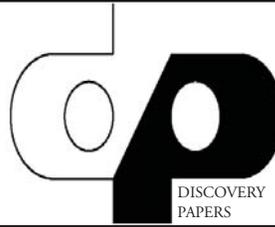


A FRAGRANCE

**SERIES: IDENTITY CHECK:
LESSONS IN AUTHENTIC FAITH**



Catalog No. 4942
2 Corinthians 2:14-16
1st Message
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October 23, 2005

Jesus asked an enduring question: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46.) We know from our last study, Danny Hall’s series on the book of Amos (Discovery Papers 4935-4941), that Israel made proud claims about the place God had in their lives—and did not obey Him. We find in the letters of the New Testament that Christians in the early church had the same problem, and they have had ever since. We very often talk as if God’s presence is vital in our lives, and yet perhaps it has decreased in our real experience. So we need to examine ourselves. My hope is that we will be strengthened in self-examination by studying a portion of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians.

The section from the end of chapter 2 through the beginning of chapter 6 of this letter is peculiar. In dense, rich wording Paul tells of life by the power of the Spirit. Yet the context surrounding it describes difficulty, disappointment, and struggle.

Ray Stedman was the first pastor of Peninsula Bible Church and a man of great influence around the world. He was the author of many books. The one he considered most important was *Authentic Christianity*. He wrote this in the preface: “This is the book I have wanted to write above all others. It deals with the very heart of the gospel, the most important truth contained in the pages of Scripture.”¹ *Authentic Christianity* was his commentary on this section of 2 Corinthians. The deepest theological roots of this church are in these chapters. My hope is that in the present era of our life together, we’ll benefit from going back to these truths once again.

Prepare to encounter these themes:

- Invisible realities overwhelm what we can see and measure.
- The things that fade are insignificant compared to what endures.
- Life by the Spirit transcends the requirements of the written code.
- What is mortal will be swallowed up by life.

- Afflictions produce glory.
- Joined to Christ’s sufferings, we are joined to his victory.

The chapters we are embarking upon contain vivid metaphors. In each of the messages in this series we’re going to consider a different metaphor. The first of these is a fragrance.

Let me give you a word of background to begin our study. In the New Testament there are two letters written to the church in Corinth. The apostle Paul came as an evangelist to Corinth and founded the church there. He disciplined those he would leave behind to lead the congregation. He later visited the church on at least two occasions that we know of. He probably wrote four letters to this church, although only these two remain.

There was a rocky relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church. The apostle was very much like a spiritual father who was concerned that his children were playing with fire. They were listening to false teachers who were leading them astray, undermining his authority. The Corinthians were experimenting with immorality and other wrongdoing that concerned him very much. Yet they resisted his efforts to correct them.

Further, chapter 1 and the first part of chapter 2 of 2 Corinthians reveal that Paul is writing in the midst of terrible circumstances in his own life. He says that he almost died when he was physically attacked in the midst of persecution in the region near Ephesus. He also says that he had expected friends to arrive, but they hadn’t come. He is alone and lonely. And now he’s writing to people who are resisting what he has to say. Yet remarkably, at the end of chapter 2 he begins this poem of insight into the nature and love of God—a powerful description of life in the Spirit.

How do you handle suffering, rejection, loneliness, and difficulty in relationships? There are three options that probably occur to everybody. The first is to quit, to pull the covers over your head and say, “I’ve had enough. This is too hard for me. Somebody else can deal with these problems.” Another option is to redouble your efforts.

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” You determine to try harder, fight more valiantly. You’ll be tougher than any set of circumstances that can come your way. Another response is to cover up, to put on a mask behind which you hide what’s really true.

But Paul, his heart bursting with concern for his friends and his own experience of grave difficulty, chooses something else. Let me highlight a verse that we’re going to come to in a subsequent message, because it succinctly expresses the choice he makes: “We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen ...” (2 Corinthians 4:18a). That statement is either mad or marvelous, isn’t it? Paul chooses to believe that there is a power available to him, though he cannot measure it by any of his senses. He insists as he gazes at the unseen things that there is a glorious future before him even though there is no evidence of it in his circumstances.

