

*Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, <sup>13</sup> 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.*

*<sup>14</sup> But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. <sup>15</sup> For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. <sup>16</sup> To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? <sup>17</sup> Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.*

**3** *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? <sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. <sup>3</sup> You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

*<sup>4</sup> Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. <sup>6</sup> He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6)*

### **Who is Equal to Such a Task?**

I took piano lessons for at least five years, including two years in high school. But I was never any good – and my teachers made that very clear. When I was a sophomore at MLS, our class chorus was struggling with one of the numbers we were singing for the Commencement Concert. Just a few days before the concert, Professor Hosbach told me that I was going to play along with the class to help them find their parts. So he gave me the music and told me to be ready for the next practice. Well, it was a disaster. Not only wasn't I any good on the piano, I simply could not play in front of people. As I sat there, with my hands shaking, plunking out random notes, I could hear them whispering, "What's he playing? Why's he there?" Prof. Hosbach realized I just wasn't up to it and he got someone else to play for the concert. Everybody was much better off. Have you ever been asked to do something that you're just not up to? Every one of you has been, because, like me, you've been called into the public ministry. God gave you responsibilities that reach from life through death to life again. My friends, my brothers in ministry and service to the Lord, **who is equal to such a task?**

#### **I.**

St. Paul asked that question – and it's clear that he knew that he was not equal to the ministry. If the greatest missionary in the history of the New Testament Church, if the author of more than a dozen New Testament books, if the great apostle to the gentiles could ask that question, don't we have to do the same? My friends, **who is equal to such a task? Who is equal to being the aroma of Christ?**

That's what Paul calls us today: the aroma of Christ. He was thinking of the Old Testament sacrifices. The Bible says that after a burnt offering the Lord would smell a pleasing aroma. But God wasn't the only one who smelled it. The people did, too. Now, what did they actually smell? Roasting, burning flesh. That smell was supposed to be pleasing for the people, not because burning meat smells so good, but because that burning flesh meant that God was appeased. Their sins were atoned for. They could stand now in his presence. In that sense, we are the aroma of Christ to all those who hear what God called us to say.

Paul took that very seriously. In 2 Corinthians he's engaged in a very tactful defense of his ministry. So he talks this morning about going to Troas where Titus was supposed to meet him. God opened a door for his work in Troas. People heard the message and believed, but Paul says that he had no peace of mind there and he had to say good-bye to that blossoming new congregation. What's he talking about? You're all aware of the problems in Corinth. It's clear from some of the comments Paul makes in 1 and 2 Corinthians that a real conflict had developed in this church where he had personally worked for a year and a half. We don't know all the details. But we know that he had made a painful visit there. We know that there were letters exchanged that are now lost to us. The situation had reached such a low point that Paul took himself out of the equation and

sent Titus to address the issues. When Titus didn't show up in Troas, Paul had no peace. What was happening in that congregation that he cared so much about? So even though he was engaged in fruitful gospel ministry there, he left to deal with this other pressing need.

Was Paul wrong to do that? I remember Prof. Panning saying that Paul "blew it" in Troas. We could probably argue all day about that, but clearly Paul was wrestling with how bad things had gotten in Corinth and trying to balance that against the ministry needs of the new mission in Troas. He finally made the best decision he could – and being a sinful human being, he wrestled with his feelings about it. I think we've all been there. Our call is to proclaim the good news about Jesus. And sometimes, I wish that's really all we had to do: preach sermons, teach classes and go home. But it isn't. The way God designed the ministry, our preaching and teaching is intimately tied up with our personal interactions with the people of God. Most of us have to attend endless meetings for our congregations. We wrestle with finances and property issues and rising and falling attendance. We have so many calls we need to make. The ministry is so much more than just those public appearances. And is there a man here this morning who hasn't had a conflict with a member? Who hasn't lost a family and then been heartbroken when they made it clear that their feelings were hurt and he didn't even know it? Who hasn't wrestled with whether his ministry is viable or with how to balance preaching on Sunday with making those visits and working on the budget and serving your own wife and children? Is there a man among us who doesn't wrestle with how to deal with people who sin and don't want to hear God's word? Has all that wrestling ever affected your ministry? Have you ever felt like you blew it?

I know I have. I think Paul felt that way. What was his answer? **"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him."** It's not up to us! God leads us in triumph when we have to make tough ministry choices! God spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ when we second guess our decisions and even when we blow it! God proclaims his message. God has elected his saints. God rules his church and when he called us, he didn't blow it. He is going to accomplish his purpose no matter how inadequate we are.

