



## THE FRAGRANCE OF A GRACE-FILLED LIFE

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2 Corinthians 2:12-17

First Message

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Over the next two months we will be looking at a passage of Scripture that contains the most important truth in all the Bible, apart from the deity of Christ. I am referring to the new covenant, of which our Lord spoke when he passed the cup at the Last Supper, and said, "This is the blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins." When we understand the full implications of that new covenant, we discover the most liberating secret in the Word of God!

David Seamands, an author whom I admire, wrote the following:

Many years ago I was driven to the conclusion that the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people ... We read, we hear, we believe a good theology of grace. But that's not the way we live. The good news of the gospel of grace has not penetrated the level of our emotions.

As we will see in the coming weeks, the essence of the new covenant is the message of grace. I am a little embarrassed to admit that I feel as though I am just beginning to grasp that message. Early in my Christian walk, I spent three years in a Bible College. I met a lot of godly people there, but as I look back on that time I have to say I learned almost nothing about grace. Yet it is grace that stands at the very center of the Christian message. The apostle John summarized the ministry of our Lord by saying, "*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.*"

Christians spend an enormous of energy debating and declaring truth. Every church defends its particular version. But what about grace? You probably don't know too many churches trying to "out-grace" each other. And yet it is grace that is our best gift to the world. Gordon MacDonald reminds us, "The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You don't need to be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace."

The world hungers for grace. Everyone wants grace. That is what brings you here to church this morning. And yet for many, the last place they look for grace is the only place they will find it—in the church.

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey shares a story about a prostitute who came to a friend of his looking for help. The woman was in bad shape. She was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for her two year-old daughter. In tears she confessed that she had even been using her daughter in sexually abusive ways to support her own drug habit. The friend could hardly bear listening to this sordid story; she knew she was legally bound to report this case of child abuse. What stuck with me about the story was the woman's answer to a question this friend had asked her. Had she ever thought of going to a church for help? she asked. She said she will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed the woman's face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

Perhaps her response says more about her than it does about the church. But it made me wonder. Women like this fled to Jesus, not away from him. In fact, the worse people felt about themselves, the more they saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Do the down and out who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth no longer feel welcome among his followers?

The message of grace is that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more—no ritual of spiritual calisthenics, no amount of study or knowledge, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes, nothing. And there is nothing we can do to make him love us less, either. God already loves us as much as an infinite God can possibly love.

This is the message that the apostle Paul wants us to learn. And it is the message that the church desperately needs to hear.

We begin our study in the book of 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, verse 12. As we pick up our text, Paul is defending his apostleship. He had come in for a lot of criticism in his ministry. He wasn't one of the original twelve, one of the regulars, and as a result he was never fully trusted. He had sent Timothy to deal with a situation in Corinth, where a man was sleeping with his father's wife (probably his step-mother). The church there had glossed over this matter. They had a "boys will be boys" attitude about the situation. So Paul had written another letter to them, this time with a very stern message. That letter has been lost; there is no record of it. But still the Corinthians didn't do anything about it. In fact, they humiliated the young and inexperienced Timothy and sent him back. So Paul sent Titus to Corinth to

deal with the situation. This where Paul inserts this section of defense into his letter:

**Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. (2 Cor 2:12-13, NASB)**

But while Paul was in Ephesus, he started to worry about them. "I had no rest for my spirit," he says. So he left Ephesus, and went to Troas, where he probably had arranged to meet Timothy. But Timothy wasn't there.

While Paul was in Troas, a door for ministry opened to him. Someone invited him to give a series of lectures, perhaps. But he couldn't do it. He was so upset and ill at ease, he was not able to walk through what he calls "an open door." His heart was so troubled, his spirit so anxious for news of what was happening in Corinth that he could not minister.

As he was waiting there in those weeks and months he could see that, perhaps, his labors in Corinth were about to fall apart. He must have been gripped by a great sense of personal failure. Despite the visits he had made to Corinth, or the letters he had written to them, apparently there was no solution to this terrible problem that was eating at the life of this church and threatening to destroy his ministry. In the midst of that emotional turmoil, the sense of failure, he was given this opportunity to minister, but he couldn't take advantage of it. He left Troas and went up into Macedonia instead, hoping to find Titus and discover how the Corinthians were doing.

I don't know about you, but it encourages me to read that the apostles had the same sort of emotional struggles as ourselves. Paul was so upset about the situation in Corinth that he couldn't minister. So he boarded a ship over to Macedonia and, arriving there, started to journey down the Ignatian Way, looking for Titus. He went through Thessalonica and got on the telephone to inquire of his friends if any of them had seen Titus, but no one had. So he went down to Berea, and as he was walking along this Roman road, off in the distance, he saw Titus. We have to skip ahead, to chapter 7, verse 5, to see what happened next:

**For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; (7:5-6)**

Titus, who was on his way back to Asia Minor, gives Paul the good news that the Corinthian church had indeed responded to the truth that the apostle had written to them. They had dealt with the situation of this sinning brother and things were going well.