Do we live as if we believe such things?

With that background in mind, let’s look at our first text where we see a metaphor of a fragrance.

2 Corinthians 2:14-16:

¹⁴But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. ¹⁵For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?

The question at the end is important. Paul knows he’s talking about things that are impossible for him to accomplish. He’ll answer this question in 2 Corinthians 3:5 when he says, “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.” God calls us to an impossible way of life, and then He provides everything we need to live such a life.

A life in which God is present

In these verses the Christian life is spoken of as a fragrance of Christ to God. The apostle probably has in mind the incense that was burned in the Jewish temple worship. Leviticus 8:21 & 28 say that the sacrifices that were burned before God were a “soothing aroma” to Him.

In the same way, our lives are an aroma of Christ to God. God is pleased to attend to us. It delights Him to know that we bear in us the presence of His Son.

But there is a second type of fragrance in view here as well. Paul also has in mind a Roman military parade, and once again, the aroma is incense. Perhaps you have seen an incense censer, a little pot, usually at the end of a rope or chain, in which incense is burned. The person carrying it swings it back and forth to waft the scent abroad. If a Roman general won a great victory over Rome’s enemies, Caesar would invite the general to Rome and give him a parade of great honor. The populace would come out and line the streets cheering. The general would ride on his steed at the front of the parade, and behind him would march his soldiers. Also in the parade would be captured enemies who were now on the way to their death. Similarly, Christ is the Victor over all His enemies, and with Him are those who are His own, who have served Him in the fight. As the parade marches along with the incense burning, those who are rightly related to the Victor delight in the smell of the incense, but those who are on their way to die smell the very same scent and are sickened by it because it means their destruction.

Some of the people we find ourselves connected to will be given hope that they didn’t have before. They will imagine that it’s possible that God might love them. They will be open to the truth, and will find themselves further inclined toward the living God. But some reject the Lord of the universe and His meddling with human beings, His insistence on righteousness, and His sacrificial love. Because of God’s presence with us, these ones will find themselves recoiling even farther from any touch of Christ.

A fragrance, as you know, is one of the most powerful types of influence. It can trigger memories. It changes our mood. A whiff of smoke will cause a herd of animals to bolt off at the possibility of danger that it represents. In the same way, our lives are an invisible, uncontrollable, elusive, and powerful means by which God touches the world we live in.

I know people who have found themselves believing in the love of God because the person next to them in a hospital room was peaceful in trauma and hopeful in the face of a difficult diagnosis. Oftentimes it’s not when we’re strongest that we have the most influence. But in all circumstances the aroma of a life in which God is present can open vistas of hope for people who had none at all.

Let me share an example of when the presence of God had a negative effect. When I was a college pastor I per-

formed the wedding of a couple who were students. The young man had come to faith while in college. It was a beautiful wedding of lovely people, full of joy. But at one point the father of the groom took me aside. He said, “I hate everything that my son has become, and I hold you responsible!” He had paid for an expensive Stanford education for his son who was now going to serve the Lord and ruin his life. This father was furious over what had happened to his son, and he blamed me—lashing out at the presence of the God whom he claimed did not exist.

Paul is saying that our lives have the touch of the living God in them—the elusive impact of an invisible aroma. Who is adequate for such things?

Let me share two stories.

Immeasurable influence

The first is in the New Testament. When Jesus was at the temple in Jerusalem with His disciples, they saw the rich putting large sums in the temple treasury, and then a poor woman came and put in two copper coins. Jesus observed her and made this comment to the disciples: “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributions to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on” (Mark 8:43-44; Luke 21:3-4). She was poor and alone, and as far as we know she had no idea that someone, Jesus himself, watched her, understood her, and valued what she did, and spoke of it to others. Two thousand years later we’re still talking about it. She didn’t know that her life would have impact on countless people who have been called to be generous because of her example. One poor woman had extraordinary influence!

The second story is more contemporary. Robert Coles is a professor at Harvard University. He has won a Pulitzer Prize and is very well known in the field of the psychological development of children. He tells a story of himself. In 1960, before he had any faith in Jesus, he was a young psychiatrist planning on doing a definitive work on children in need. He was in New Orleans when schools were being integrated. He tells the story of Ruby Bridges, who was sent to Frantz Elementary School.

