

BEING A FRAGRANCE & A LETTER**2 CORINTHIANS 2:14 – 3:3**

When we took English in school, we all learned about metaphors, right? A metaphor is a figure of speech – a literary device. It's a comparison made between two or more things using figurative or descriptive language. The Bible is full of colorful metaphors and many of them have to do with being a follower of Jesus. Now, we're going to put up some pictures on the screen of the most common ones Jesus Himself used and you identify the metaphor. Sure, Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me." (Jo. 10:14 NLT) Yes, Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth." (Mt. 5:13 NLT) Again, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." (Mt. 5:14 NLT) Here's a little harder one. Jesus said, "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches." (Jo. 15:5 NLT) Here's a couple that might stump you! Jesus also said, "So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves." (Mt. 10:16 NLT) All of them – metaphors.

The great Christian leader, Paul, also used some metaphors to help us understand better what it means to be followers of Jesus in our everyday lives. Two of them are found in the passage of 2 Corinthians we want to reflect on today together. Every Christian is like a fragrance and a letter. We are making a study of Paul's entire second letter to these Corinthian Christians. I've entitled this series of messages, "Cruciform: Living a Christ-Shaped Life, The Message of 2 Corinthians." Cruciform refers to anything made into the shape of the cross – a building, artwork, jewelry, for example. But you can also have a cruciform life – a life that resembles and reminds other people of Jesus. When our lives – our actions, attitudes, words, how we treat other people – are Christlike, they're cruciform or cross-shaped. So, then...

A CRUCIFORM LIFE HAS A FRAGRANCE.

The first unusual metaphor for being a follower of Jesus was that of having about your life and mine an aroma or a fragrance. Paul was thinking about what was called a Roman Triumph, "But thank God! He had made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ's triumphal procession." (2 Cor. 2:14 NLT) A Triumph was a military victory parade through the streets of Rome. The Roman general responsible for the great victory was given an awesome parade in his honor. The parade included a procession – first the members of the Roman Senate, then trumpeters, then lots of carts and wagons filled up with everything of value the Roman soldiers took from the people they'd just defeated. Then came the enemy leaders and their families in chains headed for prison or execution. Then came the victorious general himself riding in a chariot followed by his family. Finally, the soldiers of the Roman army that had won the victory walked in. It was quite the scene! And an integral part of the Triumphal procession were priests swinging these big censers full of incense billowing out fragrant smoke along the parade route. These Roman parades or processions were marked by a very distinctive odor, smell, or fragrance. Paul saw in that practice a metaphor he could adapt and use to explain a cruciform life.

Paul said here, “Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God.” (2 Cor. 2:15 NLT) One way to better understand these unusual metaphors is to ask some questions. For example, what do I smell like spiritually? When I have a cross-shaped life, I’m absolutely dependent on Jesus to be right with God. The message about Jesus is that He died in your place and mine. He paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. The wages of your sin and mine is death, but God accepted a substitute in our place: His sinless Son, Jesus. When people suggest you can make yourself right with God through living a moral life, doing good deeds for others, or giving money to worthy causes, they actually demonstrate their independence from Jesus. They don’t need Him. If you can make yourself right with God without Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection, then both the cross and the empty tomb are irrelevant. It’s nice both happened, but so what? But when you can say with the hymn writer, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling” you declare your complete, total dependence on Jesus to make you acceptable before God. That’s a spiritual aroma.

Paul continued, “Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume.” (2 Cor 2:15 NLT) When I have a cross-shaped life, I acknowledge Jesus’ supremacy in all of my life. If a great, holy, and loving God sent His own Son, Jesus, into the world to pay the penalty for my sin and ensure my eternal relationship with Him, then He deserves first place in my life. He is supreme. He is my first and last priority. He alone deserves to be at the center of my life around which everything else revolves. When Jesus is supreme in all of your life, you give off a spiritual aroma.

Here’s something else. When I have a cross-shaped life, I am surrendered fully to God for His purposes. Jesus made it clear He was here to fulfill His Father’s will, plan, and desires. His own were secondary. 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.” (Jo. 5:30 NLT) Even when it came to dying on the cross, Jesus prayed, “Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” (Mt. 26:39 NLT) When you follow Jesus, you discover He sometimes takes you through life experiences you’d just rather avoid: very painful, difficult, hard stuff. Along the way, you learn to surrender all things to Him. You learn to trust Him in and for everything. If you’re living a surrendered life, you give off a spiritual aroma.

