

The Glory of Gospel Ministry, Part 2

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Here's a second exhortation, for you elders, pastors, number two, clarify the convictions of Gospel ministry. In light of a ministry saturated with divine mercy, Paul is telling us at the end of verse 1 and getting into verse 2, he says there is nothing that can cause he and his associates, his fellow ministers, nothing that can cause them to lose heart. This is ministry performed in full conviction, verses 1 and 2.

"Therefore," he says, "we don't lose heart," verse 2, "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."

It may not be as clear in the English text, but if you kind of ignore the verse division, you can see there are two main verbs held in contrast by the word, "but," "We do not lose heart," on the one hand, "but we have renounced," on the other.

Those thoughts are joined together, and they really are a piece. The verb “we do not lose heart,” when it’s used in military context, it refers to a warrior, a soldier who has lost his nerve. A soldier who shrinks back from doing his duty. We would call that person a what? Coward. Paul is saying, “Having identified the role of God’s mercy in what we do, we know our place and we are resolved never to cave in. Never to shrink back in a spirit of cowardice.”

That leads not quite naturally here to the deep conviction we hear coming out of the next verse. “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.” We have nothing to do with disgraceful, underhanded ways.” Literally, it’s, we’ve renounced hidden things of shame or secret things of disgrace. Things of dishonor. Things which, if revealed, would leave a lasting humiliation, a stain on our lives. He’s talking about hidden motives of the heart, sinful desires, secret evil thoughts, sinful intentions, secret habits and practices. Renounce that. It’s a conviction about the nature of this ministry.

False ministers, pseudo pastors, deceptive deceitful shepherds, the Bible calls them hirelings. They harbor secrets

in their hearts. They have things that are hidden because they're shameful. Sadly in our calloused day, we've seen that these ministers and false pastors and pseudo shepherds, they're blatantly and flagrantly committing these sins in public. They have lost heart. That's who Paul's talking about here. They are the ones who've become discouraged. And they're now given over to religious sins, which are the worst sins of all. They're ministering under the cover of duplicity and hypocrisy and deceit. They're resorting to what Paul identifies in verse 2 as cunning and craftiness and adulterating God's Word. What are such people like that, religious people, what do they hope to gain? "But they commend themselves to others."

They hope to get the approval of men. They hope to gain people's trust, hope to get their favor and a little bit of their money. They're covetous of a good reputation or a good standing. They covet maybe money or prominence or fame or influence or power. Whatever it is. Paul says, We've nothing to do with, our ministry has nothing to do with that. It's from a sense of deep conviction. It's from this indignation he feels about that kind of stuff going on, calling itself faithful, calling itself representing Christ.

He has an abhorrence of all that duplicity, an anger even about that hypocrisy. And it's because Paul does not lose heart and become discouraged. He renounces in no uncertain terms any and every unfaithful approach to ministry. No cunning. No trickery. No bait-and-switch tactics. No tampering with God's Word. That's an interesting expression, tamper. It's *doloo*. It means, to change something, but, but not obviously so. It's to do it ever so slightly resulting in a, in a distortion that completely falsifies and reverses the intent. The noun is *dolos*. It's the word for, bait. Bait looks good and juicy to a, a fish swimming up to eat it. But it hides a hook. So the very thing that they think they're going for that's going to give them sustenance and life and joy turns out be the exact opposite. It turns out to be their doom, their death, their demise. That's what false shepherds do with God's Word.

Why is Paul saying all this? Why is he talking about this? Because this is how the false teachers, who infiltrated the Corinthian church, this how they were characterizing Paul. Remember Paul was there for a year and half, he, they knew him, they loved him, but then he went away, and he was gone. And so

in his absence without him there to defend himself, to demonstrate his character and his honesty and his integrity, they took advantage of his absence. They accused Paul, slandered him. Oh, he uses flattery, smooth words. Don't trust him. He's beguiling you with his learning and his speech, but don't trust him, makes false promises. He can't be trusted.

