

# Living as Incense Bearers

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[ 0 : 00 ]     Okay, great to see you this morning folks. Please do get a Bible open in front of you. If you brought your own, brilliant. If you didn't, there's ones in a pew that you can grab. Don't feel any embarrassment by doing that.

If you need to turn to the contents page, that's absolutely fine as well. The book is 2 Corinthians. If you've got a phone, which I'm going to go and say that most of us do, you can use your phone to get this as well. We need God's word open in front of us. This is a brilliant passage this morning.

And maybe just to get us into it, can I go all Alan's sugar on you for a minute and tell you what contributed an estimated 2 billion pounds to the UK economy last year? Surprising.

The fragrance industry. 2 billion pounds. I think that tells you that we are a nation that cares how we smell. In fact, here's a little to demonstrate that. Be brave, okay? Put your hands up if you put on deodorant, aftershave or perfume this morning before you came out.

Okay, some of us went au naturel. That's absolutely fine. Honestly, not trying to go vanity police. Here's what I want to do. If you put your hand up, I want to let you know that you've got a head start on understanding the central idea of this passage.

[ 1 : 18 ]     Okay, the key word, if you want to latch on to a key word, verse 14 is the word aroma. So what we're thinking about today is how a Christian smells in the nostrils of the world.

Right? Key word aroma, key thing. This is how a Christian smells in the nostrils of the world. Now, last week, if you remember, we took in one of the most wonderful verses of the Bible.

And this letter to 2 Corinthians is just brilliant for so many of these. That all God's promises are yes in Christ Jesus. If you remember that, one of the most famous verses in the Bible.

Today, we're going to take in one of the most powerful and celebrated metaphors that you'll find anywhere in the New Testament. One that gets us right to the heart of how people become Christians.

And how God is at work today. And it's absolutely brilliant. And I hope today we leave with a dose of refreshing realism. And we leave here with oodles of optimism.

[ 2 : 22 ]     Because how does that video, even if I watch it, but I watched it about three times this week, watch it again just there. What, that vision of reaching the UK for Christ, of Scotland for Christ, of Edinburgh for Christ, of the people that you go to work every day for Christ.

Of those who are in your lecture hall every day, reaching them for Christ. What turns it from wishful thinking to something that we can have confidence in that God will work?

The answer is this passage. And this all takes place in the context of Paul defending his ministry. Remember last week we thought about his travel plans, about how he changed his travel plans.

Those two phrases that he used to underscore his integrity. Verse 12 of chapter 1. Look at it there. What did he say? We thought about how refreshing these two phrases were.

Simplicity and godly sincerity. That was his life. Integrity or holiness. And godly sincerity. That's what he was saying. It wasn't hiding anything from you.

[ 3 : 23 ] My life was authentic. It was transparent. And you'll notice that word simplicity crops up again at verse 17. So it kind of bookends, I think, this idea that runs all the way through.

And I found out this week that one of the words that was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in the last three years was deepfake. Which I just call technology plus lying, really.

And I don't know about you, but I lost count of how many times a fact-checking video popped up on my Facebook feed this week with the presidential election.

Right? We're swimming in opinions. Really difficult to know who to trust. Paul was going all out to say, you can trust me, Corinthians.

You can trust my message. You can trust my life. But it is really difficult to know who you can trust. And Paul mentions two more things here to show the Corinthians that he was genuine. If you look at verse 17 there, he's contrasting himself with the peddlers of God's word.

[ 4 : 28 ] So those people who are speaking about Jesus, but their motives are all twisted. They're all wrong. They're in it for money. They're in it for fame. They're in it for recognition. Paul says, I'm not in it for any of that.

I'm in it for you. And so here's two more things that he mentions real quick. Firstly, verses 5 to 11 of chapter 2, what proves that he was genuine is that he was willing to say the hard thing when others wouldn't.

In our world of echo chambers, we like people who think like us, right? We like people who talk like us. Some of you, if you're certain vintage, remember that Fleetwood Mac song back in the day?

