

Aromatic Confidence

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Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Well, it's great to join you in this third part in our 2 Corinthians series. And if you'd like to follow along, we're on page 965 in your Bibles.

This is a passage that Paul has been, he's been going through a lot, sort of a list of the things that he has met with, challenges that he has met with in his life in Corinth.

And the criticisms that he has faced as well. And wonderfully, he turns to a period of giving thanks. And in this passage, he speaks about God's work in Paul, but it applies to all of us as well.

He talks about himself as a minister. And yet, we also have been called to be servants, ministers of the good news of Jesus. And we are people like Paul's listeners who live in a city, very similar to Corinth, that places a high value on wealth, on living the good life, on being accomplished and self-sufficient.

A belief and a hope that we can have it all in this life. But under the surface in our city, and in Corinth as well, there is a deep spiritual and moral confusion in our community.

[1 : 26] There's personal insecurity as well. And what 2 Corinthians does is it shows us that God turns those values of our city, of our world around us, and of Corinth, right upside down.

By saying that human frailty, human weakness, is not something to deny, or to avoid, or to cause us to give up, but it is just the opposite in God's world.

It is actually the place, the occasion, our personal failings, are the place where his grace works most powerfully. Whether those failings are spiritual, or if they are moral, or if they are intellectual or physical, God's power actually comes into those places of our greatest weakness.

And that's what grace is. And Paul's life is an example. He is the apostle that understands and he knows grace in the most personal of ways.

His life is a perfect example. He, in his church, was facing people who called themselves super apostles. It's a great term, isn't it? This is on my resume.

[2 : 40] I'm a super minister. But what he is saying, what they are saying is that they are far superior to Paul in their accomplishments, in their ability to speak, and to lead.

Even their looks are much more superior, as well as their leadership and accomplishments. And so they see this as a very powerful argument for the Corinthians to accept their gospel, which is a watered down false gospel that we're going to hear has been peddled.

That's what we heard in 2 Corinthians. But Paul doesn't answer by defending himself. He uses this attack, this accusation, to point to God, to the living God.

Look at the very end of our passage, verse 6 of chapter 3. He says, God has made us, God has made us competent to be ministers of the new covenant.

So he's saying, it's not my resume or my accomplishments or my abilities that qualify me. It is the living God working in me by his Holy Spirit that qualifies me to be a minister of the gospel.

[3 : 57] And I think that we need to keep this in mind because God calls not just ordained people, but each of us are called to be ministers of that new covenant, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That we are bringing that into the world that we live in, the sphere of influence, the relationships that are part of our life. And God himself, by his Holy Spirit, makes us ready for that work.

And this is so important for us all because we all feel inadequate. And certainly as somebody who's been in full-time ministry for a very long time, that feeling of inadequacy is frequent.

It drives you to your knees to pray to God for his strength, for his wisdom, for his leading, for his grace as I serve Jesus.

And that's true for each of us as well. It is the occasion, that sense of inadequacy for God's power to come to bear in our lives so that we can let that occasion of weakness be the occasion to look to God, to depend on him, to make us competent for ministry.

[5 : 12] It's really a constant prayer. God wants us to be, in a sense, needy children who recognize that every moment of our life we depend upon God for our very life and certainly for our ministry of serving a world that doesn't know God.

And Paul describes how God makes him competent in three very vivid images which is really helpful for us in this little passage. He speaks about a procession, he speaks about a fragrance, and he speaks about a letter.

And I want to look at the first thing, the fragrance. Look back at 2.14. Paul says, I am thankful. Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.

Now that would be a very familiar image for the Corinthian people because they would have seen Roman generals who were victorious showing their strength and the magnitude of their victory by leading captives in a kind of parade down the streets of their city.

And in that parade, those captives with all of their worldly goods have been taken and belongs to that general.

[6 : 34] And they are led to show what a great victory this general has made. And Paul is saying something very interesting here. He's saying, I am Jesus captive.

He said, I was once an enemy of God. In fact, the worst of enemies throwing Christians into jail, persecuting the church. But Jesus has conquered me.

He has made me his captive. But the big difference from the Roman parade that's parading these very unhappy prisoners behind them is that Paul is very thankful to be a captive because it is God's grace, it's God's mercy that has conquered him, that has brought him to this place where he is following the victorious Lord Jesus.

And it's that mercy that's brought him into this kingdom. And the procession of Paul being led in this parade, in a sense, is triumphal because everybody who looks at Paul can see that it is God's grace alone that has brought him into that procession, that has conquered him, and is why he is following Jesus.

God has made him the most, who is the most unlikely enemy, Jesus' follower. You see, Jesus has conquered sin and death, and that leads Paul in every circumstance that life throws him.

[7 : 58] The knowledge that God has conquered these things that were part of Paul's life. In every circumstance that life throws at him, Jesus is leading him in his procession.

And that's true for each of us as well. The thing that makes us competent to serve Jesus is that while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son.

Romans 5 tells us that. And so Jesus leads us through all of our failings, through all of our weaknesses, by the death of his son.

We are forgiven ones. In a sense, each of us is a trophy that speaks of Jesus' glorious work on the cross for us.

