

WHAT'S THAT SMELL? 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Have you heard of Spray On Mud? You can actually buy a can of mud that is marketed by a company in England. You spray the mud on your 4x4 to make it look like you've actually been out off-roading with it. The company web site says it can give your friends, family and neighbors the impression that you've just come back from a day out hunting or fishing or anything but driving around in town all day or going to the mall. You can get a can of just under a quart for a mere \$14.50.

Fake mud? Really? You don't want to go out in the wilderness, you just want to look like you go out in the wilderness? We live in a society that worships image. It's almost like it doesn't matter what you actually are, just what you look like. But image is a fragile thing, and we are in the process of thinking about how we can be more "antifragile." Something that is antifragile actually gets stronger or better when subjected to stress or chaos. We all know that in the long run our bodies are not going to be antifragile, for age will wear them down. But our souls can be antifragile. We can become stronger in spirit until the day we die. Image can easily unravel under stress or chaos. Something that is "antifragile" just gets better under difficult conditions.

The genuine article that is the Christian faith is perhaps the most antifragile thing in creation. Unfortunately there is a lot that passes for the real thing that in fact is more like spray on mud than the real thing. Today we will look at 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 and see some of the characteristics of the real thing and we will get a reminder of where the real thing comes from.

FULL OF THANKS

Paul wrote the letter we know as 2 Corinthians because he had been heavily criticized by some people in the Corinthian church who sought to undercut him as a leader for that ministry. He wasn't dynamic enough, he wasn't charismatic enough, he wasn't deep enough, he wasn't powerful enough in his personal presence and so on. The relationship between Paul and the Corinthians was seriously strained. You get a sense of how difficult this was for Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13. "Now I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia."

The Lord opened a door for ministry in Troas, but Paul was so upset he didn't seize the opportunity. He just left and went to Macedonia where, according to 7:5 he felt "harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within." The man who stood firm against riots, beatings, all manner of opposition, was unable to minister in Troas because he was so torn up emotionally by what was happening with the church at Corinth! He felt harassed and fearful.

Sometimes we think of Paul as though he were almost superhuman. He was great, but he was also very human. It helps me to know that there were times in his life when he was so tied up in knots emotionally that he couldn't do his job. Paul knew what it was like to be so fearful and so emotionally torn up he couldn't concentrate. That was his state before writing this letter.

That's why verse 14 is so profound. What was Paul's response in that situation where he felt so emotionally distraught and fearful? He says, "Thanks be to God." Part of the reason for that thanks was that he met his friend Titus who told him that the Corinthians had changed and things were better. So that explains some of why Paul gave thanks. But what he actually gave thanks for was not that Titus showed up and relieved his concern about the Corinthians. As we will see it had to do with things that were true of Paul even while facing the riots and the uncertainty of the mess that was the Corinthian church.

This was characteristic of Paul. Later he was in prison in Rome when he wrote a letter to the church at Philippi. He was on trial even though he had committed no crimes and broken no laws. He had been in prison for several years yet he started his letter in Philippians 1:3 saying, "I thank my God every time I remember you." He went on in the first chapter to write about how he rejoiced because God was using his imprisonment to advance the gospel. Around that same time he also wrote to the Christians at Colossae. That letter begins, "We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you." Acts 16 tells us that when he and Silas had been beaten and thrown in jail in Philippi, at midnight while in chains they were unable to sleep. So they sang songs of praise and thanks to God.

When a person has the genuine article of a life changing relationship with God through Jesus Christ one of the effects it will produce is gratitude. The person's response in all situations is give thanks to God. Ephesians 5:20 says that we should be "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything." Colossians 3:17 says, "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Whatever you do, in

everything you do, give thanks. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 says “Give thanks in all circumstances.”

