

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## Features of Christianity: The Fragrance of Christ

In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes four outstanding features of Christianity. These are features which were seen in Christ and should now be seen in His people. These are

1. the fragrance (or 'sweet savour' as our Authorised Version puts it) of Christ;
2. epistles (or 'letters') of Christ;
3. the love of Christ;
4. the grace of Christ.

God willing, we shall look at each of these in turn in our next four talks. So our subject for today is 'The fragrance of Christ'.

Interestingly, it is claimed that the world's most expensive perfume is called 'Imperial Majesty' and sells for around £200,000 per bottle. Understandably, only a few bottles were manufactured to begin with! That fragrance might persist for a few hours and be gone. But the fragrance of Christ that we are thinking about today can last for a lifetime and evoke memories of an even greater Majesty – He who is King of kings and Lord of lords! I love the true story of the missionary who visited a remote village in China and started telling the people about the Lord Jesus – about His kindness, His readiness to welcome little children, His desire to help those who were in need. "But that man lived here a few years ago," burst out an excited villager. Of course, another missionary had lived there earlier and had left a fragrance of Christ that had persisted over the years. But what a happy mistake for the villager to make!

It is time now to read what Paul has to say about this fragrance of Christ. It is found in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16: "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death to death and to the other the aroma of life to life. And who is sufficient for these things?"

To appreciate this astounding statement we need to look first at the background to this letter. Firstly then, the city of Corinth itself. Corinth was an important seaport at the southern end of present day Greece. As a major seaport, it attracted all sorts of people, good and bad, just like seaports today. But such was the evil that went on in that city that the expression 'to Corinthianise' had been coined to describe the worst excesses of immorality. This, then, was the background from which some of these Corinthian believers had come and against which they had to live. Life was not easy for them. So Paul had written to them earlier, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). All this had been brought about through their receiving Christ as Saviour as Paul had brought the Gospel to Corinth.

But, secondly, we need to note the problems that these young Christians had in the church at Corinth. From Paul's first letter to them, we see that the following difficulties existed:

1. there were rival factions in the church (1 Corinthians 1:11)
2. there was sexual immorality of the grossest kind amongst them (1 Corinthians 5:1)
3. they were taking each other to court to settle their grievances (1 Corinthians 6:6)
4. when they came together for a love-feast prior to the breaking of bread, some overindulged while others had not enough to eat (1 Corinthians 11:21-22).

Clearly under those circumstances, Paul had not been able to write about the fragrance of Christ. In fact, their testimony stank!

Did you know that the world's smelliest plant is the Titan Arum? It only blooms once in seven years, which may be just as well! The flower, which is about 2 metres long, is magnificent. One was last in bloom at the Eden Project in Cornwall in February 2007. Professor Moore of the University of Sussex was brave enough to smell it then. Its smell was that of decaying flesh! Such was the testimony of the church in Corinth. The flesh, that old nature, was only too evident in its evil workings. The life of Christ, sadly, was little in evidence amongst them.

So Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to them in an attempt to set things right. In 2 Corinthians, he tells them of the deep concern he felt at the time: "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you" (2:4). Here beats the heart of a true shepherd! 1 Corinthians had done its work and the Corinthian believers had repented of the evil amongst them. They had, perhaps, been over zealous in their desire to set things right and 2 Corinthians to them was written, in part, to urge them in their dealings with the immoral brother not to forget to show love (2:8).

It is striking that one of the most amazing statements of Scripture is found in 1 Corinthians: "But we have the mind of Christ" (2:16). Sadly, that mind of Christ was so little in evidence amongst them at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. But the words are potentially true of every believer in Christ. When we received Christ as Saviour, as the One who died for our sins at Calvary, we received God's free gift of eternal life as He promised: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). That life is nothing less than the very life of Christ Himself – "that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us", as John describes it (1 John 1:2). Sadly, our old nature constantly wars against this new life which we have in Christ. But in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, each believer has the capacity to demonstrate the mind of Christ in daily living – to think as He thought, to love as He loved, to care as He cared. What a tremendous blessing, but what a great responsibility!

It is because the Corinthians had repented of the evil that characterised them at the time of Paul's writing 1 Corinthians that now, in 2 Corinthians, he is able to speak of those features of Christ which he now longed to be seen in them. So he writes, "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place" (2:14). While the 'us' in this verse may primarily refer to Paul and Timothy, the co-writer of this 2 Corinthians, I believe Paul was now able to associate these Corinthian believers with himself in the statement. What a transformation!

