to our friends, or our spouse, or children, or employer, or neighbor, but to God. That is of first concern. Ultimately God is the one who must find the aroma pleasing! Who we are, what we do - it finds identity, value and acceptance through him alone, through Christ who “loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 5:2) We become the aroma of Christ by living lives that please God. Paul says in Ephesians 5:1, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us.” You spread the fragrance of Jesus in a way that pleases the Lord through a life of love. Your sacrifice for the sake of the gospel for the salvation of one soul is a pleasing aroma of Christ. It will have a powerful effect on one’s heart and mind as any aroma would have. These days many public places are going scent-free. It is recognized that certain aromas can cause allergic, even life-threatening reactions in people. By analogy, we live in a society that would pressure us to be scent-free from Christianity. They say that faith is something to keep private, to oneself, keep your aroma under cover. But the Bible says, “No! We should spread the aroma of Jesus, no matter what others may think.” The first priority is what God thinks. Does he find your aroma pleasing?

Look at verse 16b. “And who is equal to such a task?” To be the aroma of Christ demands wholehearted devotion out of a pure heart. Look at verse 17. “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.” Peddlers are those who sell cheap goods by any means to make some money. Christian peddlers share the word of God as if it were cheap goods. They emphasize the promise of good health, prosperity and human blessing without teaching repentance or the way of the cross. They gain followers, even crowds, who will support them emotionally and financially. But they are mere peddlers of the gospel. We must feed God’s flock out of a pure motive to please God and to save their souls. Then we can be the aroma of Christ.

Look at verse 17b again. “In Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.” We should have such an attitude in our lives; when we have Bible study, we should teach as if we are sent from God. We are Christ’s ambassadors, carrying on his work on his behalf. I stand here before God as God’s representative. What an awesome responsibility! We should have the aroma of Christ. We are the aroma of Christ when we have that attitude.