

What's That Smell?

Turn to 2 Corinthians 2:12-17

- We are entering what has been called “the most wonderful time of the year.” It’s a time of giving, receiving, celebrating with friends and family and, of course, eating.
- It’s also a season in which our sense of smell is activated and inundated with fragrances of every sort. Some are from primary sources – you know, like turkey roasting in the oven, freshly baked pumpkin pie, and the scent of recently-cut evergreen (for those who still decorate with live trees and boughs of real holly).
- Other scents come wafting to our nostrils from artificial sources like candles, incense, air-freshener sprays and Glade plug-in appliances.
- I asked Donna to go through our house and take an inventory of the artificial scents intended to be used especially during this time of the year. Here’s a sampling of the descriptive names attached to these scents:
 - Warm vanilla sugar
 - Carmel pumpkin swirl
 - Buttered maple syrup
 - Pumpkin pecan waffle
 - Holly wreath
 - Fresh balsam
 - Twisted peppermint
 - Frosted cranberry
 - Winter candy apple
 - Sugared snickerdoodle
- She also found three generic “mystery aromas” whose names give little clue as to what they are supposed to imitate:
 - The perfect Christmas
 - ‘Tis the season
 - Under the Christmas tree
- Smells, scents, aromas, fragrances, good or bad, are important because they originate from sources that have meaning to us and make differences in our lives.
- The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, has multiple references to fragrances and aromas. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in this passage:

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

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.

If you read Luke's account of this in Acts chapter 16, you get the sense that Paul was struggling to determine where he should go to minister. He seemed frustrated and even to a point of despair. The Holy Spirit appeared to resist him at every turn as he went from one place to another. But he goes on to make this observation:

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. 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? 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 2:12-17, ESV)

- Even though Paul was frustrated in finding God's perfect will regarding the places he should be ministering, he gives thanks that, no matter where he went, God was using him and his cohorts to spread the aroma of Christ. The good fragrance of the knowledge of God just oozed from their pores!
- In fact, it was in Macedonia, in Philippi, where he and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison, where they offered the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving at midnight by singing psalms and praying, and where the earthquake loosed their bonds and the jailer was converted.
- Many theologians believe Paul is using a metaphor here that would be familiar to most citizens of the Roman Empire...
- When the armies of Caesar defeated an enemy, those taken captive were led in a triumphal procession into the capital city, bound with shackles and clothed with none of their defensive gear.
- Caesar's religious priests would take part in the parade, burning incense to their pagan gods, symbolically offering these prisoners as sacrifices – alive as slaves or as rebel criminals to be executed.
- So, the aroma of the incense *to the conquerors* was a fragrance of victory or, as Paul put it, a fragrance of life to life. To the defeated foe, the aroma of the incense wasn't pleasant because it was a fragrance of death to death.
- Paul indicates in this passage that he, and we by extension, carry an aroma, a fragrance as we walk in this world. Now, he's speaking allegorically of course. And, allegorically speaking, as Christ followers, we want to "diffuse the fragrance of His knowledge in every place" that He may lead us, as he did with Paul.
- I've titled this message "What's That Smell?" My intention is to talk about how the aroma we diffuse is determined by the depth of the sacrifices we make as we walk in the Lord. Here's the main point: **The deeper the commitment the sweeter the smell.**

- This connection of aromas to sacrifices is as old as history itself. It's a vital part of the Old Testament record. Let's look at the first recorded example.

Turn to Genesis 8:20-22

- We learn early on in Genesis that, as the centuries rolled on after creation, God became displeased with mankind because **"...the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was *only evil continually.*" (Genesis 6:5, ESV)**
- So, God decided to destroy every living creature on the earth with a massive flood, but because Noah "found grace in the eyes of the Lord" he was spared, along with his family and two of every creature, male and female. He also took along several other "clean" animals, presumably, to be offered as sacrifices to the Lord.
- As a side note, it took Noah and his family about 100 years to build the ark. Imagine the ridicule they suffered from their neighbors and passersby. Noah sacrificed his reputation to obey God's instructions.
- It rained for 40 days, the entire earth was flooded, and, after a year, the waters had abated enough that God called Noah and his family and all the animals out of the ark. Genesis 8:20 says