The real thing, genuine Christianity, is always characterized by giving thanks. There is a reason for this. That’s because **the gospel of grace is so terrific one always has much to give thanks for no matter what else may be happening.**

On our 10th anniversary Laurie and I were given a gift of a trip to Hawaii. While we were there we saw a hotel that was spectacular. The place we were staying in was a slum in comparison. We knew we would never be able to stay at that place because it was way more expensive than we would ever be able to afford. Fast forward more than a decade and a half. Laurie and I had the chance to return to Hawaii. The intervening years had brought the Internet into play and with it a new online business called Priceline. We had used it, bid a very low price and were stunned to discover that at our absurdly low price we had gotten that magical hotel we thought we could never afford. We would be staying there at a price not much different than we paid at the slum years before. At one point early in our stay I had to go to the front desk. While I was at the desk I couldn’t help overhearing a man nearby who was unhappy. He was unloading a truckload of complaints on the desk clerk and demanding all sorts of freebies and other perks to make up for all the deficiencies he perceived. I was just happy to be in Hawaii. I would have been fine staying back in the slum, but I was staying in that lovely hotel. I was thrilled and grateful. I was thankful for everything I had there and found delight in all the wonderful service the employees rendered. The contrast with that man was stark. I couldn’t help but be thankful, he couldn’t do anything but complain and demand.

There will be times when we, like Paul, are stressed by strained relationships or by harassing circumstances, by fears in our own heart. But even then there is something good and right in our world if we have the Spirit of Jesus in us. Our circumstances may be trying or even painful, but we know God! We have hope. We have something we don’t deserve that is infinitely more important and light years better than the best circumstance we could ever enjoy. We have this as a gift, so our response, if we really know God, will always be to thank him even in the midst of the fray.

FOREVER TRIUMPHANT

Paul now explains why he gives thanks. I like the old NIV translation better than the new one. It read, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.” The words “leads us in triumphal procession” all translate one Greek word. It is *thriambeuo*. We derived the word triumph from it. The King

James translated it “always causeth us to triumph.” The Contemporary English Version translates it “always makes it possible for Christ to lead us to victory.”

I like those translations because I want to win. I would like my life to be a long series of victories. I love the word “always.” Hey if you *always* are caused to triumph what does that mean? You’re undefeated! I once played on an undefeated football team. It was really fun. We started every game expecting to win. We never felt the disappointment and embarrassment of losing. It was great fun. I’d like to live that life. No defeats, only victories. No disappointment, no embarrassment. Just the great feeling of winning. I’d like my life to be like that. It’s not. I have suffered a lot of disappointing defeats in my life. I have even been the cause of my own defeats many times. So is there something wrong with me? Did Paul experience constant victory because he had the real thing and I do not? No. We have to pay attention to what Paul actually said.

You can tell from some of the more recent translations that the Greek word *thriambeuo* didn’t actually mean victory. There was another word for that. It was the word *nike*. Yeah, like the swoosh. The word Paul used here actually meant the celebration of a victory. The noun form of the verb actually meant a song of praise. So what Paul actually said was God always leads us in his victory parade.

We know something about this. What do you think will happen if the Padres or Chargers ever win a championship? Yes, I know, that’s like asking what do you think will happen if the sun starts coming up in the west instead of the east, but try to imagine it anyway. I guarantee you that if such a thing ever happens...well the world is likely to end ...but beyond that there will be a big parade downtown. Actually if the Chargers ever win a championship there will probably be a parade in downtown LA which is where they will be playing if it happens.

In the first century the Romans were big on victory parades. When a Roman military commander won a significant victory he and his troops would be brought back to Rome for a big celebration. They would have lots of animals in the parade and what were essentially floats that depicted the battle scenes. They’d have chariots that carried pictures of the conquered cities. The troops would march in the parade with the commanding general taking center stage. But they would also have captives in the parade. Some of the defeated rulers and officers, even soldiers and prominent citizens from the losing side would be marched along in chains. In many, maybe most, cases they would be marching to their death because they would be executed at the end.

