

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

This Ministry By The Mercy Of God

January 24th, 2016

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 4:1. This morning we are going to deal with a fairly large section of text. Having explained and magnified the message of the New Covenant Paul now begins to describe the ministry of a New Covenant Apostle. Remember that the underlying issue here in this letter is the issue of who speaks for God. Who are the real Apostles? And so Paul has been talking about the Apostolic message and now he begins to describe the Apostolic ministry. Rather than chopping his description up into a couple of little pieces I thought it would be helpful for us to see it as Paul describes it – as a unit and then to draw out some application for us as followers of Jesus Christ and as ministers of the same New Covenant Gospel. The Apostle Paul has a unique status as an Apostle, I grant you that, but he intends for us to follow his example – he said that to the Corinthians back in 1 Corinthians 4:

I urge you, then, be imitators of me. (1 Corinthians 4:16 ESV)

So Paul is describing his ministry not just to educate us but to instruct us in our New Covenant calling. With that in mind we'll read the text, we'll try to explain the text and then we will respond to the text as the Apostle intended us to do. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹ Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 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.³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.⁴ 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.⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.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 Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

¹³ Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak,¹⁴ knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.¹⁵ For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:1–18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

I know that's a long passage but I think that we can clearly distinguish 4 separate divisions within it.

The Apostolic Ministry Explained

First of all in verses 1-6 Paul seems to be describing his Apostolic mandate.

1. The Mandate

He says we have this ministry by the mercy of God – we've been called, and saved and equipped for a certain service which he describes in verse 2 as "the open statement of the truth" and in verse 5 as "the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord" and in verse 6 as giving "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ". Putting all of that together we might say that Paul's job as an Apostle was to set forth the goodness of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the Apostolic mandate: to show people that God is good by showing them the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That has to be done, Paul says, because people have been deceived. Look at verse 4. Speaking about unsaved folks, Paul says:

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. (2 Corinthians 4:4 ESV)

The devil has been playing this same game for a very long time. Do you remember the story of the original sin? The devil got Adam and Eve to believe that God was holding out on them. That for some strange reason God had forbidden them to eat from the BEST TREE in the garden. It was the tree that could make one wise and make one like God able to decide right and wrong for themselves. God didn't want you to have that because he is mean and selfish and withholding. And so if you want to live the life you deserve then you are going to have to go outside the Word of God. You are going to have to climb over the fence to get at the greener grass on the other side. And so the man and the woman believed the devil instead of God, they went over the fence and they ate the forbidden fruit. Now do you remember what they did next? When they knew that they had sinned and they heard God coming – what did they do? They hid from God. You see the follow up lie of the devil is even worse than the first. He tells men and women that God delights to punish sinners and so once you are outside you have to keep on running or the wrath of God will overtake you.

That is the original deception and that is the lie we are born believing about God.

A few weeks ago I did a funeral for a tiny little baby boy. He had only lived for a few seconds and his mom and dad had some contact with our church through one of our outreach ministries. As Pastor Bill and I were meeting with this young couple to plan the service the young father was visibly distressed. We spoke a little bit about the comfort of God but he was not yet prepared to hear that and as he left he made a very revealing comment. He said: "I just feel like God is out to get me". He was hardwired to receive this personal tragedy as proof of God's vendetta against him. Now thanks be to God we had the chance to speak into that and to minister to that confusion – but you need to understand that this is the default wiring of unsaved men and women.

Nobody speaks for unsaved people with more eloquence than Richard Dawkins. Listen to what he believes about God:

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

— Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*¹

That is what people are born believing about God and so Paul says that the Apostolic mission is to set forth the goodness of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, properly understood, should dispel every wrong belief about God. Do you think that God hates you? Then see Jesus. For God SO LOVED THE WORLD that he gave his only begotten Son. Do you think that God is withholding from you? See Jesus. For God so loved the world that HE GAVE his only begotten Son. Do you think that God delights in punishing sinners? See Jesus. In Jesus God demonstrates his LOVE for us in this – that while we were yet sinners Christ DIED FOR US! Seeing Jesus – beholding the glory of the Lord as though in a mirror – seeing Jesus should dispel every lie you have ever believed about God. Jesus tells the truth and the truth will set us free. That’s the Apostolic mandate. Tell the truth about God as revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, in verses 7-14 the focus seems to shift from the mandate to the method.

2. The Method

Paul is telling us how the Gospel gets out.

The first thing he says is a little bit surprising. He says in verse 7:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Corinthians 4:7 ESV)

That’s very interesting isn’t it? Paul seems to be saying that the Gospel gets out as it leaks out through all the cracks and frailties of our very human experiences. He goes on to talk about being afflicted, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed. His point seems to be that God ordains difficult circumstances in the life of a Gospel messenger so that people can see the power of God preserving us in circumstances of death and frailty.