The truth of it is, and this is the case with sinners, you see it all the time. They're projecting upon Paul their own hearts. They're accusing him of the things that they themselves are guilty of. They start to unseat people's confidence in his shepherding, as his apostleship. You know a cowardly shepherd, one who has come to distrust God's Word, one who has given into unbelief, by the way he preaches, by the way he teaches, by the way he interacts or doesn't interact. You found cowardly shepherds and cowardly people as well, pulling to the sidelines, more comfortable on the fringe. They don't want to live in the light. They commend themselves to audiences because they want to gain a following.

You hear the way they preach, teach, counsel, minister the Word of God. And you can hear that that ministry lacks God's

authority. Therefore, it lacks God's power, God's blessing. The reason that they are there to speak to an audience is to commend themselves. And so because they want to keep the audience and hold onto the audience, they say nothing that will offend. Nothing hard. They use smooth speech to tickle the ears. True shepherds are exactly the opposite. They do what Paul does. They renounce all that falsehood. They disown it. They refuse to walk in those ways. They refuse to twist and distort and shape God's Word. Instead, like Paul, like it says there in verse 2, "By the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

That phrase, "the open statement of the truth," it's a word that means, full disclosure. There's no fine print. Everything is large caps, bold font. We could say it means, to broadcast the truth, to put the plain truth out there, floating in the airwaves so that anyone can hear it, download it, listen to it, and examine it, to see if these things are so. We do this because true ministry, it's about getting the truth out and targeting the conscience of every hearer. Calling every man, every woman, every child to listen, to understand, to examine the truth. And then to repent and believe it. And let the Spirit

of God go to work on the conscience. So we might wonder then, why so many consciences seem to be, particularly today, seem to be impervious to the truth that we proclaim.

Brings us to a third exhortation. Number three, elder, pastor, shepherd, minister, Christian, number three, you need to demystify the rejection of Gospel ministry. I've seen this so many years, how Christians trouble themselves unnecessarily as to why so-and-so just can't seem to live in holiness. And as they ponder, as they kind of wring their hands and trouble themselves, they make excuse after excuse for this rebel. Oh, it's his bad background. Oh, it's his poor relationship with his parents. He didn't know his father very well. He was always busy, always working. His, his mother didn't rock him enough. Never succeeded in school, wasn't successful in sports. He didn't have any friends. He was raised in a rough neighborhood. And on and on it goes.

So much of that bad theology, bad ecclesiology, especially in what create the seeker movement, came from the mission field. Discouraged missionaries in India succumbed to unbelief because they weren't, resee, seeing results on the mission field.

Indians did not like to come to faith because those in the higher castes would have to associate with those in the lower castes. And so what that Indian missionary did, he said, You know what? You can come to Christ and stay within your caste. Hmmm. Does the Gospel not mean that we are all one in Christ? Is our identity not in Christ? Are we not all equal in Christ? Does that not obliterate the caste system? Should you not preach with vehemence against the caste system?

But that was ported back to America where Fuller Seminary in particular, that was turned into a method for church growth. Don't make people feel uncomfortable coming to Christ. If they're yuppies, keep them yuppies. Christian yuppies. If they're hard rockers, keep them hard rockers. Christian hard rockers. And on and on it went. Every caste in our society. That's walking away from faithfulness. That's becoming discouraged, losing heart, becoming a coward on the battlefield. Listen, it is not a mystery when people reject the Gospel, when they disobey the Bible, when they continue walking in their sins. The only reason that might trouble someone is if they keep trying to consider that person and reconcile with them or with



themselves, how that person is still a Christian. Because they said they're a Christian.

We're going to be faithful Gospel ministers in our own minds and in our ministries, we need to demystify the rejection of the Gospel and disobedience to the truth. Paul helps us with that in verses 3 and 4, "Even if our Gospel is veiled, it's veiled 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." "Those who are perishing." It's a single participle there. It's, it's constructed in such a way as to point to the character of that person. So Paul is talking here about those who are perishing as a group of people, it's their identity. They are the reprobate. They're steeled and hardened in their unbelief and they're heading, happily, by their own free will down the path of destruction right into hell.

