

## 2 Cor 2.12-17 – The aroma of life and death

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Main point – Speaking about Jesus will bring positive and negative responses, but have confidence that God works through you.

When I used to work in the science lab, over 20 yrs ago, I spent a fair bit of time working next to a particular woman, and built a friendship with her. (SLIDE-That pic is not me but it was like that)

Over time I had the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus – how trusting in him saves. She was from a Hindu background, and she got offended when I shared that Jesus says, he is the only way to God.

And I was shocked and saddened that she not only rejected the message, but me.

She stopped talking to me, and told other people how offensive & intolerant I was, turning others against me too. It was tough.-----

It's discouraging when people reject the Gospel, and reject us.

Maybe you find it hard too.

And maybe it makes you want to stay quiet about Jesus.----- (SLIDE)

Or when it comes to sharing about Christ, maybe you think: "I can't do this", or "I feel overwhelmed". Or 'I'm not good enough to do it – I'm a hypocrite'.

But what we see in our passage is that the only reason Paul believes he's up to the task, is that God stands behind him.-----

Our passage gives us realistic expectations for, and encouragement in speaking about Jesus – the one who can give people life.-----

In chapters 1 & 2 Paul's explained why he didn't come to visit the Corinthians again already. (SLIDE)

He didn't want to make another painful visit so soon after writing his tearful letter.

In love, he wanted to give them time to process it & take action.-----

[5pm – At 5pm we had Sam Allberry preaching last Sunday, so I'm sorry you missed Colin's sermon on vv5-11. But you can watch that on Youtube, or see his transcript in the foyer. But as Colin said...]

Paul had challenged the church to take sin seriously, and deal with the man who'd sinned.

Because love means we don't ignore people's sin, or ghost them.

And the church had disciplined him. And the man had repented. And so Paul said the man was forgiven, and should be welcomed back.

For the church needed to be serious about forgiveness too.-----

So remember Paul went to Macedonia before coming to them in southern Greece.

But wherever Paul's gone, he's always **Speaking of Christ, (SLIDE) which is the first point.**

In **v12** Paul says, he came to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ, and the Lord had 'opened a door for me' there.

This 'open door' was a God given opportunity to speak about Jesus in Troas.

But Paul had no rest in his spirit, no peace in his soul, because he didn't find Titus.

He was waiting for Titus to bring back news from Corinth, about how the church had responded to his tearful letter.

Likely after his **Acts 16 vision (SLIDE)** of the man from Macedonia calling him, Paul left for Macedonia, hoping to meet up with Titus there.

And in a few weeks we'll come back to the good news Titus brought in 2 Cor 7.(v5-7)

Yet his restlessness to hear news, tells us that Paul really loved the Corinthians.

And he relied on the help and encouragement of brothers and sisters. We do too.-----

But the point Paul is making is really in **v14.**

Whether Paul is in Troas (Turkey), Macedonia, or Corinth in Greece, God spreads the knowledge about Christ everywhere.

There's been Gospel opportunities and Gospel fruit everywhere.

'thanks be to God, who always leads us in Christ's triumphal procession and through us spreads the aroma of the knowledge of him in every place'.-----

God leads us in Christ's **triumphal procession**.

This image Paul uses is of a Roman victory parade.(SLIDE)

More than 300 such parades are recorded, where a conquering general would enter the city, greeted by all the people celebrating.

The military victory comes and then the victory parade.

And it's like for Christ – his death on the cross has brought victory over sin & death, for all who trust in him.

Christ died but has been raised and he is victorious & glorious.

His victory for us his people is victorious and glorious.-----

Coming back to the grand Roman victory parade, it started with people carrying pictures of the battle and names of conquered cities.

White bulls would follow to be sacrificed to the Roman god Jupiter.

Then came the conquered peoples and their leaders, prisoners of war who faced potential execution.

Fourthly, came the incense bearers producing clouds of aromatic smoke.

