

DISPLAYING THE GOSPEL

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

Each of us who has been saved by the grace of God has a calling or a ministry to carry out. Your ministry is different from mine and distinct from all others; however, there are some similarities to all successful ministries and we will explore these similarities and differences by looking at the ministry of Paul as he describes it in the second letter to the church at Corinth and perhaps we can see how we can carry on with what God has called us to do in spite of problems.

Gospel Ministry – 4:1-4

¹ Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, ² but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man'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 whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Corinthians 4:1-4 (NASB95)

In the previous chapter, Paul had described the ministry of the gospel that was founded on the New Covenant. Paul had contrasted the differences in the ministries of the Old Covenant with the New Covenant and had shown the superiority of the New versus the Old. For example, the Old was written on stone and the New is written on the hearts of the believers. The Old referenced the letter of the Law and the New is tied to the spirit of the Law. The Old way was veiled and the New way is open when we turn to God through Christ.

This new and better Covenant that comes to us by the grace of God encourages those who embrace it. This Good News is so good that there is no need to hide any part of it or to water it down to make it acceptable to those who are lost. Those who reject the message of the Gospel do so because they have allowed themselves to be blinded by the "god of this world." The philosophy of the way of the world is to promote self and self interests and to focus on what the individual wants. It encourages people to ignore the spiritual and eternal and to focus on the physical and the present. The ideas of dying to self, surrendering to God and thinking about others before our own wants is really foreign to the majority of people, especially those who are lost.

Christians need to be alert so that we don't adopt the ways of the world or the methods of false teachers. Many times we will recognize that a job needs to be done and when difficulty comes we will not give up on getting the job done, but we will sometimes resort to non-Christian means to accomplish the task. Paul showed us by his example that this is not necessary and certainly not desirable. We are to turn our backs on deceitfulness, dishonesty and trickery and simply operate in a truthful and open way knowing that these "hidden" things are not hidden to God and He is the One we must ultimately please.

If we really want to be successful in the present and in all of eternity, then we do want to please God because it is He who makes us successful. We really don't have the power within ourselves to carry out our mission in life. The alternative is a better way as we see in the following passage.

Proclaim – 4:5-6

⁵ For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:5-6 (NASB95)

Since the gospel message (as Paul emphasized in chapter three) is about the glory of Christ who is the “image” of God, Paul and those who ministered with him concentrated on the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord. The message from Paul, Timothy, Titus and others was not about themselves and their lives except to point out that they were the slaves (doulos) of the Lord. Most translations of this verse use the word “servants” for the Greek word “doulos” which means “slave.” It would seem that their being the slaves of the Lord would be in conflict with the second half of verse five which is typically translated to say that they were “your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake.”

Several commentators have seen the conflict in these statements and have suggested that what Paul meant was they were bond-slave of the churches with regard to spiritual matters such as administration and ordinances and this statement was not to be interpreted to mean that Paul and the other ministers were in a bond-slave relationship with any individuals. As Paul wrote to the Galatian church “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.” (Gal 1:10)

We can truthfully say that since Jesus is Lord that we are slaves only to Him and that this Master-slave relationship benefits those to whom we minister.

We might assume that the quote “Light shall shine out of darkness” was a reference to Genesis 1:3 which reads “And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.” It may be that Paul was deliberately making a connection of “light” and “glory” in these verses. Two of the meanings of “glory” (or the Greek “doxa”) are splendor and brightness. In verse four we find the words “the light of the glory of Christ” and that light has been made to shine in our heart by the same One who created light in the beginning of the creation of the earth. In verse six we see a slight modification of the phrase with the addition of the word “knowledge.” This “knowing” is available to us in the “person” (face) of Jesus Christ.

Live – 4:7-15

⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸ we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death works in us, but life in you. ¹³ But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE,” we also believe, therefore we also speak, ¹⁴ knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. ¹⁵ For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. 2 Corinthians 4:7–15 (NASB95)

The treasure that we have in our earthen vessels is argued by John Gill to be the gospel. Some might argue that it is the “light of the glory” and other would say that this treasure is “Christ in us.” If we combine these ideas we come up the words Paul used in verse six and see that the treasure is the “Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ.” The Light is Christ Himself and the knowledge of the glory of God is the gospel message.

In the church today, some of us have a tendency to think of people like Paul, Peter, James and John as some sort of super saints that had physical, emotional, mental and spiritual qualities that are not available to people today. Paul’s reference to being a simple clay pot (that could be identified and have commonality with any other person) was an attempt to keep people from focusing on the messenger rather than the message. They were afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down and subject to dying just like those who were hearing the message. The success the messengers of the gospel had and the evidence of power in their lives was because God was in

them.

