

**SERIES: Power through Weakness**

**SERMON: How Do You Smell?**

**SCRIPTURE: 2 Cor. 2:12-17**

**SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus**

**DATE: October 9, 2005**

Last December our church staff had its annual Christmas party. We did one of those white elephant gift exchanges where a person opens a gift, but if he doesn't want it, he can take someone else's gift or pick out a new one. Well, the wife of one of our pastors, who shall remain anonymous for reasons you will shortly understand, opened a box of scented candles. She was having some bad sinus trouble, and after sniffing the candles she said, "I don't smell very good." What she meant, of course, is that she couldn't distinguish one odor from another, but her dear, always encouraging, always uplifting husband (whose initials are Dick High) immediately remarked, "Maybe you should take a bath." And for the rest of the evening she was the brunt of much good-natured kidding. In fact, to this day it is not unusual for one of the pastors to ask Sheri, "How do you smell today?" (She's got a wonderful attitude, by the way, and tolerates these brutes quite well!). And, by the way, she also gave me permission to tell this story.

The Scriptures do not often ask us to think about the aroma we exude, but in 2 Corinthians 2 the Apostle Paul does just that. He challenges us with what I like to call "the doctrine of smell," and it has nothing to do with how our sinuses are working; rather it has everything to do with the spiritual odor we are producing. Let's begin by reading our Scripture text, 2 Cor. 2:12-17:

*Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia.*

*But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.*

### **Paul found discouragement despite an open door. (12, 13)**

Have you ever done a study of "open doors" in the New Testament? In Acts 14:27 Paul returns from his first missionary journey to report how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. In Col. 4:3 he asks for prayer "that God may open a door for our message." We might be tempted to define an open door as a path that has been cleared of obstacles. But that would not be completely accurate. In 1 Cor. 16:9 Paul is explaining to the Corinthians why he has delayed a planned visit to them, and he says, "I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." Obviously, an open door cannot be equated with an absence of obstacles or opposition; rather an open door is simply a call of God to share the truth whether there is opposition or not.

Returning to 2 Cor. 2:12, 13, we find that Paul has gone to Troas, north of Ephesus on the coast of Turkey, and the Lord has opened a door of ministry for him there. But then in the very next verse Paul says, "I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-by to them and went on to Macedonia." Now I want to share a conviction I have—that

Paul was not always right in his actions. When he was writing Scripture he had the unique ministry of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that enabled him to write truth and nothing but the truth, but Paul was human and sometimes made mistakes in his personal life, and I suspect this was one of those times.

God opened a door for him to preach the Gospel, but he didn't take it. Instead he moved on to Macedonia, hoping to find his friend Titus so he could get word about how the church at Corinth was doing. Was this what we would call a wilful sin or a purposeful act of disobedience? No, I don't think so. I suspect it was more in the nature of a lack of faith that gripped him in a weak moment and caused him to seek his own personal peace of mind over a ministry opportunity. But at least he was honest about it. Paul makes no pretense of invincibility. He says in effect, "I was so worried I couldn't concentrate on ministry, and I left." I like what J. Philip Arthur says about this incident:

*If the church of Christ is to survive well into the third millennium, one vital component of her well-being will be the quality of her leadership. (Now you might expect Arthur to say, "We need leaders who take advantage of the doors God opens," but he doesn't. Instead here's what he says). Which would you prefer—a leader who exudes an aura of strength, or one who makes no attempt to conceal his weaknesses? Which of the two is more likely to rely on God? And what about ourselves? How far are we like Paul? Are we real, or do we pretend?<sup>i</sup>*

Paul was honest about his weakness. But I discover a very encouraging truth in the next verse, namely that God doesn't abandon us when we fail to walk through open doors. He doesn't say, "Well, I gave you an opportunity and you didn't take it, so I'm through with you." Thank goodness! On the contrary, God keeps opening doors for us, leading us, guiding us, encouraging us, especially when He perceives that our hearts are right toward Him.