20 Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 21 And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. 22 While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:20-22, ESV)

- Noah offered burnt offerings on the altar, and the Lord was pleased with the aroma. Those animals were sacrificed in exchange for the lives of Noah and his family.
- Contrast this soothing aroma with the horrible stench of rotting flesh that must have been prevalent all over the world during the previous year. It was the stench that came as a result of sin and the evil that can reign in the human heart. This illustrates another main point in this message: **Sin Stinks.**
- Why was God pleased with the aroma of Noah's burnt offerings? Let me assure you, it's not because God was hungry. More on that in a bit.
- As the purposes of God continued to unfold, and the priesthood was established under Moses, regular burnt offerings and sacrifices were instituted and formalized under God's requirements.
- The descriptions of these various sacrifices in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy read very similarly to this one in Exodus 29:18, and I'm quoting:

You shall burn the whole ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the Lord; it is a sweet aroma, an offering made by fire to the Lord. (Exodus 29:18, ESV)

- Depending on the Bible version you use, the phrase “a sweet aroma” or “a pleasing fragrance” to describe these various sacrifices and burnt offerings is used about 40 times in all the instructions God gave to Moses.

So, that was the Old Covenant. What about sacrifices in the New Covenant era (the time we live in now)? Turn to Ephesians Chapter 5, starting in verse 1.

- All the sacrifices in the Old Covenant were foreshadowing the ultimate sacrifice that would take place centuries later, on Calvary.
- Allow me to make this very important point...**only one sacrifice in human history permanently and completely dealt with the stench of sin - past, present, and future.** Jesus was and is the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.
- All other sacrifices *were and are* types and shadows whose affects are temporary or that accomplish other purposes.
- Paul makes a New Covenant reference to Christ’s perfect, fragrant offering of himself in Ephesians 5 verses 1 and 2:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2, ESV)

- This is the gospel. Christ loved us, giving himself up for us. His “once for all” sacrifice dealt with sin in a way that Old Covenant sacrifices never could.
- The writer of Hebrews says, and I’m quoting from **Hebrews 10:4: “...it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.”**
- Because of this, God did away with animal sacrifices for good during the time of the Apostles.
- Were all those sacrifices in the Old Testament useless? Were they ineffective? The answer is yes and no. They did not permanently fix the problem of sin nor did they *necessarily* change the heart of the person making the sacrifice.
- But they did exercise the person’s faith because he or she was bringing it as an act of obedience.
- If the person was simply going through the motions with no intention of faithfully obeying God’s requirements; if they cheated their neighbor in business dealings or if they were secretly visting pagan temples...their sacrificial gift was odious to God. The aroma of its burning was stench in God’s nostrils. (Isaiah 1:10-17)
- On the other hand, if the transgressor came to the altar with a humble and contrite heart, in full realization of his or her sin, God honored their obedience and accepted their act of faith. The sacrifice covered their sin until Christ’s perfect sacrifice dealt with it for good.

- So, we are off the hook, right? We don't need to go through the hassle of burnt offerings and sacrifices, do we? Turn to Romans 12:1-2. This is Paul speaking to us again about sacrifices:

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. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2, ESV)

- Forget about finding a bull, a lamb, or a goat to offer up from time to time in obedience to God. Instead, he wants you to offer your own body as a **living** sacrifice.
- Paul clarifies what that looks like. Our "spiritual worship" is how we offer ourselves. Not being conformed to the world is how we make this living sacrifice. Being transformed by the renewal of our minds is the sweet aroma God wants from us.
- He might be convicting you about your loose tongue. Perhaps he's putting his finger on an addiction you're enjoying. Maybe he's calling you into a more committed role at church. God works with each of us differently as we press into him.
- The New Testament is full of detailed instructions as to how we should walk as fragrant, living sacrifices. If we read on in this chapter, Romans 12, you'd find enough to keep you busy at the living sacrificial altar for the rest of your life.
- Numerous other passages in the New Testament describe how we are to live out our Christian lives on this earth...with the Holy Spirit empowering us.
- I'll refrain from reading all these instructions. Our pastor Steve is very faithful to remind us of these each week. Plus, you should be immersing yourself every day in the Word and reading these passages for yourself.
- Instead, let's consider a beautiful and powerful New Testament illustration of a sold-out life, a sacrifice, and the fragrance connected with it all.

