

Battling Discouragement in Ministry

2 Corinthians 2:12–17

Introduction

When I was preaching through Paul’s letter to the Philippians, each time I preached I always wondered if you all were going to get tired of hearing me say that the main theme of that letter was that we are to live our lives in a manner worthy of the Gospel. Every time I said the words, “Gospel-driven life,” I pictured people rolling their eyes and saying, “Oh, not this again.” I know you would never think that, but I was concerned because I said it so much. But I said it so much because that *is* the main theme of that letter, and if there was one thing I wanted you to walk away from our study of Philippians with, it was that the Gospel must be brought to bear on every aspect of our lives. I wanted that ingrained in your mind.

Well, I also feel that way about the main theme of 2 Corinthians. I’ve said it over and over again—and so I get a bit fearful each time I mention it, because I don’t want you to become desensitized to the idea. But the main theme of 2 Corinthians is to equip the people of God to carry out **a joyful enduring ministry in the midst of affliction**. And so when I continue to remind you that you are all called to ministry, it’s not because I can’t think of anything else to say at the beginning of sermons. It’s because this is a reality that needs to be burned into your mind. Life in the body of Christ is not a spectator sport. There is no category in the New Testament for a Christian who is not serving the body of Christ in some form of ministry or another.

And I hope that you can see that that is especially true given our last three sermons in 2 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 2, verses 5 to 11, we learned about the necessity and the protocol for dealing with sin in the church. We spoke in detail over those three weeks about the responsibility that we have to our brothers and sisters to come alongside one another and aid each other in discovering and mortifying sin in our lives. Even aside from our ministry of bringing the Gospel to our unbelieving neighbors (which is a huge component to our ministry!), we have been called to the ministry of laying down our lives in sacrificial service to one another in the body of Christ—especially in laboring for one another’s sanctification. Christ has given us to one another to entreat one another, to plead with one another to forsake sin and to tear down idols that would drag our souls to hell.

But if any one of you has been faithful to that commission in any sense, you know that sinful people like you and me do not like their idols being torn down. As shameful as it is to admit it, even Christians do not like our sin being exposed; we nurse our sins, and when one of our brothers or sisters tries to loosen our grip on our pet sins, it’s easy for us to get offended, to shut

down, and to put up barriers between people. Inevitably, friends, any real *people* ministry—any real ministry that tries to wrestle people away from their idols—gets messy very quickly. Inevitably, that kind of ministry brings conflict. It brings strained relationships. It can bring misunderstandings between dear friends. And because of that, ministry is so often accompanied by deep discouragement.

Is there a greater discouragement that you've experienced than when you've labored in the Scriptures with someone, wrestled with the Lord for them in prayer, poured all your emotional and spiritual energy into helping them forsake some specific sin—and even maybe see them make some progress—only to have them return to that sin, or to have them eventually turn on you and accuse you of being judgmental and legalistic. Or even worse: someone you've ministered to and aimed to help grow in grace is now flirting with some sort of false teaching, or is on the brink of apostatizing. You feel that personal investment in that brother because of your intimate involvement in his life, and any threat to his spiritual well-being causes anxiety to mount in your own heart. And of course we're all familiar with situations when supposed friends whom you've ministered to all of a sudden turn on you, maybe because they've taken some offense to something you've said, even though you were only trying to help.

You know that discouragement. Every true minister of the Gospel does. And so you know that it can be a debilitating discouragement—that the discouragements of the ministry can be of such a degree that it's hard to concentrate on anything else. This situation just seems all-consuming! Even to the point that it becomes difficult to carry out our ministerial responsibilities—even in the things we love!

Contextual Introduction (vv. 12–13)

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to the dark realities of ministerial discouragement. In his case, his ministry brought an abundance of trials, difficulties, and persecutions that would have tempted anyone to be discouraged. He details his afflictions in that famous list in 2 Corinthians 11: “in...labors, in...imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” And then he says, verse 28, “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?”

