



The Smell of Jesus

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Rev. Fred Greco

I'd like to draw your attention to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. We have been going through this book of 2 Corinthians now for several weeks, and we're going to be looking this morning at chapter 2, verses 12-17. So if you have your copies of God's Word, please turn there. Hear now the Word of the true and living God. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Second Corinthians, chapter 2, beginning at verse 12:

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

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 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.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's ask him for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we come to you and we ask, O Lord, that you would open our eyes, that even as we look upon your Word you would show us marvelous things in your Word, that you would teach us your will, that you would show us the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, that by the power of your Holy Spirit we would see your work and give you the praise. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We like to be in control. Or at least we like to *think* we're in control. Our current situation, though, has shown us our limits. It has shown us even our weaknesses, how many things are outside of our control. Nowhere is our weakness more painful than with respect to those whom we love, and nowhere is that pain more sharp than when we consider eternal things, when we consider the salvation of those who are dear to us.

Paul gives us insight and help with that this morning. He tells us about his ministry, his suffering, and the triumph he finds in Christ. We can learn more about ministry and more who we are in Christ from Paul's text this morning. What I would like us to do is to see three things from our text this morning. First, we will see the *strain of gospel ministry*. Secondly, we will see the *sufficiency in Christ*. Thirdly, we will see the *sincerity of the gospel message*. Strain, sufficiency, and sincerity. Paul has much to show us this morning.

Strain of Gospel Ministry

Paul begins this section... This is actually an extended section of the letter that will go from *here* through chapter 6 in which Paul is writing about the ministry of the new covenant. Now, we have seen it already, but Paul continues to give a very personal and very emotional account of his ministry in this book of 2 Corinthians. That makes 2 Corinthians one of the most personal and pastoral of all of his letters.

Over and over again, Paul emphasizes that he is laboring for the spiritual well-being of the Corinthians. So he begins here in verse 12: "When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest..." Paul tells us that he has arrived at Troas, which is a relatively large city on the coast of Asia Minor, what we consider modern Turkey. It's across the straits from Europe.

Paul is there, and he's waiting. We might even say that Paul is killing time, because Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to see how the Corinthian church had responded to his tearful, severe letter he had sent to them, the one we have seen Paul talk about in chapter 2, verse 4. You may recall there was opposition to Paul at Corinth and that he wrote to them to correct them, and one of the main aspects they needed to be corrected on was that they were not properly conducting church discipline. They were not looking to the purity of the church. They were not seeking to reclaim the sinner.

An even more fundamental aspect was their resistance to Paul's authority, and there were even accusations that his ministry was not of God. So Paul now, while he's waiting for Titus to bring back news, does what he always does when he's killing time. Paul is not very good at killing time. He's not very good at putting up his feet. What he does is he preaches the gospel. God opened a door for him to proclaim Jesus in Troas. Now, this is important. Look closely at how Paul puts it. He says a door was *opened*. It's a passive verb.

Paul is not saying that *he* opened a door. He's not saying that *he* went out and did something. He's not taking any of the credit or any even of the initiative. Isn't that often how we speak about new endeavors? If you've ever tried to start a business or to sell something out of your home or even to undertake a new project, what you will often say is, "I'm trying to drum up business. I'm trying to get the word out. I'm trying to do something." It's really all on *your* efforts. We might even think it completely depends on us.

Paul wants you to see that it doesn't depend on him at all, that God is in control, not Paul. This is very important, because the great apostle knew he was not in control. He was not making things happen. God was. The sooner you realize you are not in control, the sooner you will have peace about your circumstances. The one who is in control is the one who cares for you. It's not some impersonal force that's in control. It's not fate. No. It is the true and living God, the one who cares for his people. He is in control.

Paul tells us that he is unable to find rest. Now, you would think that Paul would be excited, that Paul would be focused. After all, there's nothing Paul loved to do more than preach. Have you ever had that experience when you're involved with something and you love to do it and you lose track of time, that everything else just seems to fade into the background?

