

When we get involved with people and with serving of one another, we tend to focus on those people, the results which we wish to see, and our timetable for seeing these things happen. When we view things solely from this perspective, we are inviting discouragement and frustration, even when these expectations may be good and proper. Paul's perspective in today's text allowed him to rise above the anxiety and inner unrest which the situation at Corinth caused in him. It is a perspective which should help us and challenge us as well, because it requires of us a conscious choice of lifestyle.

1. *The setting*

Paul was concerned about the Corinthians' reception of severe instructions he had sent concerning problems in the church. He had chosen not to go to Corinth himself, but to allow them to deal with the problems themselves. Now Paul was left waiting for news from Titus, who had probably delivered that letter.

A riot in Ephesus made it prudent for Paul to leave that city and start off on a route that would eventually take him to Corinth via Macedonia. He arrived in Troas (v 12), one of the most important cities in NW Asian Minor and on the trade-route between Macedonia and Asia, intent on evangelizing. He discovered that God was granting exceptional freedom to preach and had prepared people to receive the gospel.

2. *Paul's distress*

Never-the-less Paul had no peace of mind (cf. Ch 1 for mention of his distress, hardship, and despair), because Titus did not show up with the expected news from Corinth. So great was his unrest and his concern that he left the open door for the gospel in Troas and continued Corinth-bound to Macedonia.

(Note that by Paul's example "open doors" are merely opportunities and cannot be considered absolute signposts of God's direction. To Paul the spiritual health of the church at Corinth was a higher priority than evangelism in Troas. Furthermore, it can be noted that humanly speaking Paul had to leave the open door in Troas because of the sinful responses of the Corinthians. When we as believers act according to the flesh rather than keeping in step with the Spirit, we usually divert time and energy from others to dealing with our problems rather than reaching the lost and building up believers.)

3. *Paul's broader perspective*

But Paul's broader perspective (cf. "always" and "in every place") kept him from being overwhelmed by anxiety for the Corinthians.

a. *The illustrative figure*

The picture being used here is apparently that of the victory parade awarded to a conquering Roman general, riding through the streets followed by his sons, counselors, legionnaires, and finally the captives from the battle being displayed for public ridicule and eventual execution. Garlands of flowers decorated the route and the victor was honored with the burning of spices and incense. Paul pictured God the Father honoring Jesus Christ with this triumphal procession and himself with others first being led along in it and then as being the aroma that went up from the incense and spices.

b. *The explanation*

Paul appears to emphasize (1) that he and others are put on display for the glory of Christ and (2) that they spread the knowledge of Christ.

Two different words are used for odor in these verses, though not apparent in many English translations. The word in verse 15, aroma or fragrance, is used in the OT many times and exclusively for the fragrance to God of burnt offerings (animal, grain, or drink offerings). Believers as the recipients of God's grace in the sacrifice of Christ, are likened to the smoke which went up from the offering as something pleasing to God.

Another word in verses 14 and 16, though sometimes translated "fragrance", is actually of itself neutral and can refer to either a good or a bad smell. To God we are a fragrance, a sweet, pleasing smell. To those around us we are also an odor, but whether it is good or bad will depend upon them. So also to the victors in the Roman triumphal procession the smell of the incense was something good, but to the doomed captives it was a reminder of their defeat and pending death.

God wants to use our lives and our words to communicate Jesus Christ to all those around us, believers and non-believers alike. Our "odor" will be the stench of death to those who reject the gospel we will be a stench, and an aroma of life to those who receive the gospel. God does not want us to be "odorless", to fit in.

c. *The heavy responsibility*

To be a message of life and death is a heavy responsibility. Only those who find their sufficiency in Christ are equal to such a task (cf. 3.4-6). The false apostles and teachers sensed no such insufficiency since they were more concerned about themselves to the extent that they would "water down" the gospel to increase the personal profit.

Paul's ministry on the other hand was pure and would flawlessly pass inspection. He understood that his authority was from God, he was being looked upon by God, drew all his strength from his union with Christ.

Even today there are those who cheapen or dilute the gospel message (like leaving out our sin problem) in order to get a response and add to the appearance of success or popularity or even material gain. We might be tempted to dilute the message so that we do not lose friends or alienate people. But anything other than the complete gospel will not lead a person to salvation.

This is a heavy responsibility. But it is God's message and His work in us, through us and in others. We "merely" need to be faithful followers and witnesses of Christ. This gives us perspective, when we are anxious about the response in people. Our responsibility is to rely upon God to smell strong.