

Introduction:

- A. You've lived on your block for years, and you've tried to be a lighthouse for Christ there in the way you helped and prayed for your neighbors, in comments you make about your faith, but the fact is, you're not sure you've made a bit of difference. Or maybe for you, it has been the place you work. Or there is the friend you've tried to influence for Christ. You've prayed. You've talked. You've listened. You've put up with all kinds of things. But it doesn't seem like there's anything happening. Or maybe you've watched some spiritual investment you've made go down the drain. She was so excited about Jesus at first, and now she thrown the whole business overboard. When we're trying to serve the Lord it isn't always clear that we're making any progress or, for that matter, that we are even competent to serve Jesus at all!
- B. Even the Apostle Paul had thoughts like that sometimes. On his third missionary journey he was very worried about the church he had started in Corinth, south of Athens. Sin had gotten out of hand in that church, plus there had been people there questioning Paul's very qualifications and thus the gospel he preached. He was afraid the church would be lost. He sent his colleague Titus on to Corinth to find out what was happening. As Paul made his way up the coast of Asia he came to the city of Troas where gospel work went well. But listen to **2 Cor. 2:12-13...** So he went north to the region of Macedonia and there things went very badly. Listen to **2 Cor. 7:5-7...** It was after this good news from Titus that Paul sat down and wrote the letter we call 2 Corinthians. Turn to 2 Cor. 2.
- C. We are studying this passage today to help us in those times when it seems our efforts to serve the Lord are failing and we're not sure we're even competent to serve the Lord at all.
- I. **WHEN IT SEEMS LIKE OUR EFFORTS TO SERVE THE LORD HAVE FAILED, WE CAN BE SURE THAT GOD IS LEADING US IN VICTORY (2:14-16)**

In v.14 Paul thanks God for two related reasons:

- A. Thank God that even in ministry's darkest days he is always leading us in triumphal procession. As you heard earlier in the service, Paul seems to be picking up the picture of the Roman *triumphus*—a great parade of a conquering general as he returned to the heart of Rome amidst cheering crowds, followed by his victorious army and the rebel captives in chains. I think Paul pictures us as being in the army following our great general, Jesus.

For a guy who had just been through a very confusing and difficult time (what was it he had said? "*Conflicts on the outside, fears within*"?) it seems strange that he would say, "*God always leads us in triumphal procession.*" Maybe now he is, but back then? Yes, even when we serve the Lord in foxholes, even in the midst of battles that crush our souls and hardships that break our hearts, even then, "*God always leads us in triumphal procession*" when we are determined to serve the Lord.

To see that, though, we need to step back. Think of the Israelites streaming out of the broken Egypt, or going through the Red Sea on dry land. That was God's triumphal procession. Think of Israel crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, again on dry ground, and of the army of the Lord's people stalking the city of Jericho, marching round and round and round till the shofars sounded God's triumph and the walls fell down. Think of the weak and fearful army of Israel marching out against the "*vast army from Edom.*" God's army was not led by their best troops but by their choir singing, "*Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever.*" And God gave them the victory. That, too, was God's triumphal procession. Think of that awful, black, grave-shaking cataclysm at Golgotha when our mighty Captain died to conquer. There when he hung on the cross dying in shame he "*disarmed the powers and authorities, making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*" And so for us, even if we face the worst this world can throw at us—"*trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword*"—"*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*" **God's triumphal procession!** And what of death itself? Ah, "*Death has been swallowed up in*

victory!” And Jesus “holds the keys of death and Hades.” So “for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” **God’s triumphal procession!** And in the age to come, we shall ride out of heaven with the armies of heaven following our great King of kings who is called Faithful and True and he shall conquer all who have rebelled against his rule once and for all. And *that* is the triumphal procession we are in *now*, no matter how dark the days or tough the battle. Because “*God always leads us in triumphal procession!*”

- B. But there is more here; another image for us to remember when we’re not sure we’re amounting to much for the Lord, another reason to thank God: “*But thanks be to God who... through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him...*” –**vv.14b-16a...** Thank God that even in ministry’s darkest days our knowledge of Christ is a fragrance that no one can miss. It is an interesting image for Christian’s presence—a *fragrance*. Three times in these verses Paul uses a Greek word for *fragrance* that can be either a pleasant or an unpleasant smell. But the word he uses at the beginning of **v.15** means “*sweet aroma*”—“*For we are to God the aroma of Christ...*” It is a word that would bring to the mind of a Jew something in the Old Testament—that to God a burnt offering was a “*sweet smell*,” a smell to God of repentance and devotion. That aroma of Christ is what God breathes in from us.

When we are living for the Lord, that aroma of Christ that we have is evident to people around us. When he says that this smell is at once a smell of life to people who are saved and the smell of death to those who are dying, Paul may still be drawing on the picture of the Roman triumph. In at least one Triumph we know about, the prisoners of war had to carry censers as they were led through the streets to the great arena, the Circus Maximus, where they would be imprisoned or killed. That incense was the smell of death to them, while at the same time it was the smell of victory to the cheering crowds and the marching army.

That fragrance we have of Christ affects people in different ways. Illus.: I’ve thought about buying a bottle of Old Spice aftershave. It’s not that I want to use it. So do you know why I’d like to have that fragrance available? Because it reminds me deeply of my dad. It isn’t Old Spice to me. It is dad. When we who know Jesus are around other believers—especially those fervent in loving Jesus—we like that fragrance. It reminds us of Jesus. But to those who do not love Jesus, who do not want God in their lives, a Christian smells bad! It’s the smell of Jesus that they hate, whether they realize it or not. The smell of Christian humility and grace, Christian joy, peace and love. The smell when someone begins to talk about Jesus Christ. Some people turn up their noses when that scent is in the air.