How many times, kids, have you gotten interested in something going on in your room or playing with friends outside or trying to do something, and all of a sudden, you hear your parents calling you, and they say, "Why didn't you come home? We told you dinner was at 6:00," and you say, "I completely lost track of the time." Or maybe you like to work in the shop, and you're in the garage working away, and your wife says to you, "Come on! You've got to come in. We have things to do."

You see, normally, we lose track of time when we're interested and excited about something, but the interesting thing is that even though Paul is doing what he loves to do most, and even though he's having great success... He says an open door was provided to him in Troas. Paul uses this phrase several times, and it's interesting that each time it's used it describes not just an opportunity, not just a cracked open door. If you've ever opened a door and it swung open and slammed the wall, *that's* the kind of door *this* is.

It's first described in Acts, chapter 14, as a door being opened to the Gentiles. That describes the opening up of the church of Jesus Christ beyond all of Judaism to the entirety of the world. That's a big door. Then in 1 Corinthians, chapter 16, Paul says a door was opened to him in Ephesus, and Ephesus became a center of the church. It became a place that sent out missionaries from whence the church grew in Asia. A pretty significant open door.

Paul knew this was important. He even asked Christians to pray that doors would be opened for him. He tells the Colossians, "Pray that a door would be opened." He doesn't just want to see some people hear about Jesus. He doesn't even just want to plant a church. That has already happened. He wants the church to grow and expand.

So, Paul is occupied with the thing he loves the most, with the thing that brings him the most satisfaction, and he's enjoying great success. Why does he say, then, "My spirit was not at rest"? We might say, "I had no peace of mind." Well, he tells us. He tells us that it's because he didn't find Titus in Troas. This is more than that he misses a friend and a partner. He expected Titus to be there.

In the ancient world, when you traveled and you were going to meet up with someone, you had to agree several months in advance where exactly you would meet up. You will recall that there were no cell phones in Paul's day. You couldn't call someone up and say, "How about next week we get together in Troas?" No, you'd have to say, "In the month of June, we'll meet at *this* place in *this* city." So Paul and Titus have agreed, and Paul is there, but there's a problem: Titus isn't.

Now, it's not just that Paul misses Titus' company. They had arranged to meet there so Titus could bring news to Paul about the situation in Corinth. What Paul is saying here is that he cannot find peace because he's concerned about the Corinthians. This anxiety is so intense that Paul determines to leave this promising work in Troas and go find Titus in Macedonia. It seems their backup plan was to meet in Macedonia, which would have been about halfway between Corinth and Troas.

We understand that this is what Paul is concerned about because later in the letter, after this discourse about the ministry of the new covenant, in chapter 7, Paul picks up the subject of Titus having arrived to see him, and he says that he was rejoicing, he had great joy because Titus had come to him and Titus brought him news of the

church in Corinth. Then, of course, Paul tells us later in chapter 11 of this book that apart from many other things, what was his daily pressure was his anxiety for all of the churches.

So Paul is very concerned about what's going on, and he wants us to know what a strain the gospel ministry is. It's not that he was tired. It's not that there was too much work to do. It's not that he had complaints about the people he was ministering to, although we know from looking at this book he had plenty of cause to complain about. No, what has him anxious is his concern for the Corinthians and for their well-being, and it was almost overwhelming. We might even skip ahead with Paul in our text and say, "Who is sufficient for these things?"

Now, this gives me an opportunity to say a few things about ministry. I can do that because Paul wants you to know about the strain of ministry, and God wants you to know about the strain of ministry because he has put it here in his Word for you to read and understand. Then there's the fact that you can relate the strain of ministry to your *own* life and ministry.

So let me tell you. Gospel ministry is hard, but it's not hard for the reasons you might think it is. It *is* hard work. It does require a great deal of education before you can embark on the gospel ministry. It does take time away from family. We just had an incident this week where dinner was ready and on the table, and everyone was sitting, and the food was hot, and I was on the phone with someone from the congregation because they needed me. It happens.