### **Paul found encouragement in the continual leading of a sovereign God. (14-16a)**

Verse 14 reads, "But thanks be to God who always leads us . . ." We don't always follow, but God always leads. We don't always see the path clearly, but God works all things after the counsel of His own will and for our good. We usually see His leading easier after the fact than during the process, but it's always there. I'll share a case in point. Two years ago this past week I had a great deal of unrest in my own heart about the ministry in St. Louis where I had been serving for almost 20 years. I was in Arkansas on my study month and had driven to Kansas City for a speaking engagement. Since I was so close to Wichita I called Dan Wilson to see if I could stop by for a visit and spend the night. He said it would be great because a few of the Elders wanted to meet with me anyway.

To make a long and complicated story as short and simple as possible, out of that meeting came an invitation to return to Wichita as interim pastor. That was not an easy decision; I wrestled a lot trying to discern God's will in the matter. There were so many issues to consider—should we walk away from 20 years' worth of relationships in St. Louis, what about our four grandkids who lived a mile from us, how long would it be before the search committee found a new pastor and

then what, should we buy a home in the face of such uncertainty, etc.? As has often happened in my life, I had to make a decision without a clear understanding as to what the will of God was. But I see God's leading in retrospect very clearly. I am absolutely convinced today that this is where we should be at this point in our lives. We have fallen in love all over again with this church and even with Wichita. Would God have blessed us if we had stayed in St. Louis? Probably. But I am so thankful that He led us as He did.

Twenty-five years ago I found a book that has been on my Top Ten list ever since—*Decision Making and the Will of God*, by Gary Friesen and Robin Paxson, a fellow-student from seminary and a fellow-Free Church pastor. The theme of the book is that finding the will of God is not like aiming at a target and suffering His second-best or third-best if we miss the bull's eye. Rather it is primarily making sure that our decisions are in keeping with the parameters of His Word, and then using the wisdom he has given us and the godly counselors He has put in our path to make a wise decision. I believe that's the principal way God leads His people.

Paul was thankful for God's leading in two primary ways:

**God leads us to promised victory in Christ.** “God always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.” *Christus Victor* was the battle cry of the early church. The picture Paul paints here is one of the ancient Roman legions coming back from victory against one of their enemies.<sup>ii</sup> When a Roman general gained a significant victory over the barbarians who menaced the borders of the empire, the emperor would reward his achievement by granting him a parade in his honor. The victorious general would ride in a chariot at the head of a long procession thronged by cheering crowds. Behind him came the regiments in their finest uniforms, their standards adorned with new battle honors. Then came wagons loaded with the spoils of war, and bringing up the rear were captured enemy soldiers in chains, destined for execution or slavery.

To Paul the progress of the Gospel resembled one of these triumphal processions. Obviously he is taking the long view, because at any given point of time there may be as much that looks like defeat as looks like victory in the ministry, but he knew that ultimately Christ would be victorious. He knew that he was participating as a common foot-soldier in a parade that focused glory and honor on his commander.

**God leads us to spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.** First-century parades could not only be heard and seen; they could also be smelled. It was the custom of the Romans to burn incense on either side of the processional route, and the general and his troops would make their way through clouds of it. Paul continues his illustration: “God always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.”

Spreading the fragrance speaks of influence, and we need to realize that everywhere we go we are influencing the world's attitude toward Christ. That is a solemn responsibility. If our lives are attractive, if we care about people because they are created in the image of God, if we are hard workers and responsible citizens, we will tend to draw people to the Savior. On the other hand, if

we are obnoxious, selfish, greedy, negative, or manipulative, and if at the same time people are aware that we claim to be followers of Christ, we can do irreparable harm to His cause. Whether we like it or not, everyday we are spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.

However, it is to God that the fragrance of our lives is ultimately directed. Look at verse 15: “For we are *to God* the aroma of Christ.” Although we share the Gospel with people, it is in reality God who is our audience. Pleasing Him should be the passion of our lives. It was for Paul. Again and again He stresses that he is not a man-pleaser but a God-pleaser. For example, in 1 Thes. 2:4-6 he claims, “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else.” And in Galatians 1:10 he asks, “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

The fact that our ultimate responsibility is to smell good *to God* is a critical concept for us to grasp, because Paul warns us that people will react differently to us depending upon where they are coming from, or better, where they are going, and we can easily be discouraged by this fact if we don't keep our focus on God. Let's read the rest of verse 15 and 16, too. “For we are *to God* the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”

To the soldiers and the jubilant spectators of the Roman victory parade, the smell of incense was associated with the heady excitement of victory. However, to the prisoners of war bringing up the rear, the same scent had a vastly different significance. The very best they could hope for was slavery; more likely execution. What spoke of success and celebration to one group spoke of defeat and death to the other.