And it almost seems, doesn't it, that the internal pressure of intense concern for the churches' spiritual well-being was worse for Paul than the external, physical hardships. It's that daily pressure—that intense concern for a church's moral weakness—that gives a man no rest until problems are resolved. That's what discouragement in the ministry is made of. When the churches of Galatia were being led astray by the Judaizing heresy, Paul expressed his consternation over the precariousness of their spiritual state by saying that he was in the *anguish of childbirth* with them until Christ was fully formed in them, Galatians 4:19.

But I think it's safe to say that no church brought him more discouragement in ministry than the church in Corinth. His interactions with the Corinthians that form the historical background and occasion for this letter provide the prime example of the ministerial discouragement that is birthed from a sincere and loving investment in the spiritual health of the body of Christ. You remember the scene. False teachers claiming to be apostles infiltrated the church and aimed to discredit Paul's legitimacy as an apostle. The controversy led Paul to change his original plans and visit the Corinthians ahead of schedule, as he hoped he could put the matter to rest by being there personally. But when Paul arrived there, one of the men in the church openly flouted Paul's authority and insulted him before the whole church. To make matters worse, rather than coming to Paul's defense and defending the Gospel that Paul preached, the Corinthians were taken in by this false teaching, and allowed this man's sin to go unchecked.

After this "sorrowful visit," Paul returned immediately to Ephesus and wrote them a severe letter, sternly rebuking them for failing to deal with sin in the church properly, and for straying from his apostolic teaching and message. He sent the letter with Titus, and apparently had arranged to meet him in Troas where he would report to Paul how the Corinthians received the letter. But, we learn in 2 Corinthians 2:12 and 13 that Titus never made it to Troas. Look at the text: "Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother."

Paul says that he came to Troas to do what he always did when he came to a city—to preach the Gospel of Christ and to work towards seeing a church established in that city. And he says in this verse that the prospect for that was positive; "a door was opened for [him] in the Lord." Maybe the synagogue there was receptive to his message. Maybe the Gentiles in the marketplace were wanting to hear more about the Gospel. But, even though there was this opportunity for Gospel ministry in Troas, Paul says at the end of verse 13 that he *left* the believers there because not knowing how the Corinthians responded to the severe letter was causing too much turmoil in his spirit. He says he had no rest. You've got to remember, it wasn't like today. Paul couldn't just send Titus a text message. He had traveled the 260 miles from Ephesus to Troas to meet his brother and fellow-worker in the Gospel, and hear how his dear spiritual children reacted to his reproof. Did they receive the benefit of his correction and repent of their sins? Or had his strong

words only pushed them further away—further into the hands of these false teachers who would destroy their souls and corrupt the spread of the Gospel in that key city in Southern Greece?

He speaks about this restlessness again in chapter 7 verse 5. After not finding Titus in Troas, and then sailing to Macedonia to search for him there, he says, “For even when we came into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.” In 2:13 he says he had no rest for his *spirit*. Here in 7:5 he says he had no rest for his *flesh*. Inside and out, physically and emotionally, Paul was absolutely *distressed* over the situation in Corinth! Pastor John captures it well. He says, “Anxiously awaiting Titus’ report, Paul feared the worst, and his heart was heavy with concern. ... “He was so overwrought and burdened by the situation at Corinth that he found it difficult to focus on the opportunity; he had no rest for his spirit. The turmoil and discontent on his heart were debilitating and threatened to close the door that was opened for ministry at Troas. ... Until he heard from Titus, the apostle feared the worst. He was so burdened by the situation at Corinth that he lost interest in the open door of ministry at Troas” (MacArthur, 67). In the very moment when the false apostles were trying to convince the Corinthians that Paul’s change of travel plans was proof that he didn’t care about them, Paul tells them that their spiritual welfare was so important to him that he literally could not rest until he knew that they were OK—even to the point of sacrificing ministry opportunity.