But none of these things are the reasons the ministry is hard. The real reason ministry is hard is because the gospel ministry requires me to care about people. That's what Paul is writing here. He's not anxious about the outcome of a vote at a church meeting. He's not anxious if donations are down in Corinth. He's not anxious if attendance is off 5 percent. No. He wants to know if they're all right. He's anxious about the people of the church, people who have names, faces, families.

He wants to know if they're growing in Christ, and that is the strain for a pastor. Think about it *this* way. You have a problem. Your pastor is aware of that problem and is praying for you. Your problem is not as intense for me as it is for you because it is more directly related to you than it is to me, but your problem is just one of dozens of problems in the congregation, one of dozens that I take to the Lord in prayer, and the cumulative weight of those problems can be heavy.

Above all, what I want is for you to be released from the weight that is on you. I want you to find peace. This is the real strain of being a pastor: knowing the pain of the people of God, knowing that I cannot change that, knowing that only God can, and having to wait upon him. But there's application of this to *your* life also. If you have a family, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

You know the strain of the problems of your children, problems you want to be able to solve but can't. You have to wait upon the Lord. You know this even *beyond* your families. We have friends we care about, and what we want most of all is for them to know Jesus Christ. We want them to have peace and comfort. It's hard to just sit alongside them in tough times, but that is what ministry looks like. That's the strain of gospel ministry.

Sufficiency in Christ

So, what does this mean for us? How did Paul deal with this? This brings us to our second point this morning. Paul teaches us about sufficiency in Christ in verses 14-16. Paul shows us that the answer is not in ourselves. Paul, whenever he is troubled... I don't know if you have seen a pattern here, but you should. Instead of looking down, Paul looks up. That's what he does here in verse 14. He's troubled, and he says, "But thanks be to God!"

He looks to the Lord in thanksgiving, and that changes his outlook. He reminds himself, and us, that although *he's* not sufficient, Jesus *is*. So Paul's triumph is actually his sufficiency in Christ. In verse 14, Paul thanks God for the victory he gives in Christ. That's where the victory is found. He gives a vivid picture of this. He writes that God leads us...Paul, you, me...in a triumphal procession.

Now, what is that? What does Paul mean by that? This verb is only used twice in the New Testament, but it describes a very well-known event in the Roman Empire of Paul's day. It describes what happens after a Roman general had won a significant victory in a war. What he would do is write back to Rome to the senate and ask to be given a triumph.

What that meant was that the general would get on a chariot at the front of his army in all his splendor, and his army would line up behind him in strict ranks, and then they would also have behind them a train of prisoners of the defeated, those of the enemy who had been conquered by the general. They would start just outside the city of Rome, and they would come in to great fanfare. Trumpets would be blown. Praise would be shouted out. Flowers would be strewn in the path. Everyone would know who the triumphing general was and what he had done.

This would have been well-known in the city of Corinth because, you may recall, Corinth was a city made up of war veterans. It was a Roman colony. But there's a problem here. Our instinct wants Paul to describe how he is at the head of this procession, how he is next to the general. We want to be at the head of the procession. What we want to see described here is that Jesus is at the front of this procession and Paul is right next to him and we are, at most, two or three chariots back, riding, taking in the praise of the victory of Jesus and the church.

We want to focus on how powerful and victorious we are, but there's a problem. This verb does not mean that. It does not mean to ride at the front of the triumphal procession. It means to lead captives in a triumphal procession. What? What's Paul doing here? Paul is describing how he is led as a captive in a triumphal procession? That's exactly what Paul is doing. He's saying that he is Christ's prisoner, that he had been defeated by Jesus and he is now a part of the victory train.