I think Paul is trying to communicate this basic truth: *We shouldn't smell the same to everyone.* We should smell like death to those who hate Christ and His truth; we should smell like life to those who see their need of a Savior and respond. Let me explore that idea a little further with you by noting that sadly many professing Christians smell the same all the time.

**1. Sadly some people stink it up spiritually all the time.** There are those who profess the name of Christ but smell like death to everyone—believer and unbeliever alike. I can't help but think of the Phelps family and their followers up in Topeka. With their signs that “God hates faggots” and their bitter denunciations of anyone who doesn't follow their narrow portrayal of Christianity, they have an impact for Christ that is almost universally negative—to both believers and unbelievers alike. I cannot imagine how anyone could come to know the God of grace through that kind of approach. Other Christians stink it up with their demanding personalities, their sour-puss attitudes, their legalism, their laziness.

**2. Others are so sweet it's sickening.** You've met Christians who are just sugary sweet with everyone and about everything. In the October 3 issue of *U. S. New & World Report* there is an interview with the “smilin' preacher,” Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church in Houston, who never

preaches anything but encouragement. He wouldn't denounce sin if it hit him upside the head. In fact, in this interview he comments about why he doesn't preach against abortion or homosexuality: "I think (these sorts of political issues) divide us . . . . I know people are always asking, 'What do you think, is this right?' but I just think we've got to be open. I have always said, 'I'm not here to convict people or to condemn them.'" Well, I also don't think the pastor's job is to condemn people, but if they don't hear what's right and wrong from their pastor, where are they supposed to hear it?

Such an attitude exudes an aroma that is inoffensive to anyone. Even an agnostic, a humanist, or a hedonist can enjoy the smell. But in the process does that person understand anything about the Gospel or the demands for discipleship?

**3. Friends, Paul was willing to smell like death to some in order to be the fragrance of Christ to others.** Verse 16: "To the one (the committed unbeliever) we are the smell of death; to the other, (the seeker after God) the fragrance of life." In our church in St. Louis there were several women who were extremely allergic to perfume, so we had to establish a fragrance-free zone for them. While L'aire de Temp or Passion is a delightful fragrance to most people, it was sickening to them and potentially deadly. In the spiritual realm, the same phenomenon takes place. Some will be attracted to us; others will react with disgust, finding Christ and His Gospel repugnant.

Let me summarize this way: If everyone hates us, there is probably a love, grace, or mercy deficiency in your life; if everyone loves us, there is probably a truth deficiency. There should be enough grace and mercy evident in our actions that people whose hearts have been softened by the Holy Spirit will see the beauty of Christ in us, will be attracted to Him, and will respond to the Gospel when we tell them that God loves them. At the same time there should be enough bold truth emanating from our mouths that people who have been blinded by Satan to the truth of the Gospel or have consciously chosen to live godless lives will recoil from us and even hate us.

And friends, I would be the last one to tell you that this balance is easy to maintain. I couldn't tell you how often I have offended sincere seekers after truth with my poor representation of Christ, or how often I have made God's enemies comfortable by smelling sweet when what they needed was bold truth. I am only slightly comforted by the fact that the Apostle Paul struggled similarly. In fact, he asks at the end of verse 16: "And who is equal to such a task?"

**Paul found awe in his calling.** (16b, 17)

To smell right to the right audience actually may be one of the most difficult assignments in the Christian life. The way we live our lives and the way we share our faith has tremendous consequences. The weight of lost souls is heavy, and any thoughtful Christian will find himself asking the same question Paul asks here: "Who is equal to such a task?" In the next chapter Paul will answer his own question when he states that by ourselves we are not sufficient; "our sufficiency comes from God." But here he teaches us by setting up a contrast between how he responds to this task and how so many false teachers do it: "And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we

speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.”

The response of so many to the challenge of spreading the fragrance of Christ is to forget that their ultimate task is to please God, to forget that He is the principal audience, to even forget that our goal is to influence the lost for Christ. Instead they look at ministry as a business and a way of getting rich.

