

EXODUS 30: INCENSE // DESIRE-DRIVEN RELATIONSHIP

SERMON-ALIGNMENT CURRICULUM

by Kevin McGill

We are continuing our series on living with God—looking at the Tabernacle, its furniture, and the priesthood—not as mere religious services but as symbols that teach us how to relate to God. Today we focus on the Altar of Incense. It reveals something essential about God’s relationship with his people: he desires a relationship of mutual attraction—not merely transactional, functional, or obligatory, but one driven by desire.

At the end of the chapter (vv. 34–35) we’re given the “recipe” for the incense: equal parts of specific spices with a pinch of salt, ground carefully “by the perfumer’s art,” set aside as pure and holy, and offered twice daily in perpetuity. The altar stood before the veil; beyond the veil was the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. As the priest ministered, the fragrant smoke rose toward the place from which God spoke.

Incense smells sweet; it’s aromatic and pleasant—like cologne, perfume, or even deodorant. It is an agent of attraction. Many remember being twelve or thirteen when a parent placed deodorant on the dresser and said, “You need this.” Others remember the overuse of body sprays—Axe, Davidoff Cool Water—because humans intuitively know scent can draw others near. Conversely, foul odor repels. I once cleaned stalls at a dairy farm for hours in the summer heat; when I came home my dad said, “I don’t want to be near you right now.” Incense teaches us about attraction between God and humanity.

Group Discussion Questions:

Share one smell that always grabs your attention (can be your favorite dish, grass, etc.,) Share a smell that you absolutely can’t stand.

Incense: Agent of Attraction

Attraction, however, is not the end; underneath attraction is desire. John Eldredge defines desire as “the impulse of the will toward what we think will satisfy us.” Something in us sees and moves toward what we hope will fulfill us—and we hope the other moves toward us. Many discover that only God can truly satisfy this deep desire. We often awaken to desires through gifts, people, or ways of life, but we eventually hit limits: the hobby isn’t as great as expected, the career milestone leaves us empty, the children leave for college and the house feels hollow. Desire placed on created things has a ceiling; beneath it all our hearts are being drawn to God.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, “The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.” The psalmist confesses, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25). David overstated and failed at times, but he came to his senses: after

chasing other desires, he learned that true satisfaction is found in God alone. The incense, offered morning and evening, was Israel's daily confession: we desire one another. Cologne and perfume say, "I want you near." God designed us as desire-driven relational beings, and he wants our relationship with him to be defined that way.

So what compels you in your walk with God—desire-based attraction or fear-based commitment? Is God merely the intellectual conclusion of your search, or a spiritual shelter you visit only in emergencies before returning to life as usual? That's not the relationship he wants.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. Psalm 73:25 says, *"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."* What is one thing in your life that is a misplaced desire? In what ways can we help one another reorient those desires toward God?
2. The text asks, *"What compels you in your walk with God—desire-based attraction or fear-based commitment?"* How might our spiritual practices (like prayer, worship, or service) look different if they were primarily fueled by desire for God rather than obligation or fear? *Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37*
3. Think of a time when something you deeply desired left you feeling empty or unsatisfied. How did that experience shape the way you see Psalm 16:11—*"In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore"*?

Prayer - God is Attracted to your Words

Scripture expands the theme. First, incense is a picture of prayer. "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Psalm 141:2). Revelation shows golden bowls "full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Rev. 5:8), and "the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God" (Rev. 8:4). Your words are attractive to God. He listens. He loves it when you talk to him.

By contrast, human communication is hard. Much of communication is nonverbal, and people often hear only a fraction of what we say. We edit emails relentlessly to be clever, winsome, and airtight—exhausting ourselves to earn attention. Often the only people who listen closely are those with an incentive. But God is an excellent listener. Why don't we send our words to him more freely? We've been conditioned to believe we must earn an audience, and we struggle because we feel God doesn't talk back.

