

How do you smell, fragrance or stench?Text: 2 Corinthian 2:5-17¹

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Introduction

For the past few years, my family watched Fremont Fourth of July parade. This year was no exception. Only this time, my son Eugene participated in the parade. He was part of Fremont elementary school parade, playing baritone. Being in a parade...in today's Scripture, Apostle Paul said he was also in a parade. Listen to the background of his parade: "When I arrived in Troas to proclaim the Gospel, I found the place wide open: God had opened the door; all I had to do was walk through it. But when I didn't find Titus waiting for me with news of your condition, I couldn't relax. Worried about you, I left and came on to Macedonia looking for Titus and a reassuring word on you. And I got it, thank God! In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one continuous victory parade (v.12-14)."

A door was opened for Paul in Troas, but he walked away from this opportunity, for he was deeply concerned about the situation at Corinth. Paul left Troas. He took a ship to Macedonia in the hope of meeting Titus. Suddenly something dawned on Paul. He said, "***thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ*** (v.14a)." What is he saying? During Paul's days, a Roman general would lead a victory procession after a successful military campaign, just like Golden State Warrior's NBA championship parade in Oakland. In such a procession, there were two groups of people. The first group would be the troops, soldiers who won the battle. They shared the commander's honor. Another group was prisoners of war; they were exposed to disgrace as part of the celebration.

The Fragrance of Christ (v.14-15a)

Paul realized he was part of a parade; he participated in Christ Jesus' triumphal march. For two thousand years, Lord Jesus has led believers in his victory parade. Believers every age, every corner participate in this glorious celebration. Through what Christ has done, God uses believers to spread the Gospel like a sweet perfume. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the aroma of Christ. Christians are like a sweet incense offered to God, an aroma to both the saved and those who are being lost around us.

In the Bible, the primary sensation is hearing. Listening, ears are important. By comparison, smelling and scent is less frequent. In the Old Testament, we are told God is pleased with smelling the odor of a burnt offering (Gen. 8:21; Ex. 29:18, 25). Incense and scent on the altar represent God's satisfaction in the proper worship of Him. According to Paul, those who believe in Jesus are the aroma of Christ. We have distinct odor to people around us. When I graduated from high school, my cousin gave me a bottle of cologne as a gift. It was only after many years I realized how important an appropriate smell is in a public setting. Nowadays, from time to time

¹ This sermon is preached in Immanuel Presbyterian Church of Fremont, CA. Mostly English speaking second generation Asian Americans youth and young adults.

my wife reminds me to take shower. She would add, “only your wife will tell you such things.” How do you smell? What do Christians smell like? Since believers are in the same parade, one implication is our life-together should display a sweet fragrance.

Forgivingness vs. Holding Grudges (v.5-11)

When Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, one member in the church committed a sin. Paul instructed them how to spread the aroma of Christ, “now regarding the person who caused all this pain, I want you to know I am not the one injured in this as much as all of you. So, I don’t want to come down too hard. What most you agreed to as punishment is punishment enough. Now is the time to forgive this man and help him back on his feet. If all you do is pour on the guilt, you could very well drown him in it. My counsel now is to pour on the love. The focus of my letter wasn’t on punishing the offender, but on getting you to take responsibility for the health of the church. So, if you forgive him, I forgive him. Don’t think I’m carrying around a list of personal grudges. The fact is I’m joining in with your forgiveness, as Christ is with us, guiding us (v.5-10).”

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to restore a sinner in their midst. The community’s disapproval of him had gone on long enough. Now is the time to comfort those who have fallen. In a faith community, there is discipline, but also fragrance of forgiveness. Forgiveness smells like a healing balm. When sin occurs in a faith community; it injures the whole church. Disciplinary correction is needed, but forgiveness and love always have the last word. Dear brothers and sisters, neither vindictive punishment, nor righteous indignation, but forgiveness is the way of the gospel. God’s disapproval of our actions is never a rejection of us. If we chose to hold grudges against those who wrong us, you and I will smell like foul stench.

The Smell of Death (v.15b-16)

Christians are sweet fragrance to God and those around us. At the same time, there is another side to the aroma of Christ, “But those on the way to destruction treat us more like the stench from a rotting corpse.” One of the most popular classic Taiwanese dishes is stinky tofu. Many foreigners are horrified with its smell. Last week, Lucie bought a durian and my family ate it for the first time. The world is surrounded with this fragrance of the gospel and believers’ testimony. For some people, Christians smell like stinky tofu or durian. The same fragrance that is pleasant to some is offensive to others. On a street where the air is filled with smoke and fragrance, to those who participate in the parade is joyful fragrance; to those who are prisoners of war they are smell of death. Please notice, it is not the fragrance of the gospel brings death to some; it is those who reject the gospel. Though among living fragrance, they are moving toward the path of death. Gospel is joy and hope to those who believe; to those who refuse is condemnation and stink.

To hear God’s Word is not entertainment: **“To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”** It is a spiritual reality, either to receive God’s grace or His judgment. No wonder Paul asked, “This is a terrific responsibility. Who is competent to take it on (v.16b)?” The answer is no one. Dear friends, it is an awesome responsibility to be a Christian. For we are potential instruments of life and death to those around us. Paul reminds us, believers are not only soldiers in Christ’s victory parade, but are also the burnt incense carried along as part of the triumphal procession. Through God, you and I spread the fragrance of Christ

everywhere. Simply put, we have a public impact. Whether it is to Christians or non-Christians, we have influences on all people around us. To some, we are like alluring perfume, bring life to their souls; to others, we smell like a foul stench.

Cover up the Smell (v.17)

Of course, there are believers uncomfortable with such aroma; they do not want to smell like Christ. Paul calls these people “peddlers of God’s word.” Originally, “peddlers” refer to those people who watered down their wine, so they can sell it cheap. Since the aroma of Christ can be offensive to the public, some Christians water it down, dilute the gospel, then take it to the streets and sell it cheap. These people use perfume to cover up the smell of Christ with pleasant scents, so they and their message are popular and acceptable. Paul warns these people are not true servants of God. “On the contrary, we stand in Christ’s presence when we speak; God looks us in the face. We get what we say straight from God and say it as honestly as we can. We speak as men and women sent from God, never ashamed to be those whose lives make a public impact (v.17).” Paul followed the tradition of the Old Testament prophets who spoke the Word of God with integrity. He was not concerned with any personal gain.

Conclusion:

God calls us to be faithful and honest about how we smell as Christians. Not as peddlers of God’s word, not trying to hide or dilute the smell, but speak sincerely in God’s presence. So, Christians, how do you smell at home, in school, at workplace? Do you cover up the aroma of Christ? Remember, we are supposed to smell. We are supposed to carry reek of Jesus. Relax, there is no need to smother ourselves with deodorant and cover up how we really smell. Let us not dilute the aroma of Christ, even at the risk of being an offensive stench to some people. Instead, on each day, at every place, we are called to have the right kind of influence, to permeate the right kind of fragrance to those around us. As we seek to be obedient to God’s call in us, as Christ provides us with brothers and sisters who share love and mercy, may we become a community that brings honor to His name, Amen.