

“MINISTERS OF A GLORIOUS GOSPEL”
(2 Corinthians 4:1-6)

Every year advertisers in our country spend a whopping \$285 billion dollars trying to convince you and me to buy their products. One of the oldest and most proven ways of advertising is to pay well-known celebrities to endorse their product. If you see someone like Peyton Manning say that he uses MasterCard, then maybe you should use MasterCard as well. Sometimes celebrity endorsements backfire, like when actress Cybil Shepherd was hired by the Beef Industry Council to talk about her cravings for beef in a series of commercials. They later had to drop the commercials when she said on a talk show that she was a vegetarian. Oops.

But advertisers also like to use average, everyday people to represent their product – “I bought my car at such-and-such dealership and they were great – you should also buy your car from them.” Testimonials of how a product or idea changes someone’s life is one of the most powerful forms of advertisement.

It’s no surprise that God uses people who have been transformed by His grace to proclaim the transforming power of the gospel to the world. As Christians we don’t have a product to sell, but a person that we want people to know and trust. We have the most awesome truth in the world to share with people – the gospel message that Jesus died to save us and give us eternal and abundant life. There’s a number of ways that God could have chosen to “advertise” His message, but He primarily chose to use you and me, so that through us people may see Christ.

Today we come to another tremendous passage in 2 Corinthians 4 – a passage that is a template of sorts for how we go about representing Christ. Throughout 2 Corinthians Paul uses the word the word “minister” and “ministry.” The word “ministry” means “to serve.” We naturally think of a pastor as being the minister and the one doing ministry, but according to the New Testament, God has called every believer to be minister and be involved in the ministry. What does that mean and how are we to go about the ministry of the gospel?

Let’s start by reading the entire passage in verses 1-6 of chapter 4. Paul writes... “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”

In these verses we see four essentials of being a minister of the gospel. The first is **confidence** – we must have confidence in our ministry and message. Paul writes, “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” It’s easy to lose heart in serving the Lord, and Paul talks often in 2 Corinthians about how discouraged he became in ministry. God called him to spread the good news of Christ to the gentiles – those who had never heard the gospel – but time after time he met opposition – he was mocked and jeered, he was beaten up and thrown into jail, and eventually run out of town. He gave up everything to do this – he didn’t own a home, he didn’t have any financial safety-net, and he often went without the basic necessities of food and water and shelter.

And yet he says, “I do not lose heart.” How can this be? What kept him going? He mentions two things. The first is the ministry he’s been given... “*Since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.*” In chapter three he described how we’ve been made ministers of a new covenant. Unlike the old covenant of the Old Testament that demanded people live up to the perfect standards of God’s law, the new covenant offers forgiveness of sin and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit to obey God.

If all Paul had to offer people was a set of laws – of do’s and don’ts – that condemned them to die in their sins – he would have thrown in the towel years earlier. Unlike the old covenant that veiled the glory of God, the new covenant unveiled the glory of God in the person of Jesus. How could he keep such incredible news to himself? To be effective ministers we must be absolutely sold out to and convinced in the message we we’re presenting.

The second reason that Paul did not lose heart was God’s mercy. Paul lived everyday with the awareness of God’s grace in taking a guy like him and entrusting him to proclaim the gospel. Before he was saved on the road to Damascus, Paul was as far from God as one could be – as a devout Jew living under the old covenant, he was self-righteous, smug, and arrogant – and violently persecuted anyone who did not adhere to his works-based religion. But God, in His mercy, intervened in Paul’s life and saved him. In 1 Timothy 1:13-14 he says, “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

Paul’s acknowledgment of God’s mercy fueled his optimism... “How can I possibly lose heart when I deserve nothing? Everything I have – my life, my abilities, my opportunities – are all a gift from God. How can I complain and feel sorry for myself – how can I throw in the towel and give up – when God has shown such mercy to a sinner like me? My life is all His.”