We can do all things through Christ Jesus and without Him we can do nothing as Paul stated in his letter to the church at Philippi. In our own strength we are really powerless to do anything of lasting good. We hear a lot nowadays about self esteem. If the truth were known and admitted, then we would realize that the only true value we have is the fact that God is in us and loves us. Because we recognize the fact that God does indwell us and really cares what happens to us, then we can endure problems and difficulties and pressures without caving in and giving up.

The Christian life itself is a study in contrasts. In fact, it is a paradox: we are dying and becoming more alive at the same time. The problems and troubles that we encounter are the instruments by which we put to death the influence of the old nature. Just as Christ died on the Cross, we must take up our cross and die to self. If we do not do this, then the influence of the remnants of the old nature blocks the demonstration of the new nature (the life of Christ) in our daily living.

When did the “old nature” die? It died when we were born again of the Spirit of God and had the “new nature.” Does the “old nature” still have influence in our lives? Yes, since our thinking and habits were developed during the time before we had the new nature and there is now an ongoing process of transformation of the “renewing of our minds” that Paul addressed in Romans 12.

It may be helpful to compare this with the Old and New Covenants. When did the Old Covenant end? Officially, it ended with the ratification of the New Covenant when Christ shed His blood on the Cross. Did the Old Covenant continue to have influence on the Jew of that time? Absolutely. The practices were carried out just as if nothing had changed for forty years. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, some still tried to hold on to the practices of the past and some still carry out some of the major celebrations of the Old Covenant.

Another comparison of what needs to happen with regard to the “Light” being in clay pots can be found in the account of Gideon and his small army who put torches in clay pots and surrounded the enemy. They then broke the jars and when the light was seen by the enemy they panicked and fled. In the same way, the brokenness that Christians experience in their lives is an opportunity for the “Light” that is within us to be seen by the world around us.

There are occasions when we need to help interpret to the world around us what is happening when we experience troubles. In verse thirteen Paul essentially said we need to make a good confession of the faith that we have regarding these things. Living life in such a triumphant way will draw others to Jesus and we will be able to see, either in this world or the next, that all things really do work together for good to them that love the Lord. I believe that this is what Paul is talking about when, in verse 12, he says, “So then death works in us, but life in you.”

Focus – 4:16-18

¹⁶ Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 (NASB95)

Paul had discovered that true life does not consist of physical things. We know that the physical nature we have is temporary. We slow down, our bodies age, we can't do as much as we used to. In spite of all that, spiritually we can and must become more and more vigorous with each passing day. After all, all of life in the physical is but a very short time compared with

all of eternity and we would do well to spend that short time we have preparing for that which is to come. This means that we have to look beyond what we can see and experience in the physical and see that God really is in control and wants what is best for us. As we recognize this, we can view problems and successes in an entirely new light and see the hand of God at work in our lives to transform us into the image of His Son, Jesus.

The description of the persecutions that Paul had endured as being “light afflictions” and “momentary” seems to be a gross understatement of all he had experienced. However, as we read further into the text, we see that he was making a comparative statement to the anticipation of the eternal glory that these troubles would produce for him. This is a similar statement that was made regarding the suffering that Christ endured as we read in Hebrews 12:2: “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

In fact, Paul specifically instructed them (and us) to deliberately not look or focus on the problems which we see in this life but to look beyond this life and the physical to eternal life which is spiritual. As we condition ourselves to do this, then we develop a different perspective on life itself which helps us see the present (temporal) and the future (eternal).

Unless we shut out the world, we will not see the things that are described as “not seen.” A conscious effort aimed at bringing us in touch with “the things that are not seen” needs to be a characteristic of all Christians. We don’t see a lot of that awareness being practiced in the church today.

This transforming process will not take place in some secluded monastic life style, but will happen as we go about life fulfilling the ministry to which God has called us. By its very nature, ministry is related to others. As we go about the work to which we are called, we will find perplexity, frustration and trouble. We see within these things that God provides the help we need to overcome and be victorious. We have hope beyond this life because of the resurrection of Christ and even though we may not immediately see the good that comes from the problems that we encounter in this life, we will eventually see it. This process is just that, it is a process and we experience it on a daily basis. Daily we put the old nature to death, daily our physical bodies have less vigor, daily we walk closer to God, daily we are renewed inwardly. And we “keep on keeping on” because we are projecting beyond this life which we realize is temporary, knowing that what God has prepared for us in eternity is going to be so glorious that we can’t even imagine how great it will be.