Paul knew what it was to be discouraged in ministry. He knew what it was to invest every bit of himself into the holiness and sanctification of the people of God, only to have them betray him (and themselves!) by becoming infatuated with false teaching. He knew what it was to have his heart so dedicated to the spiritual well-being of his flock that their danger distressed him so much that he couldn’t concentrate on anything else. And friends, if we are faithfully discharging our responsibilities as *ministers* of the New Covenant in Christ—if we are being obedient to the call to ministry that God placed in our lives when He regenerated us and made us part of the body of Christ—we *will* know something of this ministerial discouragement in one form or another, at one time or another. And so we need to be equipped to respond to the discouragements of ministry in a biblical and God-honoring way.

Well by God’s grace, the Apostle Paul once again lets us peer into his own heart and soul. He shows us how he himself responded to this deep discouragement. In a time when he had no rest in his spirit and no rest in his flesh—a time when he couldn’t keep his mind from racing, a time when his discouragement reached all the way down to the level of *depression* (cf. 7:6), he tells us what kept him going. He tells us how he battled against that discouragement. He tells us how he fought to press on in joyful, enduring ministry, even in the midst of affliction.

And what’s interesting is: his first inclination is not to fix his circumstances. He speaks about this distress at the end of chapter 2, but then doesn’t mention it again at all until the beginning of

chapter 7. In chapter 7, he does say that God comforted him in his distress by providentially orchestrating a reunion with Titus, who brought good news of the severe letter's success in Corinth. But Paul doesn't say that in chapter 2. He waits four solid chapters to say that. So how *does* he overcome discouragement in the ministry? Answer: **he turns his mind from focusing on the horizontal, and fixes his heart upon the true, spiritual, theological nature of the Christian ministry.** He stops and reflects upon the cosmic significance of what he is a part of. He meditates upon the privileges of giving his life to the service of Christ and the Gospel. And it's those truths fixed in his mind that begin to warm his heart, that give him hope, and that restore his joy in the Lord which is his strength for ministry.

And so what you have, really in the next four and a half chapters of this letter, is the most glorious treatise on the nature of new covenant Christian ministry anywhere in Scripture. Paul lays out what it means to be true minister of the Gospel in these chapters. But as we bring our attention particularly to the opening verses of this introductory paragraph—just verses 14 to 16 for the rest of this morning—we find Paul shedding light on nature of true Christian ministry by employing **two illustrations.** And as we look into the significance of these **two illustrations of true Christian ministry,** we will find great encouragement to press on in joyful, enduring ministry, even in the midst of great affliction.

I. Military Triumph (v. 14)

The **first illustration of true Christian ministry** that Paul employs in this text is, number one: **military triumph.** And we see this in verse 14. Paul writes, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.”

Paul speaks of God leading his ministers in triumph in Christ. Now this Greek word, *thriambeúo*, was a technical term that pointed to a particular, very interesting cultural practice in ancient Roman society. The Roman triumph, or triumphal procession, was an exorbitantly lavish victory parade that celebrated significant military conquests of Roman generals. The victorious general would be featured in a parade through the capitol city of Rome, which anybody who was anybody throughout the empire did their very best to attend. This was a kind of a World Series Champion ticker-tape parade through the heart of Times Square.

To be honored with a triumph was the highest honor that could be given to a Roman general, and his victory had to meet particular standards in order for him to qualify for one. Commentator William Barclay explains, “He must have been the actual commander-in-chief in the field. The campaign must have been completely finished, the region pacified and the victorious troops brought home. Five thousand of the enemy at least must have fallen in one engagement. A positive extension of territory must have been gained, and not merely a disaster retrieved or an

attack repelled. And the victory must have been won over a foreign foe and not in a civil war” (cited in MacArthur, 69). So this was not exactly an everyday occurrence! In the history of all the battles fought by the Roman Empire, ancient literature makes mention of a total of 350 triumphs.

