

## Gospel Ministry

2Corinthians 4:1-6

### Can you believe that Christmas is around the corner?

That thought crossed my mind the other day and that got me thinking about Christmas movies.

One of the classic Christmas movies, in my opinion, is “It’s a Wonderful Life”.

The main character of the movie is named George Bailey who is played by Jimmy Stewart.

George lives in a small town that he didn’t want to stay in running a family business that he didn’t want to run.

He does get to marry the girl he loves and they build a life together.

Things are going along pretty nicely until George’s uncle loses a huge sum of money.

Things get bad and George is about to do something terrible when Clarence, his guardian angel shows up to help him out.

### As George and Clarence are talking things out George says to Clarence, “Maybe it would have been better if I had never been born.”

That’s when everything changes. George gets to experience what the world would have been like without him.

By the end of the movie things go back to the way they were and George is incredibly thankful to be back despite his problems.

In the end a bunch of his friends get together and bail him out of his financial difficulties and all is well that ends well.

The movie has terrible theology and is way off when it comes to angels, but it has a happy ending and forces the viewer to reflect on the significance one person’s life can have in the world.

That got me to thinking something I have thought about a number of times over the years.

What would the world be like if Jesus had never been born?

### As you know Christianity has no shortage of critics and no doubt a long line of people who have wished the name Jesus did not hold a place in history.

Most people who think along those lines fail to appreciate all that Christianity has done in western civilization.

Health care, education, and life for the marginalized just to name a few are radically different today because of the effect of the Christian Worldview upon society.

The name Jesus has been a means of pouring out the common grace of God upon people in enormous measure.

Of course as believers we know there is much more to it than positive societal influences there is the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life which would be impossible without Jesus being born into the world.

[It is absolutely astounding to think of the impact of the good news of Jesus Christ upon the world. It is also important to remember that this is more than something that has happened in history, it is something that is still happening in the world today. Gospel ministry is happening all over the world and changing lives every day. As believers we are a part of that. Isn't that incredible? The apostle Paul certainly thought so and we can see that clearly in our text this morning **2Corinthians 4:1-6**. These verses teach us some important lessons about Gospel Ministry. There are four important reminders for us as we seek to follow Jesus in our everyday lives. First, Paul reminds us here that...]

**Point #1 – Growing in Christ sustains gospel ministry. (Verse 1)**

When, by God's mercy, we can see and enjoy more of the wonder of the glory of God in Jesus we will find motivation to continue to serve Him in this world.

Because verse 1 begins with the word 'therefore' we have to remind ourselves of what the apostle has said leading up to these verses.

In chapter three he talks about the ministry of the Spirit in the lives of believers giving us an increasing capacity to behold God's glory and how that serves to change us so that our lives can better call attention to His glory in the world.

Then he says this in the first part of verse one in chapter four. **(Verse 1a)**

There are two important things for us to see here. First, notice the word "having".

That word suggests this ministry of being transformed by the glory of God and better displaying the glory of God is an ongoing action in the present.

In other words it is something that is always happening in the life of believers.

Also, notice the reason why believers have this ministry.

He says here that this is happening "by the mercy of God."

It is good to be reminded of mercy on a regular basis.

Mercy means that we have been spared what we deserve from the LORD.

Most people operate on the assumption that they deserve good things from God.

People think that way because they fail to appreciate the magnitude of their offenses against God.

As human beings tend to excuse our own failings and assume God should do the same, even though we struggle to excuse the failings of others.

However, when we begin to realize that God is absolutely perfect and requires absolute perfection we begin to see that we don't deserve anything good from Him, we only deserve His judgment and wrath forever.

[Paul was keenly aware of that. He had persecuted Christians up until the time he met the risen LORD Jesus on the road to Damascus. What did he deserve? He deserved to have Jesus put an end to his life and send him to hell forever. The Lord, though, shows him mercy. He is not condemned and killed but rather redeemed and called into the service of the LORD. That is why he can wholeheartedly say here that he has this ministry, "by the mercy of God".]

Listen, we are no different. This is a room full of murders, idolaters, adulterers, liars, gossips, coveters, thieves, people who have dishonored their parents, blasphemers, Sabbath breakers, and alike.

Not a single one of us here deserve to be saved let alone enjoy the ministry of the Spirit transforming us by causing us to behold more and more of the majesty of God.

We do not deserve it, but if we are in Christ this morning then we have this ministry by the mercy of God.

"Therefore", he says at the end of verse one, "we do not lose hope."

That is an amazing statement when you think back to chapter one where the apostle speaks of a situation where he and his fellow workers were suffering such affliction that they "despaired of life itself".

Things can get bad at times. While I certainly have never faced anything close to the suffering of Paul, I do know what it is like to despair in some ways and I suspect many of you do too.

What this text is saying to us is that by the mercy of God the ministry of the Spirit shows us the glory of God and because of that "we do not lose hope."

We are sustained in life by drawing closer to Jesus.

Don't wait until your life is falling apart to ask God to make Himself known to you.

Plead with Him that you might see the splendor of His glory today so that you will be sustained through every trial.