Many scholars believe Paul is depicting himself as one of the defeated enemy soldiers marching along in the parade. That's why the recent NIV revision includes the words "as captives." Those words aren't in the original text, they are interpreting that's what Paul meant. He may have, but I don't think that's his main point. I think Paul is rejoicing and giving thanks for the fact that at every moment of his life he knew that he was marching in God's victory parade. The victory has already been won. It is not in question. There is no doubt how this life is going to turn out. The enemy of our souls has been defeated and nothing can change that. It's not his victory that Paul was referring to, but God's. He got to celebrate it.

So Paul could go through life saying, "Maybe I will be mistreated, maybe I will be criticized, maybe the Corinthians will want nothing more to do with me, maybe my whole ministry will totally fall apart, maybe I will be thrown in prison and maybe I will even be assassinated or executed. But God has won the victory and nothing can change that. My whole life is a celebration of his win, the biggest win the universe will ever see."

In Philippians 1:19-20 Paul said "I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." He said that he knew the situation he was in would turn out for his deliverance. But it is crucial to observe how he defined deliverance. It was not that he would be acquitted and released. It was that Christ would be honored by him whether he lived or died. His point was that God was going to triumph, no matter what circumstances came about in Paul's life.

The great news is, if we live for God's purposes, we can't lose. Isn't that what Romans 8:28 tells us? "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Paul goes on in verse 29 to say that we are predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. Verse 30 says that those who are predestined also are glorified. The end of the story has been written. God's purpose is sure, and it is that we are going to become like his Son and in the end be in glory with him. Nothing can keep that from happening the victory has been won.

Last year I was watching a football game and saw a play that illustrated this. One team had the ball on the 10 yard line, about to score. The wide receiver on the right started to slant into the middle of the field. The whole flow of the play was going to the left. But then the wide out on the right cut back and headed for the corner of

the end zone. The quarterback reversed his field and rolled out to the right. Suddenly they had the defensive back on the right isolated. If he stayed with the receiver the quarterback would be able to just run the ball into the endzone for a touchdown. If he rushed up to stop the quarterback he would just toss the ball to the receiver for a touchdown. The defender had no good alternatives. If he stayed with the receiver his only hope was that the qb would trip and fall. If he made him throw the ball there was always the hope he'd make a bad throw or the receiver would drop the ball. He rushed toward the qb. He threw the ball. Touchdown.

I want you to imagine yourself being in the position of that quarterback. What a great place to be. He's out there with the ball in his hand, his receiver in the endzone and only one defender in the area. No matter what the defender does it will be a win for the qb. What Paul is saying is that when we have genuine Christianity we are in precisely that position in this world. No matter what happens we are going to win, because God's purpose will win.

In Romans 8:35 Paul said, "who shall separate us from the love of God? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" Paul endured the threat and in some cases the reality of all of those. He faced persecution, he was threatened with the sword, he faced danger repeatedly, he went hungry, he didn't have enough clothes, he endured all kinds of trouble and hardships. But in verse 37 he answers his own question. "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

For Paul the equation was simple as he worked it out while in prison in Rome. He would soon stand trial. His case would be judged by a Caesar who didn't care about justice. He only cared about expediency and power. But Paul said, "I can't lose. If they decide to execute me, I get to go home to be with my Savior, which is what I really want. If they sentence me to stay in prison I will preach to the guards and to all the others who come to see me here in my prison. And if they release me then I will continue my ministry of spreading the gospel of grace and planting churches. No matter what happens, God is in charge and he is going to use me for his purpose."

Paul was like that quarterback. He had only good options and he couldn't lose no matter what happened. When we have the real thing, real knowledge of Jesus and his grace, we will have that view of life. Yes, some bad circumstances will happen. Paul got thrown in jail and that wasn't fair or good. But did that stop God's purpose in his life? No, he might not have enjoyed being in chains, but he was still able to be what God wanted.