And so the mark of a Christian is not that we are pressed down by being captives of Christ, but in fact that we are overjoyed at being conquered by God's love for us.

[8 : 56] And it is a joy for us to live under his lordship. This is the paradox of the Christian. This is what qualifies us as well, that he has conquered us.

We have surrendered to his mercy and his grace. And the second thing Paul says is that we are a fragrance. And again, this qualifies us.

Looking at the end of 14, God through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.

To one, a fragrance from death to death to the other, a fragrance from life to life. And what Paul is saying is that knowing Jesus brings with it a beautiful and fragrant grace.

And it comes from Jesus himself. It is a grace that doesn't stop being a grace if somebody rejects it. But the rejection of Jesus' message brings death with it.

[10 : 02] And receiving it brings life. And the remarkable thing is that God chooses to spread that aroma through Paul and everyone who knows Christ.

It is just a fact of being in that procession that the aroma of the knowledge of God, of Jesus Christ, is actually spreading in the world. And he says, you, Paul, and each of us are the aroma of Christ.

Well, what does it mean? What it means is that we don't have a choice in the matter. If we are his captives, the world knows who we belong to. And we commend him, or sometimes don't, by our living, by the things that we do, by the things that we say, by the way that we relate to those around us.

And I'll give you an example of this. I don't know if you saw this, but in the, all over social media and the internet, there is a small video.

And it was a video of the Pope yesterday. And, of course, the Pope is somebody who is recognized by billions as being a Christian, of being somebody who stands for who Christ is, represents the church.

[11 : 22] In Philadelphia, yesterday, the Pope was going from the airport, and all of a sudden, in this video, you can see him look and tell the driver to stop, and he gets out of the car, and he walks over to a boy named Michael Keating, a 10-year-old boy who's in a wheelchair with cerebral palsy.

And he walks over there, and he prays for him, he blesses him, puts his hand on his head, and he kisses him. And that image was very, very powerful.

It was relayed to literally billions of people yesterday. And in a real sense, the Pope, in that occasion, was the aroma of Christ. And what he did was he pointed to Jesus' love for every human being, including children.

He gave expression to Jesus' priority for the weak and for the vulnerable. He, the picture was showing the excellency of knowing the Jesus who pours mercy and grace into us through human weakness.

And the fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus through that one person spread through that small gesture to millions and probably billions of people because he represents Christ.

[12 : 40] Now, in a much, much smaller way, the place you live in, in your unique way, you are representing Christ as well. You are the aroma of Jesus to the people in your home, to the people who are in the place where you work, in the place where you have your free time or your school.

They have at least a small idea that you follow Jesus and stand for him. And for a number of people in your life, you are the only one who brings that fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus into their life.

And it's an awesome responsibility in a sense because that aroma is life for those that God is bringing to life and it is death for those who reject it as well. And Paul says, you know, who is sufficient for these things?

Who is sufficient to be the aroma of Christ in your life? It's an awesome responsibility, a matter of spiritual life and death. Well, if you jump down to verse 5, chapter 3, he says, we are not sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us.

Instead, he said, our sufficiency is from God. Our sufficiency is from him. And that's why this is what qualifies us. We are his aroma just because of what he has made us.

[14 : 06] And he alone can make us sufficient for that role of being God's aroma. And finally, Paul gives us a picture of a letter.

He says, in verse 2-4 of chapter 3, he says, you yourselves are our letter of recommendation written on our hearts to be known and read by all.

In other words, he's saying, Paul says, I have a special love for you Corinthians. And you show, he says, 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.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. There is a deep expression of confidence, not in himself, but in the power of the Holy Spirit, of Jesus working through that spirit in our lives.

And what he's saying is that Jesus has written his story, his gospel, on the hearts of these Corinthians by the Holy Spirit of the living God.

[15 : 14] The Holy Spirit has actually changed their hearts so completely that they know and love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength as we began our service. Their lives show that Paul's message and ministry are true.

And that is an important word for us because the people in your life that you serve, that you are the fragrance of Christ for, God is at work in their hearts, in their minds, and in their souls as well.

You and I cannot change the people who are in our lives. The Holy Spirit does that. That's what Paul is saying, the Spirit of the living God. He qualifies you to serve simply by making you the letter carrier.

And he works through your weakness to write his truth on their hearts. And he does this powerfully. He does that by our very halting conversations. He does it through our prayers of desperation and sometimes perhaps prayers of almost despair.

He does it through your testimony of God's grace in your weakness. He does it by these acts of serving as well. You know, the question is who am I?

[16 : 32] Well, I can say I'm pretty weak. I have many limitations. But the real question is who is the Holy Spirit? He is the living God, Paul says, himself, who delivers the grace of Jesus through you.

So you are that willing captive. You are the one who is being led by Jesus, who is actually affecting the world around you with his fragrance. And so our prayer today as we leave this service and go through our week is that we pray that God will give each of us confidence through Christ towards God.

That we will place our confidence in him knowing that in this way God will use us to be his powerful ministers. He will qualify us to be used by him to bring the fragrance of the knowledge of God into our world.

thanks be to God for his grace and his mercy that has conquered us and brought us into this place of serving. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.