Michelle reminded me last night of a quote from George Mueller, he said, "My first order of business every day is to get my soul happy in God."

If you know his story then you know he was a busy guy who faced great challenges on a daily basis and yet he was sustained in his ministry for many years.

Why? Because he knew that marveling at who God is and being changed by that was the means to “not lose heart.”

[That is the work of the Spirit sustaining his people in gospel ministry. That is a miracle. He will come back to the sustaining work of the Spirit in verse 7 (I hope you will join us for that next week), but before he expands on that he has some more to say to us about having this ministry by the mercy of God. Having shown us that growing in Christ sustains the ministry, he shows us that...]

**Point #2 – God’s word faithfully proclaimed is the heart of gospel ministry. (Verse 2)**

When the message of the scriptures becomes warped or treated as a matter of secondary importance the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is lost.

Having told us about what does not happen on account of the ministry of the Spirit, namely that we “do not lose heart” he then tells what does happen on account of that ministry (Verse 2).

One of the things that the work of the Spirit does in the heart of the believer is to give us a distaste for evil things.

Do we still stumble and fall? Do we still give into temptation? Do we still disobey the LORD?

Yes we do. There are no perfect people in the Church. There are no perfect Christians in this current world.

We are objects of mercy and must never become proud with regards to our being transformed by the grace of God.

While we admit our imperfections we also take our calling towards perfection seriously.

What the ESV translates here as ‘disgraceful and underhanded’ can also be translated as “hidden things of shame”.

It is language reminiscent of the Garden of Eden. Remember when Adam and Eve disobeyed what did they do? They tried to hide, they tried to cover up their shame.

The work of the Spirit changes that for the Christian.

We are to stop trying to hide and cover up our disobedience because when we do that do you know what happens? We remain in it.

Listen, because of the mercy of God we can bring out those hidden things and put them aside.

We should neither fear past sin nor be complacent about it, we must renounce it by God’s grace.

Some of you need to that today. Stop hiding it and start getting rid of it.

In addition to renouncing ‘disgraceful and underhanded ways’ he says, “we refuse to practice cunning or tamper with God’s word.”

People in Paul's day and throughout the history of the world have done both of these things for a variety of reasons.

Some are trying to make the word of God more acceptable to unbelievers.

They think that by making the gospel into something attractive to worldly people they will bring the godless into the church.

Some are self-seeking wanting to gain power and control over people (that is likely what was happening in Corinth).

Some just want to be well liked and popular.

There are any number of reasons why people would 'tamper with God's word.'

Commentator Colin Kruse points out that the word translated "tamper" here most likely means "diluted".

The picture is mixing water in with wine. When you do that it makes the wine less potent.

What the apostle is saying here is that the ministry he has been given demands that he refuse to mix other things in with the word of God.

It is not the task of the believer to change the word of God, it is the task of every believer to deliver the word of God.

That is what he says at the end of the verse here. He says, **(end of 2)**.

[How many of you have ever had to get a prescription from your doctor? Happens all the time right? How many of you have ever tried to change the medication that you were given? Assuming you trust your doctor and your pharmacist you are going to take the meds as prescribed without tampering with them because you want to get better.]

That is Paul's aim in the ministry of the gospel.

He knows he is neither the doctor and neither is he the pharmacist.

He is the delivery man.

That is what gospel ministry is. We are not called to change the message we are called to deliver it.

[Should we seek to convince people? Without a doubt. Should we seek to be respectful, kind, loving, wise, and thoughtful in the ministry of the gospel? Yes we should. Do we manipulate, sugar coat, or avoid the truth? No, we must refuse such things because God's word faithfully proclaimed is the heart of gospel ministry. It is impossible to share the gospel apart from God's word accurately proclaimed. That brings us to a third lesson about gospel ministry. This is one that is incredibly important to keep in mind especially as we face opposition to the gospel. The lesson is that...]

**Point #3 – Satan wants to keep unbelievers from gospel ministry. (Verses 3-4)**

The devil is constantly at work through a variety of means to keep people from seeing their need of Jesus.

One of the questions that comes to mind from what is said at the end of verse 2 about the “open statement of truth” being the means by which the apostle and his co-workers commend themselves “to everyone’s conscience” is if the truth is being proclaimed why don’t people believe it?

He begins to answer that for us in **verse 3**.

For “those who are perishing” the gospel is “veiled”.

A veil is simply a covering that makes it difficult to see whatever is being covered.

It is like the unbeliever is wearing a blind fold and, therefore, they do not see the glory of the gospel of Christ and so they have no desire for it.

He adds something more in **verse 4**.

When we look at the Bible from cover to cover it seems clear that people are responsible for their rebellion against God.

It would be easy to look at this verse and say it’s all Satan’s fault and people are just innocent bystanders, but to say that we would have to ignore all that the bible says about our own evil desires to rebel against the LORD.

The ‘perishing’ as they are called here are perishing because they are willfully disobeying God’s law, but it is also true that Satan is actively working in the world to encourage that in every unbeliever.

