

What is God Doing with You?
2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Turn to 2 Corinthians 2 please. Our Scripture today answers the question, “what is God doing with you?” “What is God doing with me?” If someone asked you, “what do you think God is doing with you,” what would you say to them? How is God using me? What’s he getting done with me? What does my life look like to God?

In 2 Corinthians, Paul has a long section on being a true servant of Christ. The Corinthians were not good judges of true servants, tended to think that false servants of Christ were the true ones, so Paul taught them about true servants. This long section begins with our paragraph, at 2:14, and goes to the beginning of chapter 7. A bit over four chapters on true servants of Christ.

2:14-17 is the opening summary. He first gives us the core of being a servant in this paragraph, and then expands it for four chapters. This paragraph is the center.

I am speaking mostly to David Funk today, because this day represents him formally becoming a minister to this church. But this Scripture is also God’s message to the rest of you, in two ways.

One, this whole congregation needs to know how God speaks to your ministers. And Two, we are all servants of Christ “*Christ died for all, so that those who found life in Christ should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again.*” 2C5:15. We all have found life in Christ, so we live not for ourselves but for him, which makes us all his servants.

What’s God doing with us? We usually picture serving Christ as what we do for Christ. We are more used to asking, what do I do for God? That’s fair, behind that, underneath that, is a deeper question, which Paul answers in the first line of his long section on serving Christ.

Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives, in Christ’s triumphal procession, and uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him, everywhere.

1. Christ’s Triumphal Procession “*Leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession*” is how the 2011 NIV translates this. The NIV has taken some liberties here, but they have captured the truth perfectly. Scholars know more now about Latin the word “triumph,” and this is it.

In the Roman world, when an army leader won an important victory, they would have a parade in Rome. They called it a “triumph.” That was a victory procession. The leader of the army would be honoured, but there would be other people, some of his generals, and so on.

And at the end of the procession would be prisoners of war, defeated soldiers, who were kept alive for this parade. They all would parade through the streets, and the crowds would cheer the victor and mock the prisoners, and they ended up in the arena, and there the prisoners of war would be executed. The audience in Rome would get to watch the last stage of the battle.

Paul writes about apostles this way in 1 Corinthians 4:9 - *For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.*

All followers of Christ are in this procession. *Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.*

2. We are Christ's Captives - In this world, God is the director and leader of a victory parade, which features his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus, the triumphant conqueror, being paraded by God up and down the streets of the world. He has with him his prisoners of war, his captives. That's us.

We think we ourselves chose to follow Christ. Christ's followers usually think that. But Jesus says in John 15, *you did not choose me. I chose you.* Says same in Mt 11. Christ chose us, conquered us, keeps conquering us, we are his captives, we belong to him, that's the picture.

God is leading this parade featuring Christ the champion. But Christ is invisible. The world does not see him. What does the world actually see? Only his captives, only us. *God always leads us as captives, in Christ's triumphal procession, and uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.* That is what God is doing with our lives.

Thanks be to God! That's how this begins. Being Christ's captive is something for which we thank God. It is a glorious parade, and the glory is even on the prisoners. Being Christ's captive, being led to the arena in Christ's parade, is the best thing that could happen to anyone. It is a glorious parade, the glory of God and of Christ are on us. Thanks be to God.

3. The Experience of Captives - What would be the experience of an actual prisoner of war, a captive in one of those Roman triumphal processions? Four things: (1) They are weak-powerless-helpless, (2) they have big troubles, (3) they are frightened, and (4) humiliated. That's what it was like to be such a captive. Weak, troubled, frightened, and humiliated.

Jesus himself was led to execution, and that's where Paul gets this idea. We are imitating Christ in this life. Jesus experienced all these things.

What pleased God was not that Christ suffered, not at all. But what did please God was that Christ continued to trust God and live in his ways. What's God doing with me? What's God's doing with you? At God's instigation, Christ captured us. God always leads a victorious parade in Christ's honour, and takes the smell of Christ everywhere. That's serving Christ.