If you recall, that's exactly what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. The proud Saul was met by Jesus and was literally kicked off his high horse by Jesus. You see, Paul is a prisoner of Christ. He rejoices in that. That's why he begins virtually every letter in the New Testament with "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ." Sometimes we miss that when we hear the word translated *servant*, but Paul is a slave of Jesus. He's a prisoner of Jesus.

What Paul is doing is showing who is in control. He's showing who has the glory and who is worthy. It's Jesus. That's how you and I must view our lives. We don't have to worry about not being in control. Jesus is. We don't

have to focus on our weaknesses, because what matters is Jesus' strength. We don't have to try to win the victory in our strength, because Jesus has already won it.

What a relief that is. Are you going around with the weight of the world or at least the weight of your family on your shoulders? Paul tells you now to stop. Jesus has won the victory. Yes, the victory over sin; yes, the victory over death, but even the victory over self. He has defeated you for your own good, and he has brought you into his kingdom.

Paul then moves on to describe another aspect of the triumphal procession. What would happen would be in front of the general and his army and the prisoners would go priests, and they would have these large metal containers filled with incense. You can almost picture them in your mind, these metal bowls with holes in them on a string. They would swing them from side to side, and the incense would spread throughout all of the area.

If you have ever been in a place where incense has been burned, you will know it even if it's a week later, because the smell lingers. You can't mistake it. That's what was going on. The smell would permeate the area. Everyone would know what was going on. They would know that a procession was coming. Now that's right. We know that fragrances and odors are intrusive. Have you ever driven on a highway where a skunk has been run over? All you have to do is pass over or by the skunk at 70 miles an hour, and you will have skunk in your car for the next 50 miles. Right?

Or gentlemen, have you ever tried to enter a department store in the mall and had to go through the area where the cosmetics are? You know, the place where all of the nice young ladies have the samples of perfume that they will spray on anyone's wrist, including a man's, just to see if it smells good to try to sell it to you. It's going on all day, and you go through there, and by the time you've walked through, *you* smell like a young lady, because it just permeates all over you. You can't get rid of it easily. That's the power of a smell.

Paul goes a step further here. He says it's not just that there's some scent out there. He says we are the aroma of Christ. He says in verse 14, the knowledge of Christ is everywhere because we spread that smell. That's how people get the aroma of Christ. *That* is your sufficiency because of what Jesus has done. If you have believed on Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, you carry his smell...everywhere you go, everything you say, everything you do. Just by being who you are, you are a trophy of grace and you are the smell of Jesus.

Now, Paul does give us a warning. You might say, "Paul, Pastor, not everyone I come into contact with believes in Jesus. Not everyone appreciates what I have to say. As a matter of fact, some people are downright hostile to the gospel." Now, let's go back to Paul's picture. What would the triumphal scent mean to the victors? As they smelled that incense, it would mean victory, joy, honor, glory. But what would that smell be for the defeated, for the conquered, those who were being led in the triumphal train to their execution? It would be a smell of death.

Paul reminds us here of something the Bible is very clear about. There are only two types of people in the world. It's not Americans and foreigners. It's not red states and blue states. It's not people who wear a mask and people who won't wear a mask. There are only two types of people: those who are being saved and those who are perishing. That's it. Every other distinguishing characteristic or division fades away on that.

The smell of Jesus to the saved is the smell of life, but the smell of Jesus to the perishing is the smell of death. You see, the gospel is good news to those who want to be free from the burden of sin, but the gospel is bad news to those who refuse to give up self. It's a stench of death. They don't want to give up self and control. They don't want to bend the knee to King Jesus. They don't want to find forgiveness in someone else. So to them, the smell of Jesus is a foul smell that they try to run as far away as they can from.

So what does this mean? Again, it's that your sufficiency is in Christ. Leave the results up to God. I know that sounds hard, especially concerning people you love, but your responsibility is faithfulness, not results. Do you see for whom you are the aroma of Christ? Look at verse 15. You are the aroma of Christ to God. You don't need to manage your smell. Your smell is the smell of Jesus to the glory of God. God takes care of the rest.

