

The Apostle Paul has been defending himself against detractors in the church of Corinth. There had apparently been such strong resistance to his instruction that he cancelled a trip to see them and wrote a severe letter instead. In our passage for today he continues defend his heart for them and reminds them of their calling.

¹² When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. 2 Corinthians 2:12,13 On Paul's way to Macedonia he stopped in Corinth and was met with hostile resistance. Then, he went to Troas of Alexandria to preach the gospel. Paul frequently went to strategic Roman cities knowing the influence they had on the surrounding areas and the opportunity they provided for the gospel to spread. Troas was the entrance to the Dardanelles, a major waterway in what is now northwestern Turkey. There he found a door was opened for him in the Lord.

God provided opportunities for him to share the good news of Jesus. This would normally be all the sign that Paul needed to continue ministering in a location, but his spirit was not at rest. That is because he had sent his severe letter to Corinth and then sent Titus to follow up on how it was received. Paul was hoping Titus would arrive and bring news from Corinth, but that had not happened. We will not find out about Titus catching up with Paul until chapter seven (7:6,7ⁱ). Anxious to hear about Corinth, and not finding Titus, Paul went on to Macedonia.

Paul is explaining to the Corinthians the burden he feels for the churches (11:28ⁱⁱ). While he already said he was certain of their faith (1:7ⁱⁱⁱ), he wants them to stay connected with him so that he can help them mature. He had the heart of a shepherd, wanting them to stay in good pasture and avoid the poisonous weeds of false teaching (Colossians 1:28,29^{iv}).

We often see in Scripture that God uses imperfect people like us. Paul exhorts us not to be anxious about anything but to pray and trust God (Philippians 4:6^v). He tells us to make the most of every opportunity (Ephesians 5:16^{vi}). But we see here that his deep concern had him pass up on this opportunity to share the gospel and instead go to where he hoped Titus would show up with good news. Humans are emotional beings. We naturally care about those whom we love. God understands, and yet we can pass up opportunities He sends our way because we are anxious about a situation that is out of our hands. Remember that God's hands are the best place to leave those whom we love.

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 2 Corinthians 2:14 Though Paul passed on that opportunity, he declared the wonder of Christ victoriously leading us and spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere we go. He may have left only a few seeds behind in Troas. But we learn in Acts 20:6^{vii} that he would be back and that it appears that a church had been established there.

Paul likens our life in Christ as being led in a triumphal procession. Some interpret this as us being the defeated captives. I can see that, for we were once enemies and His love conquered us (Ephesians 2:1,2^{viii}). At the end of the procession most of the captives were executed but some were given grace. That kind of fits with the theology of Scripture, except that *all* who are captured by Christ's love are granted grace (Ephesians

2:8^{ix}). But I lean toward the interpretation that we are the victorious army that follow our commander, Jesus. After all, the wording in verse 14 says it is a triumphal procession spreading His fragrance (Psalm 68:18^x; Revelation 19:14^{xi}). See in the following description how the army follows the commander.

Dr. Kenyn Cureton described a Roman triumphal procession. *After Julius Caesar returned from four great conquests, the Roman people organized a "Roman Triumph." He had brilliantly conquered in North Africa, Pontus, Egypt, and Gaul. So at dawn, the Roman senators lined up in their white togas. Following them, there were the musicians sounding the praises of the conquering Caesar. Behind them came the spoils that were captured, wagons loaded with the spoils of war. There was gold, silver, precious stones, ivory, spices, and fine linens. Then came the animals that were representative of the region. Next came the conquering army, carrying their commanders on their shoulders. And behind them came the banners of war, the flags of the kingdoms they had defeated as they marched across the land.*

Then came a picture parade, which artist's renditions of the great victories won on the battlefield and preserved for this great day of triumph. Behind the picture parade came the prisoners of war who had been defeated in chains, snarling and cursing at the Romans who had conquered them. And then following that, the victorious Caesar in his chariot, and behind him --his own army.