So Paul's talking about here, this is someone who has heard the Gospel and rejected it. They understand. They clearly understand it and they've walked away. Perhaps they even professed faith for a time, but now they walk in disobedience

decidedly so. They've handed themselves over, in some cases, to judicial blindness. A hardening of the heart. The minds of sinners, dead in their trespasses and sins, the minds of sinners are dark, unenlightened and they so desperately need the light of God's truth. The source of that is spiritual illumination.

As Paul is saying here is the Gospel and this is what Gospel preachers bring to the unbelieving sinner. But the forces of darkness are there to throw over that unbelieving mind a thick impenetrable veil. Kind of like a blackout curtain that lets nothing in. No light penetrates. So distorted is the image of God in these unbelievers. So hardened they are in unbelief. So blinded are they by the god of this age that they're fallen reason can never ever elevate to perceive the truth about Christ. He's the only one who is himself the very image of God. The only one who makes visible the invisible God.

So why is it so important for us as ministers, shepherds, pastors, elders to demystify the rejection of the Gospel by the unbelieving? Because not only is it fruitless to try to figure out what God has so clearly revealed about the rejection right here, it can easily turn into disobedience, discouragement, not

believing what God has plainly said. To doubt the true power of God's Word and resort to our own human energy and effort to persuade. When the sinner rejects the truth, it is not the fault of the minister. It is not weakness in the Gospel. It is not the, a deficiency in the power of God's truth. What we're seeing there is a sinner under condemnation when he rejects. We're seeing a sinner in danger of a judicial hardening by the agency of Satan. So what's the answer to this impervious conscience? What is the answer to this rejection? Well, Paul's answer was to double down on preaching the truth. He never budged from that and specifically, this aspect of the truth that comes up in the next verse, the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

So with that in mind, here's a fourth exhortation, a fourth exhortation for you pastors, elders, shepherds, and all Christians. Number four, magnify the dominion of Gospel ministry. Again, apparent success or failure of our ministry, that is in terms of the number of those getting saved and all the rest, that is not about us. This is why Paul said, verse 5, "For what we proclaim, not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." As Gospel ministers, we have only one bullet in our gun and it's the

Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

So what does this mean preaching the Lordship of Christ? First of all, it means, we never preach ourselves. We don't foster groupies or followers or fans. In fact, we discourage that kind of behavior. Why is that? Because we are miserable, powerless, substitutes for Christ. What are we? We have no power at all. None. Zero. We've no power to convert sinners. We have no power to overcome Satan's schemes. We have no power to change hearts. That is the province of Christ and his province alone.

And that's why, second of all, we preach Jesus Christ as Lord; not ourselves. Him as Lord of the universe, his dominion. Start with Jesus, we preach Jesus. We preach the historical man whose life is the subject of the Gospels. We preach his true humanity, born of the virgin Mary, raised to maturity by Mary and Joseph, proving what we know from the very beginning that he's sinless and perfect and that he fulfilled all righteousness. We preach Jesus Christ.

Christ the Savior, Son of Man, Son of God, promised son of David, fulfilling all the promises God made to the patriarchs to his people, to David. Sitting on the throne of his father David, ruling over the whole world. He's the Messiah. He is the Savior. He's the Redeemer. He's the ruler of the world. We preach Jesus Christ is Lord, *Kyrios*. He's Lord of heaven and earth. Lord over angels and men. He is Lord over governments, over all authorities, whether local, state, national, international, and maybe one day universal. Lord over dollars and cents and bitcoin. He rules over every molecule at the smallest level and every star and galaxy at the greatest level.

