

Fragrance
2 Corinthians 2:12-17

Friends, I'm not sure if we realize how intimidating it can be to just show up to visit on a Sunday morning at a small local church?

Even the most self-assured and confident among us can feel awkward and out of place when you walk up to the front door of their building and you see people looking at you, wondering who you are and why you would be at their little church.

I've certainly visited enough small local churches while I've been on vacation to know what that feels like and if you've ever tried to make time for worship on a Sunday morning while you are vacationing up in cottage country, or in the lake country in rural Minnesota like my family used to do – then you know what I'm talking about.

If you haven't - well then just remember what it was like when you were the new kid at a new school, or walking into your workplace on the first day you started your new job...

You feel very self-conscious because you are new and you don't really belong there yet, and all these people are looking at you, sizing you up, looking at what you are wearing, taking stock of who you are – or worse perhaps they don't even notice you...

But it's Sunday morning and that means that you are going to find a church and worship Christ – remembering that Jesus said we will have troubles in this world, but to take heart because He has overcome this world - so you take a deep breath and put your best foot forward and smile back and hope they are friendly as well.

So, my whole family – Dad, Mom, myself and my three sisters had filed into this little country church somewhere in the middle of nowhere in northern Minnesota and we sat down in the pew and waited for the service to begin.

And as my mom tells the story, shortly after the service started the people sitting in front and behind us started to look a bit puzzled – as if they were catching a whiff of

something and they couldn't quite tell where it was coming from.

But my Mom knew right away what it was and where it was coming from – it was the smell of skunk and it was coming from our family!

You see the previous night my family and all our relatives had enjoyed BBQ ribs for dinner and all the bones leftovers had been thrown into the garbage can - behind our cabin – not thinking about the fact that this might attract animals.

So, somewhere around midnight, my dad wakes up to hear some animal making a terrible racket getting into the garbage and he decides to grab a broom and go out and give them pesky racoons what for... not thinking it would be anything else.

So, broom in hand he goes out behind the cabin and sure enough, he sees the garbage can tipped over and the “racoons” inside it, and he winds up and goes all “Jose Canseco” on it.

Unfortunately the animal inside the garbage can was a skunk, and that skunk let loose and sprayed all over the back of the cabin with our open windows.

We spend the entire next day washing and cleaning and doing laundry. My mom even fried bacon and fish all day to introduce other strong smells to fight the skunk odor.

And she did a pretty good job too – we thought we had gotten rid of all of it.

But there we were, sitting in church that Sunday morning... and the people around us were definitely catching a whiff of skunk – you could see it on their faces and they were looking around trying to figure out where this smell was coming from.

Very quickly my mom figured out that while she had managed to clean pretty much everything in the cabin – she had forgot about her vinyl purse, and as you may know vinyl and plastic tend to absorb and retain odors rather well – especially skunk!

So, very casually, she adjusted herself in the pew, leaned forward and slid her purse behind her back, and slowly leaned back on it - and remained seated for the rest of the service!

Because friends, there's nothing quite as embarrassing and mortifying as when you smell something awful – and you realize that it's coming from you!

Of course this is why there is a multi-billion dollar industry around personal hygiene – nobody wants to be the one that stinks – and so we have deodorant, antiperspirant, scented bodywash and soap, perfume, cologne and even Febreze!

We want to smell pleasant, fragrant – like an alpine meadow, or an Irish spring, or lavender potpourri.

But I wonder friends, when we reach for that deodorant in the morning, when we choose whatever perfume or cologne we are going to wear – do we ever think about what it is that makes us smell like Christ?

Because the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2:14 *“But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.”*

Friends, the truth is that as we go about our daily business we give off a “spiritual scent” and the people around us can “smell it” and it is a good indication of whether we are who we claim to be or not...

As the saying goes “if it walks like a duck, talks like a duck, and we can add - and smells like a duck.... then it must be a duck!”

However the church in Corinth was having some doubts as to whether or not Paul, their founding apostle smelled like a duck, so to speak.

