

The Fragrance of Faithful Service:
How to Smell Good for the Lord (2 Cor. 2:14-5:10)
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Introduction

They say that the sense of smell evokes memories more readily than the other senses. Even though my sense of smell is much less perceptive than my wife's (I think she can smell a mouse in the house), I have a lot of vivid memories attached to smells. Some of them aren't very positive memories.

- dead cat when I was a kid on the way to school
- the smell and taste of freshly prepared tortillas in Mexico
- outdoor markets that seemed to smell like a dead cat in one of the foreign countries where I spent time as a kid
- the smell of fresh bread wafting from the many neighborhood bakeries in Chile
- following a truck carrying dead animals along north Glenstone Ave
- a dead squirrel in the attic of our Virginia home
- freshly baked cookies (a fairly regular occurrence at the Smith house, except in hot weather)

14 Now thanks *be* to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. 15 For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. 16 To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life. And who *is* sufficient for these things? 17 For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

The imagery of smell represents a life of faithful witness to the Lord (2:14-16).

Paul appeals to the imagery of scent in 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, which introduces the following chapters. In fact, he uses two words for smells in these verses: one a neutral term and the other denoting a fragrant smell.

- *osme* (v. 14, “fragrance”; v. 16, “aroma”)—an odor or a fragrance, including that which is emitted from a sacrificial offering (Eph. 5:2; Phil. 4:18) or a perfume (John 12:3)
“The same Greek word (ὀσμή, *osmh*) translated “odor” here (in relation to the stench of death) has been translated ‘fragrance’ in 2:14 and in the next phrase of the present verse. The word itself can describe a smell or odor either agreeable or disagreeable depending on the context (L&N 79.45)” (*NET Bible*, notes on 2 Cor. 2:16).
- *euodia* (v. 15, “fragrance”)—a sweet smell (Eph. 5:2; Phil. 4:18)

Surprisingly, Paul speaks of Christ's servants producing a smell that simultaneously gives life and bears the stench of death. Paul also introduces another key concept in these verses—that of sufficiency or adequacy (v. 16). Specifically, he asks who is adequate, who is equal to the task of

disseminating a message that has such potent effects. To be sure, Paul is speaking primarily of apostles and other Christian ministers, but the principles he shares are applicable to anyone who desires to serve the Lord.

Paul answers the question, “Who is sufficient?” in the chapters to follow (2:16).

“Behind Paul’s thought in both these verses may be the rabbinic concept of the Law as simultaneously life-giving and death-dealing. . . . Just as the Torah had a beneficial effect upon those who received and obeyed it and a lethal effect upon those who rejected it, so the proclaimers of Christ are a ‘life-giving perfume’ to those who believe the gospel and so are being saved and at the same time a ‘death-dealing drug’ to those who repudiate it and so are perishing (vv. 15b, 16a; cf. 1Cor 1:18, 23, 24)” (Harris, notes on 2:15-16a).

What does it take to be the kind of person who spreads the influence of Christ as effectively as a strong smell—whether good or bad—can fill a room or even a larger space? And who is equal to the task of presenting a message that is a matter of life or death? In the following chapters Paul shares four principles that will enable our lives to carry the fragrance of faithfulness—in short, to smell good for the Lord.

Principle #1: Trust that God will equip you to fulfill your calling (3:1-18).

1 Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some *others*, epistles of commendation to you or *letters* of commendation from you? 2 You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; 3 clearly *you are* an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, *that is*, of the heart.

4 And we have such trust through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as *being* from ourselves, but our sufficiency *is* from God, 6 who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

[. . .]

“Paul’s confidence before God in claiming that the Corinthians were a letter written by Christ validating his apostolic credentials came through Christ (v. 4). It was not the product of a pious wish or imagination. Still speaking of this confidence before God, he disowns any ability to form a competent judgment on the results of his own ministry or any personal right to lay claim to the results of what was in reality God’s work. His qualification and source of competence for the work of the ministry, including the assessment of its success, were not natural ability or personal initiative but divine enabling. Paul’s confidence came through Christ, his competence from God, and he says all this against the background of his opponents’ claim to be self-sufficient” (Harris, notes on 3:4-5).

Competence for service comes from God (3:4-6).

God is the one who makes us equal to the task of serving him; God's calling is God's enabling.

The ability to lead is God-given. For the Christian leader, competence is not just a matter of innate gifts; rather, it is rooted in his relationship with Christ. Understanding this, the leader must avoid the pitfalls of self-centeredness and pride (3:4-6; cf. 4:1).

Confidence in service comes through successful experience (3:1-4).

People—not documents—are the greatest evidence of leadership. Letters of reference cannot match the credibility of a widespread reputation of effective service. Thus a competent leader does not have to draw attention to himself through artificial means (3:1-3).

If we want to verify that someone is qualified for spiritual leadership, we should look for evidence that God is using them to make a difference in others.

How often do we fail to share the gospel or undertake some form of Christian service because we are focused on our limited abilities rather than the power of God?

Are we focused on building our reputation or serving God?

We fail to rely on God, simply wandering off into "service" without seeking his face.

Principle #2: Devote yourself to the truth of the gospel (4:1-6).

1 Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. 2 But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. 3 But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, 4 whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. 5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. 6 For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Devotion to the gospel entails perseverance and integrity (4:1-2).