4. The Aroma of Knowing Him - *God uses us to spread the aroma of knowing him everywhere.* In Leviticus, we often read that a sacrifice gave a pleasing aroma to the LORD. That's probably the smell here. When Paul speaks of the fragrance of Christ elsewhere, that's what he means. Christ's sacrifice was a fragrant offering, an aroma that pleased the Lord.

Christ himself was in great distress, as he died, but he continued to trust in God and obey God, and to God that had the most pleasing smell imaginable.

We tend to think that our weaknesses, and our troubles, stop us from doing what God wants us to do. We think that our fears, and the things that shame us, stop us from being used by God. Nothing could be farther from the truth. If we are captives in this parade, weaknesses and troubles are assumed, fears and humiliations are assumed.

What God wants is people like that who will continue to trust him and live faithfully. That is precisely what God is doing with us. Christ's captives are regularly weak and troubled, frightened and humiliated, but they continue to trust in God and live faithfully. *THAT* is the aroma of knowing God, the aroma of knowing Christ.

But when we get up close to this parade, these captives are not silent. If you get close, they are speaking. What are they saying? They are thanking God. They are thanking God that they are in the most glorious parade ever, they thank God that Christ captured them, and that God always leads them and uses them to spread the aroma of Christ.

In fact, they're not just speaking, they are singing, they are praising God. 2 Corinthians begins, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" They praise God for his comfort and compassion, they praise him for putting his glory on them, and for the remarkable hope they have, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, which is better by far. This is not a gloomy parade. These captives know that they're by far the most fortunate people in the world.

Questions – the main question our Scripture answers is "what is God doing with us?" He is always leading us as captives in Christ's victory parade, and he is always spreading the smell of Christ everywhere. This leads Paul to answer two further questions: (2) what do we smell like? And (3), what are the qualifications for this?

5. What do we smell like? There's a lot here about smell. *Thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread **the aroma of knowing him everywhere.*** ¹⁵ *For we are to God **the fragrance of Christ** among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* ¹⁶ *To the one we are **an aroma of death** that brings death; to the other, **an aroma of life** that brings life.*

Let's be clear about the smell. It is not the smell of being an attractive lovely sweet smelling person. It is the smell of sacrifice, the smell of trusting God and living in his ways even when life is most distressing. [2x] That's the smell God always spreads.

What do we smell like? *For we are to God the fragrance of Christ.* No ambiguity here. To God, we smell like Christ, and to God this is a wonderful smell. He's delighted to spread this all over.

To the perishing, we are the aroma of death that brings death. To the people who don't want Christ, don't think the gospel is good news at all, we putrid, repulsive, we smell like death, and their response is leading to their own eternal destruction.

To those being saved, we are the aroma of life that brings life. To the people who want Christ and think the gospel is the best news possible, we smell wonderful, we smell like life, and that response is leading us to eternal life.

What do we smell like? Depends on the nose. To God we have the wonderful smell of Christ himself. To the saved we smell like life, and to the perishing we smell like death.

Paul takes no responsibility for smelling terrible to some. Many people wanted no part of Christ himself. So of course there will be people who, in the same way, don't want to be near his servants. Christ told us that. We think everyone should be attracted to us, and if they are not, we need to change our ways. Christ did not think that way, and neither did Paul. Lose that, people.

Paul is explicit about this. He says it three ways in three chapters, Some will like what true servants do and some won't, some will want it, some reject it, that's just how it is, as with Jesus. What do we smell like? To God we smell like Christ, to others, it depends on them.

6. Who is Qualified for This? (2:16b-17a) *And who is qualified for such a task? ¹⁷ Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we speak and act sincerely, we speak and act from God, before God, belonging to Christ.*

This Scripture puts everyone into one of two groups: peddlers and genuine servants. Peddlers are those live for their own benefit, they use the gospel to benefit in some way. The others live to serve God, to serve Christ.

In 2Cor 5 he puts it this way: *Christ died for all, so that those who found life in Christ should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again.* Every person in this room is either living for themselves, or living for Christ. There are no other options. If we are living for ourselves, then we are peddlers, how can I benefit from the gospel, and not qualified.