The first essential of ministry is confidence in the glorious ministry given to us by God’s mercy. The second essential is **integrity** – our life and message must be based on truth, with nothing to hide. In verse 2 Paul describes three things he renounces. The first is **dishonesty**... “*We have renounced secret and shameful ways.*” We don’t say one thing in public and secretly do another thing in private – our life is an open book – what you see is what you get. We’re all too familiar with well-known pastors and Christian leaders who are found to be living secret lives – and when their sin becomes public, it gives unbelievers an opening to label all Christians as hypocrites, and the message of Christ is tarnished. When someone like Cybil Shepherd talks about loving beef, but is actually a vegetarian, no one is going to listen to her message. Paul says, “Be honest and forthright – you don’t have to be perfect, but don’t put on a pretense and bring shame to the message of Christ.”

Secondly, he renounces **deception**. In 2:17 Paul talked about “peddlers” who dishonestly used the gospel to make money or gain popularity. It’s like the televangelist who pleads for money to help people in impoverished or war-torn countries, only to use most of the money to build a multimillion-dollar mansion. There used to be preachers – maybe there still are – who would send you water straight from the Jordan River that had magical, healing powers... just send \$100 and its yours. These kinds of deceptive practices became so common that the US Senate conducted a three-year investigation into financial integrity of several high-profile TV preachers. Paul says, “We’re not in the ministry to line our pockets or be popular – we’re in it to unveil the glorious gospel of Christ – that is our only aim.”

Third, Paul renounces **tampering with or distorting God's Word**. A whole message could be preached on all the ways the Bible is twisted, altered, and changed to suit an agenda. There's an old adage that says, "You can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say." With enough bending and twisting, you can squeeze the Bible into whatever agenda you're promoting. To mistreat God's glorious revelation is not only appalling, it's deadly serious. The last chapter of the Bible warns us to not add to or take away any of the words contained in scripture.

Let me mention two common ways God's Word is distorted. One way is to emphasize things you like – the positive, uplifting parts of scripture that speak of God's love and comfort – and deemphasize, or not even talk about, the harder, more difficult truths like God's judgment of sin and certain passages that are offensive to postmodern sensibilities. To just pick out certain parts and leave out others leaves a distorted and incomplete understanding of what God's wants us to know.

A second way God's word is distorted is changing what it says. In the last 100 years, and especially the last few decades, the Bible has been attacked in ways never before seen in 2000 years of church history. Certain doctrines and beliefs that have been universally accepted by the church for centuries have, in our lifetime, have suddenly questioned and reinterpreted to fit the cultural narrative of the times.

The doctrine of hell is a prime example. The Bible is pretty clear about the existence of a literal hell. But the idea that a loving God would allow anyone to spend eternity in hell is unacceptable in postmodernism, and in order for Christianity to appeal to unbelievers, what the Bible says about hell must be reinterpreted. Hell, they say, is not a real place, but symbolic of darkness and evil. In the end, God's love will prevail and everyone will be saved and restored to a right relationship with God. In order to arrive at that conclusion, you have to dismiss the plain meaning of God's Word, and gut the Bible so that it no longer has authority over our lives.

Another example of scripture twisting that has gained alarming traction in churches in the last decade is the reframing of sexual standards. Any person who honestly reads the totality of scripture can see the clarity of God's design for sexuality – that God created male and female, giving each unique gifts and characteristics that reveal God's glory – and that sex is gift to be enjoyed by a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage. It's a perfect, glorious design given to us by a loving God for the flourishing of humanity. But this, of course, is unacceptable to the world, and rather than conforming to what God's Word says, there is a push to reinterpret God's design to be more inclusive and less offensive.

Paul says, "No one has the right to tamper with or change the glorious revelation of God's Word." Our responsibility as ministers of the gospel is to stick to, be governed by, and bound to the Word of God. We don't go in whatever direction the cultural winds are blowing – which are always changing – we just stick with God's timeless revelation. We don't give into pressure or intimidation – we don't apologize or get embarrassed by what the Word says – we accept it as glorious and perfect and which promises blessing to those who heed it.

In verse 2b Paul says... "On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." I love the simplicity – our job is to set forth the truth plainly. We have nothing to hide or shy away from – we have the truth of God's Word and we present it as it is. That's why every Sunday we open up the Bible and go through a book of the Bible verse by verse. This has two huge benefits. Number one, it keeps me from preaching, and you from hearing, only what I want to preach. I could just pick out the parts of the Bible I like, that are not controversial or offensive – that would make for easier preaching – but it would be hiding the full scope of what God wants us to know.