That's when Paul says, **"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. And who is equal to such a task?"** Just like God smelled a pleasing aroma when he smelled burning meat in the tabernacle, God smells Christ when he reviews our ministry. That's true no matter how many times we screw up. And God made us the aroma of Christ to those who are being saved and to those who are perishing. We smell like life to those who have faith. To those humble, repentant Christians who gather every week to listen to our poor efforts to proclaim the gospel, who endure all the quirks of our personalities and all the weaknesses in our gifts – to those believers we are the aroma of life. Because when we talk they see their Savior dying and rising for them. And we are even the aroma of death to all those people who don't want to hear. Every time we proclaim the gospel, one of three things happens: an unbeliever becomes a believer, a believer is strengthened in his faith, or an unbeliever is hardened in his unbelief.

Who is equal to such a task? Not one of us here today. But God didn't call us because we're such great speakers or Greek scholars or evangelists. God didn't call us because of our people skills or our administrative abilities. God called us to proclaim the gospel. As Paul says, we don't peddle the gospel. We speak before God with sincerity. He is our real audience. He takes our words and runs with them. He accomplishes what he set out to do.

## II.

Of course, none of that excuses sin and laziness. We are all imperfect tools for God's work because we're all still sinners. Each of us needs to regularly go to the throne of grace and confess how unworthy we are for the work God has called us to do. Each of us needs to hear our Savior's word of forgiveness: "I died for you. I rose for you. I paid for all your failures as a pastor. I have wiped your sin away forever." That gospel message is what prepares us to be the tools God calls and uses. But without his power in the gospel, we could never have a positive impact on even one soul God entrusts to us. **Who is equal to such a task? Who is equal to writing on human hearts?**

Paul talks about letters of recommendation – again hinting at whatever conflict existed. He says, **"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody."** I never noticed it before, but Paul does not say, "You are our letter, written on *your* hearts," he says, "You are our letter, written on *our*

hearts, known and read by everybody.” The Corinthian Christians, the very people that Paul was wrestling with, were written on his heart. And everyone could read the letter of love that he had for them.

Only after saying that does Paul talk about the letter written on their hearts. As he always does, Paul gives Jesus the credit for the real change in their hearts. They are a letter from Christ. But how did Jesus write that letter? Through the ministry of Paul and his mission team. They brought the gospel to Corinth when those gentiles there were merrily going their own way, thinking that if they just jumped through the right hoops they could appease their gods. Those missionaries taught them to trust in a Savior who lived and died and rose for them. They came and served them and God wrote on the hearts of those new Corinthian Christians.

Those two letters cannot be separated. When we serve God’s people, he writes them on our hearts. And he writes on their hearts. Do we pastors always love our members as we should? It’s easy to love the ones who support us, who hear the word with joy and we see the fruits of their faith. But what about the ones that challenge us? What about the congregations that we don’t enjoy serving, because of the attitude of the members or their lack of zeal for the gospel? St. Paul gives us a remarkable example of Christian love to “problem members” in a “problem congregation.” He loved them even as he strived to straighten out their doctrinal and practical problems. He loved them even as he called the congregation to do church discipline where necessary. He loved them when he sent Titus to stand in for him and when he didn’t come to see them on schedule. He loved them and he considered his greatest gift to them to proclaim Christ to them – to write on their hearts the good news of their salvation.

He closes this section by reminding them and us how it’s possible for sinners like us to ever write on the heart of any Christian. He says, **“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”** Jesus is that new covenant. His life, his death, his resurrection that we’ve all proclaimed these last two Sundays as the Easter season began, that’s what writes on our people’s hearts. Even if we don’t have the greatest speaking skills or people skills on earth, even if God calls us to serve a challenging group of saints, our competence comes from God who gave us that rich message of Jesus Christ.

That message writes on our hearts, too. Paul wasn’t writing this letter primarily to pastors, although we know that there were ministers there in Corinth who must have heard these words. But all that he says here does apply to you and me. Christ died for us. Christ rose for us. God has wiped away all our incompetence as ministers of the gospel. God has wiped away all the times we failed to write on people’s hearts because we didn’t use the gospel. God has wiped away all the times we failed to write our people on our own hearts because they were just too difficult to love. God has wiped all that sin away in the blood of the Lamb. And he has called us to represent that Lamb. He has given us tools that cannot fail: the law and the gospel. He has made us sinners competent and he has gifted us – often in ways that we don’t even see. He has given us members who love us despite our failings and he has blessed our ministries – even if right now it’s hard to see what he’s doing in your congregation.

It all comes from God. Who is equal to such a task? None of us are. Left to ourselves, we could be no more effective as proclaimers of Christ than I was when I sat at that keyboard and my hands shook and I couldn’t even play the melody with one finger. The strength and the wisdom and the knowledge don’t come from digging deep inside ourselves. They come from God. From his call, from his work in our heart through the gospel, from his grace on our ministry and his blessing day after day. They come from God and the tools he gave us to use. Take comfort in his promises, my brothers, and recommit yourselves to faithfully using those tools. Amen.