If we live for Christ, we are qualified. We all sin, and we all have terrible bursts of self-centeredness. That is also true of those who live for Christ. But there is a basic direction: "Today I want to be a faithful servant of Christ. Lead me, Lord, trust you and live in your ways." And we mean that, it's genuine, sincere. Or, we pretend that but actually just live for ourselves.

And who is qualified for such a task? Unlike so many, we do not live for ourselves, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we live for him who died for us and rose again, we speak and act sincerely, we speak and act from God, before God, belonging to Christ.

The last six words of v17 read this way in Greek: *from God, before God, in Christ*. That's how real servants of Christ live.

From God. God tells us how to speak and act, and God leads our lives. We get our lifestyle and our speech habits from God's instructions. God is leading this procession, and God has told us all how to live and speak. This guided Paul, and guides all true servants of Christ. From God.

Before God. From God, before God. We live our lives before the Throne. We act for an audience of One. God leads us, God has told us how to live and speak, and we respond for him alone.

In Matthew 6, Jesus gave instructions on giving money for the poor, and on praying, and on fasting. The instruction was always the same: do this so others won't notice, do it privately for your Father in heaven. Do all your righteous acts for an audience of One.

This is the mark of a true servant. To some we will smell like life, to others like death, and that is immaterial, as long as to God we smell like Christ.

This whole paragraph on being a servant of Christ is remarkably God-centered. Thanks be to **God, Christ** captured us, **God** always leads this procession, through us **God** spreads the aroma of **Christ** in every place. Our response is to live and speak as **God** instructed, doing this so **God** will see, as captives of **Christ**.

To some, this smells like life, to others like death. Does this mean we don't care about people? No, nothing could be farther from the truth. God tells us to love each other, serve each other, forgive each other, honour one another above ourselves, submit to one another, and so on.

God told us that, so we do it because God had told us how to live and speak. Paul deeply loves the unpleasant Corinthian church. But this doesn't make everyone pleased with us and attracted to us. That is a distortion, and we are then peddlers of the good news. We are servants of God, or we are peddlers, we live for Christ, or for ourselves. The only possibilities.

In Christ. *We live and speak from God, before God, in Christ.* We belong to Christ, we are his captives, he captured us, we did not choose him, he choose us. False ministers say this, but are not sincere.

When we say this, we are sincere, we mean to live this way. This is not living for ourselves, but for him who died for us and rose again. We will regularly fail of course, but the Lord gave us the Lord's Prayer for that, and we continue on. This qualifies us to carry the fragrance of Christ, and it is God's business to get us where he wants us. He always leads us.

What is God doing with you? How is God using you? At God's instigation, Christ captured us, and God is always leading us in Christ's victory parade, up and down the streets of the world, and using us to spread the smell of Christ everywhere. We captives are often troubled, weak, frightened, and humiliated. As Christ was.

We are also thanking God and praising him that Christ captured us and that God is leading us, that this procession is the best possible place to be, that we are the most fortunate people on earth.

The smell God is taking everywhere is the smell of Christ, specifically the smell of an often troubled life that continues to trust God and live in his ways. Some really like this smell, and some really don't.

Who is qualified to smell like this? We are, because we do not live for ourselves, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, we live for him who died for us and rose again, we speak and act sincerely, we speak and act as God has taught us, for him alone, for the Audience of One. We do this as Christ's servants, Christ's captives.

This Scripture is to guide us all. This Scripture is to help our church understand how God leads. And this Scripture is also God telling everyone of us how he uses us, and how we cooperate with him.

PRAYER: Almighty God, thank you that Christ captured us, thank you that you are leading us in his great victory parade. Thank you that you are using us to bring the fragrance of Christ to every place. Thank you that weakness and troubles are built into this picture, and fears and humiliations. Thank you that we still radiate Christ's glory, which is your own glory.

We all put our trust in you again, Great God, at this moment. We want to act and speak in your ways, as you taught us. We want to live for you, the audience of One. We agree that we are captives of Christ. May your good Spirit renew us every day, and strengthen us in this, again and again. Thank you for your indescribable kindness to us. Amen.