And they snaked their way among the Seven Hills of Rome until they came to the Forum, he was crowned with a laurel garland, and he was HAILED as mighty Caesar! It was a day of Triumph! by Dr. Kenyn Cureton

Is that how you see your life in Christ? Our mighty king Jesus has conquered all His enemies through the cross. Our life through this fallen world is victory parade. We wind through this world like the Caesar would wind through the hills of Rome, and as we do, Jesus spreads through us the beautiful fragrance of the knowledge of Him. And when people know of Him, they either hate Him or love Him.

¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 2 Corinthians 2:15,16 What is the aroma of Christ? I believe it is the fruit of the Spirit that people see in our lives. It is not just love, but the unconditional love of Christ that we call *agape* love (John 15:12^{xii}). It is the same language used for whole burnt offerings in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Our lives are a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1^{xiii}). It is not just being happy, but the deep abiding joy we share with Jesus' heart knowing that God is good, that we are loved, that He will work all things together for our good (Romans 8:28^{xiv}). It is a joy that is not dependent on favorable circumstances but on who God is. It is *His joy* in us (John 15:11^{xv}). It is a peace that is not moved by the passing storms of life. We could go through every fruit of the Spirit and tell how it is different from the way the world looks at each. Jesus described the difference in John 14:27. *²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

That fragrance we spread as we live in the Spirit is quite unique. All who encounter us know they have never sensed anything like it. It challenges sin, draws the soul, and stirs the heart. It is like nothing they have ever encountered before in this world. And then the battle begins within them. Death clings to them while reminding them of the

pleasures of this world they will have to leave behind (Hebrews 11:24,25^{xvi}). Life calls to them of the mysterious world of the Spirit, with meaning and purpose that is eternal. The more they lean toward life the more wonderful is that fragrance. The more they lean toward death the more disgusting it is to them, which sadly means they are perishing.

As I was working on this the men were studying Ephesians 5^{xvii}. *As the church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything.* And I thought how do we as the church submit to Christ? Though we often fall short, it led me to think of how Christ leads us, for that is how we men should lead our wives. He does out of love for us command us at times. And even if we do a poor job at following through, His arms are open to us, and His love never lessens. Every direction He gives is out of love. Even when we resist, He keeps leading us in a way that is for our good (Romans 8:28^{xiii}). But as the church, how blessed are we to have the opportunity to follow His leading and spread that fragrance of the knowledge of Him, laying up treasures in heaven, seeing lives go from darkness to light! That is what we are called to do, my brothers and sisters.

The fragrance industry is huge! From perfumes to deodorizers to incense, the sense of smell is highly valued because it gives us impressions for better or worse. It conjures our imagination and reminds us of events in our lives. While Paul is not talking about an actual fragrance, it is a perfect analogy to the presence a worshipful believer carries with them when they are at peace with God and man. The world desperately needs this fragrance. If more of us spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ, we would find more people drawn to Christ.

Then Paul asks, “*Who is sufficient for these things?*” Who can faithfully spread that fragrance of the knowledge of Christ? Who does make the most of every opportunity (Ephesians 5:16^{vii})? None of us do! But by the grace of God, we yield to the Spirit and say the words He prompts us to say, and pray the prayers He puts in our hearts and the fragrance spreads, and souls find themselves in the valley of decision. No, we are not sufficient, but Jesus is all-sufficient. We must simply keep leaning on Him and allowing Him to direct us (Philippians 4:13^{xviii}).

17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. 2 Corinthians 2:17 There have always been those who fleece the flock of God for personal gain. Paul tells us to support those who are in ministry (1 Corinthians 9:4-7^{xix}), even to give elders double honor (1 Timothy 5:17^{xx}). But we must distinguish between those who are sincere, commissioned by God, speaking in Christ, from those who have other motives. One brings the fragrance of life and the other of death, for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life (3:6^{xxi}). Even tears can be faked. Knowledge of obscure facts and hidden meanings are not signs of sincerity. God’s servants give of themselves, and like Jesus, they come to serve and not be served (Matthew 20:28^{xxii}).