This was followed by the general, then others who'd been rescued by the general, and finally the victorious Roman troops.

Bigger n' better than any AFL grand final a parade, this was massive.-----

Now the NIV translation adds the word 'captives', not in the original – Christ leads us as captives in his triumphal procession.

And this may be another paradoxical power in weakness, suffering yet triumph element here, as elsewhere in the letter.

Paul in his preaching and ministry is suffering yet victorious through Christ, and we get to share in his victory.

However, as commentator Gary Millar says, Paul is not likely identifying with the captives - they're about to be executed. The key lies in the group of people in the parade who are often overlooked – the incense bearers.(SLIDE)

Christ, with God the Father, is the triumphant general, we are the incense bearers.

We spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere.

As incense bearers it is our role to spread the good news about Christ, by proclaiming the Gospel, speaking about Jesus.-----

Maybe you're thinking, well that was true for Paul, but not for me.-----

Yes, we all support Gospel ministry and the Gospel going out in different ways – with our gifts, our money, our love, our hospitality, our prayers. We're not all gifted evangelists and preachers.

Yet, in **1<sup>st</sup> Cor 10.33 (SLIDE)** Paul says, 'I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved.

Then he immediately says in **11v1**, 'Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.'

Paul's saying, I seek the good of others, I want them to be saved. Do that too.-----

If Jesus has won the victory over sin & death for us, we should want others to be saved. We should speak of Jesus too.

We're not all public evangelists or preachers, but all who've been saved by Christ can speak about him with others.

As **Becky Pippert** says in Stay Salt,(SLIDE)

"Jesus did not say 'Go therefore all you extraverts, all of you with dynamic communication skills, and all of you gifted as evangelists, and make disciples. The rest of you just hang out, sing some hymns, and wait until I return.' No, Jesus commands and calls every Christian." I'm not wanting to guilt you into speaking.

And yet God wants the salvation of others to matter to us.-----

Does it matter to you?-----

At my last church a **man called Andrew** was a person with an intellectual disability, yet he was just a good friend to people, and an amazing inviter.

Andrew had a simple but real faith in Jesus. And he wanted others to come to know Jesus too.

He'd speak with many people of how Jesus had forgiven his sins, and given him eternal life and they could have that too.

Once or twice a month he'd be bringing someone to church with him – some did not come back, but others kept coming and I read the Bible 1-1 with a few of them.

Some came to trust Jesus.

Andrew couldn't answer their tough questions, but that didn't matter, he wanted them to find salvation like he had – and he was a great example to us all, for me.-----

But how do we go about speaking about Jesus if we're just unsure?

**Doug Pollock** in God Space: Where spiritual conversations happen naturally, helpfully suggests:

We need to realise that if people aren't asking us what we believe, we might be wiser to keep the spotlight on what they believe and think. The secret of being interested in a conversation is to be interested. At the end of the day, I want people to follow Jesus. I want to keep the spotlight on him and what he said.

The most important evangelistic skill is listening.

Doug says, (and I'm guilty of many of these):

When I find myself finishing other peoples' sentences, or giving my opinions before hearing them out, mentally rehearsing what I'm going to say next, interrupting with comments, listening briefly then beginning talking, or answering before gaining real understanding, it often won't help them be open to what I want them to hear.

Let's work at asking questions, like:

- I'm wondering what role religion has played in shaping your life?
- That's interesting, I'm wondering how you arrived at that perspective? Can you tell me more.
- You might talk about someone's career or dream job, or desire for whatever it is, then say, 'I've heard you talking about things you're longing for. I'm wondering if you're searching for something that's able to fill that void?'

Would be happy for me to share about the difference relationship with Jesus has made in my life?-----

If you want to be equipped to reach people with the Gospel, I recommend signing-up for Helen's evangelism training in June.