When those conditions were met, this is what a triumphal procession looked like. Here’s Barclay again: “First came the state officials and the senate. Then came the trumpeters. Then were carried the spoils taken from the conquered land. For instance, when Titus conquered Jerusalem [in A.D. 70], the seven-branched candlestick, the golden table of the show-bread and the golden trumpets were carried through the streets of Rome. Then came pictures of the conquered land and models of conquered citadels and ships. There followed the white bull for the sacrifice which would be made. Then there walked the captive princes, leaders and generals in chains, shortly to be flung into prison and in all probability almost immediately to be executed. Then came the lictors bearing their rods, followed by the musicians with their lyres; then the priests swinging their censers with the sweet-smelling incense burning in them. After that came the general himself. He stood in a chariot drawn by four horses. He was clad in a purple tunic embroidered with golden palm leaves, and over it a purple toga marked out with golden stars. In his hand he held an ivory scepter with the Roman eagle at its top, and over his head a slave held the crown of Jupiter. After him rode his family; and finally came the army wearing all their decorations and shouting [‘Hail, triumphant one!’], their cry of triumph. As the procession moved through the streets, all decorated and garlanded, amid the cheering crowds, it made a tremendous day which might happen only once in a lifetime” (cited in MacArthur, 69). Finally, “as the procession ascended the Capitoline Hill, some of the leading captives (usually royal figures or the tallest and strongest of the conquered warriors) were taken aside into the adjoining prison and executed” to demonstrate the glorious power of the triumphing Roman general (Harris, 244). This is pomp and circumstance!

And as Paul finds himself in the midst of discouragement—restless in spirit, restless in the flesh; conflicts without, fears within—Paul remembers that whatever afflictions he endures, he endures them for the sake of this ministry of the Gospel. And he reflects upon the ministry that he has been called to, and with the eye of his soul he sees Christ as this conquering general, gloriously triumphing over sin, death, and the enemies of righteousness, marching through the world to demonstrate His power and glory! And just as the lieutenants and other soldiers who served under the general rode on horseback alongside the general’s chariot in the triumphal procession, Paul sees himself as a lieutenant of the Gospel—a sharer of Christ’s victory as a result of his union with Him—marching along in that conquering train! In the very midst of *despair*, Paul stopped to consider the true, spiritual reality of what takes place as a result of his ministry of the Gospel. And that was enough to catapult him from the pit of despair into the exhilaration of triumphant thanksgiving! “Thanks be to God, who *always* leads us in triumph in Christ!”

You see, friends, because of what God has accomplished in Christ—because Christ has accomplished righteousness, because He has borne the wrath of His Father against the sins of His people, and because He has risen from the grave, victorious over sin and death—there is cause for *triumph*! Jesus Christ, the great General and Captain of our salvation, has stormed the very shores of hell itself! “The Son of God appeared for *this* purpose,” 1 John 3:8, “to destroy the works of the devil!” Hebrews 2:14: He partook of flesh and blood, “that through [His] death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives!” Even during His earthly ministry He described His ministry of casting out demons as triumphing over Satan. He says in Luke 11:21: “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are undisturbed. But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away from him all his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder.” Oh, dear friends, someone stronger than Satan has attacked and overpowered him, and paradoxically through His glorious sacrifice of humiliation, He has plundered the devil’s house, He has freed Satan’s captives, and now distributes His spoils as ministers of the Gospel throughout all the climes of His empire!

He has led captivity captive, Ephesians 4:8! He has disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public display of them, having *triumphed* over them, Colossians 2:15! He has conquered sin and destroyed death; 1 Corinthians 15:56: “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

The victory is His! The war has been won! And inasmuch as we, the people of God, as heralds of the Good News this conquering King—inasmuch as we are obedient to Christ and fulfill our calling to preach the Gospel in all creation; inasmuch as we manifest the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place—through our preaching, we are going through all the lands that our General has decisively conquered, and we are bringing everyone into subjection to His rule. That’s what Paul understands his ministry to be. And insofar as he is faithful to that Gospel ministry—and brothers and sisters, insofar as *we* are faithful to *our* Gospel ministry—we as faithful soldiers follow our all-conquering Commander in His triumphal procession over sin, death, and hell, parading as spoils of war the souls of men and women who have been rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son! (Col 1:13) (MacArthur, 70, 71).