We preach Jesus Christ as Lord. And then, thirdly, we preach ourselves, it says, seems like a contradiction with what I just said. But "We preach ourselves," Paul says, "as your slaves." So we don't preach ourselves in the sense that we don't preach ourselves as anything. But we do preach ourselves, if we speak about ourselves at all, we preach about ourselves as your slaves. What is the significance of all this for us as ministers? It means that the Lordship of Christ, it doesn't just apply to the people to whom we preach. We're not just calling sinners to repent and bow the knee to the Lordship of Christ; we

bow the knee to the Lordship of Christ. It applies to us, first of all as ministers.

We shouldn't even open our mouth without acknowledging Jesus is Lord over my heart, my conscience, my words, my time, my effort, my energy. Consider ourselves to be slaves of Christ, under his orders. Bought and paid for by him. Deployed by him. So we're not allowed to say whatever we want to. We're not allowed to do our own thing. We're not allowed to innovate ministry. We're his property. We belong to him. We must obey our master. Christ has chosen to give us ministers, shepherds, pastors, elders. He's decided to give us as gifts. We're his gifts to the church. We're slaves of Christ; not of men. And as slaves of Christ, it's our solemn duty to command the consciences of Christ's people. It's our duty to command them to obey the will of the Lord, their Lord, and our Lord. Those who lead, along with those who follow, we're all united under the same head, aren't we?

One more. A fifth exhortation to you pastors, elders, shepherds, number five, glorify the sovereign of Gospel ministry. The god of this age may have active agency in the

judicial blindness of the reprobate sinner. But the god of this age is not the sovereign of the universe. The devil is on a chain held by the hand of a sovereign God. Even the devil in all of his rebellion, he's accomplishing the ultimate purpose of God, the one who holds his chain.

When we understand God's sovereignty in salvation, when we recognize what he is actually granted in salvation, this infuses our ministry with zeal and with passion and with deep and strong abiding confidence. So we go out preaching Jesus Christ as Lord, verse 5, and for this reason, verse 6, "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, of Jesus Christ." I think the key is in following the verbs; realizing following the verbs, that the subject of these verbs is God. In the first instance, God is the one who speaks. "Let light shine out of darkness." Paul reminds us of how the glory of God is revealed in an instant, at the moment of creation. God's singular essence, in the moment of creation, it refracts in the glory of divine attributes discernable to all who worship him.

That's what he's saying. What makes this verse such a crescendo of splendor and a climax of divine glory in this ministry of the Gospel, that the God whose essence became known through creation, now, in this Gospel that we're preaching, notice in the second instance, God is the subject of that verb, too. It is none other than the triune God. He himself is the one who has shone in our hearts. Not light shining in our hearts, but God shining in our hearts. What was external in creation becomes internal in salvation. What can the god of this age to prevent God shining in the hearts of his elect? Answer: Not a thing. He stands aside because God will be God. What the devil seeks to prevent, verse 4, "The light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." He seeks to prevent and keep that light from shining in human hearts. That only works on the reprobate. That only works on those who are perishing, those who have been handed over to that blindness.

But, the elect of God, nothing will thwart God's sovereign initiative. Not just to give light, but for he himself to shine in the hearts of his people. And when he shines, he puts the spotlight at his son Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He helps us to see clearly what he himself loves, who he himself sent, Jesus



Christ the Lord. The very subject of all our preaching, the main topic of all of our teaching and ministry. And in this sense, Gospel minister, pastor, shepherd, elder, listen, we are partners with the triune God in the salvation of sinners. He makes our preaching effectual for his chosen people. He gives them the privilege of seeing the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. The knowledge, knowing him, understanding him so that we might worship him. And in worshiping and praising and giving thanks to him, we bring him glory.

That light of the knowledge of the glory of God shines most brilliantly in the face of Jesus Christ. We look at him. My fellow elders, my fellow Christians is there any reason we should ever become discouraged, lose heart, become weary? And God forbid that we should turn and run in cowardice. Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord over all. We are confident and rejoicing at the privilege that's ours to partner with the sovereign initiative of God to save and sanctify his people.