Now in the section from 2:14 to 7:4, Paul goes off on a tangent, sharing all that he had learned in those weeks and months when he had agonized over the Corinthi-

ans. At last he realizes that, even though he thought all was lost, God was at work. When he finally sees Titus, he responds with this great expression of praise, in v. 14:

**But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. (2:14)**

Ray Stedman told us that this was his favorite verse in all the Scripture. I know that he quoted it a lot. Notice the jarring juxtaposition of this verse with the words of verse 13. Paul's grateful thanksgiving for a powerful and effective ministry stands right next to the verse in which he is confessing his failure, weakness, frustration and despair.

Why this sudden reversal? Here Paul shares with us an amazing insight he had learned. When we understand how God works, we discover that our circumstances, which on the surface may appear dreary and dark, are actually glowing with great possibilities. Paul was rejoicing because he had discovered that God "always leads us in His triumph in Christ."

The phrase "leads us in triumph" is one word in Greek. It means, as the NIV translates it, to lead in a triumphal procession. Paul is drawing a picture here that was familiar to his audience, but not to us. A Roman General returning from a victorious battle was treated to a triumphal entry, a "ticker tape" parade through the streets of Rome. The conquering general would ride in his chariot, preceded by priests swinging pots of fragrant incense, the streets crowded with people shouting acclamations. Behind him would come the captives he had taken, being led to their execution in chains; then there would come the generals of his army, the captains and the commanders of his forces.

This is the imagery that Paul uses to describe the Christian life. The point he is making is that our Lord always—*always*—leads us in triumph in Christ. That is good news, because we want to win. As Lucy says, "Winning isn't everything. Winning big is!" Christians can't lose. We are in a no-lose situation!

We need to understand what Paul means by this, because he is not saying that we always have circumstances that are triumphant. It doesn't mean that we will always have good health; that we will always get promoted; that our marriages will work the way we want them to; that our children will turn out the way we want, or that people will react the way we want. He is not talking about that kind of thing.

Ray Stedman writes, "If we can judge from his life instead, the 'victorious Christian life' is a feeling of weakness, with only brief glimpses of success, of seemingly going from one battle to another, one conflict to another, without ceasing, and with little sense of personal triumph at the moment." And yet, according to Paul, even then, God is leading us in his triumph in Christ; our lives are making a powerful impact.

The world was not impressed with the apostle Paul. No reporters followed this bald-headed, hook-nosed little Jew in his travels around the Roman Empire as he preached this great message. Even in his own eyes he was not doing anything tremendous. He felt, as he says, frustrated and restless; a great sense of failure gripped him. But, because he knew that his ministry did not rest upon his feeble efforts to do something for God, but, rather, on his expectation that God was going to do something through him, he knew that he was at the very moment of his frustration being led in triumph by Jesus Christ, and a great, widespread testimony of the fragrance of Christ was going forth. People were being set free; his ministry was a success. And so he cries from the eternal gratitude of his heart, *"Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place."*

What a magnificent metaphor! Paul says that as Christians we have about us wherever we go the fragrance of Christ. Our lives emit a sweetness, an aroma, so that when people are around us, it is as if they can smell the Lord Jesus himself. Wherever we go we leave behind an unforgettable fragrance, a winsomeness of grace, a loving, peaceful, gentle spirit. In Christ we have courage to stand against moral attacks with strength and beauty.

Paul goes on to elaborate. Verse 15:

**For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; (2:15)**

The effect we have on others is two-fold, and these are opposite reactions: We smell very good to some people and very bad to others.

**to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? (2:16)**

Paul divides the human race into two classes. He does not do so on the basis of race, class, culture or economics; such divisions are irrelevant. The apostle says that some people are being made alive, and some are dying. People who are being made alive are drawing near to God. Their hearts are open. They are dependent on him. They are growing in grace. Those who are dying have shut themselves off from that message. And life does become more and more deadening apart from God. We become more death-like in our living. We become bored and weary, cold and restless, unsatisfied and unhappy.

As you continue to grow and emit the fragrance of Christ, some who smell that fragrance will be drawn to the life that is in you. They will be attracted to the way you live and your humble character. Others will be totally turned off. They will dismiss you as a loser, as someone who needs a religious crutch. This will happen on the campus, in the workplace, in your neighborhood. You are trying to be a gentle, loving witness for

Christ, but people will ignore you, make cruel jokes about you, and won't want anything to do with you. That may even be true in your own home. Your spouse may not be a Christian and he or she is constantly finding fault with you, not because you have done anything wrong, but simply because you love your Lord and respond to him.