Sincerity of the Gospel Message

Paul ends verse 16 by asking the question, "Who is sufficient for this?" He has already given us the answer by pointing us to Christ. He'll answer this question directly in chapter 3, verse 5, but now he concludes this text by pointing to his sufficiency in the sincerity of the gospel message. That's the third thing we see here this morning.

Again, Paul points us away from himself. He brings up the image of a peddler, a hawker of goods on a street corner. He says, "For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word..." Have you ever been to a big city and someone is on the street corner selling you something? They tell you it's the greatest thing that has ever been at the best price that could ever be found. Maybe you've had the experience of buying a Rolex for \$50 on a street corner, even though Rolexes cost thousands of dollars.

What someone has done is they've tampered, they've deceived, they've tried to trick you in order to sell you something. Maybe they've even shown you on the watch where it's engraved "Rolex." The only problem is that it's spelt R-O-L-A-X. You see, that's what peddlers do. They deceive to make the sale. One of the things this word is used of are those who would water down wine to make it go further or those who would use false weights to sell you a pound of meat that was really only 12 ounces.

Paul says, "I don't mess with the gospel to be able to get people just to buy it. I don't change the gospel. It's not up to me; it's up to Jesus." He says, "I don't try to change my smell to get people to like it. I just smell like Jesus. God takes care of the rest." This is a significant problem in American Christianity today, because people try to do all sorts of things to make the gospel more relevant or to make it more attractive. They'll mix in patriotism with the gospel. They'll mix in social justice with the gospel. They'll mix in health and wealth with the gospel.

We are not to be peddlers of God's Word. We don't check to see which way the wind is blowing. Now, that doesn't mean we are to get in the way of the gospel either. It's not our job to make the gospel harsh or offensive. There are others who try to put up artificial barriers to the gospel so they can keep *those* kinds of people out of our church. "No," Paul says, "we are to be people of sincerity." When Paul says that, *sincerity* means to examine something in the sunlight so you can see truly what it is.

Have you ever owned or had a very dark blue suit or dress, and then elsewhere in your closet you have a black suit or dress? There's a difference between dark navy and black, but you go in your closet and you say, "Do I have the

black one in my hand or do I have the blue one in my hand? I don't know." You might even take it out of the closet into the bedroom under the light, and you might look and say, "I still can't tell the difference."

So how do you tell the difference? Well, if you're anything like me, what you do is you go over to the window, you open the shade, and you look at those suits or those dresses in the sunlight, because in the sunlight you can see them, and you say, "Oh, *this* is the black one. Oh, *this* is the blue one." You can easily tell the difference. Sunlight does that because it's powerful. It reveals. That's what Paul is saying here. He's saying we should be able, as Christians, to stand up to the strictest examination. We shouldn't only not trick people. If they shine the spotlight on us, we should be found true, sincere.

Paul concludes this with evidence of sincerity that also points to our sufficiency in Christ. He writes that as ones who do not tamper with the gospel, as sincere, we are actually commissioned by God. The Greek is actually more direct than the English translation here. The Greek literally says, "We are *from* God." We are sent from God. God has sent us. Yet more than that, we speak in the sight of God. God watches over us as we speak about the gospel. Yet even more than *that*, we speak in Christ.

Everything Paul is he is because he is in Christ. Go back to Paul's image of the triumphal procession. It's not *our* victory. It's not *our* message. It's Jesus'. It is *his* scent that we have, not our own. Paul does in this passage what he so often does. He takes our weaknesses, our known weaknesses, and uses them to point us to Christ.

As a minister of the gospel, as a pastor who loves you, let me tell you that I know the strain of being insufficient. I know that you are hurting, but I want to remind you that Christ *is* sufficient. He has won the victory, and he doesn't ask you to be strong. He doesn't ask you to be successful. He only asks you to follow him. You are a part of his triumphal procession. All you need to do is smell like Jesus. God will take care of the rest.