She will help equip you to answer people's tough questions, and learn how to respond to people's felt needs and issues with the good news of Jesus.-----

So as God gives us opportunities, and opens doors, let's make the most of them (Col 4.5)

God wants to spread the aroma and knowledge of Christ everywhere.

Is there one person coming to mind that you could start with?-----

### **Next, let's consider the Responses.(SLIDE)**

Firstly, God's response, **v15** – 'to God we are the fragrance of Christ'; or pleasing aroma, pleasing smell, of Christ.

This is actually sacrifice language.

**Exodus 29** tells us under the Old Covenant, sacrifices were to be offered in the tabernacle every day – a one-year old lamb in the morning, and one at sunset, 'as a pleasing aroma' offering to the Lord.(**v41.SLIDE**)

When Israelites brought a burnt offering, symbolizing their total devotion to God, it was a 'pleasing aroma to the Lord' (**Lev 1.9**).

The burnt grain offerings gave a pleasing aroma (Lev 2.2).

God likes smells, sweet smelling fragrances.

God doesn't have a nose, but he likes the smell of burnt meat,(**SLIDE**) or the sincere heart of faith that offers it.

Now we are to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices – holy and pleasing to him. (Rom 12.1.SLIDE)-----

All we have, all we do, and all we say, should be to please God.

We are even to speak of his Son, our Lord Jesus, and when we do that, it pleases our God who has shown us such mercy.-----

Now through faith in Jesus we are the beautiful fragrance of Christ to God.-----

Coming back to the Roman triumphant procession – there's two key groups – those who share in the victory, and those captives who'll potentially soon die.

All breathe in the incense. (SLIDE)

But the smell likely brings very different emotional responses.

In v16 the Gospel is breathed in by both those who have opposed the general, King Jesus, and are facing death – to these people our message has the stench of death.

But those who have been rescued by the general would be skipping along, delighting in their newly found freedom.-----

**Fragrances** can be powerful.

Many of us like to wear perfume or a fragrance. Not just women.

Teenage boys and young men are right-into fragrances 😊

Not just the Lynx or David Beckham, but now it's quality fragrances.

Maybe a (SLIDE) Jean Paul Gaultier, Le Male,

But it's not just the teenagers, I don't want to smell bad either.

Most of us prefer to smell nice.

We don't want to turn people off by our smell.

And yet, sometimes a smell does turn people off, or can be a smell of death. (SLIDE)

When I was studying biology at uni in the 90's, in our animal anatomy class we were dissecting a dead **baby crocodile** over many weeks.

One week we'd open our crocodile and investigate the digestive system, next week the heart and lungs, next week the limbs and muscles. And after a month, this dead animal just wreaked, and made many of us nearly vomit.

It was the smell of death

And in 2 Cor 2.16, we're told that the message of Christ is literally a fragrance of death to death. It can smell like death.

And rejecting Jesus it will lead to people's eternal and spiritual death.----(Rev 21.8)

But for others, the message of Christ is an aroma of life – the best, most attractive fragrance they've ever smelt; like good news that's music to their ears.

And to those hear the message of Jesus as good news and trust in him, it gives life, eternal life.-----

People respond to the Gospel in different ways.

It was like Paul said in 1 Cor 1.18, the Gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing, but the power of God to us who are being saved.

In 2 Cor the theme continues (SLIDE) – in ch 3 we're told of a veil over peoples' hearts.

And in ch4, the god of this age has blinded unbelievers' minds to the gospel.-----

So many people will respond negatively, but others positively, by God's grace.

We need to have **realistic expectations**. (SLIDE)

Not everyone will be glad to hear that they have sinned, and Jesus is Lord not you. But he died so that all who trust him can have eternal life, fulfilment and joy in relationship with God, now in part, and perfectly in the future.

Have you believed in Jesus?

