

YOU'RE A FRAGRANCE

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-17

Have you ever noticed how your sense of smell and your memory are connected? I can still vividly recall what happened to me when I visited Thailand a few years ago on a mission trip that you were kind enough to send me on. Our team was making its way from the airport to the hotel. Almost immediately I began to encounter odors that gave me a powerful experience of déjà vu. I really can't even remember what I smelled, but I got the strong impression, "You have experienced this at another time in another place." I spent the first six years of my life in India where my parents served as missionaries. Now India is not Thailand, but they're pretty close to each other geographically and they have some cultural similarities. I began to realize that I was encountering odors and smells that were stored in my memory bank for fifty years. I'm sure you've had similar experiences: the smells of the beach... the odors encountered by walking in the forest... a distinctive perfume or cologne... a favorite kind of food simmering on the stove. All of a sudden you're flooded with memories all brought about by this incredible sense that God gave you: your sense of smell.

You have a spiritual odor. You give off a spiritual scent. You have a distinct spiritual aroma. This summer we've been making a study of missional metaphors in the Bible. The fact is that every follower of Jesus has been called to mission whether or not you ever leave central Ohio, cross an ocean or learn another language. The word "missional" captures that all important truth. Being missional simply means being available to point people to Jesus for salvation and transformation with your lips and your life every day and in every situation. Some of those metaphors are well known like being the salt of the earth and the light of the world, while others are kind of on the obscure side. I'll readily admit that the metaphor of being a fragrance is a little known one. What can this metaphor tell us about being a follower of Jesus?

Some passages in the Bible require more background information than others. This is one of those! Paul, the great apostle and missionary who wrote this letter to the members of the church he had founded in the Greek city of Corinth, had a couple of different things going on when he introduces this unusual metaphor. First, Paul was thinking of what is called a Roman Triumph when he starts out with this phrase, "But thank God! He has made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ's triumphal procession...." (2 Cor. 2:14 NLT). A Roman Triumph was a military victory parade. The general responsible for a great military victory was given an awesome parade through the streets of Rome honoring him. This parade included a procession – first the members of the Roman Senate, then trumpeters, then lots of carts filled up with everything of value the Roman soldiers took from the people they'd just defeated, then came white bulls to be sacrificed to the Roman gods, then came the enemy leaders and their families in chains either headed for prison or execution, then came the general himself riding in a chariot followed by his family, and finally members of the specific Roman army that had won this victory. It was quite the scene! An

integral part of the Triumphal procession was priests swinging big censers of incense billowing out fragrant smoke along the parade route. These processions, you see, were marked by a distinctive odor, smell or fragrance.

That's why Paul goes on to say immediately: "But thank God! He has made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ's triumphal procession. Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume." (2 Cor. 2:14 NLT) Paul is saying that Jesus, through his death at the cross and mighty resurrection from the dead, is like a conquering Roman general on the spiritual level and that we're a part of His great spiritual victory parade. Then he thinks of that strong, sweet smell that permeated these events – the strong, sweet smell of the incense – and he adds the thought – the metaphor – "Why, as a follower of Jesus, you're like incense, a sweet perfume, a lovely fragrance."

I also believe there was another image that Paul had in mind here. As a Jew, Paul was well acquainted with the Old Testament Temple worship which included the burning of incense as well as the offering up of burnt animal sacrifices to God. Both resulted in strong, pleasant odors. Incense is a pleasant, perfume-like smell. Animal sacrifice would have smelled a lot like grilling a steak! Most of us really enjoy that odor, yes? Several passages in the Old Testament indicate that God Himself appreciated these odors, too. Just one example. After the great flood, Noah offered up to God in worship several animals as a burnt sacrifice. The Bible says, "The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: '... And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.'" (Gen. 8:21 NIV) I know it sounds weird that God likes the actual smell of incense or grilled meat. It's easier to understand when you realize that it's another way of saying that God appreciated and gladly received the act of worship represented in the burning of incense or in the offering up of an animal sacrifice. Paul is alluding to that imagery in the next verse of our text today, "Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God..." (2 Cor. 2:15 NLT) So, that's a kind of lengthy but necessary background so we can better understand this metaphor. I find myself asking two questions of this text. Here's the first one:

WHAT IS MY FRAGRANCE?

Paul says here, "Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God..." (2 Cor. 2:15 NLT) I believe Paul means, first of all, the aroma of a life that depends on Jesus to be right with God. It's your calling and mine to spread that essential, all important message to other people. The message about Jesus is that He died in your place and mine. He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. He fulfilled the deepest spiritual meaning of the Old Testament practice of animal sacrifice which was meant to reinforce the concept of a substitute. The wages of your sin and mine is death, but God accepted a substitute in our place: His sinless Son, Jesus.