A leader must conduct himself with integrity before his followers as well as God, renouncing shameful and deceptive tactics and declaring the truth plainly (4:2).

Not everyone will believe our witness (4:3ff).

We should not be self-centered, but mission-driven (4:5).

A leader is not self-centered, but mission-driven. He does not seek others' praise and service, but offers himself as a servant to those whom he seeks to lead. A minister of the gospel proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord, recognizing that his own importance is far outweighed by that of the message he bears (4:5).

The movie *Faith like Potatoes* tells the real-life story of a farmer in South Africa whose life was transformed by God's grace. He became a lay preacher and saw God work miracles through faith—even while doctrinally sound churches sat by in disbelief.

How often do we look at human problems and suppose that politics, finances, medicine, counseling, etc. hold the answers to those problems? God offers a simple message: Believe and see (vv. 3-6).

Principle #3: Look past present sufferings to see God's glory (4:7-18).

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 *We are* hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So then death is working in us, but life in you.

[. . .]

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward *man* is being renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory, 18 while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen *are* temporary, but the things which are not seen *are* eternal.

Suffering for Christ can bring benefit to others (4:8-12).

Our weaknesses remind us that we stand only in God's strength.

Suffering is an ever-present reality in the life of God's servant, but it need not lead to despair.

A spiritual leader is strengthened for ministry despite his personal weaknesses and adverse circumstances. In fact, it is in precisely such a context that God can receive the credit for delivering his servant (the leader). Thus, identification with Jesus' death through suffering yields a demonstration of his life-giving power in the experience of the leader—a process which ultimately engenders life among his followers (4:7-12; cf. 13:4).

We need daily renewal to focus on the eternal and invisible (4:16-18).

A spiritual leader is able to persevere in the face of adversity—and even death—in the hope of eventual resurrection. He recognizes that his efforts ultimately bring glory to God. He overcomes external circumstances through daily spiritual renewal. He keeps the eternal and unseen in perspective, enabling him to overlook troubles that are, by comparative standards, light and temporary (4:13-18).

“The deeper [Paul's] experience of the trials and sufferings of the apostolic life, the richer their experience of the joys and privileges of Christian existence (cf. Col 1:24; 2Tim 2:10)” (Murray, notes on 4:12).

“Rather movingly, the apostle reminds his converts that he endures all his addictions with resilience, not to promote his own good but for their benefit (cf. 4:5), and ultimately for God’s glory. As God’s grace expanded in their hearts and through them reached ever-increasing numbers, so too, the volume of thanksgiving to God for the receipt of illumination (cf. 4:6) would increase and promote the glory of God” (Murray, notes on 4:15).

Principle #4: Anticipate your future with God (5:1-10).

1 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. [. . .] 5 Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

6 So *we are* always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. 7 For we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.

9 Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

The Spirit’s presence in our lives assures us of a future resurrection (5:1, 5).

Nevertheless, we rest in this assurance by faith.

A spiritual leader longs for future redemption—being clothed with a heavenly, immortal body (5:1-8).

We are accountable to the Lord, so we seek to please him in this life (5:9-10).

We anticipate being present with the Lord. All believers will give account of themselves before Christ; indeed we will be rewarded for our deeds, whether good or bad.

A leader recognizes that he is first accountable to God—not to his human superiors, or even to his followers. Knowing that his every action will eventually be judged, he consistently seeks to please God. Though he is sensitive to his followers’ consciences, he is more motivated by reverential fear toward God (5:9-11; cf. 8:21; 12:19).

“Paul is not repudiating any interest in the visible world. Rather, he is affirming that his affections are set ‘on things above’ (Col 3:1, 2), on lasting realities as yet unseen, on the age to come that is present in promises and blessings still to be fully realized. The antithesis is temporal and eschatological, not essential and philosophical” (Murray, notes on 4:18).

Conclusion: Good smell or bad smell?

- Relying on the promises of an invisible God rather than trusting in what we can perceive with our senses
- Believing a “foolish” message about a Jewish teacher whose madness led him to be crucified
- Enduring abundant sufferings through confidence in God’s eternal purposes
- Looking forward toward what is unseen—the resurrection of the body and the judgment of earthly works

“If Jesus is taken to be a dead Jew and nothing more the message about him will be rejected, and those who reject it will become as dead as they suppose Jesus to be. If however he is recognized as ‘Christ Jesus—who died, or rather was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who actually is interceding on our behalf’ (Rom. viii.34), he becomes the source of life” (Barrett 101).

In the Pixar movie *Ratatouille*, a rat named Remy had a unique gift: his senses of taste and smell were the most perceptive in his colony. His father put him to work as a food-sniffer, ferreting out safe food from that which was tainted with rat poison. The rest of the rats would have regarded poisoned food as acceptable—even delectable. But to Remy such food smelled deadly. No matter how any rat perceived the poisoned food, each one who ate it would have suffered the same deadly fate. The Scripture text we have examined today conveys a similar concept. Those who represent Jesus Christ carry a singular “smell” that attracts some and repels others. Everyone who rejects him will suffer eternally, but everyone who accepts him will inherit eternal life. God wants us to live so as to advertise our smell. Not all will be attracted to it, but those that do will never be the same.

Sources

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Harris, Murray J. “2 Corinthians.” Vol. 10 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: With the New International Version of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976.

NET Bible

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