Turn to Luke 7:36-50. I'd like to read this entire account (NKJV), then make a few comments:

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him (Jesus) to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat. 37 And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, 38 and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." So he said, "Teacher, say it."

41 "There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "You have rightly judged." 44 Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. 45 You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. 46 You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. 47 Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." 48 Then He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 Then He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50, NKJV)

- This woman was, most likely, a prostitute. It took a lot of courage for her to enter the Pharisee's house to perform this act of devotion. She would not be welcome there.
- Not only that, the ointment she used was, probably, very expensive and something that was vital in her occupation. The fact that she poured it out on her Savior was a very vivid indication that she was abandoning her sinful life. It was a costly sacrifice.
- Simon the Pharisee's motive for inviting Jesus to his house was not as risky. This event took place early in Jesus' ministry when Jesus was more of a celebrity among the religious elite than someone to be avoided.
- It's not that Simon the Pharisee did anything wrong. But his commitment to Christ was still wavering. He hadn't, yet, sacrificed anything. Instead, he judged the motives of the repentant prostitute, and he questioned Jesus' own sense of right and wrong.
- The woman left Simon's house forgiven. She left Simon's house to begin a new life. And she was the only person there who left Simon's house smelling like Jesus.
- This scene was replayed during the last week of Jesus' life when Mary, the sister of Martha and of Lazarus, anointed Jesus with oil in a similar way. Mary didn't care that some might associate her with the prostitute whom she was imitating.
- Judas, the disciple who only a couple days later would betray Jesus, rebuked Mary for wasting this expensive oil. It could have been sold and the proceeds could have been used to feed the poor. Jesus rebuked Judas saying:

"Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me. 11 For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. 12 In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. 13 Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her." (Matthew 26:10-13, ESV)

- Isn't it interesting we are reading about her today?

To close...Psalm 51:16-17

- Psalm 51 is the prayer of David when he got caught after he committed adultery with Bathsheba, then he tried to cover it up by seeing to it that her husband was killed in battle.
- It's a prayer of repentance and contrition, one that the prostitute we just read about could have prayed, and one we should read and pray often.
- Verses 16 and 17 say:

16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;

You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;

A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:16-17, ESV)

- Sacrifices are meaningful and important, but only if accompanied by a humble, broken, and contrite heart.
- Sacrifices offered in this way produce a fragrance that is noticeable, sweet-smelling, and that can last for centuries.
- A life fully committed to Jesus produces a fragrance that is "from life to life," as the Apostle Paul said. The deeper the commitment, the sweeter the smell.
- On the other hand, if we aren't willing to sacrifice much, it's probably because we have no real sense of just how much we have been forgiven.
- Today we considered the examples of Paul, Noah, a sold-out prostitute, Mary, the sister of Lazarus and, ultimately, Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
- One more example is worth mentioning this time of year. Four hundred years ago a small group of sold-out Christians, we call them Pilgrims, came to the shores of America seeking a place where they could worship freely and with clear consciences. They sacrificed much in the years leading up to their journey, and they suffered even more after they arrived. Half of them died in the first year in New England. But their story of sold-out obedience inspires us to this day. As we enjoy the aromas of our Thanksgiving meals this week, may we take time to reflect on the eternal impact a life fully committed to Jesus can have.

Let's pray...

Other Resources:

- **Isaiah 1:10-17, ESV:**

***10 Hear the word of the LORD, You rulers of Sodom; Give ear to the law of our God,
You people of Gomorrah:***

***11 “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” Says the LORD. “I have
had enough of burnt offerings of rams***

***And the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
Or of lambs or goats.***

***12 “When you come to appear before Me,
Who has required this from your hand,
To trample My courts?***

***13 Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me.
The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies— I cannot endure
iniquity and the sacred meeting.***

***14 Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates;
They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them.***

***15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you;
Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.***

***16 “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil,***

***17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor;
Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow***

- **“Living Sacrifices to God”** - A sermon by R.C. Sproul
<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/living-sacrifices-god>
- **“Our Pilgrim Fathers”** - A speech by Senator Tom Cotton on the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrim’s coming to New England.
<https://www.cotton.senate.gov/news/speeches/our-pilgrim-fathers>