That's why the Bible says, "With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.... For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins." (Heb. 9:12-14 NLT) When people suggest that you can make yourself right with God through trying hard to live a moral life, doing good deeds for others or giving money to charity, they reveal their lack of dependence on Jesus. If you can make yourself right with God, then the cross of Jesus was just a terrible mistake that never should have happened and His resurrection is irrelevant. Instead, when you can say with the hymn writer, "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling" you declare your absolute dependence on Jesus to get you right with God, to be right with God and to keep you right with God. When you depend on Jesus to be right with God, you give off a wonderful spiritual fragrance.

What is my fragrance? "...Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume." (2 Cor. 2:15 NLT) Secondly, it's the aroma of a life that acknowledges Jesus' supremacy in all of life. If this great, holy and loving God sent His own Son, Jesus, into the world to pay the penalty for my sin and ensure that I will have an eternal relationship with Him, then He deserves to have first place in my life. He is supreme. He is your first and last priority. He alone deserves to be the center around which you and everything else in your life revolves. The Bible says, "We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything... — everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. He was supreme in the beginning and... he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone." (Col. 1:15-18 MSG) When Jesus is supreme in all of your life, you give off a wonderful spiritual fragrance.

What is my fragrance? "...Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume." (2 Cor. 2:15 NLT) Thirdly, it's the aroma of a life surrendered fully to God for His purposes. Jesus was utterly surrendered to do the will of His Father. Jesus said of Himself, "I can do nothing on my own.... I carry out the will of the one who sent me, not my own will." (John 5:30 NLT) Even when it came to dying on the cross, Jesus was able to pray, "...My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." (Matt. 26:39 NLT) The longer you follow Jesus, the more you discover that He takes you through some life experiences you'd rather avoid: very painful, very difficult, very troublesome stuff. You learn what it means to surrender to Him in all things. You learn to trust Him in everything.

Musician Steven Curtis Chapman speaks of a little place where he'd stacked some rocks out in the woods – just a place he'd go to pray when he felt desperate for God to do something, to show up, or to have some sort of breakthrough in his life. On one occasion, as he was praying, he smelled cedar,

so strong it distracted him from his prayer. He looked around to see this little cedar tree that had been snapped in half from his stepping on it accidentally. That's where the smell was coming from. It became a picture of grace to Chapman. The phrase "the fragrance of the broken" came to him as he knelt there in prayer. When you are broken before and yielded to God, you give off a spiritual aroma. When you are fully surrendered to God for His purposes, you give off a wonderful spiritual fragrance. Let me move on to a second question.

WHO SMELLS MY FRAGRANCE?

Paul says, "Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God. But this fragrance is perceived differently by those who are being saved and by those who are perishing. To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom. But to those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume." (2 Cor. 2:15-16 NLT) Again, knowing something about the Roman Triumph – this incredible military victory parade winding through the streets of ancient Rome – is helpful here. Remember, the smell of incense filled the air at these events – billows of smoke from the priests' censers as they swung them around. For the people of Rome, for the victorious soldiers, for the Roman leaders, that incense was the smell of life, the smell of victory, the smell of being on top of the world! But for the defeated enemies of Rome who were part of this procession and who were being herded toward either their imprisonment or execution, the smell of that incense was the smell of defeat, the smell of failure, the smell of death. In a Roman Triumph, quite literally, the smell of incense meant exactly the opposite for two groups of people—for some, the smell of life; for others, the smell of death.

If you're a fragrance, who smells it? First of all, the ones who are responding to Jesus smell your fragrance: men, women, boys and girls who are already being drawn by the Holy Spirit... people in whom God is already working... folk who are open to God even though they might not recognize it yet. To those people, your words about Jesus – who He is, what He's done, the whole message of salvation – it's life to them! They crave it! To those people, the way you live your life makes them interested in Jesus, makes them want to check Jesus out and makes them curious about eternal things. Not everyone is going to respond to Jesus and His message, sad as that may be. But many will respond, and God wants to use you – the fragrance of your life – to draw them to Himself.

I read about a class at a language school for men and women training to be missionaries in China. The very first day of class the teacher entered the room and, without saying a word, walked down every row of students. Finally, still without saying a word, she walked out of the room again. Then she came back and addressed the class. "Did you notice anything special about me?" she asked. Nobody could think of anything in particular. One student finally raised her hand. "I noticed that you had on a very lovely perfume," she said. The teacher said, "That was exactly the point. It will be a long time before any of you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to share the gospel with anyone in

China. But even before you are able to do that, you can minister the sweet fragrance of Christ to these people by the quality of your lives."

If you're a fragrance, who smells it? Secondly, the ones who are rejecting Jesus smell your fragrance. "...But this fragrance is perceived differently by those who are being saved and by those who are perishing. To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom...." (2 Cor. 2:15-16 NLT) I realize that's a kind of odd concept, but perhaps it explains why some people in your life who don't know Jesus find you irritating. Hopefully, it's not because you really are annoying, but rather because they sense something of God in you, something of the Lord Jesus Christ in you, something of the Holy Spirit's presence in you. As a result, they lash out at you, they treat you with a kind of irrational hostility, they mock your faith or they try to antagonize you. Again, we're reminded here that not everyone is going to respond to Jesus and His message positively.

