



*<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.*

*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.*



Arc de Triomphe was commissioned in 1806 by Napoleon Bonaparte and was not completed until thirty years later, fifteen years after the death of Napoleon. In 1840, Napoleon's cremated ashes passed through the arc on the way to their final resting place.<sup>1</sup> This famous Paris landmark was constructed for the



same reason similar arches had been constructed for thousands of years—they were used gateways through which conquering kings would lead a parade of victory. Translated, the Arc de Triomphe is the Arch of Triumph. It would happen like this. Kings and generals would lead the parade of victory through the arch with great pomp and circumstance and cheered by the adoring crowds. The victorious troops would follow next and at the end of the triumphant procession would be the defeated enemy. They would be led through the arch at the point of a spear or shackled in chains. Most of them would probably be executed later that day.

As I said, the construction and use of these arches has been going on for thousands of years. This particular arch of triumph was constructed during the time of the apostle Paul. However there is no question that the most famous arch is the one in Paris. Napoleon may have gone through as a conquering general, even though it was only his ashes, but the history of the Arc de Triomphe is not all gold and glitter. Probably the low point in its history is when the German troops marched through the arch after conquering France in June 1940. You can imagine how demoralizing it would have been for the French to have witnessed this toward the beginning of World War 2.



Another famous triumphal procession was celebrated in 168 BC when a Roman general Aemilius defeated General Perseus from Macedonia in a brief, fifteen day battle. The celebration lasted for three days and ended with Perseus at the end of the procession. It is recorded by the Greek historian Plutarch.

Behind the children and their train of attendants walked Perseus himself, clad in a dark robe and wearing the high boots of his country, but the magnitude of his evils made him resemble one who is utterly dumbfounded and bewildered. He, too, was followed by a company of friends and intimates, whose faces were heavy with grief.<sup>2</sup>

This was the meaning of a triumphal procession that Paul writes about in verse fourteen. The difficult question then is why would he compare Christians to a defeated enemy? At first glance you might think that this is a positive metaphor and that Christians are led by Christ in triumphal procession, that we are celebrating the victory with Christ. But this is not at all the meaning of this word. Christ is the victor—that much is true—but we are not celebrating with him. We are Perseus, the defeated enemy. But how can this be? With Christ as our head and leader, are we not ultimately triumphant and victorious through him? Moreover, if we are the defeated enemies in this metaphor, how can Paul say “thanks be to God”? Yes, we are *ultimately* victorious in an eternal sense, but there is an important theological point Paul wants to draw out of this metaphor which I think I can draw out with a simple question.

Before we became believers, what were we before God? We were God’s sworn enemies. You may not have felt like you were God’s enemy as if your goal in life was to somehow defeat or kill God, but that is what the Bible calls us in several Scriptures. Therefore, Paul rightly views us in this verse as conquered enemies of Jesus Christ. Yet this is the very thing which makes Paul break out in praise—*But thanks be to God!* I believe that Paul is praising God in the spirit of Romans 6:22. *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.* A defeated enemy became a

slave to the one who defeated him in battle. Paul is rejoicing because we are slaves of God and as a slave, our new master is in complete control over us. Our will must now become aligned with his will. Do you see? This is a reason for great rejoicing. We are a defeated enemy but we have come under the sovereign rule and protection of the almighty king.

Let me show you how this works out in real life. About two weeks ago, this twelve year old boy named Trent was killed in a skiing accident. As a parent, there can be nothing more heart-wrenching than this. But listen to a little of what his parents have written.



On Friday February 18, 2011, God did the unthinkable in our life: He chose to take our 12-year-old son, Trent Lee Stellrecht, home in a skiing accident. It is only considered “the unthinkable” because our plans are not God’s plans, and our ways are not God’s ways. Before Trent was born we have entrusted the Lord with his life and have asked Him, above all else, to bring salvation to our son, to use him in a mighty way for God’s glory, and to let him dwell in heaven for eternity. God only answered our prayers last Friday in a mightier way than we could have imagined, and we have been rejoicing in His good works and His mercies ever since.

God says he knows the number of our days, that He has created each one, and that He will do what He pleases. For most of his life Trent struggled with his own sinfulness before God. He knew that he was not right before God, and nothing he could do would ever make up for the sins he committed to make him worthy to enter heaven. In the summer of 2010 God graciously chose to bring salvation to Trent through repentance and the saving grace of Christ Jesus. Trent’s life was transformed and we enjoyed the young fruit in his life as we watched God work.