What was the chorus? Tell me lies. Tell me sweet little lies. Telling people what they want to hear is easy. It's like handing out a pack of love hearts, isn't it?

Our kids love these things. Remember those sweets? All yours, true love, be happy, you're the best. It's easy to do that. People love you when you do that. But you tell people what they need to hear, it's way, way harder.

[ 5 : 36 ] How do you know that someone really loves you? It's when they'll tell you the inconvenient truth. When they'll have a hard conversation with you. Not because it's what they want to do, but because they love you.

Everything from you've got something on your teeth to that relationship you're in. It just isn't good for you. Where's Paul learned this from?

I take it he's got it from Jesus. I love Jesus. One of my most favorite thing about Jesus is that truth and love are never separate when it comes to him.

They're perfectly joined. I was reading the other day, the rich young ruler, you get in Mark chapter 10, he comes to Jesus and he asks, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Mark says, just before Jesus answers him, Mark says Jesus looked at him and loved him.

And said, sell all that you have and give to the poor. In other words, there's an idol in your heart that's robbing God of first place. Do you see, love and truth always perfectly go together with Jesus.

[ 6 : 42 ] I think it's one of the things that makes him so magnetically attractive. That's what Paul did in Corinth. There was someone in this church who was clearly consistently and stubbornly behaving in a way that was incompatible with faith in Jesus.

And we don't know exactly what that was. But whatever it was, I think you can guarantee that sparks flew when Paul challenged it. This person probably shouted expletives at Paul.

Who are you to judge me? But the majority of the church, they agreed with Paul. And so this individual was asked to leave. They exited the church stage left.

But what Paul perceives has happened with the passing of time. Do you see in these verses, two things have happened. One thing, I think this, we should believe that this individual has repented.

So they've realized the error of their ways and they've turned back to God and to the church and are kind of facing in the right direction again. That's the first thing.

[ 7 : 46 ] But the second thing is that bitterness and unforgiveness have gained a foothold in the hearts of those who have been hurt. Do you see what's happened? It's rotting their hearts.

And seeking to capitalize on all of it, verse 11, is the devil. Paul says we're not unaware of his schemes. We're in a spiritual battle. The evil one is always on the prowl. The evil one would love nothing more than to cause factions in our relationships.

And what does Paul want them to know? If he was the one that was on the end of this verbal attack, he says, listen, I want you to know that I forgive them. I forgive them.

I'm not holding a grudge. I forgive them. And I want you to extend that same forgiveness as well. Because the whole point of me pointing out this hard truth to them was not to put a stigma on them.

It's so that they would see the error of their ways, repent before the Lord and come back in. And that they would be restoration and reconciliation.

[ 8 : 53 ] Can I just say that is our job as elders of this church? There's six of us. That's our mug shots on the screen. Our job is not to win popularity contests.

Or to ensure that we don't rock the boat or upset the apple cart. We're not in this to get your vote. That's politicians. That's why they change their opinion all the time.

The skin in the game here is to ensure that God's holiness, his fame and his renown and the joy of walking obediently with Jesus are central to what we do.

And to be on the front line of the spiritual battle in prayer. And working to see that as much as it depends on us, that reconciliation and forgiveness are part of what we do in our life together.

Can I just say I've been doing this gig for a little while now. See the stuff that causes you floods of tears. The stuff that causes you sleepless nights. Listen, I can go over a bad sermon in about a day.

[ 10 : 00 ] But see when a relationship goes south. When there's a friction. That's the stuff that keeps you up at night. But flip side, see when you see the grace of Jesus.

When you get a front row seat to see how he changes hearts. And about how he can really transform even the darkest and the bleakest of situations.

Really those are the most precious moments in this game. And even as I say that, I wonder if there are relationships in our lives. Past or present.

Where the Lord is saying maybe it's time. Maybe it's time that you turn. And you reach out. It was Corrie ten Boom who once said to forgive is to set a prisoner free.

And discover the prisoner was you. You see Paul was willing to say the hard thing. Even when others wouldn't. And secondly, he was willing to do the right thing when others didn't.