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/23651-the-god-of-the-old-testament-is-arguably-the-most>

I love how NT scholar Mark Seifrid puts this. He says:

“The essence of apostolic ministry is speaking in faith, doing so out of situations that contain no earthly hope.”²

There certainly is nothing more compelling in our world than a person who suffers with hope. We live in a world, my friends, where hope is in very short supply. I’m sure you’ve heard the news³ that the death rate has actually gone up for people in North America in our generation for the first time outside of a major war or human conflict. Meaning that generally speaking for the last couple of hundred years the human life span has been increasing due to better conditions, better medicine, better technology etc. But for the first time – apart from a major military conflict – death rates are on the increase in this generation. Why is that happening? There isn’t a war going on, there aren’t any new plagues sweeping through society – so what is causing people to die earlier and more often than before? Do you know what the answer is? Massive increases in the number of people committing suicide and overdosing on drugs. For example the suicide rate has increased by 60% in one generation. Drug use and drug misuse is absolutely epidemic in our culture and specifically in this present generation. What is the common thread in all that? The complete and utter absence of hope. People in our culture, right now, like never before, are finding themselves without resources and without the ability to maintain a living hope in the midst of trying times. That’s not just happening out there – that’s Orillia, right now, right here.

So how do we reach people like that? How do we reach them before it comes to that? Well if you were God and you loved people like that what would you do to reach them and to give them hope? I think you would sow some human suffering into your own covenant people so that they could show the resurrection power of God in the midst of terrible pain.

People in this city need to know that there is hope. That death and disease and depression are not the greatest powers in the universe. They need to know that there is a God who raises the dead! You show them that when you suffer WITH HOPE. God doesn’t make you shiny – God doesn’t

² Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 205.

³ As for example here: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/science/drug-overdoses-propel-rise-in-mortality-rates-of-young-whites.html?_r=0 or here: <http://www.befrienders.org/suicide-statistics>

lift you above the masses – that isn't how he does it because that would not get it done! People would just dismiss the Gospel as a message for shiny people. They would say: "That is the religion for rich people or healthy people but I need something human – I need a religion for the trenches!" So God doesn't lift you up, he presses you down. Not to crush you but to shine through you.

That's the method. Shine resurrection power through cracked and human vessels. Show people hope in human pain. Show people life in bodies of death. Your suffering is God's gospel strategy. That's what Paul's saying.

Now before we start thinking that the Gospel goes out through silent suffering, Paul heads that off by saying:

"I believed, and so I spoke," (2 Corinthians 4:13 ESV)

That's a quotation from the Psalms. The whole quote reads as follows:

I believed, wherefore I have spoken: but I was greatly afflicted. (Psalms 115:10 LXX-B)

The method really isn't two things I guess, its really one thing that happens inside another thing. It is speaking faith from inside human suffering. That's the plan. That's how God brings light to people living in darkness.

Thirdly, in verse 15 Paul talks about the ultimate goal or mission of the Apostolic ministry.

3. The Mission

He says:

For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 4:15 ESV)

Paul says that the ultimate goal here, the ultimate mission, is one thing that is really two things.

The one thing is an increase in thanksgiving. That sounds way better in the original Greek. The word Paul uses here is *eucharistia*. It is a compound word meaning that there are two parts to it. The first part – *eu* – just means “good” or “beneficial”. The second part *charis* – means “grace”. So the word *eucharistia* means literally a right or good response to grace. It is usually translated into English as either “gratitude” or “thanksgiving” because that is how we respond to gifts but the sense of the word is much deeper than just saying: “thank you”. Paul is saying that the ultimate goal here for the Apostolic ministry is to extend the grace of God so that more and more people receive it to their benefit and to the glory of God.

Let me bring this down to street level. God’s glory is good for people. God’s glory is his goodness and when you are healed by the Gospel so that you can see who God is and love who God is and come back to who God is that is ultimately really good for people. You were made for this – this is where you flourish, this is where you come to live, this is where you were meant to live FOREVER. So that’s the ultimate goal – that’s the mission – to get people back to that place. Everything we do, every Christian endeavour is towards that one ultimate goal: the glory of God and the good of all people forever.

Lastly, we need to notice what sustains the Apostle in his ministry. In verses 17-18 Paul talks about his motivation, he talks about the vision that keeps him going despite his many trials.

4. The Motivation

¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17–18 ESV)

We could never do this – we could never live this way – without a constant vision of the glory of God that is to come. You can’t live this way, you can’t serve other people, you can’t endure suffering with hope, unless you believe in and remember and LONG FOR the glory of God that it is to come. Paul is saying something we all know to be true: knowing where you’re going in the future changes how you live in the present. Even children understand this.