This real faith in Jesus will produce in us an unflappable confidence. We will encounter circumstances that we do not enjoy, and we may wish to avoid many of them. But in the middle of them we will have this underlying sense that we cannot lose! This will produce staying power. I've noticed that in the church there is a tendency to try to whip up enthusiasm. So common for churches to rely on some new program to get everyone excited, to try to whip up fervor for the latest project. There's a rush of involvement and activity, but eventually it wanes. So it is up and down all the time. That's because we are not depending on the real thing. Authentic Christianity will produce a steady, long lasting enthusiasm that doesn't die out because it is based on confidence that God is going to win. Perhaps we will see big things happening in ministry, perhaps we won't, but it doesn't matter how it looks to people because in the end we know God leads us in his, not our, triumph. So we can keep being faithful day in and day out.

FRAGRANT

How can it be that we really can conquer in all situations? Paul explains it in verses 15-16. "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life." So Paul says we give off an aroma to God, but people can smell this aroma. It's the same smell, but to some people it smells like death, while to others it's just the opposite because it smells like life. How can it be that the same smell would have two such opposite effects?

I love the movie *Miracle*. There are lots of movies about underdog teams defeating more powerful favored teams. We all love those kind of movies. What sets *Miracle* apart is that it is a true story. It is the almost unbelievable story of the 1980 US Olympic hockey team, a bunch of college hockey players and minor leaguers who somehow defeated the best hockey team in the world, the Soviet national team. There's a scene in the movie that is accurate in showing the speech coach Herb Brooks made before the game with the Soviet Union team. It is difficult today for most people to understand how much of an underdog the US team was in that game. No one gave them even a hint of a chance. The Soviets had beaten the best the NHL had, and a week before the Olympics in an exhibition game they totally destroyed the US team. In his speech Brooks acknowledged the seeming impossibility of the task before his team. He said if they played the Soviets 10 times the Soviets would win 9. But then he said, "But not this game." Sure enough that unlikely team went out that evening and beat the best team in the world in a historic upset and win on to win the gold medal. What a terrific moment that was. I love watching that movie. It is such a feel good story.

However, a few years ago I happened to see an interview with a man who had been on that Soviet hockey team so many years ago. He now lives in the United States. He said when that movie came out he could hardly bear to watch it. He said it brought up awful memories of the most painful day of his life. He felt again the bewilderment that such a thing could happen to them, the disappointment and the embarrassment that they had lost to a team that they knew was not as good as they were. The same movie produces exactly opposite feelings. For me it produces great feelings of happiness and inspiration. For that man it produces feelings of loss, humiliation and disappointment. That's what Paul was saying in verses 15-16. If we have the real thing we will give off the aroma of Christ. Some people are going to smell that and be drawn by it, finding it incredibly pleasant and appealing. Others are going to be repelled by it for it reeks of judgment to them.

We should hardly find that surprising, for that was true of Jesus himself. To fishermen, shepherds, hated collaborators with the Romans, prostitutes, lepers, the common folk who knew that they were far from measuring up and were likely a big disappointment to God, Jesus was the best thing they'd ever encountered. He was compelling and appealing and life giving. But to the religious establishment he was an abomination, a contagion that had to be destroyed. To the one he smelled like life, to the other death.

Genuine Christianity is going to be marked by this one thing: it gives off the aroma of Jesus Christ. The smell of Jesus is fragrant and beautiful. It is what every human longs to smell. Sadly to some who have hardened their hearts against God's truth it will smell like death. But to others it will be enormously appealing.

Dr. Martha Myers was an obstetrician who wanted to bring the aroma of Jesus to places where it is generally not present. After graduating from medical school in Alabama she went as a Southern Baptist missionary to Yemen in the Middle East. There she served poor women, delivering thousands of babies and performing difficult surgeries without charge, all in the name of Jesus. She didn't preach, she demonstrated the love of Christ by the way she cared for people. One of her patients was married to a man named Ali Abdul Razek. One December 30, 2002 he walked into the hospital in Jibla, Yemen with a concealed gun. He pulled the gun out and fired. He shot and killed Dr. Myers and two other missionaries. He was later arrested. When asked why he killed the Americans he said that his wife as a patient of Dr. Myers and that his wife had told him the doctor had showed her love beyond anything she'd ever experienced in her life. Razek said, "Such love could turn all my people from Islam to Jesus Christ." His answer was to try to snuff out

the fragrance of Christ by killing Dr. Myers. But the fragrance remained. Dr. Myers as per her instructions was buried in Yemen. Thousands of people in Yemen came to faith in Jesus following her death. Five years later thousands gathered at her grave and sang “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