Oh friends! No matter the discouragement that comes with our ministry—no matter how deep the pain or how intense the anxiety—it is no match for the thought that *in the very midst* of persecution and distress and trouble and affliction, there is the spiritual reality that we are being led in triumph alongside our Sovereign King. If we could but grasp this reality, our hearts, like Paul’s, would be catapulted from despair to triumphant thanksgiving to the Christ who makes us more than conquerors in Christ (Rom 8:37).

And I can't move on to the next illustration until I draw your attention to one brief word of application. Look again at verse 14: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and *manifests through us* the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place." You see, one of the groups of people who marched through the triumphal procession were the priests, who would swing censers filled with incense, filling their air with a sweet aroma. Others in the processional, the historical sources tell us, "displayed spices brought from the conquered regions, and [still] others...scattered garlands of flowers and sprinkled perfume along the streets" (Harris, 246). And so between the incense, the spices, the flowers, and the perfumes, the triumphal procession emitted the most pleasant of fragrances. There was an air of sweetness, literally, throughout the entire ceremony. And Paul says that when we preach the Gospel of Christ, God manifests through us—through our preaching of the Word—the sweet aroma of knowing Christ. What a glorious picture!

Now can I ask you something? Do you smell like Jesus? *Do* you manifest the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place? Are you being a faithful soldier in your General's army? Because this triumphal procession is for soldiers only! Are you being faithful to your calling to ministry in Christ? Are you, as it were, swinging the censer of Gospel-spices by opening your mouth and proclaiming the Good News of Christ's triumph over sin and death? Because that is only way to be in this triumphal procession! Friends, is it the passion of your lives that the sweet aroma of knowing Christ would be manifest through you? Do you long for Christ to be known and worshiped, as the text says, "in every place"? If you do, you will delight to speak of Him. Don't you see?! We are called to ministry! And we can't expect to receive the indomitable strength and comfort that overcome the deepest discouragements if we are not faithful to our ministry of evangelism. Oh, but if we are. If we *are* faithful to that calling to manifest the sweet aroma of knowing Christ in every place by preaching the Gospel in every place, then we will know something of the indestructible joy Paul had that sustained him through the deepest of discouragements and afflictions! Let the delightfulness of that blessing entice you to faithfulness!

II. Living Sacrifice (vv. 15–16a)

And so we have seen the rich imagery of the military triumph as an **illustration of the true nature of Christian ministry**. But just as Paul begins using that figure of speech, he switches over to another picture. A **second illustration** that grants insight into **the nature of true Christian ministry** is, **number two**: the imagery of **living sacrifice**. Look with me at verses 15 and 16. Paul writes, "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life."

Paul says, “We are a fragrance of Christ to God.” And this word “fragrance,” is the Greek word *euodía*. In the previous verse, Paul used the term *osmē*, which could, depending on the context, be used to mean either a pleasing aroma or a foul odor. But *euodía* always speaks of a pleasant smell. And the thing: these two words are often used together in Scripture, especially in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where the phrase *osmē euodías* appears more than 50 times. This was the “soothing aroma” that ascended into the nostrils of Yahweh from a sacrifice offered by fire. After the flood, when Noah built an altar and worshiped God by sacrifice, Genesis 8:21 says, “Yahweh smelled the *soothing aroma*; and Yahweh said to Himself, ‘I will never again curse the ground on account of man.’”

And so this language is the language of Old Testament sacrifice. And Paul says, “We, Gospel ministers, are like the sacrificial animal that is hoisted up on the altar, slaughtered to death, and burned as an act of worship to God, who smells the soothing, fragrant aroma of our worship and is pleased.” This is only following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Himself. In Ephesians 5:2, Paul uses that exact Greek phrase from the Old Testament to speak of Christ’s sacrifice of Himself on the cross. He says, “Walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a *fragrant aroma*.” Christ offered Himself to the Father as the sacrificial lamb to atone for the sins of His people. And as the smoke of His sacrifice as it were ascended into heaven, God was pleased with it as with a fragrant aroma.