If you're a fragrance, who smells it? The last answer might surprise you: the One who is the Father of Jesus. Isn't that exactly what Paul says here? "Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God...." (2 Cor. 2:15 NLT) I began today's message by talking about how the sense of smell can awaken memory in a powerful way. Here's what that verse suggests to me. You can live your life in such a way that it reminds God the Father of how Jesus lived His life. It's as if He takes a big old whiff of your life and mine and says, "That smells like My Son!" That raises some interesting questions, doesn't it? As God the Father watches you from day to day, is He reminded of Jesus? Is your life fragrant with the aroma of Jesus? Does He pick up in your words, in your lifestyle, in your attitudes, in your treatment of others, in your love for lost people, in your delight at all times to do His will, the unmistakably lovely scent of Jesus?

We have two great opportunities coming up to be the fragrance of Jesus as individuals and as a church. First, I strongly encourage you to be a part of the Northland International Festival next weekend. There's at least four ways you can offer up a pleasing aroma to God by doing just that. First, make a commitment to observe tomorrow as a day of prayer and fasting for Northland and for the festival. There are some prayer suggestions at the Welcome Center that you can use if you so desire. Second, you can serve as a volunteer at the Northland churches' tent for two hour increments on either Saturday or Sunday. Instead of each church getting our own little booth, we're going to be all together under one tent telling people what we're doing and what ministries we offer. I believe God might give you some great opportunities to share the fragrance of Jesus with Northland residents. Go to the website on the back of that insert to sign up. Third, you can be a part of a mass choir singing at the worship service. Rehearsal information – dates, times and location - is also available on that same insert. Fourth, you can join us for the worship service next Sunday at 4:30 pm.

The second opportunity has to do with our Wednesday Club ministry that begins again on September 12. The club programs themselves will remain pretty much

the same. Instead, we want to make the atmosphere before, during and after them much less chaotic and far more relational. What do we need from you? We need an army of volunteers to offer a weekly ministry of hospitality, friendship and caring: like greeting parents and kids on Wednesdays when they arrive, like helping to sign kids in and out to provide a safe environment, like acting as table hosts during our dinner time, like praying with or just talking with parents, like making visits on kids in their homes and more. Our hope and prayer is that ministering to kids will also allow us to get to know parents and families. We have a vision of the empty spaces and seats in our sanctuary gradually filling up with men, women, boy and girls transformed by Jesus Christ and knowing that the initial point of contact was our Wednesday night ministry. Like it or not, our church has a fragrance in this community. When it comes to our church, I wonder what kind of odor unchurched people in Northland smell? Indifference? Irrelevance? Caring? Compassion? My prayer is that – even if they don't recognize it for what it is – they'll smell the sweet scent of Jesus in this place.

Back in the fall of 2005, 9-year-old Austin Blessit, had his tonsils removed. Before the surgery, an anesthesiologist came in to start an IV. He was wearing a cool surgical cap covered in colorful frogs. Austin loved that "frog hat." When the doctor started to leave, Austin called out, "Hey, wait." The doctor turned. "Yeah, buddy, what do you need?" "Do you go to church?" "No," the doctor admitted. "I know I probably should, but I don't." Austin then asked, "Well, are you saved?" Chuckling nervously, the doctor said: "Nope. But after talking to you, maybe it's something I should consider." Pleased with his response, Austin answered, "Well you should, 'cause Jesus is great!" "I'm sure he is, little guy," the doctor said, and quickly made his exit.

When Austin's surgery was finished, the anesthesiologist came into the waiting room to talk to Austin's mom. He told her the surgery went well, then said, "Mrs. Blessit, I don't usually come down and talk to the parents after a surgery, but I just had to tell you what your son did." *Oh boy*, Mom thought. *What did that little rascal do now?* The doctor explained that he'd just put the mask on Austin when he signaled that he needed to say something. When the doctor removed the mask, Austin blurted, "Wait a minute, we have to pray!" The doctor told him to go ahead, and Austin prayed: "Dear Lord, please let all the doctors and nurses have a good day. And Jesus, please let the doctor with the frog hat get saved and start going to church. Amen." The doctor admitted that this had touched him. "I was so sure he would pray that his surgery went well," he explained. "He didn't even mention his surgery. He prayed for me! Mrs. Blessit, I had to come down and let you know what a great little guy you have."

A few minutes later, a nurse came to take Austin's mom to post-op. She had a big smile on her face as they walked to the elevator. "Some of the other nurses and I have been witnessing to and praying for that doctor for a long time. After your son's surgery, he tracked a few of us down to tell us about Austin's prayer.

He said, 'Well girls, you got me. If that little boy could pray for me when he was about to have surgery, then I think maybe I need his Jesus, too.'"

I don't care how old you are or how young you are, you are called to be missional. I don't care if you've been a follower of Jesus for 50 years or 50 minutes, you are called to be missional. You are called to be the fragrance of Jesus in this world, so get out there and smell like Him!