There is a question at the end of verse 16 that is crucial. It is, in fact, the most important question in the world. “Who is equal to such a task?” That’s a really good question. Most of us think, “Yeah, that giving off the aroma of Jesus is a great idea. Wish I could do it. I’ve tried and I just don’t think that’s the smell I’m producing. Martha Myers clearly gave off that aroma, so she must have been equal to the task. But most of us think we’re not. We might know a few people who give off that aroma, and we might think in our best moments we might emit that fragrance briefly, but on the whole we just don’t think we’re equal to the task.

Our problem is that we think we have to be. We think it is up to us to somehow do all this stuff right. This is where authentic Christianity has a freeing, life giving message. Paul doesn’t actually answer his own question until 3:5. “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.” The word translated “competent” might be better translated “sufficient” as the English Standard Version has it. Who has enough in him to produce that life of always being thankful and exuding the aroma of Christ? Paul says, “I’m not sufficient for that. I don’t have what that takes. But my sufficiency comes from God.”

Here’s the heart of the gospel. This is what makes sufficient, what God gives us will be what we need. What God supplies is enough. That means we only need to humble ourselves, admit our inadequacy and our lack, and look to God to supply what we need. We don’t have to prove anything. We don’t have to try harder to measure up. We simply trust God, rejoice in the peace we have with him through Jesus Christ, and thank him for what he has done for us. In Romans 5:1-2 Paul wrote, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

In his book, *Authentic Christianity* (p. 38), the late Ray Stedman wrote that there are “two covenants at work in human life. One is the new, which he (Paul) describes as ‘nothing coming from me, everything coming from God.’ The other is the old, which is in direct contrast to the new and can therefore be described as ‘everything coming from me and nothing coming from God.’” At every moment of our lives we are living by one of those covenants. When we live by the new we get

this real thing, the new covenant life. We begin to experience and live out the life that Paul describes.

How does this enable us to produce this life? As long as we think it is up to us to produce this life we will try out of our own sufficiency to make that life come out. We will produce a smell to be sure, but it won't be the aroma of Jesus. Generally speaking the smell we produce will be one that will make everyone in the vicinity hold their noses. It reeks!

Yesterday we went to Sea World with Carissa, whose company provided a free day at that park for employees and their families. I hadn't been there in many years. One of the shows we saw used to be a favorite of mine, the dolphin show. It's changed. I imagine some people love the new one. In my humble opinion it was lame in the epic fail category. They tried to turn it into some sort of melodrama with emotive music and human dancers, some of them in ridiculous costumes dressed like parrots, and the bare rudiments of what was apparently supposed to be a plot of some kind. Please forgive me if you have seen it and like it. Everyone is entitled to an opinion. Here's what it did to me: distracted me from the glory of the animals. I came away not saying, "wow, those dolphins are just so cool," but, "what a train wreck. Who was responsible for that?" Why didn't they just relax and let the dolphins shine? When we try to produce this authentic faith with our own efforts, relying on our strength and sufficiency, it is lame, it smells. When we relax and let Jesus shine, just let what he does for us be enough, it is glorious and joyful, for people will see Jesus.

Nothing can make us more “antifragile” than this new covenant life. No matter what situation we face we have reason to give thanks, we know that God will triumph in it and bring us with him in his victory, and we will be giving off the delicious, life giving aroma of Jesus Christ. In fact, the more stressful, the more difficult, the more chaotic the situation, the more pungent will be the fragrance of Jesus that we will emit!