

The Glory of Gospel Ministry, Part 1

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Find your way to 2 Corinthians 4:1. Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians is really the most autobiographical of all his epistles. That letter reveals Paul's deep affection for the Corinthians. It gives us insight into what he suffered as an apostle, as Jesus promised him. And we see in the suffering and in the trial and affliction, we see what's revealed is the heart of this apostle. And you can see the work of grace of Christ in his life in a remarkable way.

He has a deep affection for the Corinthians church and particularly so in view of the danger of false teachers, who had infiltrated Corinth, infiltrated the Corinthian church. And they came in wanting to win followers for themselves. They came to turn the church against Paul, to ruin his reputation and question his motives. So Paul uses those attacks of his opponents as an opportunity to teach the faithful, to show the Corinthians what true Gospel ministry really looks like.

Paul says this, 2 Corinthians 4:1, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. What we proclaim is not ourselves, but what we proclaim is Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

There are two parallel phrases you may have noticed. There is one in verse 4 and another in verse 6. And those parallel phrases help us see the theme of this section and to understand the true significance of our ministry in the Gospel. The Christian ministry plays a significant role in God's work of what we call, spiritual illumination. Illumination, causing the

eyes to see and the mind to understand, to reveal and illuminate the truth that's plain on the pages of Scripture, but to illuminate it and teach it to the mind. That's spiritual illumination.

Satan opposes the work, to prevent verse 4, if you look at it there, "the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ" from entering into unbelieving minds. But the sovereign God in his work of salvation he is undisturbed by Satan's efforts. And so he gives to his people, verse 6, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." That's what's at stake in the ministry. And in fact, that's what the Christian ministry is all about. As slaves of Christ the Lord, we obey him. As his slaves, serving his purposes, we follow his plan for ministry. It's a plan that Paul lays out plainly in this text. And there are other texts in the New Testament that explain his blueprint for ministry. But we do his ministry his way.

We don't innovate. We don't go outside the local church, which is where he does his ministry, is through the local church. We don't modify it. We don't update it for new times. We do his will and we do it in his way. Sadly, so much of

evangelicalism over the past half century has not followed this very simple model. It really has departed from a biblical philosophy of ministry written down by Christ's Apostles. All that, used to make evangelical headlines over the years, all the advice we got from church growth experts, all the self-styled evangelists who went and did their own thing, all the parachurch ministries who said they were assisting the church, but then came to supplant the church, all those unqualified men and women assuming leadership, dictating direction for the churches, so much of that has clearly fallen away. But not without doing great damage.

While shipwrecking their own faith, these leaders were also confusing many. Leading many astray. Leading many pastors astray. Worst of all they brought reproach, to the fair name of Jesus Christ and his church. I only point it out to highlight the need for all of us, especially pastors, especially elders to keep on knowing, to keep studying, to keep following and returning time and time again to the Lord's blueprint for Christian ministry, so that we see his plan. His plan is always before us, that we follow his philosophy of ministry.

So elders and you who aspire to leadership in the church, pastors, shepherds, pay attention, because I'm speaking this morning to you. For those of you who are not in formal ministry, not called to eldership, you have a responsibility to know and understand what Christian leadership is supposed to look like as well. Why is that? Well as church members, you are responsible to obey your leaders and submit to them, Hebrews 13:17. So you should pray for your leaders, certainly. But by knowing the Lord's plan, knowing his expectations for his ministers, you can pray effectively, purposefully. Target your prayers. You can ask the Lord to keep these men on course. Protect them. Keep them always faithful.

You can also talk to your leaders, and you should talk to them if ever you see them drifting off course. And if you have faithful elders and a faithful church, God has blessed you with such men as examples, as models to follow, the writer to the Hebrews again he says early in that same chapter Hebrews 13:7, "Remember your leaders those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."

So every point in today's sermon has implications for each and every one of you as individual Christians and as church members united in a local church body. Every point in today's sermon is applicable to your life as well. So elders, I'm preaching directly to you this morning and by so doing, I hope and trust that all will benefit as well. I've got five exhortations for you this morning from this text. Five exhortations that if you obey them, if you stay faithfully committed to following them, then Christ will count you faithful when he comes to judge your ministry and how you handled the stewardship of his glorious Gospel.

Here's the first exhortation. Number one, identify the disposition of Gospel ministry. Identify the disposition, or we could say the character of Gospel ministry. It's a disposition, as Paul says here, "of mercy toward sinners." Disposition or character of mercy toward sinners. Look at verse 1. Paul says, "Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God we do not lose heart." Paul says, we, there. You'll notice throughout the section Paul is using first person plural verbs. "We do not lose heart," verse 1. "We do not renounce," verse 2 and so on.