The other night at family devotions we were reading through John 13 where it says that because Jesus knew that he was from God and that he was going to God he took off his towel and began

washing the feet of his disciples. I wanted to make sure my kids saw the connection between where we're going and how we serve so I asked my son, who is 13 years old, I said: "If you knew for certain that this life was all there was and that when you died the lights would go off and you would just cease to exist how would you live the rest of your life on this earth?" And he said: "I would just do what I want. I would have fun and just take care of myself". That's exactly right – eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. But then I said: "But suppose that when you die you immediately stand before God and you give an account for your life and God decides whether you will spend eternity with him in heaven or eternity away from him in hell – if that is true how will you live the rest of your life?" And he said: "I would want to do what God wants me to do and I wouldn't just do what ever I want. I would do the will of God."

Exactly! It was the same way for the Apostle Paul. What he knew about the future changed the way he lived and served in the present. It changed how he counted the cost. It made his sufferings appear LIGHT and MOMENTARY in comparison. He is no fool to spend what he cannot keep to earn what he cannot lose. Paul knew that and we need to know that if we are to take up this calling.

Now we aren't Apostles – we don't write books of the Bible, we read them, but other than that Paul expects us to imitate his example. So very quickly in the time we have left let me suggest some appropriate applications.

The Apostolic Example Applied:

1. Trust your tools

Do you know what I mean by that? Paul said in verse 2:

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. (2 Corinthians 4:2 ESV)

We're not crass peddlers here, Paul says, we are Gospel messengers so we don't need to compromise the message or manipulate people, we're just going to do what God told us to do and we are going to leave outcome in the hands of Almighty God. Paul says that, he says:

if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. (2 Corinthians 4:3 ESV)

If there are people who can't see what we're saying then its because God hasn't opened their eyes and that's above our pay grade. We don't determine response, we just use the tools we were given. God gave his people the tools of prayer and preaching. He did not give us the ability to MAKE CONVERTS. You need to know that. God is Sovereign, he opens and he shuts, he kills and he makes alive, he wounds and he heals – you just do your job. When you understand that it will save you from compromise and pragmatism on the one hand it is will save you from soul anguish and anxiety on the other.

Remember who God is. He doesn't hate you. He isn't eager to destroy your loved ones. You know who God is – remember? So you can trust him to do his part – you just do your part. Pray like crazy and speak according to how you have believed.

2. Major on the goodness of God in the person of Jesus Christ

Let me say this as simply and as practically as I can. When you are witnessing to friends and loved ones, don't create a false contrast between God and Jesus – right? Don't concede the Richard Dawkins delusion. He makes a contrast between the God of the Old Testament and Jesus and far too often we conduct our evangelism as if we are prepared to concede this false assumption. We essentially concede that God is mean and nasty and legalistic and perhaps best relegated to the pages of the Old Testament. Instead we say that want to talk about Jesus, we want to stick to “The Red Letters”. But our friends immediately spot the confusion in that approach. After all don't we believe that Jesus is God? Why then this great disparity in their character? Do you see how problematic that is? That's what happens when you let the devil, or Richard Dawkins frame the terms of the conversation. Because that's not what the Bible says. The Bible doesn't say that Jesus came to correct God or to replace God, or to rehabilitate God, the Bible says that Jesus came to REVEAL GOD – Paul says that the Gospel gives us the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ so when you talk to unsaved people you want to show them the goodness of God in the person of Jesus Christ. You want to say to people – why would you think that God is withholding from you? Look at Jesus. God gave us his very best. Why would you think that God is eager to punish you? Look at Jesus. God bore our punishment

in his body on the tree. If Jesus is who he said he is then God can't be who you think he is – that's what you want to say to your friend. That's the goal of evangelism: to show people the goodness of God in the person of Jesus Christ; major on that.

3. Embrace your suffering as an opportunity to display the resurrection power of Jesus Christ

Remember that the people of our world lack the resources to deal with human suffering and affliction. When things get really hard they tap out. They commit suicide or they drown themselves in drugs. People in our world need to know that there is a power in the universe greater than the power of depression, disease and death. They need to see that power at work in you. They need to see you suffering IN HOPE. They need to watch you process the loss of a child. They need to watch you worship while losing loved ones to cancer. They need to see that and they need to be blown away by that and they need to know that you have something they desperately need.

And you need to let God decide how best to show that power. God may show his power by delivering you from your affliction – praise the Lord – or he may show his power by sustaining you in your affliction – praise the Lord. God knows what's best. Ask for whatever you want, but tell God that you will embrace whatever he decides – for his glory and for the good of all people – forever.

Lastly, if we want to persevere in this calling we need to:

4. Think about the future

We need to sing songs about heaven. If there aren't any, then we need to write some. We need to read what the Bible says about the hope that is ours in Christ. We need to keep one eye on the mission and one eye on the clouds – loving for and longing for his appearing.

Things are hard now, I know that; death reigns in our bodies; but this is not forever. The power of death has been defeated – the resurrection life of Jesus Christ is already present and moving among his people – for now we have this treasure in jars of clay; but one day we will shine like

the stars in the heavens. Think about that – think about the future as you minister the Gospel in the present. For the glory of God and for the good of all people this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.