And when you understand this secret of living life, which Paul is going to explain in detail, and which we are going to talk about for the next couple of months, you find increasingly that you leave an unforgettable impact with people: they either love you or hate you. They are never the same after knowing you, because you leave behind that wonderful fragrance of Christ. To some people it is like a stench, because it shows them up for what they are; to others it smells so good they want to know more about you and your life. That is what the apostle is saying.

Now, Paul says, "And who is adequate for these things?" Who is up to this? Who is sufficient for these things? Our first thought is, what do we have to count on? I don't have what it takes to leave that kind of unforgettable impact upon people.

You may think your personality is lacking; that you are not an attractive person; that you are too short or too tall; too underweight or overweight; that your hair doesn't look right; that you can't give enough because you can hardly make it from month to month; that you are not very articulate. How can you have this kind of impact on others? you ask. Do you just grit your teeth and try to be fragrant? "Who is adequate for these things?" asks Paul. How do we generate this kind of impact? You can't, of course.

But, you can imitate it. Unfortunately, that's what many of us do. And that is why Paul goes on to say, in v. 17:

**For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God. (2:17)**

Paul says he isn't like a lot of folks who use their personal power to manipulate others. He is not a religious huckster.

All our lives we are taught that the way to influence people is to have a powerful personality. We need a strong, authoritative voice, we are told. We need to stand erect, to dress for success, to be more assertive or more educated. We may have a bachelor's or a master's degree, but we think that if we had a Doctorate, then people would listen to us. Now there is nothing wrong with any of those things. There may be times when you need to be more assertive (I don't have that problem!). But gradually we have been seduced to believe that these are the elements that make for true impact. But they aren't! There is no power in any of those things. They can be useful, but there is no power in them.

You don't influence people with degrees and titles

and image. Paul says the world is full of people like this, peddlers who hawk the gospel. Just turn on the television or radio. The airwaves are full of them. People use certain mannerisms to make them look pious, contrive experiences to impress others with what they have accomplished, or appeal to visions or dreams where God spoke to them and told them to do a certain thing.

Paul would have none of that. He was not out to try and impress people, "peddling the word of God."

When people come to Christ they discover that they have to live life on a different basis from now on, and that makes them feel very insecure. We have had it drilled into our heads that if we are going to get on in this world we've got to hustle to make things happen. The early bird gets the worm, we are told. No pain, no gain. There is no such things as a free lunch. Demand your rights. Get what you pay for. I know all of these rules, because most of my life I have lived by them. It is hard for us not to rely on ourselves, because these are the tangible assets we have always trusted, our personalities, our humor, our money. We can use those things, but they have no power. For many of us, trusting the Spirit of God and not the flesh is like withdrawing from a drug we have depended on all our life. That is why Paul says he feels so inadequate when he talks about this, because he realizes that he can't depend on his vast learning and his debating skills. We can make use of these things, but that isn't what leaves behind this unforgettable fragrance that Paul is talking about. The sincere admission of our failure and weakness and our reception of God's grace is what accomplishes that.

That is what the world needs to see, the reality and sincerity of lives that have been changed by grace.

I want to close with a story that Phil Yancey shares in his latest book, *What's So Amazing About Grace*. A few years ago, Bill Moyers did a documentary film on the hymn "Amazing Grace." It included a scene filmed in Wembley Stadium, in London. Various musical groups, mostly rock bands, had gathered together in celebration of the changes in South Africa, and for some reason the promoters scheduled an opera singer, Jessye Norman, as the closing act.

The film cuts back and forth between scenes of the unruly crowd in the stadium and Jessye Norman being interviewed. For twelve hours, groups like Guns 'n' Roses have blasted the crowd through banks of speakers, riling up fans already high on alcohol and drugs. The crowd yells for more curtain calls, and the rock groups oblige. Meanwhile, Jessye Norman sits in her dressing room discussing "Amazing Grace" with Moyers.

Finally, the time comes for her to sing. A single circle of light follows Norman, a majestic African-American woman wearing a flowing African dashiki, as she strolls

on-stage. No backup band, no musical instruments, just Jessye. The crowd stirs, restless. Few recognize the opera singer. A voice yells for more Guns 'n' Roses. Others take up the cry. The scene is getting ugly.

Alone, *a capella*, Jessye Norman begins to sing, very slowly:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost but now am found -  
Was blind, but now I see.

A remarkable thing happens in Wembley Stadium that night. Seventy thousand raucous fans fall silent before her aria of grace.

By the time Norman reaches the second verse, "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved..." the soprano has the crowd in her hands.

By the time she reaches the third verse, "'Tis grace has brought me safe this far, And grace will lead me home," several thousand fans are singing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago.

When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we first begun.

Jessye Norman later confessed she had no idea what power descended on Wembley Stadium that night. The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.

It is my prayer that our lives would emit that fragrance.

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