**Paul refused to market his faith for profit.** Please notice how he introduces this thought: “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit.” Paul was apparently a rare bird in that there were no dollar signs in his ministry plans. In fact, he generally refused even to accept gifts for his services; instead he chose to be bi-vocational; i.e. he earned his own living expenses by making tents so that he could offer the Gospel totally free. But not even Paul expected other preachers to do that. This was his own personal choice and he made it clear that it was perfectly alright for other ministers to be paid for their services. It’s one thing, however, to be paid, even paid well, for a job well done, and it’s quite another to peddle one’s ministry for profit. This has been a common tragedy down through the centuries among the people of God.

Balaam was a prophet turned profiteer back in the days of Israel’s wandering in the desert. He was a very interesting case, because like a lot of ministers he said the right things about greed, but his heart was not in it. Some of you may remember the story. Balak the king of Moab asked Balaam the prophet to put a curse on the Israelites, who were camped nearby and seemed to be a threat to him. For a fee, of course. Balaam said he needed to consult with the Lord, who told him in no uncertain terms not to do it, so he declined the offer. Balak was not easily discouraged however, and offered to pay Balaam handsomely for a curse. And Balaam answered beautifully: “Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God” (Numbers 22:18).

Wow, how can you beat that for commitment and obedience! But then he made a fateful, and almost fatal, mistake by adding, “Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what *else* the LORD will tell me.” He didn’t *need* to hear anything else from the Lord; God had already made His will perfectly well-known. I believe Balaam was trying to finagle and manipulate the situation in order to get his commission. So God sent an angel to take his life, and it was spared only when his donkey balked in the road and subsequently lectured him—a fascinating story.

Nor is this the only example in Scripture of greed getting the best of God’s servants. Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, secretly requested payment for his master’s ministry to Naaman the leper and ended up as a leper himself due to the judgment of God. God sends Ezekiel to denounce the spiritual shepherds of Israel:

*“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.’”*

Even today, or perhaps I should say especially today, it's a common thing for pastors to hear the call of God when a bigger church with a higher salary has a vacancy. It's not unusual for mega-church pastors to rake in millions of dollars in book sales—for books written on church time. And the temptation to greed is not just affecting preaching pastors. Two years ago in St. Louis we contacted a well-known Christian musician who sings while playing the piano—no entourage or orchestra or sets to haul around. We asked if he would come and do a night of worship at our church. Sure, he said, for \$22,000, plus expenses, plus a percentage of ticket sales. We weren't even wanting to sell tickets—just offer our people an opportunity to worship, and we would have paid him generously to do so. But \$22,000?!!! Give me a break!

Ministry should not be for sale. Paul's sure wasn't.

**His preaching was Christ-centered, God-honoring, and sincere.** “On the contrary,” says Paul (i.e., in contrast to these profit merchants), “in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.” He spoke in Christ, i.e. with Christ as his chief subject, his chief object, his chief motivator. He spoke before God, as one sent from God, always aware that he was an ambassador without any authority of his own but rather with a solemn responsibility to convey his Master's message accurately, faithfully, and completely. And he spoke with sincerity. Paul did not tailor his words to the reaction of his hearers, he did not conceal his true motives, he did not pervert the truth in order to curry favor and gain financially.

**Conclusion:** Well, let me return to the question I posed in my sermon title: “How do you smell?” I'm not asking, of course, about your olfactory senses—whether or not your sinuses are clogged; rather I'm thinking of how you impact the people around you. Do you exude the smell of life and the smell of death, depending upon the spiritual condition of the people around you?

You know something? Christ Himself has a dual effect on people. Peter quotes the OT in 1 Peter 2:6-8 when he says:

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion,  
a chosen and precious cornerstone,  
and the one who trusts in him  
will never be put to shame.”*

*Now to you who believe this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, [it is] “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.”*

Is Jesus a precious stone to you, or is He a stumbling stone? He can be the former if you will right now recognize your sin before God, accept the fact that Jesus died in your place to forgive your sins, and then receive Him as your personal Savior.

---

i. J. Philip Arthur, *Strength in Weakness*, 59.

ii. Much of the description of Roman victory parades here is based upon Arthur's book.