“Soon out of the Frantz School came a little girl, Ruby Bridges, and beside her were federal marshals. She came out, and the people on each side started in. They brandished their fists. They told her she was going to die, and they were going to kill her

The school had been totally boycotted by the white population, so here was a little black child who was going to an American elementary school all by herself in the fall of 1960.”²

He decided this was an outstanding example of stress in children, and he was going to study this and write about it. So he got to know the family.

“I kept on asking her [Ruby] ... how she was getting on, and what I began to notice was that here was a girl who was six years old whose parents were extremely poor, were illiterate so that they did not even know how to sign their own names. They were going through tremendous strain day after day, and they didn’t seem to be complaining, parents or child. What a contrast with the well-to-do middle class people I had seen in Boston whose children, for one reason or another, all of them white, by the way, were having all sorts of difficulties I didn’t know how to explain that. I was accumulating all this information, and I was getting very frustrated.”³

He goes on to talk about another interview he had with Ruby.

“Your teacher told me that she saw you talking to the people in the street.”

“Oh yes, I told her I wasn’t talking to them, I was just saying a prayer for them.”

“Ruby, you pray for people there?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes!”

“And why do you do that?”

“Because they need praying for,” she answered.

“Later on, Mrs. Bridges told me that Ruby had been told in Sunday School to pray for the people. I later found out that the minister in their Baptist church also prayed for the people publicly every Sunday.

“I said to Mrs. Bridges, and then to her husband later, ‘You know it strikes me that it’s an awful lot to ask of Ruby, I mean given what she’s going through.’

“They looked at me, very confused. ‘We’re not asking her to pray for them because we want to hurt her or anything,’ said Mrs. Bridges. ‘But we think that we all have to pray for people like that, and we think Ruby should, too.’ Then she looked at me and said, ‘Don’t you think they need praying for?’

“Once a couple of weeks after the first time I

mentioned it, I again asked Ruby about this praying. 'Ruby, I'm still puzzled. I'm trying to figure out why you think you should be the one to pray for such people, given what they do to you twice a day, five days a week.'

"Well," she said, 'especially it should be me.'

"Why you especially?"

"Because if you're going through what they're doing to you, you're the one who should be praying for them." Then she quoted to me what she had heard in church. The minister said that Jesus went through a lot of trouble, and that Jesus said about the people who were causing the trouble, 'Forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing.' And now little Ruby was saying this in the 1960s about the people in the streets of New Orleans."⁴

He continues:

"How is someone like me supposed to account for that, psychologically or any other way? What does this leave us with? The great paradox that Christ reminds us about is that sometimes those who are lonely and hurt and vulnerable—meek, to use the word—can be touched by grace and show the most extraordinary kind of dignity, and in that sense, inherit not only the next world, but even moments of this one. We who have so much knowledge and money and power look on confused, trying to mobilize the intellect to figure things out. But it's not so figurable, is it? These are mysteries. As Flannery O'Connor said, 'Mystery is the great embarrassment to the modern mind.'"⁵

The brilliant psychiatrist had no answer for what he saw in Ruby Bridges. We're reading this story forty-five years later. Robert Coles is an important man, and he tells this story frequently. The influence is immeasurable.

God uses the unexpected. He uses our lives when we don't know it. He has made His home in us, and He touches the world that He cares about through us. Even when Paul was suffering and he couldn't see any way forward, he was sure of that.

We too want to gaze at what's invisible, to be sure of things that can't be seen, to affirm that God is present when it doesn't seem as if He is. We want to announce

that victory is certain, that resurrection is coming, that God is doing what only He can do. Let's make it our prayer that God will help us believe that these things are true of our lives.

NOTES

¹Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI, © Discovery House Publishers, 1996), 9.

²Robert Coles, *Finding God at Harvard*, edited by Kelly Monroe, (Grand Rapids, MI, © Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 36.

³Coles, 36.

⁴Coles, 37-38.

⁵Coles, 39.