Satan doesn’t want you to see yourself as a sinner under the judgement of God.

He wants you to think you are fantastic as you are, that you are the master of your own destiny, that you can determine for yourself what is good.

He doesn’t want you to see your need of a Saviour.

He wants you to be blind to the miracle of the incarnation, that God the Son took on humanity and was born in Bethlehem, and lived a perfect life upon the earth.

He wants you to be blind to Jesus’ dying for you. He doesn’t want you to see that Jesus suffered the penalty that you deserve.

He wants you to be blind to Jesus rising from the dead. He wants you to think that the early church just made that up.

He wants you to be blind to the glory of what Jesus has done because He wants you to perish instead of believing in Christ to have eternal life.

[If you have shared the gospel with people then you have probably asked yourself from time to time, “How can these people not get it?” Years ago I was talking to an atheist about God while we had lunch together. I asked him if he thought the table we were sitting at was made or came into existence by random chance. He answered right away saying, “It was made.” I said, “How do you know?” He said, “It is too complicated to have happened on its own.” I said, “So you think this table has to be made, but you, even though you are way more complex than the table, happened by random chance?” Again without hesitation he said, “Yes, the table is on purpose and I am random chance.”]

That is blindness brothers and sisters and Satan is working hard to keep people in the dark.

I vividly remember being blind to the gospel.

I know for a fact that the gospel was shared with me many times and I completely ignored it.

I remember the first time the gospel was shared with me and I intellectually understood it for the first time.

I said to the person who shared it with me, “If you believe that you are stupid!”

I thought that way because I was blind and Satan was at work to keep it that way.

[It is important for us to keep that in mind as believers. We can very easily start seeing unbelievers as enemies and fill our hearts with anger towards them. We can very easily forget that once we too were blind to the truth. Instead, we should look on the perishing with compassion and sorrow? They are prisoners of the kingdom of darkness, blinded by Satan, and under the wrath of God. It is a bleak situation, but it is not without hope. Yes Satan is powerful, yes he is blinding the minds of unbelievers to the ministry of the gospel, but we are given one more lesson in our text this morning. One that should give us all great hope in the ministry of the gospel. The lesson is that...]

#### **Point #4 – Gospel ministry depends on the power of God. (Verses 5-6)**

Christians ought to serve the LORD in the knowledge that the light of His glory can and will overcome the darkness of this present world.

#### **The apostle reminds us of something very important in verse 5.**

Gospel ministry is NOT about us!!

That can get easily confused in our lives as individuals and within the church.

We can very easily make gospel ministry about us.

That can happen in more than one way.

We can become discouraged in the face of unbelievers rejecting the gospel.

We can think, “What is the point no one is listening and nothing I do matters.”

That pendulum can swing the other way as well.

It’s all about me, look how many people got saved because of me, look at how many people come to my church.

This is a particular danger for church leaders.

[A few years ago Jason and I went to a pastor’s day and the speaker talked about how the church needed to honour him. When he showed up he had people form an honour guard for him to enter the building with someone carrying his bible in front of him.]

It was crazy and quite the opposite of what Paul says here.

Gospel ministry is NOT a tool to gain honour from people and power over them. What does it say here? It says it is the proclamation of “Jesus as LORD”

Jesus being LORD makes us all servants.

Jesus says if you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven you must make yourself a “servant of all”.

That is an important reminder and prepares us to hear what is said in **verse 6**.

We are mere servants. The ministry of the gospel does not depend on us, it depends on the power of God.

Paul takes us all the way back to the beginning of creation in Genesis chapter one.

Before there were stars and before the sun and moon existed almighty God spoke into the darkness and said, “Let there be light!”

What does the bible say after that? It says, “and there was light.”

It is impossible to get darker than the time prior to light existing in creation and yet the darkness cannot resist the command of God.

Now the apostle applies that to the gospel.

The same God whose power brought light into creation out of nothing by the power of His word; that God “*has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”

That is what is happening in the ministry of the gospel.

When a person hears that they are a sinner and that Jesus died for them and that he conquered the grave and they believe it and received the gift of eternal life God almighty is saying, “Let there be light!” and no veil of the evil one can withstand that light.



[Paul's own conversion experience is an amazing picture of this. The Bible says then when he was on the way to Damascus to put Christians in jail in the noon day sun Jesus appears to him and the light of Christ's glory eclipses the sun. It did more than eclipse the sun it also penetrated the darkness in his heart.]

That is our hope in gospel ministry.

Not programs, not intellectual arguments, not manipulation, not catering to the sinful condition, but the power of God to say, "Let there be light!"

So brothers and sisters don't be discouraged and don't become proud, but instead be resolved to minister the gospel in whatever capacity God calls you to.

It is a ministry that comes by the mercy of God making His glory known to us and through that sustaining us as we grow up in Christ.

It is a ministry that makes the word of God central to all that we say and do.

Though it is a ministry strongly opposed by Satan, it depends on the power of God and therefore we can have great confidence in it.

May God in His mercy shine the light of the gospel into the hearts of many so that we may see it and praise His name forever.