As preachers we are commanded to teach the whole counsel of God's will, and preaching expositionally, verse-by-verse, accomplishes that. I don't decide each Sunday what I'm going to preach on – the passage decides for me. And believe me, some passages are tough – tough to understand, tough to prepare, and tough to preach – and some passages are easy to understand, uplifting and comforting. We can trust that whatever God's Word tells us is for our good and what we need to hear. Another huge benefit to going verse-by-verse through a book is that we avoid taking verses out of context, which is one of the primary ways God's Word gets distorted and twisted.

The Word of God we hold in our hands is glorious – it is God's divine revelation to us – it is the truth – and our job is to openly present the truth and nothing but the truth – so that people can see and judge with their own conscience if what we say is true.

In verses 3-4 we come to a third essential of ministry and that is **perception** – perception to understand what is going on behind the scenes when we share the gospel. Every believer who shares Christ with someone is going to feel the sting of rejection, and rejection can be paralyzing. We say, "I'm never doing that again... I'm not going to stick my neck out and have it chopped off." Worse yet is the feeling that maybe the gospel is not as powerful and glorious as Paul says it is. If it was, wouldn't we see more revival? Wouldn't we see churches full of people? Wouldn't we see more receptivity to our message?

Verses 3-4 are super important in helping us deal with rejection. Paul writes... "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." The reason people don't respond to the gospel is not so much us as it is their own spiritual blindness. Sometimes the problem is partially us – if we're living hypocritically or acting obnoxiously – but the main reason people don't immediately pray to receive Christ when they hear the gospel is because the god of this age has blinded their minds.

In verse 3 Paul picks up on imagery of chapter 3 of how the glory of God in the old covenant was veiled from people because of their sin – it kept them from seeing the glory of God and being destroyed. But in the new covenant, the glory of God is unveiled in the person of Christ, who makes it possible for us to be at peace with God. When we share the gospel, some will see the light and be saved, but others will reject the light and remain spiritual blind. It's not personal – it doesn't mean we're lousy witnesses – it's because the "god of this age" has blinded their minds.

When we attempt to share the gospel with someone, we must remember that there's a cosmic spiritual battle taking place behind the scenes in which Satan is doing everything he can to keep unbelievers from believing. The Bible calls Satan the "ruler of this present world" and the "god of this age." God, of course, is the sovereign ruler of all things, and created Adam and Eve to rule over the earth. But when they sinned the title deed of earth was forfeited to Satan. When we come to faith in Christ we are no longer under Satan's power, but unbelievers continue to be under his rule and tyranny. One day Christ will return, take back the earth, and redeem it as His own.

Satan does not want anyone to come under Christ's rule, so he seeks to blind their minds so that they cannot see *"the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."* One of the major themes of the Bible is light and darkness. Darkness represents Satan's kingdom of sin and alienation from God, while light represents God's kingdom of holiness and purity. On Christmas day Jesus invaded Satan's kingdom of darkness and revealed the glory of God to the world.

Some people say, “If God is real, why doesn’t He just show up right now and reveal Himself?” 2000 years ago He did! What confuses many people is that God came in the form of a human, which doesn’t seem very God-like or glorious. But He came as a human to pay the penalty for our sin. When we come to faith in Christ, our blinders are taken off and we see that Jesus is God.

It’s helpful to remember that the Godhead or trinity consists of three distinct persons – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who are each equal in being and essence. Each is God. God the Father is spirit and cannot be seen, but God’s Son became man and is the visible expression of God. Therefore, to see Christ is to see God.

Satan does whatever he can to blind hearts and minds to the glory of God revealed in Christ, because when people see who Jesus truly is and what He came to do, they will leave his kingdom of darkness and be transferred to the kingdom of light. Spiritual blindness doesn’t necessarily mean that people are completely unaware of who Jesus is or what the Bible says, but they don’t have the spiritual perception to grasp what it all means. It’s kind of like when you’re looking for something – your car keys or your phone – you look everywhere only to find out that it was right in front of you – you were looking right at it but you didn’t see it.