Musician Steven Curtis Chapman had a little place out in the woods where he’d stacked up some rocks kind of like an altar. It became a place for him to pray when he felt desperate for God to do something, to show up in his life, or to ask God for some kind of breakthrough in his life. On one occasion, Chapman was praying, and he smelled cedar. It was so strong an odor that it distracted him from his prayer. He looked around and saw this little cedar tree. He had stepped on it accidentally and it had snapped in half. That’s where the strong smell of cedar was coming from. It became a picture of God’s grace to Chapman. As he prayed, the phrase “the fragrance of the broken” came to him. When you are broken before and yielded to God, you give off a spiritual aroma. When you are fully surrendered to God for His purpose in this world, you give off a wonderful spiritual fragrance.

That leads to a second question. Who smells the fragrance of my life? Paul wrote, “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.” (2 Cor 2:15 NLT) The smell of incense filled the air at those Roman Triumphs. For the people of Rome, their victorious soldiers, and their leaders, the incense was the smell of victory. But for the enemies of Rome who were part of the procession – who were being herded toward either imprisonment or execution – the incense was the smell of defeat, failure, and death. Quite literally, at a Roman Triumph, the smell of incense meant exactly the opposite for two groups of people involved in it. For some incense was the smell of life, but for others, it was the smell of death.

If your life gives off a spiritual fragrance, who smells it? First, it’s the people who are responding to Jesus. These are men, women, boys, and girls who are already being drawn to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. These are people in whom God is already working. These are people open to God even though they might not recognize it yet. To those people, there’s something about the way you live your life that intensifies their interest in Jesus. 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! Not everyone is going to respond to Jesus and His message, sad to say. But many will respond, and God wants to use you – the fragrance of your life – to draw them to Himself. “To those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume.” (2 Cor 2:16 NLT)

I read about a class at a language school for men and women training to become missionaries in China. On the very first day of that class the teacher entered the room. Without saying a word, she slowly walked down every row of students. Then, she unexpectedly walked out of the room for a few moments. All the students were mystified. When she came back in she asked the students a question, “Did you notice anything special about me?” Nobody provided a quick answer. Finally, one student raised her hand, “I noticed you were wearing a very lovely perfume.” The teacher nodded and said, “That was exactly my point. It will be a long time before any of you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to share the good news about Jesus with anyone in China. But even before you’re able to do that, you can share the sweet fragrance of Jesus with these people by the quality of your lives.”

If your life gives off a spiritual fragrance, who smells it? Secondly, it’s the people who are rejecting Jesus. That’s an odd concept, but it might explain why some people in your life who don’t know Jesus find you irritating. Hopefully, it’s not because you really are very annoying, but rather because they sense the Lord Jesus Christ in and around your life. They’re repelled by the idea they need to confess and turn away from the sin in their own lives. They’re too proud to surrender their lives to Jesus. But because they can’t really lash out at God Himself, they end up lashing out at you because in some sense you represent Jesus. They mock your faith, or they treat you with an irrational hostility, or they try and antagonize you. Not everyone is going to respond to Jesus and His message positively. Many will reject Him, sad to say. “To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom.” (2 Cor. 2:16 NLT)

If your life gives off a spiritual fragrance, who smells it? Thirdly, it's God Himself, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't overlook what Paul wrote here, "Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God." (2 Cor. 2:15 NLT) You can live your life in such a way that it reminds God the Father of how His Son, Jesus, lived His earthly life. It's as if God somehow takes a big old sniff of your life and mine and says, "His aroma is just like My Son. Her fragrance reminds me of My Son." Question? As God the Father watches you day in and day out, is He reminded of Jesus? Is your life fragrant with the aroma of Jesus? When He hears the words you speak, perceives your attitudes, sees the way you live day in and day out, observes the way you relate to and treat other people, notices your love of lost people, and evaluates your interest in doing His will at all times, does He smell the unmistakably lovely scent of Jesus... or not? As with the fragrance or aroma of incense at a Roman Triumph, Paul used another metaphor that needs a little explaining twenty centuries later.

A CRUCIFORM LIFE IS LIKE A LETTER.

In the 1st century letters of recommendation were a very common part of everyday culture. It was a culturally acceptable way people introduced themselves to other people in hopes of forging an ongoing personal or business relationship. If someone wanted to establish trust with you, they might carry with them actual letters from someone you already knew or someone you deeply respected. Today, we might Google someone online to find out if he or she is trustworthy. In the first century, these letters or recommendation would vouch for the trustworthiness and authenticity of whoever was carrying them. Paul wasn't against these letters of recommendation as such. His point was simply that he didn't need to produce any such letters to prove his authenticity to the Corinthian Christians. After all, they were products of his ministry! In fact, if anyone wanted to ask Paul for his letters of recommendation, he could just point them toward the Christians in Corinth. Then it seemed as if Paul realized he's just landed on another new metaphor to describe a cross-shaped life. It's as if he said, "Come to think of it, yes, you're like a living, breathing letter from Jesus Himself to a lost and dying world. When people look at your life, they should be able to 'read' in it that Jesus matters supremely." So if the Corinthians were like a spiritual letter to their world twenty centuries ago, can we also be like a spiritual letter to our world today? Yes, we can be, but – again - let's ask ourselves some questions.