Illus.: I read about a missionary candidate in language school. The very first day of class the teacher entered the room and, without saying a word, walked down every row of students. Finally, still without saying a word, she walked out of the room again. Then she came back and addressed the class. “*Did you notice anything special about me?*” she asked. Nobody could think of anything in particular. One student finally raised her hand. “*I noticed that you had on a very lovely perfume,*” she said. The class chuckled. But the teacher said, “*That was exactly the point. You see, it will be a long time before any of you will be able to speak Chinese well enough to share the Gospel with anyone in China. But even before you are able to do that, you can minister the sweet fragrance of Christ to these people by the quality of your lives.*” [M.Green; *Stories for a Faithful Heart*, p.95].

SUMMARY: Even when we feel like we’re not accomplishing anything for the Lord, if we are intent on loving and serving him, you can be sure there is a Christlike fragrance about you. It is beautiful to God, and that is enough. But it is also the scent that will attract some unbelievers to Christ and will be a delight to brothers and sisters in the Lord.

You know, we hear that and I wouldn’t be surprised if you are thinking to yourself, “*I am so unqualified to be the fragrance bearer of Christ. How could anyone be near me with my fumbling words and inconsistencies and be drawn to Christ?*” Paul must’ve thought the same thing because at the end of **v.16** he asks, “*And who is equal to such a task?*” The word he used is translated in v.5 & 6 as *competent*. “*Who is competent for such a task?*”

II. WHEN WE'RE NOT SURE WE'RE QUALIFIED TO SERVE THE LORD, WE NEED TO REMEMBER WHY WE ARE COMPETENT (2:16b-3:6)

The Bible here tells us why even we are competent to serve Jesus:

- A. (V.17) We are competent because we sincerely speak for God. We don't talk about Jesus to score points or to win contests. We talk about the Lord, we live out our love for the Jesus, because we *mean* it. The way Paul put this sentence together is interesting. Part of it is like this: "*we speak from God, before God, in Christ.*" We speak sincerely because (1) we got this message from God (we didn't make this up), (2) because God is listening when we talk to others and he cares about sincere hearts as much as he does a true word, and (3) because we are "*in Christ*" as we speak; that is, we speak as people who *have* what we tell other people about—a relationship with Christ.
- B. We are competent because there are people who are our letters of reference (3:1-3). Apparently some of Paul's detractors in Corinth had suggested to the church that he needed better references. That didn't go over so well! "*Reference letter?! You're my reference letter!*" he shouts. "*You are the letter on my heart, you are a letter written by Christ with the ink of God's Spirit on your own hearts. You want to know if I'm authorized and qualified to represent Christ. Just look at you!*" Paul was clearly thinking of God's promise of the New Covenant in **Jer. 31:33**... Our credibility as a servant of Christ is what God writes on the hearts of others as "*the result of our ministry.*" Do you see that phrase in **v.3**...? Maybe you think that *ministry* is what pastors and missionaries do, but not you so much. A synonym for the word 'ministry' is simply 'service.' When we simply *serve* others for Jesus' sake, both in word or deed, Jesus uses *our* service to write *his* promise of love—his *new covenant*—on the hearts of those we serve. And those heart-letters are our references.
- C. We are competent because God has made us competent! (vv.4-6). That is such good news! Remember how this discussion started back up in v.16: "*And who is competent for such a task.*" The answer: every child of God is competent as a servant of God because God *makes* us competent. He does that by forgiving our sins and by giving us a living hope, by writing his word on our hearts, by giving us his indwelling Spirit, by giving us gifts of wisdom, love and peace. In sum, we are competent because we have Jesus Christ and he has equipped us!

SUMMARY: Illus.: **Elisa Morgan**, is the president of MOPS Int'l (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers). Ten years ago now she wrote this: *I'm probably the least likely person to head a mothering organization. I grew up in a broken home. My parents were divorced when I was 5. My older sister, younger brother, and I were raised by my alcoholic mother.*

While my mother meant well—truly she did—most of my memories are of my mothering her rather than her mothering me. Alcohol altered her love, turning it into something that wasn't love. I remember her weaving down the hall of our ranch home in Houston, Texas, glass of scotch in hand. She would wake me at 2 a.m. just to make sure I was asleep. I would wake her at 7 a.m. to try to get her off to work.

Sure, there were good times like Christmas and birthdays when she went all out and celebrated us as children. But even those days ended with the warped glow of alcohol. What she did right was lost in what she did wrong.

Ten years ago, when I was asked to consider leading MOPS International, a vital ministry that nurtures mothers, I went straight to my knees—and then to the therapist's office. How could God use me—who had never been mothered—to nurture other mothers?

The answer came as I gazed into the eyes of other moms around me and saw their needs mirroring my own. God seemed to take my deficits and make them my offering—"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). [Elisa Morgan, Christian Parenting Today (May/June 1999), p. 64; in PT.com]

So... even if you are in one of those dark times in the Christian life—"conflicts on the outside, fears within"—remember these things. God always leads us in triumphal procession and he spreads the fragrance of Christ

everywhere we go. What's more, we are competent to serve him, because we are sincere in what we do, we have living letters of reference and because God himself has made us competent.