And though Paul wouldn’t dream of speaking of his self-sacrifice as an *atonement* sacrifice, he nevertheless uses this same imagery of Old Testament worship to speak of the Gospel minister’s entire life being offered up in service to God. Isn’t that what he writes in Romans 12:1? “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” You see, friends, though we as believers share in the triumphal procession of Christ, it is a *spiritual* triumph in the present age. The Christian life *is* a life of victory and triumph, but it is a life of victory and triumph over *sin*; it is not the elimination of every painful circumstance in our lives! In fact it’s the opposite! It means precisely that there *will* be painful circumstances! And as Paul confronts those painful circumstances—and chiefly, in this text, the painful discouragements that accompany Gospel ministry—he reminds himself that he is a living sacrifice to God! His life is dedicated to Christ’s service, no matter where that leads him! And in fact, it will lead him right up to the altar of God, where he must die to himself daily, and as it were be continually consumed by the flames of sacrificial worship! And so he is not surprised by the pain! When the pain comes, he realizes that this is what a life of self-sacrifice is *supposed* to feel like!

And we can take comfort in that same truth. When we face the trials and discouragements that are promised to come to anyone who really devotes himself to Christian ministry, we don’t need to be taken off guard by those afflictions. We expect them! That is what we signed up for! “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow

Me” (Luke 9:23). “Follow You where, Jesus?” The only place anyone takes a cross! To Golgotha! To your death, in service of the people of God. But in addition to battling those discouragements with the reminder that that’s what we signed up for, we can be comforted by the fact that the Christian minister, who offers up his life as a living sacrifice in service of Christ and His people, is pleasing to God—that the soothing aroma that ascends from the sacrifice of our lives pleases the heart of our God. He is honored by a people who esteem the glory of His Son to be so valuable, so worthy, that they are willing to sacrifice *all* their earthly comforts, and lay down their lives in service to Him!

Now notice, that in verse 14, the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ was manifest *through* Paul. But here in verse 15, Paul says that he *himself* is the fragrance. Which is it? Is it the minister himself who is the aroma, or is it the preaching of the Gospel that is the aroma? And the answer to this question shows us a precious implication for the nature of true Christian ministry. I want you to keep a finger here in 2 Corinthians 2, and turn to 1 Corinthians 1:18. Here in our passage, Paul speaks about these two categories of people—those who are being saved, and those who are perishing; we’ll speak about them just a little bit later. So in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul says, “*We* are fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.” But then in 1 Corinthians 1:18, he says, “For *the word of the cross* is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” In 2 Corinthians 2 it is *we* who are the fragrance, but in 1 Corinthians 1 it is the *word of the cross*—the *Gospel*—that is the fragrance.

And what this shows us, friends, is *not* that people can get saved by our noble life just as well as they can get saved by our preaching. No! It is that the entire identity of the true Christian minister is so grounded in the message that he preaches, that Scripture can speak about them as interchangeable! The true minister of the Gospel is so dominated by the Gospel—the Gospel has so permeated every aspect of his life—that to speak of the messenger is to speak of the message! You cut him, and he bleeds Gospel! Glorious! Calvin says, “So [the ministers] themselves have the name of *odor*, not as if they emitted any fragrance of themselves, but because the doctrine which they bring is odoriferous, so that it can imbue the whole world with its delectable fragrance” (159). Charles Hodge wrote, “But it is the apostle not as a man, not the purity or devotion of his life; but the apostle as a preacher of the gospel, and therefore the gospel which he preached” (421). You see, true Christian ministers manifest the fragrance of Christ in their ministry when they are *proclaiming* the Gospel of His salvation! Christian ministry is, preeminently—first of all—a call to proclamation!