First, can anyone read the letter of my life? Imagine you go out to your mailbox and find a letter in there written to you. Or there you are hovering over your computer, or your smart phone, and you see an email message or a text sent to you. If you open any letter or message, you unconsciously ask the question, "Can I read it? Is it legible? Does it make sense? Can I understand it?" If you're like a letter from Jesus – or an email or a text – can other people look at your life and get interested in Jesus as a result. In other words, is your life legible? Does your life point to Jesus – who He is and what He's done? Very few non-Christians ever read the Bible, so – like it or not – they're drawn toward Jesus or pushed away from Jesus based on what they see – or read – in your life and mine. What can people read in your life that gives them any information about Jesus? About what really matters in life? Is your life legible? Or to

put it differently, is your life credible? Would anyone become curious about Jesus by looking at your life? Those first Christians in Corinth were far from perfect. But the Holy Spirit had brought about enough change and transformation in them that even the non-Christians in Corinth could observe it plainly enough. You could read a very clear message about God's grace and power just by looking into their lives. That's why Paul wrote here, "Clearly, you are a letter from Christ showing the result of our ministry among you." (2 Cor. 3:3 NLT)

It was obvious those Corinthians converts were spiritually changed. In other words, is the message about Jesus in my life obvious to others? It's possible to profess a faith in Jesus so quietly, so hiddenly, and so "under the radar" that a non-Christian can miss it entirely. From the perspective of a non-Christian, the only difference between you and him (or her) might be that you have this odd habit of going to this building with a steeple attached to it on Sunday mornings, singing some songs, and having someone tell you why and how a very old book should tell you about God and how to live your life. Sometimes our lives aren't very legible spiritually simply because we haven't made the fact we follow Jesus obvious enough. If you're a follower of Jesus, can it be said of you, "Clearly, you are a letter from Christ." (2 Cor. 3:3 NLT)

Here's a second question. Who wrote the letter of my life? So you're looking at this letter, or email, or text. You open it and determine if you can read it or not. If you don't immediately know who sent you the letter, email, or text, don't you often go right to the end of the message first and see who sent it to you? Sure! You try to figure out who sent you the message even before you read it. Paul wanted to emphasize here that the Corinthian Christians were never a letter from Paul himself to their community. No, they were a letter from Jesus Himself to the lost people living in the city of Corinth. Sure, Paul had a role, but Jesus was the author of the letter of their lives – not Paul.

Here's the application. Your life can only have a compelling message if Jesus is the true author of it. Paul wrote, "Clearly, you are a letter from Christ.... This 'letter' is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on tablets of stone, but on human hearts." (2 Cor. 3:3 NLT) What was this about "tablets of stone"? Paul was thinking about how the Ten Commandments were literally written by God on physical tablets of stone and then given to Moses and the Jewish people in the OT. They were meant to be wonderful, gracious guidelines that resulted in a happy, productive life if you followed them. But, along the way, they became ten rules. And if you kept those ten rules as well as some other rules, God would let you into Heaven. What mattered was keeping the rules - not your love for God or the condition of your heart before Him. People today still believe much the same way. If I live a reasonably decent, moral life, that's all that matters to God. That's my ticket into Heaven.

But that's not the good news about Jesus, is it? Paul said here that a person becomes a letter from Jesus only when the Holy Spirit of God comes into your heart. The Holy Spirit enables you and me to start loving God and He puts a new desire in our hearts to live for Him. Something changes fundamentally. Now, I want to keep all of God's gracious guidelines not as the way to get into Heaven, but rather as the way to show my

gratitude that Heaven is already a certain promise for all those who follow Jesus. We run into something the Bible calls “grace” and that grace changes us at the very core of our being – our heart. As a result, a Christian isn’t just an improved person, but you’re a new person. A follower of Jesus isn’t someone who’s just a little different than someone who doesn’t follow Jesus. You’re essentially different because you’ve been born again by the Spirit of God. In a couple of chapters further on into this letter, Paul put it like this, “This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Cor. 5:17 NLT) Has anything like that ever happened to you? Has the real you – at the deepest place and core of your personhood – been invaded by the Holy Spirit? Are you born again?