Because whether you get life or death depends on your response to Jesus.---

There's only 2 groups, 2 options, 2 destinies – life or death, there's no neutral.---

And **Isaiah 55** which we read earlier (SLIDE) is your invitation, to come and receive life and fullness, as a free gift.-----

And if we have come, and been saved by Jesus, God wants us to trust that the Gospel is powerful to save others. (Rom 1.16)

Some will reject Jesus like he's a stinky dead animal. But others will turn to him for life.-----

God's word will accomplish all he purposes. (SLIDE)

To some spiritually thirsty people, Jesus is good news, and soul satisfying water. God's word will not achieve nothing, but accomplish all that God chooses.-----  
 Whether it goes out on youtube, from a preacher, or from your lips, God's message about Jesus is powerful to save people, and will save some.(cf. Mk 4.8)  
 Do you believe that?  
 God says it is so, so Believe that brothers and sisters!  
 When speaking about Jesus, expect people to respond differently, but to some it will be the fragrance of life.-----

### **Third brief point is, the Temptation.(SLIDE)**

Having just said that the message about Christ will be like the best or worst smell for people, and mean life or death, it's huge.

The consequences are huge.

So in **v16** Paul asks, 'Who is adequate for these things?' Who's sufficient, who can do this? When we think about people needing the Gospel, or rejecting the Gospel, or experiencing heaven or hell as a result, we can feel our inadequacy. I do.

When we focus on ourselves we may feel we cannot do it.

We sense our weakness in this, don't we?

But look at what Paul says. He asks who is adequate for these things, and effectively says, 'we are'; by God's enabling.-----

**V17** We do not market or peddle the word of God for profit like so many.

We'll hear more about this later in the letter, but back in 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth other preachers and 'super-apostles' preached for money.

But Paul is saying, he and Timothy are sincere.

Andy spoke about that word two weeks ago in 1v12.

That transparent integrity is what Paul assures them of.

He's saying, 'You guys know, we don't have hidden agendas or selfish motives.'

We speak with sincerity in Christ, and our sufficiency comes from him.

We speak 'from God and before God'.

That is, God has sent us and enabled us.

And God sees it. It's done for him, to please him.-----

So even when we speak of Jesus, we shouldn't go, 'Yeh I did well, I'm amazing'.

No, God sends, sees, and enables by the Spirit of Christ in us.

Really, God does it through us. He 'leads us' in this, like v14 said.

Our sufficiency comes from God not us.-----

The temptation in speaking about Christ is to shrink back from it and stay silent; or to do it for selfish reasons – maybe not for money, but to take credit for saving people.

But Paul is saying the strength, sincerity and ability is all from God.

God enables us 'in Christ'.---(SLIDE)

So when you sense your weakness, let it lead you to rely on God.-----

As I close I bring you back to the image of the incense bearer.

The incense bearer doesn't have to create the aroma – he or she just shows up and holds up the incense, and the smoke does the rest. And that is the role that God gives to us.

Are we up to the task of Gospel ministry?----

If we prepared to speak of Christ about Christ with sincerity, then yes we are – because when we speak the Gospel it is God who speaks through us.

Who is sufficient for this?--- We are. Because God speaks through the gospel.

It's good to remember this next time you think you have nothing to say to your friends who aren't Christian. Or next time you're finding anxiety or a sense of dread in your stomach before you speak in church, or to your family member, when that voice in your head shouts, 'Who do you think you are? Do you think anyone will listen, or believe you?'

The great news is that speaking about Jesus isn't really about us. Our sufficiency isn't based on us. It's based on the aroma of Christ which God spreads everywhere through the Gospel, and through us.

It's not about our giftedness, personality, confidence or knowledge. It's about God speaking in Christ through us.-----

What we've read today is encouraging, freeing and motivating. I hope you see it that way.

Evangelism is not too hard for you Christian, because while people will respond in different ways, and sometimes reject the message and reject us, God saves people through it.

It's a privilege to spread the powerful news of Christ's life-giving victory.-----

So what fragrance will you waft out this week?

Let's pray