

A Ministry Given by the Mercy of God
(4:1-18)

In this letter, after his preliminary remarks to the Corinthians, Paul broke off in 2:14-3:18 to state the very foundation of ministry which is the ministry of the Triune God. In today's reading he resumes his polemics against the false teachers and repeats what he began in 2:14-17, but with a slightly different emphasis. When the two passages are put in tabular form, the similarity can be seen quite evidently. It is as if Paul wants to state his case all over again in chapter 4 before expanding this in the body of his letter.

2 Cor. 2:14-17	2 Cor. 4:1-6
¹⁴ But 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.	¹ Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ... 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.
¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?	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.
¹⁷ For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.	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. ... ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

This is the ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6) and who is sufficient for these things? That is why it is only by the mercy of God that we are engaged in it. When we say we are in the ministry, it is not our ministry. We are participating in God's ministry by His mercy. This is probably not highlighted enough when we see the dependency of so many in ministry. All the stresses and strains of ministry result from not appreciating this. And so 'we do not lose heart' (4:1).¹ Paul repeats this in v. 16, 'So we do not lose heart'.

These two parallel statements emphasise the need for the minister of the word to be true to the word. V. 2 - 'to practice cunning'. This comes from two words, 'walk' and 'all works'. It implies doing (walking through) anything (all kinds of works) in order to get an outcome. It strikes at the pragmatism of the super apostles and indeed the pragmatism of our day. Outcome orientation is denounced by William Arthur. He wrote this over a hundred years ago.

A minister can never be responsible for success, but he is responsible for power; responsible not only for presenting the truth to the people – in which many seem to think that their responsibility terminates – but responsible also for this, that the truth he presents be not dry, but accompanied with some energy of the Spirit.²

This is liberating for ministers of the word when we are under so much pressure to produce results. If we play according to the rules of the world, then we have no choice but to 'walk through all kinds of works', to be pragmatic to bring about a result. It is the truth of the word of God presented in the power of the Holy Spirit and that is our primary responsibility. It calls for diligence in the word of God and a life that is 'led by the Spirit' (Gal. 5:18).

In contrast to trying all kinds of new methodologies, it is by our 'statement of the truth', i.e. our proclamation of the word that counts in the sight of God. Of course, not everyone will see it this way. This problem is present ever since. Again, William Arthur wrote,

The converting power is also the Church's great attraction. It is true that some would attract men by ceremonies, or talent, or the charms of architecture or music – attract them that they may convert them; whereas the true order is, Convert, that you may attract.³

¹ ἐγκακέω *ekkakew* - tired, neglect our tasks, despair, cowardly, ashamed of the gospel, behave weakly (Strong's Concordance).
² William Arthur, *The Tongues of Fire*, (Methodist Book Concern, 1894), 190.
³ Arthur, *The Tongues of Fire*, 203

Paul continues in v. 3-4. Paul presents a reason for those not understanding the gospel. There is a blindness caused by the ‘god of this world’. He may be referring to the devil, but the ‘god of this world’ is no god. He is only god in so far as we hand the control over to him. In other words, in our sinful state, we have allowed those things to so dominate our thoughts and our lives that we refuse to see the truth of God’s word, which is the ‘gospel of the glory of Christ’. Paul continues in vv. 5-6.

This is the crux of the proclamation – Christ as Lord, and all that this implies. We are the slaves pointing to the master who ‘leads us in triumphant procession’. It is the ministry of the Spirit and it is the Spirit that is at work. He shines the light so that we may receive the ‘light of the knowledge’, i.e. Christ. Here, Christ is the light, and He is the subject and the object.

Treasures in jars of clay (4:7-18)

All along Paul has been careful to make clear that this is the work of the Spirit and so this power belongs to God. He maintains the contrasts of master-slave and power-weakness. This is in contradistinction to the claims of the super apostles who simply do not understand what it is to have ‘treasure in clay jars’. What we do in God’s ministry points to the God who is at work in what we do. Human logic does not allow us to think like that. Our actions are like jars holding the treasure. The jars are not the treasure, but point to the treasure, i.e. the surpassing power of God in the infinite care and knowledge of God. That is the contrast that Paul is making here. However, this ‘power’ needs to be qualified. He does this in the verses that follow but it is not what we are used to think in terms of power. It is the power of the cross.

Paul uses several pairs of contrast here.