[ 11 : 01 ] Verse 12. Do you see how he says he went to where? He goes to Troas. There it is in the map. He's there. What's he doing there?

He's wanting to find Titus. This guy's going to crop up later in the letter. In fact, he crops up a few times in the New Testament. He's one of Paul's closest friends. And he's one of his closest ministry companions.

Paul longs to be refreshed by him. Comforted by him. We see later on in the letter. Can I just say you need friends? We need friends in our lives who will speak the truth in love.

We also need friends in our lives who will refresh us and bring us comfort. And that was Titus in Paul's life. But added to that, the fact that Titus is due to come from where with news?

Corinth. Means that this is a doubly desperate situation. Paul longs to see him. Long to find his comfort. I long to hear how you are doing Corinthians.

[ 11 : 59 ] And that's why I was hanging around Troas. Again, he just wants them to see the genuineness of his love for them. But when he doesn't find Titus there, he keeps on going to Macedonia.

It's the place where God has called him to go. And here's where we arrive at our metaphor. From verse 14. And Paul's still defending his ministry.

But it's as if he moves from being on the defense to here being on the offense. When it comes to saying, this is why I do what I do.

And this is all about his deep conviction. Don't talk much about convictions, do we, these days in our culture. But Paul wants us to know about his deep conviction.

It was German poet, Henrik Heine. What a great name that one is. Who went with his friend to visit Amiens Cathedral in France.

[ 13 : 01 ] There it is on the screen. And his friend turned to him and asked, Why don't people build cathedrals like that anymore? And here's what he replied. I found this really interesting. He said, people in those old times had convictions.

But we moderns only have opinions. And it means more than a mere opinion to erect a Gothic cathedral. Here's what he's saying. Opinions don't get you out of bed in the morning.

But convictions drive us to go the distance. Right? Imagine working on those cathedrals. If you go to Barcelona, you see the one that's there, right?

It's just never finished. Imagine working on a project knowing that you're never going to see the finish. But convictions get us out of our beds day after day and keep on going.

And this is Paul's conviction. This is why he sticks with weakness is the way. Because this is how God changes people. Not on the outside.

[ 14 : 00 ] I think more about this next week. Not on the outside. God changes people on the inside. That's the place where we need to be changed. Now this metaphor might at first seem alien to us.

But we've got to understand to the first readers of this letter living in their Roman occupied world. This is their bread and butter. Right? What Paul describes here is what is known as the pompa triumphalis.

Or in English, the triumphal procession. Right? If you've got your nose in the text, you can look at that verse there. The triumphal procession. So, when a Roman emperor went into battle with their army and won, what they would do on their return to Rome is have a victory parade.

And all these wee details are really important where we're going to finish. Right? And boy was this lavish. Don't know what you think of when you think parades. Maybe a stage of life thing. I think of Aladdin riding into the palace in Agrabah.

Maybe you think Super Bowl parades. Maybe you can think Team GB parading around London after the 2012 Olympics. Remember that one? Maybe you can think Hibs when they won the Scottish Cup back in 2016 and paraded around central Edinburgh.

[ 15 : 17 ] It's one for the Hybies out there trying to remind you of better days. But if you go to Rome, you'll still find this stuff. Right? You will find the Titus Arch there. If you go to Rome.

This contains panels depicting the triumphal procession that was celebrated in 71 AD. So, yes, we're talking about a metaphor here. But we're also talking about history.

This stuff really happened. Now, let me try and get us into the running order of the parade. Because this is where the gold is. Okay? There would be one man receiving the praise in this parade.

Who's in the middle? Who's at the center? Who's in the spotlight? Who's taking all the praise as the victor? The conquering general. So, this parade, above all else, is about his victory.

And just in front of him, there would be one group making a smell. The incense bearers. Now, you know that phrase that we have in our culture, you've got one job.

[ 16 : 24 ] So, this group of people really did have one job. Just to hold up these massive lanterns, torches, filled with all kinds of spices and fragrances.