Perhaps you can answer that question for yourself after you ask and try to answer this question. What does the letter of my life say? There we are at the mailbox, or in front of the computer screen, or gazing at our smart phone. We open the letter or the message. Yes, we can read it well enough. And, yes, we know who wrote the message – the author. Then we actually read it. What does it say? What’s the content or the information? If you’re a letter from Jesus, what does your life say on a day-by-day basis? Paul told us the Holy Spirit lives in us now. When that happens others will inevitably see evidence of it. One evidence – one message is what the Bible calls the fruit of the Holy Spirit. These are character qualities the Holy Spirit works into our lives over time. What are they? “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Gal. 5:22-23 NLT) You have to have the Holy Spirit living in and through you to produce all those spiritual attitudes and actions with consistency and authenticity.

Sure, people who don’t follow Jesus can produce normal human affection, but they can’t produce God’s kind of love. They can produce laughter and comedy, but not joy. They can teach you relaxation techniques, but not give you peace. Just to press that fruit metaphor a bit, human beings without Jesus can produce a plastic apple or a wooden peach in terms of character qualities which look like the real thing, but they can never produce Holy Spirit-quality fruit. So, where will non-Christians ever see the real thing? In your life and mine. They will come to see something of Jesus’ beauty and grace revealed in your life. They’ll see something of God’s compassion and respect for human beings created in His image, something of Jesus’ integrity in how we handle ourselves, and something of the Holy Spirit’s power as we sort through the problems and the heartaches we patiently endure in our own lives. Non-Christians don’t read the Bible. Instead, they “read” you and me. You’re a letter from Jesus to them.

Jesus said your life and mine needs to provide an additional message. Every person needs to be spiritually transformed and that can only happen through Jesus. If being Jesus’ follower is only about getting your sins forgiven so you can go to Heaven when you die, that’s not being like Jesus. If your life is about staying away from and “protecting” yourself from lost people because they’re so disgustingly unholy, that’s not being like Jesus. Jesus said of Himself, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.” (Luke 19:10 NLT) As He was ascending back to Heaven, Jesus clearly handed off His mission to His followers. “And you will be my witnesses, telling

people about me everywhere.” (Acts 1:8 NLT) Jesus is saying to us, “You’re My letter. You’re My email, My text, My posting, My blog, My tweet. Your life and how you live it. Your lips when you share with others what I’ve done for them. You’re My letter.”

John Dickson is an Australian author and speaker. He became a follower of Jesus through the faithful witness of an ordinary, middle-aged mother named Glenda. Years ago, the public schools in Australia used to offer a Scripture class taught by a volunteer from a local church. Glenda became John’s teacher. She invited John and his friends to her home on Friday afternoons for lunch and honest conversation about Jesus. Over several Fridays, slowly but surely, the "Jesus stuff" became as important to those boys as the free food they were served. Some of those 15-year-olds were the worst sinners in the school, but Glenda just opened her heart every Friday afternoon and treated them all like they were family.

There was one night when John’s friend Daniel got very intoxicated. John and his friends knew they couldn't take him home. His dad would be livid. But they didn't want to leave him out on the street, so they all said, "Let's take him to Glenda's house. She'll have him. She'll clean him up." It was near midnight when they got to Glenda’s house. They knocked on her door. It turned out she was finishing up some kind of fancy dinner party with lots of guests. Glenda didn't bat an eye. She welcomed this group of boys into her home and showed them straight past her guests into the back of the house. She went and got some spare clothes and said, "Throw Daniel in the shower, clean him up, and just put him to bed. We'll sort it out in the morning." So they did. The next morning John and his friends went back to Glenda's house around 10:00 to pick up Daniel. He was sitting at the kitchen table. Glenda was making him bacon and eggs, and they were having a good old chat.

John says he and his friends took Daniel to Glenda's house because she had left a real impression on them that Christians actually like sinners. They had no doubt she hated their drinking habits. She never drank and talked openly about avoiding alcohol. But even then, Glenda’s first instinct was not to condemn her young friends but to love them even more. After about six months of these Scripture classes on Friday afternoons, and the incident with Daniel, John and his friends found themselves thinking that Jesus was real, inescapable, and powerful. About five of them became followers of Jesus. They accepted His mercy and surrendered to His Lordship. Why? Because an ordinary, middle-aged mother became to them both a fragrance and a letter from Christ Himself.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? The fact is you give off a spiritual aroma – a fragrance. What do you smell like, Christian? Like Jesus? If you do, you will also be like a letter from Jesus Himself to the lost and hurting people around you – a letter full of God’s abundant mercy and amazing grace.