And Paul isn't referring to himself in the plural, like a literary plural. He is acknowledging that others are helping him. There are others assisting him in his apostolic ministry. Timothy is one of those associates. He's named in the greeting of this letter, chapter 1, verse 1. But there are others, too. And he names them and thanks them and encourages them and appreciates God for them in his letters. And you can see that especially in the closing portions of his epistles.

In fact, there is a true sense by extension that all the evangelists, pastors and teachers, Ephesians 4:1, from Timothy onward, who is a pastor, they are building on this foundation of the apostles. That means that this pattern is the pattern for all Christian ministers to follow. It's the same pattern Timothy followed in Paul's day. And it's what's written down for us, and it's commended to us, commanded of us and we can't depart from it.

If we're to remain faithful to the apostolic ministry, remain faithful to the will of Christ, this is how we do ministry. This is what we do and the main verb there, "We do not lose heart," it's preceded by a, therefore, at the beginning of

the sentence. That points us back to the previous context. That phrase, "having this ministry" makes us ask, what ministry?

What's he talking about?

Ministry. It's the word *diakonia*. That's where we get our word for deacon. In this context, though, the meaning of deacon is, or *diakonia* is broader. Here *diaknoia* refers to an administration, like ministries that you've heard of maybe like in the United Kingdom. Departments of Governance are referred to there as ministries. And those who exercise oversight and authority are called ministers. They were servants of the state, but they are ministers with regard to the administration of their ministry. So they're called ministers. Cabinet ministers. You've got the Prime Minister and so on.

So that's the concept here of *diakonia* in this context. And in talking about this ministry, this *diakonia*, Paul is pointing back to what he said in chapter 3. And he uses that word *diakonia* repeatedly. And he contrasts two different ministries. There's a ministry of death and condemnation in the law and then there's a ministry of life and glory by the Spirit in the Gospel. Look back at chapter 3, verse 6 and Paul says this, "God



has made us sufficient, adequate, totally equipped, ready to be ministers of a new covenant.” That’s that word *diakonia*.

“Ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death,” there’s the word again, “carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not,” the *diaknoia*, “the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?”

If the Old Testament administration had glory but it’s a fading, passing away glory on its own, until brought in by the new covenant ministry, *diakonia*, this administration with greater glory. “If there was a glory in the ministry of condemnation,” verse 9, “the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.”

So on the one side of that contrast the ministry of death. The ministry of condemnation. On the other side of the contrast, the ministry of the New Covenant. The ministry of the Spirit. The ministry of a, a full completed righteousness revealed in Christ. We could sum it up with two words: Law and Gospel. Law

and Gospel. The ministry of the Law, but it's completed, perfected by the ministry of the Gospel.

On the Gospel side, verse 6, Paul cites God's promise in Jeremiah 31:31. "I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts not on cold tablets of stone but on soft tablets of human hearts." In the age of the Spirit the law is no longer an externally imposed thing upon God's people. The law is now, because of the Spirit, a matter of internal desire, because of spiritual regeneration, because of new life in Christ, because of the Spirit's indwelling presence. Continuing in Jeremiah 31:31, God promises in the New Covenant. He says, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." How can that be when all have sinned and broken God's holy law? How can a perfect righteous just God bring a guilty sinner to himself and still be counted just? Does he overlook sin? No. Verse 34, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

That is the New Covenant. That's the New Covenant that's fulfilled in the atonement, the perfect final atonement of Jesus Christ. Both sides of that contrast, Law and Gospel, had glory. Both sides of that, glorified God in what they revealed. On the

one said the ministry of death and condemnation, that glorified God's perfections of his holiness, of his purity, of his perfect righteousness. His, his standard of perfection required morally and ethically for all people. His inflexible justice in pursuing accountability and calling people to account for keeping that standard. And that glorifies God, doesn't it? It reveals who he is and what he's like. It tells us clearly what he expects.

On the other side in this New Covenant ministry, the Spirit's regeneration, the ministry of righteousness. These had an even greater glory, superlatively so. Not by way of contrast as if mercy is greater than justice. We don't pit God's, attributes one against the other. All God's, attributes are one because God is one. They are all in perfect unity, in perfect harmony, because God is in unity and harmony. God is one. His attributes are one.

The greater glory of the New Covenant is in the fact that it completes God's redemptive glory. It started in the Old Testament, completed in the New. It reveals how God can be just and the justifier of the one who puts his faith in Jesus Christ. It's a full and final reconciliation with God from the heart

based on full and final forgiveness from God provided by God. It's the forgiveness that God provided by the perfect all-sufficient and final atonement of Jesus Christ.