A few years back there was a popular video that showed a group of students passing a basketball to each other as they moved in a circle. Viewers were asked to count the number of times the players with the white shirts passed the ball. In the middle of the video, a man dressed in a gorilla suit walks right through the middle of the players, beats his chest, and walks out of the picture. If you’re just watching the video, it’s impossible to miss the gorilla, but if you’re focused on counting the passes, half of viewers don’t see it. And those who do see the gorilla, often miss seeing the curtain in the video changing colors.

It’s a great illustration of spiritual blindness. All of us, the Bible says, are born spiritually blind. We have some awareness that there’s something bigger than ourselves and that life has a purpose and destination, but sin impairs our vision to the point that we’re unable to see beyond the physical world. Unbelievers can see the awesome handiwork of God in the sky, but they don’t say, “Someone made that.” They can read a Gideon Bible in a motel room, they can read about Jesus, but they can’t comprehend who He is or what He came to do.

The problem is not just their minds, but their hearts. Because they cannot see spiritual realities, their hearts are consumed with the things of this world which further dulls their spiritual senses. When the glory of the gospel is preached, they are not drawn to it or find it appealing or attractive. It’s like seeing a beautiful sunset and being unimpressed. What’s more, John 3:19 says that people actually prefer the darkness because their deeds are evil. They reject the light because they love sin and want to retain control over their lives.

Since this is true, how does a person who’s shrouded by spiritual darkness ever come to faith? This brings us to the fourth essential of ministry and that is **illumination** – our responsibility is to shine forth the glory of God to the world. Verses 5-6 says, “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.”

There are lots of ways God can get the light of the gospel to someone, but the primary way He uses is

the preaching of the gospel. Romans 10:14 says, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” The word “preaching” simply means to announce something publicly. It doesn’t have to just be behind a pulpit, but preaching can take place anywhere, anytime, and this means that God has called all of us to be preachers.

Paul says we are not to preach ourselves – we don’t have anything to offer people in and of ourselves – we preach Jesus Christ. He is the only one who can save and transform someone, we are just the conduits who tell people of His transforming power. Once He’s revealed His light to us, we are to shine forth the light we’ve received to others who are still in the dark.

Verse 6 reminds us that our salvation is a supernatural work of God. The enlightening of someone’s soul is as cataclysmic as the first day of creation when God spoke into the darkness and said, “Let there be light.” The same power that created the world is unleashed when God recreates a sinner by shining the gospel in their hearts.

When God turns the spiritual light on, we are able to see and understand God “in the face of Christ.” What an interesting phrase. You’ll recall that Moses had to veil his face to keep the people from seeing God’s glory in their sin, but Christ came unveil the glory of God, making it possible for us to see the glory of God through Him. That’s really deep, but simply put, through Christ we are able to see and understand God and have an intimate relationship with Him.

The Apostle Paul’s own testimony illustrates this. Before he came to Christ he walked in total spiritual darkness – he was prideful and arrogant, he was a blasphemer of God and a violent persecutor of Christians. But on the road to Damascus, on his way to hunt down Christians, he saw the light – a blazing, bright light from heaven knocked him to the ground and Christ appeared to him. God made His light shine in Paul’s heart so that for the first time He could see the glory of God in the face of Christ. God transformed Paul on the spot, and for the next thirty years continued to transform Paul by His grace.

Then Jesus said, “Get up... I have a job for you.” In Acts 26:17-18 Jesus said, “I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Now that you’ve seen the light, I want you to go and open the eyes of those still in darkness, under the power of Satan. Simply put, if you see the light, shine the light. It’s as simple as the children’s song... This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.

All of us can think of people we never thought would be saved one day see the light and come to faith. Only God knows how that happens, but we do know that he uses us to shine the light and through our life and message people can understand what they must do to be right with God. If they don’t come to the light, we keep loving them and keep praying for them that the blinders will be taken off and they will be able to see. Conversion does not always happen as suddenly and dramatically as it did with Paul – sometimes it is a slow, gradual unveiling. We just keep shining and radiating the love of God – and thank Him for the privilege of being His ministers of a glorious gospel.