It was with great peace and much rejoicing that we as his family have sent him off before us and accepted God’s perfect plan for Trent’s life. Our longing is that God would be glorified in what He has done to wake up many to the realization that we are not guaranteed any number of years in this world.

What we have asked nearly every person we have seen since Friday is “What if it had been you? Where would you be right now?” We diligently raised Trent up to know his sinful state and taught him what the Word of God says because we know the implications of denying Christ now, and God was gracious to answer our prayers and to save Him. Scripture says that the gospel will go forth with much sorrow and heartache. Please let Trent’s short life be a wake-up call to you. We are rejoicing in the sorrow because we know where our son is and that we will one day be with him again for eternity because of our own salvation.

God’s mercies are new every day, and His peace does surpass all understanding. God has been so gracious to us in these few days by blessing us first of all with His peace. The family and friends that have surrounded us and have lifted us up in prayer are amazing and

another testimony to God's goodness. It is with great rejoicing that we release our son, Trent Lee Stellrecht, age 12, to our Heavenly Father. Dance before your King my son.

The attitude of these grieving parents is remarkable, but it is also consistent with Paul's idea of being led in triumphal procession by our conquering king Jesus. Such an attitude cries out, "Lord, you are our Master. I will gladly serve you and will accept your will for my life no matter what it is. Not only are we led in triumphal procession by our conquering king Jesus, but there is a greater purpose to this procession laid out in the next few verses.

*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. 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.*

Paul offers a word picture here that is steeped in Old Testament truth. In Leviticus, the phrase, "an aroma pleasing to the Lord," is used seventeen times. Whenever a grain offering, burnt offering or fellowship offering is placed in the fire on the altar, it rises up and becomes a pleasing aroma before the Lord. What is the point of all of this 'pleasing aroma'? To the untrained eye it might seem that God is hungry and likes to smell wonderful aromas. We all know what it is like to catch a whiff of a steak on the grill or a pot of coffee brewing. Such aromas trigger our appetites and our desire to consume that which creates the aroma. We would say that such things create pleasing aromas. But we know that God is not hungry, nevertheless he is pleased by these aromas. We could go into great detail about this, but the short answer is that these offerings and the aroma they create are a sign of obedience to the Lord. It is not the sacrifices themselves that are pleasing to the Lord. He could burn his own sacrifices if he wished or just create the same aroma. What is pleasing to him is the obedience that underlies the various offerings.

This is driven home very clearly when Samuel rebuked King Saul for offering an improper sacrifice to the Lord. *But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.* Saul was stuck on the actual act of offering a sacrifice but God was only interested in Saul's heart. Obedience is not just better than sacrifice it was the point of all sacrifice and in so doing pointed the way to Jesus Christ and the need for a once for all sacrifice to atone for sins.

Paul picked up on this theme in the fifth chapter of Ephesians. *Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children<sup>2</sup> and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God* (Eph 5:1-2). Christ was a fragrant offering to the Lord on our behalf and now our sacrifice of obedience is likewise pleasing to the Lord. When we joyfully follow Christ in triumphal procession with our knees and hearts bowed to him, this obedience becomes a pleasing aroma and fragrance.

But there is yet another level to our obedience. Notice carefully how verse fifteen flows. *For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* First, the aroma rises up to the throne of God. Just like the Levitical offerings, it is directed

toward God but now we are the “aroma of Christ.” We are not grain offerings or burnt offerings but rather Jesus offerings. The blood atonement of Christ, the sweet aroma of his limitless sacrifice is spread through our lives of obedience. This drives home the point that works in and of themselves are worthless. Anything done in our own strength, anything not accomplished in faith and genuine obedience is no better than cutting the head off of a chicken and throwing it into the fire. But genuine obedience from a pure heart is a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

But we also see that this aroma spreads among everyone with whom we come in contact—*among those who are being saved and those who are perishing*. That describes your daily life, does it not? We spend our time around people who are saved and people who are not saved and are perishing. Every day is spent around these two classes of people but we have a vastly different effect on each group. *To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life*. This verse is reminiscent of what Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 1:18. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*. In the same way, the message of the cross is the smell of death to those who are perishing and the fragrance of life to those who are saved. This means that an obedient life is a type of gospel message. When unsaved people see a believer whose life is bent toward radical obedience to the teachings of Jesus, they can have the same reaction to this life well lived as they do to the gospel message itself.