As you may be aware, the Corinthians were Paul’s most challenging congregation and he frequently had to write them to admonish and correct them about matters of proper

teaching and Christian living - so there was always a bit of tension between Paul and his congregation in Corinth.

And after writing we call 1 Corinthians to them, Paul promised that he was going to come and visit them and spend some time with them in his role as their overseer.

“After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go.” (1 Cor 16:5-6)

Now this visit never happened, instead Paul sent another letter to Corinth – harshly rebuking them about some additional issues.

So their relationship was a bit strained, and it would be easy for the Corinthians to feel like Paul had abandoned them, that he really had no idea about the issues which he had written them about, and that he was neglecting his duties as their

apostle and instead travelling around to wherever it was that he felt like going.

So vs. 14 is part of Paul’s efforts to commend himself to as the apostle to the Corinthians, showing that he does pass the “smell test” in spite of his failure to visit, and that he is indeed their legitimate apostle and that part of the reason he has not visited yet is because this tension needs to be resolved before he comes otherwise the visit will not be productive or helpful to either of them.

Thus in 2:1-2 he says *“So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?”*

And in vs. 12-13 he explains just how dedicated He is to them by telling them that he turned down an opportunity to start another church in Troas in order to go and left to go find Titus in Macedonia who was coming to report to Paul on how things were going in Corinth.

“I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my bother Titus there, so I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia”

And that bring us to verses 14-17 where Paul starts using the smell analogy to offer additional proof to the Corinthians that he walks like an apostle, he talks like an apostle, and he smells like an apostle – so he most certainly is their apostle.

Let me read it for you...

“¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us [Himself, Timothy and other genuine apostles] as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are to God the pleasing fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶ To the one we are a fragrance that brings death; to the other, a fragrance that brings life. And who is equal to such a task? ¹⁷ Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.”

So friends – now that we know the context of what was going on, we can understand what Paul is talking about here.

His travel plans are not random choices – he is in fact part of Christ’s victory procession that goes where Christ takes it and as a result Paul spreads the gospel message wherever it takes him.

And while Paul is concerned about the Corinthians recognizing him as their legitimate apostle and he will make his case for that - in the end, what matters most to him is that God finds him having been faithful to his call to preach the gospel.

And if the Corinthians have a problem with Paul’s or anyone else’s faithful gospel ministry - if they think it stinks... then they need to be made aware, that is an indication that they are not among those who are being saved as they might think, but among those who are perishing...

So friends – the verse that the Holy Spirit wants us to focus on this morning is this; *“For we are to God the pleasing fragrance*

of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.” (2 Cor 2:15)

In other words what matters most is how you smell to God!

Paul’s faithful service and obedience to his calling as an apostle of the gospel of Jesus makes him smell like Christ to God, and is a pleasant smell to God.

In the same way friends, when we put our faith and our trust in Jesus Christ, when we live our lives to be obedient to Christ, when we worship and praise and honor Jesus Christ – we smell like Christ to God – and that is pleasing to Him!

And that is what matters most.

And it’s important that we are reminded of that because we often become more concerned with how we smell to others – because as I pointed out at the beginning of this message, nobody likes to discover that other people think they stink!

And as we go about our daily lives, the temptation is always there to roll about in the same moral mud as everyone else in order to disguise the fragrance of Christ that comes from us.

We’re tempted to curse and swear like everyone else, laugh at their dirty jokes, pass on the office gossip, and so on...

We’re tempted to nod in agreement when everyone else says that all religions lead to God, that same-sex relationships are ok, that what is most important in life is being true to yourself...

Because if we speak up and disagree, well... we’ll find out pretty quickly what it’s like to be the skunk at the garden party.

The fragrance of Christ is sweet and pleasing to God and to those who are being saved... but to those who are not, it is terribly offensive! As Paul says *“to those who are perishing we are the smell of death...”* (vs.16)

So friends as much as we might be concerned about not wanting to be a stench to those we live and work and play with... we ought to be more concerned that we don't stink to God!