Now back to 2 Corinthians 4:1. What does Paul mean there that he and his associates have this ministry, the phrase, "by the mercy of God." It's not the ministry itself that they are pursuing that is the mercy. That's not the mercy. The granting of a ministry from God, that's called grace, not mercy. The word, mercy, means, not getting what we're due. The word, grace, that's, unmerited favor. It means we get what we don't deserve, right?

So Paul had received both from God: Mercy and grace. But here he's talking about mercy. The fact that God gave him the New Covenant ministry, that's called grace, not mercy. And here he's focused on mercy. So what does he mean? "Having this ministry by the mercy of God." What does he mean there? Simply this: The fact that Paul and his associates are conducting Gospel ministry, that is evidence of God's mercy to an unbelieving world. The very fact of their existence, the very fact and existence of a ministry like this, the fact that Gospel

ministers exist at all, is proof that God is being patient because of his mercy. He's giving people time to repent. He's being forbearing.

The fact that sinners are not immediately extinguished like snuffing out a dying flame at the very first thought of sin, as it takes form and shape in their mind. The fact that God does not snuff them out immediately at that moment is a mercy. The very existence of Gospel ministry, then, is a mercy of God. And our work as Gospel ministers is a mercy of God. We are God's mercy to the world. And listen, it's vital that we as ministers, shepherds, pastors, elders, you as Christians, that we identify the disposition of our ministry. That we identify the character of Gospel ministry as a disposition of divine mercy toward sinners. Why is that? Why is that so important?

When we establish the fact that the character of our ministry is God's mercy, it does two things for us. It keeps us from becoming discouraged, from losing heart, from giving up because of two things. First, we recognize that the ministry is far bigger than us. It's not about me and my thing. It's not about you and your thing. This has something to do with God's

intent from before the foundation of the world to glorify himself. To show his own mercy. Just by the fact that we minister the Gospel to people, it's his mercy. We're a part of that. All things considered, us being faithful, obedient, and speaking the truth and living holy lives. Our apparent success or lack of success is relatively unimportant in the broader scheme of things. And knowing that, it really does give us great confidence in the ministry because this ministry is about God's greater plan to bring all glory to himself.

God didn't need your help in creating the world and yet, when you use the world that he created, when you give thanks, it brings glory to him. In the same way, God doesn't need your help in the ministry of the Gospel. But he grants us this ministry by his grace. And it's because of his ministry broadly speaking. So as you do your part, as you play your position, as you minister the Gospel, you bring glory to him. Knowing that you may be a very small player in God's program, as we all are. We're like "flowers of the field that are here for a little while and fade away," knowing "our life is vapor, here today, gone tomorrow." Knowing that your existence in ministry is daily proof, though, of God's mercy. That takes all the pressure off. It encourages

you. And never lose heart. Never be discouraged. Never give up because the sovereign God is over you, pleased with your ministry of his mercy to people.

And second, so another way that this keeps us from becoming discouraged and losing heart. Since ministry is a mercy, we are continually reminded, aren't we, of our own participation in the Gospel? The day that God visited us with his mercy, showed mercy to us, this changes, and it ought to, it changes the way you deal with other people. For Paul, he never forgot the fact that God spared his life. He never got over it. God did not give him what he had deserved. God showed him mercy. Paul saw himself rightly as the chief of sinners, 1 Timothy 1:15. That's because he was the chief of sinners. He persecuted the church of God in full knowledge and understanding of what he was doing.

1 Corinthians 15:9, Philippians 3:6, Galatians 1:13, he rats himself out. He says, I did that! It's recorded in Scripture for all time. In Galatians 1:13, he even admits to doing that persecution violently. He was trying to destroy the church. If that Paul visited this church, he'd want us dead. He'd want us carted off to prison and brought upon trial. It

says God showed him mercy, 1 Timothy 1:13. He says this, "Because I was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." And Paul never ever forgot that. The forgiveness he received in Christ, that was the mercy of God to him.

Fellow elder, pastor, shepherd, why is that important to remember? As we conduct ourselves as ministers of this Gospel? Because as Gospel ministers, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, we know we're heading into a deadly storm. We know persecution is coming, affliction. We're ministers, we represent God and his Christ and so people will, as Jesus promised, people will hate us. They'll exclude us. They don't want us in polite company. They're embarrassed when you bring up what you do in service of the church. They revile us, they spurn us, and our names as evil.

And these days, we're becoming a threat to public health and safety. What does Jesus tell us to do in return when people treat us like that, spitefully? Find an opportunity to exercise



our Second Amendment rights? No. Jesus said in Luke 6:27, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who persecute you, pray for those who abuse you.” “Be merciful,” he said, “Just as your Father in heaven is merciful.” The Gospel minister must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. That’s the disposition of Gospel ministry. That’s the character. It’s a divine mercy to others. And we understand that because we were recipients of that same mercy. We get it. And we must never forget it.