In the next verse Paul returns to defending himself to any potential detractors. *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*. Is this still being done today? Is anyone peddling the word of God for profit? This is absolutely happening in every corner of the globe. Religion is big business whether it is a small storefront church in the city or a one hundred million dollar building in the suburbs. Christianity is becoming less and less a message of the cross and more and more crass marketing. How does marketing work? Marketing works in one of two ways—either they convince you that they have what you need or else they convince you that you need what they have. Isn't this the truth? Marketing in the church usually follows the first tactic—they convince you that they have what you need. In other words, if you want a church with a certain kind of music and a shorter and lighter kind of teaching, then many churches can meet that need. Some churches do this blatantly and others do it more subtly, but any church can fall into this trap, including ours. We need to resist it at every turn. If churches and believers peddled the word of God for profit in Paul's day, how much more can it happen in our day?

Paul continued to answer his critics in 3:1. *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?* This type of commendation was not a boasting where we brag about all of our accomplishments. It is much more similar to our ‘name-dropping’ and networking, but in a good sense. If I can vouch for another person, my recommendation will give them an in. These kinds of recommendations are based on trust.<sup>3</sup> If you have a certain level of trust in me, then you will probably place some trust in the person I recommend. This is how Ryan got a job at Village Market. Garrett Seeley recommended Ryan for the job and soon after he was hired. Management obviously trusted Garrett so they trusted his recommendation of Ryan.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, Paul did not need to be introduced to the church in Corinth for he founded the church. Some were probably making a claim that Paul had somehow destroyed that level of trust and needs to be “recommended” once again before they start to work together. If this had not been a significant issue between them Paul would never have even mentioned it. However, they should have all known that this was not true. On the contrary, he wrote: <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.*

In other words, Paul did not need a letter of recommendation from a friend. The believers in Corinth were his letter and the way he describes their relationship reveals a very personal side.

There are four characteristics to this description—*You show that you are*

1. *a letter from Christ,*

Paul didn't need any letter of recommendation from anyone because his letter was from Christ.

2. *the result of our ministry,*

No matter how much Paul was criticized, they could not take away the results of his ministry. There were hundreds if not thousands of believers in Corinth that could be traced to his ministry.

3. *written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God,*

4. *not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

What good are letters when Paul can point to all of the hearts of these people that were touched and redeemed by the power of the Holy Spirit? Please understand that he was not bragging in any way. These were not notches in his evangelistic belt. We have all heard of ministries who proclaim the thousands or hundreds of thousands of converts through their ministry. We can only hope that all of these are genuine but sometimes you can't help but wonder if there isn't a little boasting involved in their parade of large numbers. Paul did not think this way. He saw each convert as an individual human heart.

Paul's description of his ministry ought to make us ask the question, “How is my ministry”? Do you have any similar results? Have you written yourself on any human hearts? Some here might be tempted to respond like this: “Ministry? What ministry? I don't have a ministry? Billy Graham has a ‘ministry’. John MacArthur has a ‘ministry’. Pastors have ‘ministries.’ But me? How can you say that I have a ministry?” To such a query I would ask, you are a Christian, are you not? If you are a Christian then it is assumed that you have a ministry. We should probably give a definition of ‘ministry’ so that you understand what I mean. Actually, Paul gave the best definition possible. It's a very simple and accurate definition but you might miss the forest because of the trees. Paul is saying that ministry is people. It is as simple as that. Ministry is people.

Just by saying that I can almost hear the excuses coming back to me—“If ministry is people, then that doesn't apply to me because, you see, I'm a task-oriented person. I'm not much of a people person myself.” I understand that by nature and personality, many people are certainly more task-oriented than others. This is true, but that does not mean that ministry is tasks. Ministry is people whether or not you are a “people-person” or not. The key for the task-oriented person is to do your tasks *for* people. You see the difference, don't you? It is possible to do tasks for just to

accomplish tasks but it's something else altogether to do tasks on behalf of others, to truly serve people. Then your tasks become ministry because ministry is people. How many hearts have the letter from Christ as a result of your ministry? You will have a positive impact on people to the degree that you are joyfully led in triumphal procession by God. That is, your submission to God's sovereignty is in direct correlation to your ministry to people.

Rich Maurer  
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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arc\\_de\\_Triomphe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arc_de_Triomphe), accessed on February 23, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Garland, p. 142 AND <http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/people/a/aemiliuspaulus.htm> accessed on February 24, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> As one commentator put it, "self-commendation is therefore equivalent to self-introduction." (Garland, p. 155).

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, when I applied for my first pastorate after graduating from Seminary, as you always do with resumes, I tried hard to put my best foot forward. As one of my references I put the president of Trinity Seminary, the school from which I had just graduated. It just so happened that he had been the pastor at the church we were members of and I served part-time on staff there for a year. I wasn't just name-dropping because he was a bona fide reference.