Yet God does speak. Jesus often said, "He who has ears, let him hear." The problem is learning how to listen. Over time, disciples learn to discern his voice. One way is through circumstances—with the help of wise friends and prayerful reflection. Another is through his Word. Even pastors don't understand everything, but there are moments when Scripture becomes piercingly clear—God is speaking. God may also speak in worship, when his presence presses upon our hearts, and through friends who counsel us. We assume speaking must be verbal, like a phone call. But listening to God often requires moving inward—attending to what he is impressing on our hearts through Word, worship, relationships, and providence. A healthy spirituality wants a God who both listens and speaks.

Daniel Nayeri (in his autobiographical novel *Everything Sad Is Untrue*) reminds us that love without justice is empty; justice without love is cruel. Jesus embodies both. Crowds press in on him, and he gives people the time of day; the only time he silences someone is a demon (Luke 4:35). Blind Bartimaeus cries out; Jesus calls him over and asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus listens. But he also speaks with authority: “Lazarus, come out”—and the dead man comes out. When Jesus speaks, things happen. So don’t be discouraged if you don’t hear an audible voice. God speaks in many ways, and every sincere word you pray is attractive to him. He takes your prayers seriously, delights in them, and welcomes you to speak again and again. Sit with him. Talk to him.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. Jesus called Bartimaeus and asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51). If Jesus asked you the same question today, how would you answer—and what might that reveal about your trust in his listening and speaking presence?
2. Jesus said, “He who has ears, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15). What practices help you personally discern God’s voice amid the noise of daily life? How can the church community encourage one another to grow in both speaking and listening to God?
3. Reflect on times when you’ve felt unheard by people? How has God shown you that he attentively listens (Psalm 34:17-18). How did that awareness change your perspective on prayer?

Influence: People Are Attracted to Christ in You

The theme of incense also appears in knowing Christ. “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:14–16). Attraction in the Christian life is not only God being drawn to your prayers; because Christ is with you, others are drawn to him through you. The word “knowledge” here (*epignōsis*) is experiential knowledge. It’s not merely facts we can recite; it’s truth we have lived.

You can read about Los Angeles on Wikipedia, but locals know the city firsthand—they’ve experienced it. Likewise, when you truly experience Jesus, his character rubs off on you like a contagion: his patience makes you patient, his justice makes you just, his love for the Father deepens your love for God. Character spreads. People’s dispositions shape communities. When the person of Christ is truly experienced, he comes into your life in such a way that his traits begin to manifest in you—patience, justice, love, humility, courage.

This is why ordinary choices matter. We make hundreds of decisions each week. When we invite the character of Christ into those decisions—and put his character on display—we become like a sweet aroma to those around us. Christ’s fragrance spreads through integrity, confession, repentance, truth-telling, gentleness under pressure, and a persistent preference for the good of others over the protection of ego. Over time this draws people toward Jesus himself. That is what God wants: mutual attraction between himself and people, and your participation in that attraction.

From the Altar of Incense to our daily prayers and lived character, God invites us into a relationship marked by desire and nearness. The incense rising morning and evening pictures a continual exchange of love—God drawing near to hear, and his people drawing near to speak and to listen. As we speak to him, he listens. As we listen, he speaks—through circumstances, Scripture, worship, and the wise counsel of others. And as we live what we’ve heard, the aroma of Christ spreads where we work, worship, and walk. This is life with God: not perfunctory religion, but a fragrant, mutual attraction of love and desire that both satisfies the soul and invites the world to come near to him.

Group Discussion Questions:

1. Paul writes that “we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:15). How does this metaphor of fragrance help us think about Christian witness differently than words or arguments, especially in an age of violent rhetoric?
2. Consider one area of your life this week where you made an ordinary decision (work, family, friendship). How did that choice reflect—or miss—the “aroma of Christ”? What would it look like to invite Jesus’ patience, love, or justice into that specific moment?
Scripture reference: Galatians 5:22–23
3. Think of someone who has deeply influenced you by their Christlike character. How did their “fragrance” of patience, gentleness, or integrity affect you? In what ways do you long for God to form similar traits in you?
Scripture reference: Philippians 1:9–11