Likely that the emperor had handpicked to be the smell of his victory. And what their one job was, was to walk in front of the emperor, hold them in the air, and fill the air with the smell of a thousand scented candles.

That was your job. The light to do your job. Hold it in the air, and just waft the incense of victory everywhere. Have you ever had that experience of walking into a room filled with a really powerful smell?

What's the phrase that we use? The smell hit us. That's what they had to do. So that everyone about knew about the emperor's victory. Fill the air with that news.

And then finally, there would be two peoples breathing it in. One group of people were in front of the emperor.

[ 17 : 33 ] Who were they? They were some of the people from the city that he had conquered, that he had captured, was bringing home, and were now kind of prisoners of war.

Heads down, faces gloomy, uncertain about what was going to happen next. And the other group were behind the emperor.

Now, who were they? People who had been captives in the city that the emperor had gone to conquer, had conquered it and had brought his people back home.

And they are not gloomy. They are dancing. They are skipping. They are singing for joy. Because our king has set us free.

Now, why go behind the king? I take it that to show the world that we are living in the slipstream of his victory. And the thing to understand is that both of these groups are breathing in the same smell.

[ 18 : 35 ] They are both breathing in that smell that the incense bearers are wafting everywhere. But here is the difference. This is crucial.

Here is the difference. The group out in front, remember the prisoners of war, they smell the smell of the emperor's victory. And to them, they smell it. Get it in their lungs.

And it smells of death. But to the other group, they smell it. And to them, it's the smell of life.

And Paul wants us to picture, is the whole world like that victory parade? God has declared Jesus to be that emperor supreme.

He's the only reason there's a parade. Because he is the one who lived the life that we couldn't live. Because he is the one who died on the cross paying the penalty, the one that should be on us because of our sins.

[ 19 : 43 ] Because he is the one who rose again, defeating death, freeing us from the power of sin and death and the claim of the devil. Because he is the one who has given us life. Because he is the one who has ascended.

God has declared him in the eyes of the watching world to be the emperor supreme. And you've got to understand that that is what Jesus is doing right now, even as we speak. You know, we woke up to a new president on Wednesday.

What do they call the person in that role? The most powerful person in the world. But we've got to understand that there's a king way above him. And he's never going to be voted out of office.

And his term is never going to expire. Presidents and parties will come and go. It will go blue, red, blue, red, blue, red for many a year to come.

But this king is never going to be toppled. And he is this right now. God understand that right now. As we speak, he is Lord. God has declared him to be Lord over every square inch of this cosmos.

[ 20 : 50 ] It means every single bit of the city. Every bit of your life that you walk around. He is the Lord over it. And the Christian, I take it, we are the incense bearers.

Yeah, with one job. To delight, to fill the air with the news of the king's victory. What happens when you go past security into the airport, isn't it?

What do you hit? Duty free. Duty. Bright colors, loud music, M&Ms, shortbread, see you Jimmy hats. But you know the thing that gives me a headache every time I walk through it?

It's just the smells. Just pinging up fragrances into the air everywhere. That's what Paul is saying here. Just to fill the air with the news of her king's victory.

Our job through our mouths and by our lives is just to delight, to carry his smell of victory in the air in every place that we go.

[ 21 : 56 ] And as we do that, we've got to understand, as we put that smell into the air, there's always going to be two reactions. To some, some will breathe that in.

Our friends and family. And to them it will be the smell of death. What utter nonsense. How narrow-minded. How pathetic. That's the realism of this passage. But friends, hear the reason for optimism.

Because others will breathe in that same smell. And man alive to them it will be the smell of life. And it will be the smell that causes you to leap and to dance and to sing in the slipstream of the king who's just given you life.

Now think about how many of us here came to know Jesus through the Jesus fragrance that came from the lives of other friends and family that we had in our lives. Imagine the vast, vast majority of us, right?

We smelt it from somebody. Was it sorted people though? Was it impressive people? Was it spectacular people? No, of course it wasn't. It was just ordinary people doing ordinary things.