The language of these verses reflects the current practice of welcoming home victorious Roman generals. The victorious general would ride at the head of a procession followed by his soldiers and finally his prisoners, some appointed to die, others to live. Along the triumphal route, fragrant incense would be burnt. As Paul travelled with the Gospel, there would be those who refused to believe the message that Christ died for their sins and would consequently die in their sins, "the aroma of death to death". But others would believe, receiving God's gift of eternal life, "the aroma of life to life" (verse 16).

I well remember as a young boy, it was fashionable, particularly amongst elderly ladies, to be liberally sprinkled with lavender water. You couldn't mistake their presence in a room! They brought their own fragrance wherever they went. But now, in a far more wonderful way, in Paul, in Timothy and in these Corinthian believers, the fragrance of Christ was being spread abroad.

That fragrance of Christ was first experienced when He was here as a Man in this world. Men experienced it. At the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus read to the people in the synagogue from the prophet Isaiah. At the end of that reading, Luke tells us, "So all bore witness to Him, and marvelled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth" (Luke 4:22). After Jesus had healed a deaf mute, we read, "And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, 'He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak'" (Mark 7:37). The life of Jesus, lived out under the public gaze, was so perfect that when the chief priests and rulers wanted to try Jesus on some trumped up charges, they could not even get false witnesses to agree in their testimony (see Matthew 26:59-60). Finally, Pilate, when Jesus was brought before him to be crucified, had to acknowledge, "I find no fault in Him" (John 18:38).

But in a very particular way, that fragrance of Christ was experienced by His Father in heaven. At the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus went to be baptised by John in the River Jordan. We read, "Then Jesus, when He had been baptized, came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice from heaven saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17). Those words of appreciation echo His Father's delight in those thirty or so years in the obscurity of Nazareth. In fact, such was that delight, that God had already given vent to it in anticipation some 600 years earlier through the prophet Isaiah: "He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2). Amidst the barrenness of the nation of Israel in its departure from God, in the Lord Jesus there was One growing up before God in all the beauty and fragrance of a young plant.

That same cry of the Father's delight was heard again when Jesus was transfigured on a mountain top in front of His disciples, Peter, James and John: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 17:5). The disciples saw His glory; His Father appreciated His preciousness.

Now that same fragrance was being experienced by God, and by the unconverted inhabitants of Corinth, in the transformed lives of these Corinthian believers. What God was able to do in and through these Corinthian believers, He is still able to do in and through us! The words of the song by Carl Stuart Hamblen that were popular around the middle of the last century are still relevant:

*It is no secret what God can do.  
What He's done for others, He'll do for you.  
With arms wide open, He'll pardon you.  
It is no secret what God can do.*

*There is no night for in His light you'll never walk alone.  
Always feel at home, wherever you may roam.  
There is no power can conquer you, while God is on your side.  
Just take Him at His promise, don't run away and hide!*

The world's most expensive perfume can only be applied on the outside and, as we have seen, may only last for a very short while. But the fragrance of Christ begins on the inside. That same distinction between the outside and the inside is found in Paul's appeal to the Romans: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2). The Greek word translated 'conformed' refers essentially to what is outward. By contrast, the word translated 'transformed' refers to a change which begins on the inside but is then seen on the outside.

Paul's prayer for the believers at Ephesus was "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Ephesians 3:17). The fragrance of Christ will only be found in me as that prayer of Paul is effective in me. It would be unthinkable to welcome a dear friend into your home and then say, "Now you must stay in this room. I don't want you in any other of my rooms." And yet, sadly, some of us treat the Lord Jesus in just that kind of way. We are glad to welcome Him into our lives as Saviour, to know the forgiveness of sins that only He can bring, but there are many other areas of life into which we do not want Him to come. We refuse to surrender to His Lordship. We want to run our lives ourselves. In that situation, the Lord Jesus cannot truly be said to be dwelling in our hearts. It is striking that immediately preceding the prayer "that Christ may dwell in your hearts..." Paul prays "that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man" (verse 16). Paul prays for that great supply of divine power simply because Satan will do his level best to prevent Christ having His proper place in each of our affections.

Not surprisingly, Paul ends this section of his epistle, "And who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Corinthians 2:16). The plain answer is that none of us is sufficient in ourselves. As Paul goes on to say in the next chapter, "Our sufficiency is from God" (3:5).

We all need the power of God's indwelling Holy Spirit opening up every area of our lives to the control of the Lord Jesus so that the fragrance of Christ in us will be experienced by our Father in heaven and by those around us. The world today that, in a spiritual sense, very much carries the stench of the Titan Arum, desperately needs the fragrance of Christ. May the Lord help each one of us to manifest it!

I can think of no greater compliment than that once given to a servant of God:

*"For me 'twas not the truth you taught,  
To you so clear, to me so dim –  
But when you came to me you brought  
A sense of HIM."*

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