Pairs of contrast		Inference
afflicted	not crushed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The servant of the Lord is vulnerable to worldly powers. The real power lies in the restoration.
perplexed	not driven to despair	
persecuted	not forsaken	
struck down	not destroyed	
Death (dying)	Life (living)	In living there is firstly the dying.
invisible	visible	

The life in Christ is a paradox. It is also vicarious – ‘death is at work in us, but life in you’ (v. 12). It is indeed a life identified with Christ – His death and resurrection. Therein lies the reason for the paradox, though it may not be comprehensible. Yet the point is not in the comprehension, but in the life that is lived in the Spirit. It is not firstly understanding and then living the life. That would imply a human effort and not a work of the Spirit. This life is firstly lived and experienced in the Spirit and out of that experience comes the meaning and understanding. Only then is it the work of the Spirit. It demands submission to the Spirit of God.

We are ‘carrying in the body the death (dying) of Jesus’ because we are ‘always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake’. We are being handed over to death. That is the lot of the believer. The problem with our churches today is that they refuse to die. They want the new life on top of the old. That won’t do. The old has to die before the new birth can take place.

Christian ministry is a vicarious ministry. ‘So, death is at work in us, but life in you.’ (v. 12). There is no fairness (so we are used to thinking). We go through the paradoxes that Paul enumerated so that the gospel may bear fruit in the lives of others, and they in turn ‘carry the dying of Jesus’ so that others may live. Have we not distorted the gospel and ministry?

The death and dying in the preceding section is not a note of despondency. It is part of the life in Christ because there is the expectation, a real hope, of the resurrection and ultimately being brought into the reality of the presence of God. This is the work of the Spirit of God. Hence, the statement that ‘we have the same spirit of faith’ (4:13). He is the effecter of all that God purposed for His creation, i.e. the union of His creation

in Christ. In Ephesians, Paul wrote, 'With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph. 1:8-10). He further elaborates on the unity of the Spirit. (Eph. 4:3-6)

Who is the one who raised the Lord Jesus (v. 14)? The Spirit of God (Rom. 8:11). He will bring us into the presence of the Father. This is the Spirit's ministry.

The 'all' in v. 15 (for it is all for your sake) refers to the suffering of Christ and indirectly to the suffering of Paul as this has been the subject of this section. And this is for the sake of the Corinthian Christians. Our calling is also to a vicarious ministry as we have pointed out above. As this happens, 'grace extends to more people and thanksgiving abounds to the glory of God' (v. 15). There is a sense of the transcendence as a result of the ministry of the Spirit of God. When there is a loss of the transcendence, then thanksgiving abounds to Paul and that is a disastrous result. It is no longer the work of the Spirit. By the same reckoning, we should not feel down when there is a turning away from us and there is no acknowledgment of what we have done. It is in the light of all these, that Paul reaffirms again that 'we do not lose heart' (v. 16).

This is Paul's summary so far. He reaffirmed that we do not lose heart when facing the difficulties in ministry. Here Paul is not playing the game of the super apostles. He is quick to affirm the weakness and decay of the physical frame, but this is only for a brief period of time. It may seem an eternity while we are going through it. However, within us there is a renewal by the Spirit as we look forward to the wonder of the resurrection that was first effected in Christ and in turn in us as well. We do well to look beyond the present to what is not seen and eternal and this is what Paul writes in the next chapter.

Living in the in-between

(5:1-10)

In this chapter, Paul is providing a rationale for the way in which he faced the afflictions that he was going through. How is it possible for him to put up with all that he had gone through? He explains it by describing what it is to live between the now and then on earth.

This body is subject to wear and tear. We groan under our burden (v. 4). What is this 'burden'? R Martin suggests that this burden is when we are 'being weighed down by either affliction or with anxiety'.⁴ It may also refer to the longing for the new body as the present body is subject to sin. Paul appears to desire the freedom from this body, but it is not to be interpreted that he wants to give up the earthly body, i.e. death. The groaning is for something positive, the hope of the future. It is a groaning as a result of the Spirit indwelling.

Paul does not see this liberation as the Gnostics did. The body is not to be despised while waiting for the resurrection. Neither is the body a mere shadow of a future glory. Though sin is present in the present bodily existence, Paul sees this temporary tent as real and it prepares us for what is to come. That is guaranteed by the Spirit and this is what gives us the confidence to handle all that we face in life. That future glory is not yet here as the super-apostles claimed. Note that it is God who is preparing us for the hope of glory. Paul continues to encourage the Corinthian Christians.

The key to this confidence is faith (v. 7), trusting in the God who is preparing us for this future glory. While living between the now and then, the preference must be for the future glory with the Lord as this is the goal of creation. Yet whatever state we may be in, the aim is 'to please him' (v. 8). It is living in Christ that matters, whether it is on earth or in heaven. The flesh is no less real as the Word has become flesh, a rebuff to the Gnostics and all other philosophies. 'To be away from the Lord' (v. 6) does not mean to be out of communion with the Lord. It is not having the face-to-face encounter as in the future glory. Communion with God is a present reality, but the future will disclose more.

⁴ R Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Texas, Word Books: 1986), 106.