I have met some currently famous ministers whom I will not name. You would know them because of their books. They are too egotistical to really give their attention to you unless you are influential. God’s ministers do not care what you think of them or how important you are to the world. They are only there for you and how they might minister to you and encourage your life in Christ. They do not care about where you are from, your social status, your looks, or anything else but only that you are an eternal soul for whom Jesus died. May God help us to have that heart for all with whom we converse. That is the beauty of the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ.

¹ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. 2 Corinthians 3:1,2 Today most people in churches recognize that it is not the degrees earned that truly commend a minister but rather the degree of concern for the lives of others and the willingness to sacrifice for them.^{xxiii} Because he had faced such opposition, he asks a rhetorical question. Does he need to reintroduce himself? This is not about boasting, it is about pointing out who God has called him to be. It was an introduction in which he entrusted himself to them. It was a common social activity at the time. After all the time he was with them, the very one who introduced them to Christ, did they need a letter of introduction? Or did he need a letter from some of the Corinthians to the other Corinthians? Paul remembered how God worked through him to bless their lives. Had they forgotten, or did the problem with the immoral brother so offend them that they discarded the past experiences they had with him? Sadly, one incidence of disagreement can cause people to forget all the sacrifice and love that had been shown in the past.

Paul hid nothing. His life was an open book. He always acted with sincerity and love (1:12^{xxiv}; 2:17^{xxv}). His ministry to them came with signs and wonders (12:12^{xxvi}). Their very salvation was the only letter he needed. Their transformed lives are his letter of recommendation (1 Corinthians 9:2^{xxvii}), proof of his apostleship. False teachers do not produce that kind of good fruit.

Paul expresses his fatherly love for them, telling them they are written not just on his heart but the hearts of his whole team. He expresses the fact that they are in his heart numerous times in the letter (2:4^{xxviii}; 6:11,12^{xxix}). In chapter seven verse three^{xxx} he says they are in his heart to die together and to live together!

If the Corinthians cannot read the letter of their own lives, the world certainly could. Those outside the Christian community could see the change in them. Even with all their shortcomings, they were new creations in Christ. They were on a different path from all their fellow citizens in Corinth. This calls us to consider what the world is reading when they look at our lives. Are we spreading the fragrance of Christ?

³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. 2 Corinthians 3:3 Paul is declaring their lives are the evidence. Paul and his team delivered the letter of the gospel and they turned into the letter. They became gospel people. That is what happens to us when we receive the good news from faithful messengers. We are all postal carriers. When our sister Cathy retired from the postal service, she did not quit being a postal carrier. It is just that now the only mail she delivers is the good news from Christ to people longing for a letter from God.

I got my first letter when I was five. It came from my father. I got another letter when I was twelve from a minister two blocks from here. And then when I was sixteen I got a letter straight out of the Bible as I was sitting with a group of teenage boys in a Bible study. When did you get your first letter that turned you into a letter known and read by all?

Satan is always throwing fiery darts of doubt (Ephesians 6:16^{xxxi}). Some of you know you got a letter, you remember the day Jesus made His home in you (John 14:23^{xxxii}), but you doubt that you are a letter today. I am not talking about conviction. Conviction says I need to change this habit or forgive that person. Doubt on the other

hand says my salvation is not real, and I am not good enough for God. But Paul eliminates that doubt in this verse by reminding them that the letter was written by the Spirit of the living God. The fact that you want to please God, that you hunger for God's Word, that you are not the person you once were, are all works of the Spirit of God. Your heart is not what it once was. Your flesh is still around, and you must keep crucifying it to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16^{xxxiii}), but the very fact that you have the battle tells you that you have been born-again.

Paul is alluding to a promise from the prophets. Jeremiah 31:33 ³³ *For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* The covenant was made in the blood of Jesus on the cross. He has written His law on your heart. That is the conviction you feel when you step out of line. And this change that results in being seen as different from others in the world is the same thing as the aroma of Christ. Paul is using both senses, smell and sight, to illustrate that people sense that you belong to God.