So many people these days buy into this bankrupt notion that the Gospel can somehow be preached without words. “Like St. Francis said, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.’” Now, as I’ve said in the past, I get what they’re trying to say: Your life should be consistent with your message. Yes. Amen. But dear friends, your life is *not* your

message! God forbid! Your life is *not* the Gospel! Your life will *not* open blind eyes to the glory of Jesus! So-called “lifestyle evangelism” is not evangelism! You *must* use words! You can’t *evangelize* without proclaiming the *evangel*; and the *evangel*—the Gospel—is not your life! Nobody is going to hang out with you, and think to themselves, “Hmm. You know, this person is always happy. They never use foul language. They’re always so polite and nice to me. I think I’ll repent of my sins.” Not going to happen! The human heart is *so* corrupt that it will not sever its ties with sin unless it is quickened and regenerated by the Gospel of Christ.

Look at what Paul says in verse 17 of our passage. Paul virtually defines his ministry in four prepositional phrases in verse 17. And each of those phrases modifies a particular verb that characterizes Paul’s ministry, and I want you to notice what that is. Here is a literal translation of verse 17 that follows the original word order: “But as from sincerity, but as from God, before God, in Christ, we *speak!*” *This* is the heart and soul of Paul’s ministry: *we speak!* Flip over to 2 Corinthians 4:13. Paul says, “But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, ‘I believed, therefore I spoke,’ we also believe, therefore we also *speak.*”

Dear friends, the Christian ministry is a *speaking* ministry. Let us not fool ourselves into thinking that we can be faithful ministers of Christ if we never open our mouths—whether to a world of lost unbelievers who need to hear the Gospel for their justification, or to a church of yet-sinful believers who need to hear the Gospel as the fuel of their sanctification. We believe, therefore we speak. The soothing aroma that pleases the God to whom we offer our sacrifice of worship is the soothing aroma of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are the fragrance of Christ only to the extent that we preach the message by which Christ is known. We cannot be found unfaithful to this task.

And that is chiefly the case for a very important reason: because the primary audience of our ministry—of our proclamation of the Gospel—is *God Himself*. Look again at verse 15. Paul says, “For we are a fragrance of Christ *to God.*” We are indeed a fragrance of Christ *among* those who are being and those who are perishing; we preach the Gospel *among* people, to be sure. But this text gives us another wonderful implication for Christian ministry. The proclamation of the Gospel of Christ, before it is anything else, is first of all an act of sacrificial worship to God. *God* is the first and primary audience of your preaching. That means that our chief concern in the evaluation of our ministry cannot be the results—how many people got saved through our preaching, how many come to our church, and so on. Our chief concern in the evaluation of our ministry must be **whether we are worshiping God in the way He has appointed**. When we do that, our sacrifice of ministry is a pleasing aroma to God, no matter how many converts we win, how many members are in our church, or how many Twitter followers we have. God doesn’t care about numbers. *Faithfulness*, not *results* is the plumbline of our ministry.

And that's only further certified by the next part of our verse. Look again at verses 15 and 16: "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life." Now even though Paul has transitioned to using imagery from the Old Testament sacrificial system, it seems that he lets some of the figures of the military triumph spill back over into his illustration in this verse.

Remember that in the Roman triumph, *both* the victorious soldiers from the general's army *and* the conquered enemies who were being led as captives to their death were in that processional march. *Both* groups heard the celebratory music. *Both* groups heard the cries of triumph. And *both* groups smelled the fragrance of the incense, and spices, and flowers that were being wafted through the air. To the victorious lieutenants rejoicing in the general's triumph, that fragrance was a pleasant aroma, a sweet smell of victory. But to the captives being led to their execution, that very same fragrance was the very stench of death itself.

Paul says the very same dynamic is at work in the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. Among those who hear the Gospel, there are two kinds of people: (a) those who are being saved and (b) those who are perishing. Now, these are not just throw-away phrases; these are technical terms that identify the elect and the non-elect. We saw them back in 1 Corinthians 1:18, where Paul says, "the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved"—the ones he calls in 1 Corinthians 1:24, "those who are the called"—to those who are called and are being saved, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation. So, "those who are being saved" is a reference to those whom God chose in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him, Ephesians 1:4. And "those who are perishing" is a reference to those whom, in God's inscrutable wisdom and sovereign purpose, He passed over and left in their sins. So Paul is saying: when the Holy Spirit quickens the heart of the elect and they smell the fragrance of the Gospel, it is to them an aroma of life that brings about their destiny unto spiritual life. But when the non-elect hear that very same Gospel, it is an aroma of death that only certifies their certain spiritual destruction.

You see, friends, the reason you can preach the Gospel to two of your friends, and one friend responds and gets gloriously saved and the other friend mocks you and makes fun of you, is *not* because you gave a really slick and clever presentation to the one friend and a really boneheaded presentation to the other. It's not because you were really culturally sensitive to the first friend but culturally irrelevant to the other friend. It's because God has chosen those whom He means to save, friends! And only those whom God has chosen that have a sense of smell that accords with the Gospel of life! They smell the aroma of Jesus, and to them it's like warm apple pie baking in the oven—or the smell of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies wafting through the house. But to those who are perishing, they smell *the very same aroma of Jesus*—they hear the very same Gospel—and it is the putrid odor of death!

This truth is illustrated by others of the five senses in Scripture. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul says those who are perishing are blind to seeing the glory of Christ, and regeneration is God opening our eyes to treasure that glory. In John 10, Jesus says only His *sheep* hear His voice, and regeneration is the opening of the ears to treasure His voice. And so the question for us as we evaluate our ministries is: If only the sheep hear His voice—if only those who are being saved see His glory and love the smell of His fragrance—why would we change any aspect of the message of the Gospel OR the method of our presentation in order to make it more palatable to those who are perishing? Why would we add to or take away from the message that is the fragrance of Christ, if only those whom God means to save will receive Him anyway? With reference to 1 Peter 2:7 and 8, Charles Hodge writes, “As Christ is to some a tried corner stone, elect and precious, the rock of their salvation, to others he is a stone of offence. So the gospel and its ministers are the cause of life to some, and of death to others. . . . The word of God is quick and powerful either to save or to destroy. It cannot be neutral. If it does not save, it destroys” (Hodge, 422).

You see, friends, the doctrine of election *grounds* our ministry in the Word of God. This passage teaches us that *success in Gospel ministry is not measured by numbers, but by faithfulness to the message*. And so in seasons when the harvest is little, we must not retreat to asking what offers the greatest appeal, what will fill the most seats, or what will have the greatest “influence.” We need to remember that we have an audience of One—that God is the primary audience of all our ministry. And so we ask ourselves, “Have we gotten the Gospel right? Are we preaching the message we’ve received? Are we emitting the fragrance of Christ, or the fragrance of our own ideas and philosophies?”

And in seasons of ministerial discouragement, there is nothing more comforting than the fact that the results of ministry are not our responsibility! No matter the results—no matter the chaos that may exist in our ministries at any given time—God is still absolutely sovereign, and will accomplish all of His good pleasure. It is not our job to fix everything. It merely falls to us to be *faithful* to the message that we’ve received, and trust that God’s Word does not return to Him without accomplishing what He desires (Isa 55:10–11).

Conclusion

There’s so much more that can be said, and we’ll look at this text again next time when we examine verses 16 and 17 in detail. But before we go I want to ask you: How does Christ smell to *you*? {Refer to audio for Gospel presentation.}

And to those of us who are drawn to that aroma more than to anything else in the world—those who have given their lives as a sacrificial offering to Christ in the ministry of His Gospel—heed

the lesson Paul teaches us in this text. When your ministry brings with it the inevitable discouragements and afflictions, stop and remember what a glorious privilege it is to be a pleasing aroma to God, and to be in the triumphal procession of our glorious King.