And so as we are getting ready at the start of the day and we reach for our deodorant and we put on our cologne or perfume to make us fragrant... I'll reiterate what I said earlier... do we ever think about what we can apply that will make us smell like Christ for the rest of the day?

Let me give you a suggestion- what about Garlic?

Using G.A.R.L.I.C as an acronym can help us remember that it is Grace And Righteousness and our Life In Christ that helps us give off the aroma, the fragrance of Christ each and every day.

And, not only is garlic a handy acronym – it's also a good illustration of what it means to smell like Christ.

Because if you cook with and eat lots of garlic or if you take garlic pills for health reasons - you will actually start to give off the smell of garlic...

And just like the smell of Christ – the smell of garlic divides people into two groups. People who don't mind garlic are normal people, while those who have a strong aversion to it are usually vampires... 😊

Seriously though - anyone else who likes garlic as much as you do won't find your odor offensive at all, but those who don't like garlic will find you rather pungent and unpleasant!

Now, in order to give off the scent of garlic you have to ingest it, and you can do this by mixing it into whatever you eat or by taking garlic pills, and in many ways that's kind of like how we take Christ into our lives.

When we eat the Lord's Supper – through the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit – we are taking Christ into us so that, as

I often say before we partake, that our life is in Him and His life is in us.

You see The Lord's Supper is much more than the occasion where we mentally acknowledge that Jesus died for us. It is the means by which the Holy Spirit fills us with the life of Christ.

And without getting all superstitious or ritualistic, the more we partake in the Lord's Supper by faith, the more our lives will start to give off the fragrance of what we are ingesting... our Lord Jesus Christ.

And similarly friends, when we read and meditate on verses of scripture, through the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God causes our faith in Jesus Christ to grow – and this kind of like popping garlic pills, we're ingesting Christ in concentrated form!

So in between the times when we eat the Lord Supper, we can continue to take Christ into our lives by "popping a scripture

verse" every day by spending time reading the bible – just like we would take a garlic pill each day.

And it's so easy to do, there's all sorts of devotionals you can get – you can even set one up to go off in the morning on your smart phone so that as soon as you wake up you are taking a scripture verse to think about during the rest your day.

Or if you don't do smart phones, go old school and write down a verse on a piece of paper and tape it to your bathroom mirror. Pick a verse that speaks to something you are struggling with that doesn't smell pleasant to God – for example lying and gossiping.

Psalm 15:1-3 addresses this issue, so you would write down *"Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others"* and you would tape this to the mirror.

And then when you are standing there getting ready in the morning and you're putting on your perfume or cologne, you can read that verse out loud.

Ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of that verse during the day to help you tell the truth and refrain from gossip and in this way you are giving off the fragrance of Christ...

Or perhaps you need to write down *"Grace is when you get something GOOD that you don't deserve"* and stick it on your dashboard to remind you not to honk and make rude gestures to all the terrible drivers who deserve it – but you're reminded to say a prayer for them instead, so that you are giving off the fragrance of Christ...

Or when you have given in to temptation, when you've sinned and done something wrong and failed to stay loyal and righteous to God. Instead of punishing yourself and vowing that you'll do something to try to make up for it, simply ask God to forgive you because of Christ's sacrifice

These are all easy ways to take Jesus Christ into your life – just like we would ingest garlic in our food or by taking pills - so that He is in our life more and more and we start give off the fragrance of Christ in all that think and say and do.

So friends just remember - G.A.R.L.I.C: Grace and Righteousness Life In Christ!

You know, it pretty embarrassing it is to find out that you stink, and it's even more embarrassing to find out you stink in church.

So friends, I'm sure you can appreciate that our motivation to take Christ into our lives more and more comes from the fact that one day we will stand before God in heaven... and what we want to hear him say before all the saints and the angels is *"ahh, the pleasing fragrance of Christ, well done good and faithful servant!"* not "holy smokes - something stinks to high heaven and its you!" Because friends - what matters most is how we smell to God!

Amen.