[ 23 : 09 ] Changing nappies. Doing the school run. Sitting in the lecture. Going to work. Doing the commute. But people who we could tell had had their hearts captured by an extraordinary God.

Right? Here's the deal. See when people have been to the pub? You can smell it off them. See when people have had a cigarette?

You can smell it off them. See when people have been to a coffee shop? Starbucks is the worst. You can smell it off them, yeah? See when people have delighted to spend time with Jesus?

You can smell it off them. You know a little evangelistic phrase that I find really helpful? What grabs the heart, wags the tongue. Let me ask you, who did you first smell it off?

Can I just tell you, the guy for me, just as we closed, this is one of the guys that God used in my life when I was young. Do you remember this guy from The Simpsons?

[ 24 : 11 ] Yeah? Ned Flanders? The squeaky clean, no fun religious guy that everyone kind of laughed at? We had a guy in our school like that. I remember rightly, one of the nicknames that somebody once gave him was Neddy, which in Glasgow means something else, right?

But that's what we meant by it. I think I've told you about him before, but he came to mind again this week, and I just sent him a text just telling him, thank you for playing this role in my life. You've no idea what God did.

His name was Stephen. Right? Everyone knew that he was a Christian. Every so often we got reminded that he was actually serious about it. In fact, I distinctly remember him once in front of our entire school rugby team, turning down the chance to play at Murray Field for the school team because it was happening on a Sunday, and he was saying, no, I'm going to be at church.

And we thought, this guy's nuts. He's bonkers. But I tell you what, he was a very impressionable teenager at the time, trying to figure out what life was all about.

I watched Stephen unashamedly nail his colours to the mast when I was all too happy to sit on the fence. I owned the fence. And to most, what Stephen stood for was absolutely nonsense.

[ 25 : 18 ] And I heard the nicknames and I heard the jokes that people made about him. But see, for me, what he had, the fact that he was like the grand old Duke of York, he was neither up nor down, the fact that he was consistent, the fact that he was content, that he was happy, was wildly attractive.

Wildly attractive. And here's the thing. People smelt death. But somehow in God's goodness and in his sovereignty, I smelt the same smell. And I smelt life.

Can I give you three quickfire encouragements as we close? These are real quick. And it's all wrapped up in that phrase at verse 14. See it. Through us. Through us.

Or he uses us. Right? How does God do this? What's the means by which God reaches people for Christ? Paul is saying it's through us.

It's through everyday people. Three quickfire encouragements. Here's number one. God works through our weakness. He says, who is up to such a task? Do you see him say that? Who's up to such a task?

[ 26 : 24 ] And you think, if anybody cannot say that, it's the Apostle Paul. No. But he's saying, who's up to this task? We can't transform anybody. But listen, the power is not in our performance.

The power is in the message. No one says this better than Sam Albrey. I come back to this quote again, again, again. Love this guy. He said, I don't need to look good so that Jesus can look good. I need to be honest about my colossal spiritual needs so that he can look all sufficient.

Number two. Dear friends, you have no idea who's breathing it in. Let's encourage you with that. You have no idea who's in the background breathing it in. Don't underestimate what God can do through the power of your simple witness.

And then number three. The God who created our physical nostrils is sovereign over our spiritual ones as well. And we can trust him that he knows what he's doing.

Even when we see these twin reactions going on. And we can trust that his purposes are perfect. And Father, I pray that your spirit be moving amongst us this morning.

[ 27 : 33 ] And would he be bringing that knowledge of who the Lord Jesus is in his victory? That knowledge of forgiveness. Perhaps that conviction of where we're not right with somebody.

Lord, I pray particularly for those who are here today who are struggling with perhaps their friends or family, Lord. Thinking that their faith is nonsense or hitting a brick wall.

Father, I pray that you would give us endurance and strength. And Lord, we do pray as we think about those who will smell this. And it will be the smell of life. Lord, we long for more people in this city to come to know you.

So Father, we thank you for the words of Ephesians chapter 3. Now to him who's able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. According to his power that is at work within us.

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[ 28 : 35 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.  
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.