A brief story to illustrate this change recently blessed my heart. Our brother Stefan in Germany is unable to enter deep sleep. It makes life very difficult. Please pray that Jesus heals him or guides him to an answer. The medical field does not know how to help. But it has driven him to put all his hope and trust in Jesus. He had the name of Jesus tattooed across his forearm. But still he had doubts about being accepted by God. I shared with him the verse that if we confess Jesus before men, He will confess that we are His before the Father (Matthew 10:32^{xxxiv}). That brought him the assurance that Paul was trying to convey to the Corinthians. He thought it might bring persecution because of the culture there, but instead, someone told him they liked his tattoo. He was a likeminded believer. For years Stefan has been longing for local fellowship and found it, all because he confessed Jesus before men, written on his heart, and therefore written on his arm.

⁴ *Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.* 2 Corinthians 3:4 Such is the confidence we (the elders) have through Christ toward you, brothers and sisters of Wayside Bible Chapel. You are here because of the hunger God has put in your heart for the Word of God and the fellowship of believers. We are not perfect, but the Spirit of God is at work in our hearts. People smell the fragrance so to speak and are either drawn or repulsed. They see your lives and read the letter, the very one you received from Christ through us or another servant of God. Christ in us the hope of glory! You are written on our hearts to die together and to live together in Christ.

Questions:

- 1 Why did Paul pass on the opportunity in Troas?
- 2 What are two interpretations for "leads us in triumphal procession"?
- 3 What is the aroma of Christ?
- 4 How does this aroma affect people?
- 5 Who is sufficient for these things?
- 6 What is the difference between peddlers of the Word and those who are sincere?
- 7 What does commend ourselves mean?
- 8 What was the proof of his apostleship?
- 9 In what manner does Paul describe his love for them?
- 10 How can we be assured we are born-again?

ⁱ **2 Corinthians 7:6-7 (ESV)**

⁶ But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, ⁷ and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

ⁱⁱ **2 Corinthians 11:28 (NIV)**

²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

ⁱⁱⁱ **2 Corinthians 1:7 (NIV)**

⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

^{iv} **Colossians 1:28-29 (ESV)**

²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

^v **Philippians 4:6 (ESV)**

⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

^{vi} **Ephesians 5:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

^{vii} **Acts 20:6 (ESV)**

⁶ but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days.

^{viii} **Ephesians 2:1-2 (ESV)**

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

^{ix} **Ephesians 2:8 (ESV)**

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

^x **Psalms 68:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the LORD God may dwell there.

^{xi} **Revelation 19:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses.

^{xii} **John 15:12 (ESV)**

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

^{xiii} **Romans 12:1 (ESV)**

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

^{xiv} **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

^{xv} **John 15:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

^{xvi} **Hebrews 11:24-25 (ESV)**

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

^{xvii} **Ephesians 5:24 (ESV)**

²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

^{xviii} **Philippians 4:13 (ESV)**

¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

^{xix} **1 Corinthians 9:4-7 (ESV)**

⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

^{xx} **1 Timothy 5:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

^{xxi} **2 Corinthians 3:6 (ESV)**

⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

^{xxii} **Matthew 20:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

^{xxiii} ¹David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 157.

^{xxiv} **2 Corinthians 1:12 (ESV)**

¹² For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.

^{xxv} **2 Corinthians 2:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

^{xxvi} **2 Corinthians 12:12 (ESV)**

¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

^{xxvii} **1 Corinthians 9:2 (ESV)**

² If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

^{xxviii} **2 Corinthians 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

^{xxix} **2 Corinthians 6:11-12 (ESV)**

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.

^{xxx} **2 Corinthians 7:3 (ESV)**

³ I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.

^{xxxi} **Ephesians 6:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;

^{xxxii} **John 14:23 (ESV)**

²³ Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

^{xxxiii} **Galatians 5:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

^{xxxiv} **Matthew 10:32 (ESV)**

³² So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven,