

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

A Ministry of Mercy and Light

From time to time, people ask me the question, how is ministry going for you?
And it's not an easy question to answer.
On many occasions, I could answer that I have the best job in the world
I love running Christianity Explored courses at Bundy
When people are investigating who Jesus is
And I get to open the bible with them and try to answer their questions
And help them learn about Jesus
And when I see people understand the gospel of Jesus.
On those days, I can't think of anything better than doing ministry

But on many other occasions, it's easy to lose heart in ministry
When I grieve with people at shocking health diagnoses
Or when standing with them as they bury their loved ones
Or being criticized or misunderstood by people I'm trying to serve
Or seeing people I love walk away from Jesus to follow lies that destroy their lives
Those are the days I feel like giving up and finding any job
Other than ministry

I know I'm not the only one in the room who feels this way
I make a living from ministry
But many of you are also involved in gospel ministry
Whether that be teaching the bible in Sunday School
Or serving as a youth group leader or growth group leader
Or someone who is simply seeking to share Jesus with your friends or family
I wonder if you have ever felt so discouraged in ministry
That you've been tempted to throw in the towel and give up

My hope is that what the apostle Paul has to say today will keep you going in gospel ministry.
Because Paul will remind us once again of the goodness of Jesus in two significant ways

In gospel ministry, remember that

- 1. Jesus is merciful (4:1-2)**
- 2. Jesus is light (4:3-6)**

**And with each of these two points,
There is a DO and a DON'T**

Here's the first point, Jesus is merciful so we don't give up
Look at verse 1

4 Therefore, since we have this ministry because we were shown mercy, we do not give up.

The very basis of every Christian's ministry is that we are sinners saved by God's grace
Saved from the certain judgement of death and eternal condemnation for our sin
But not only have we experienced God's grace in not getting what we deserve

But God has also shown us His mercy,
In giving us what we don't deserve
God has saved us to do good works,
prepared in advance for us to do
Remember from last week
The context of chapter 3
The good works of new covenant ministry
Empowered by the Holy Spirit of God
Is to point people to Jesus and not to the works of the Old Testament law.

It's so easy to forget your origin story as a Christian
Here I am standing on this stage
As a preacher and pastor of God's word
But my origin story is that of a sinful wretch
Deserving of eternal separation from God for my sin against Him
Then God, purely out of his radical grace
Acted to redeem my life through the death and resurrection of Jesus
Plucking me from judgement
Showering me with His love
So that I can stand before Him
forgiven as His child
And then not only that
Such is the mercy of God
That He gave me a role to spread the good news of His Son Jesus with others
Here I stand in this ministry
when I have no right to even stand in His presence

Paul never forgot his origin story
Listen to Ananias' description of Paul in Acts 9 verse 13

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

What did Paul deserve?
After all, here is the one who approved the death of Christians
He was determined to eradicate the church, one Christian at a time
Surely justice demands that Paul deserves death
But what does God give him?
A *ministry* based on His mercy

Verse 15

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for this man is my chosen instrument to take my name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

God has a sense of humour.
He's going to take the greatest threat to the gospel

And turn him into its greatest proponent
This incredible mercy is what Paul falls back on
In not *giving up* His ministry.

Here in Corinth he's been slandered by the false apostles
The Corinthians themselves have doubted his motives and methods
Paul's been beaten, flogged, shipwrecked, run out of towns, criticized, hungry, in danger from every group
Paul has very good reason to give up His ministry
But rather than looking to *others* to keep persevering in ministry
He looks to the mercy of Jesus
Who called him on that road to Damascus and saved His life
And that is why he does not lose heart

It's disappointing isn't it, when you prepare a bible study for someone in your group
And that's the week they don't show up
When you try your hardest to gently love someone in a difficult conversation about their sin
And then you don't hear from them again
When you pray for your family members for years and they seem as far from Jesus as ever
When you find yourself discouraged or despairing in ministry
Never forget your origin story
Don't look anywhere else for motivation
other than the mercy of Jesus who saved you
And has given you this ministry

But along with the DON'T is a DO from Paul

In gospel ministry
We DO display the truth

Verse 2

² Instead, we have renounced secret and shameful things, not acting deceitfully or distorting the word of God, but commending ourselves before God to everyone's conscience by an open display of the truth.

Gospel ministry is not sneaky ministry
It is not secret, shameful and underhanded
It is not deceitful and distorting of the Bible

In sales tactics, there is a method called Bait and Switch
You put up a product that looks attractive on the surface
That draws you in – that's the bait
But really the product that you actually get is not what you bargained for
It's much more inferior than the one that was advertised
That's the switch.
It happens all the time on online shopping websites like Temu
And the Corinthians are suckers for bait and switch gospel ministry
They like to boast in what appears to be strong and impressive
That's why they were drawn to the impressive public speaking skills of the false apostles

But the gospel they preached was not right
It was based on legalism drawn from the Old Covenant
It did not rely on Jesus
It boasted not in the cross of Christ
But on human success
Listen to Paul's summary of ministry of the false apostles in chapter 11

¹³ For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ.

Bait and switch ministry continues to exist today
The prosperity gospel is a good example of this
It distorts God's word, picking and choosing bible verses
In order to say what God wants to do is to bless us
But according to this false doctrine
the blessing is material wealth and health
It looks attractive on the outside and so people want to buy into it – that's the bait
But what happens then when you get an incurable disease
Or when you suffer financial loss
And it ignores that fact the gospel of Jesus in the Bible
Has much more to say about weakness and suffering
That when you follow Jesus it's not a bed of roses but picking up a cross and denying yourself
The prosperity gospel has little to offer you when you hit times of suffering, that's the switch.

Instead of secret, shameful and deceptive methods like bait and switch
Real gospel ministry is an open display of the truth
It is not *self*-commending but it is done in order to please God
It is not done to please people but to *appeal* to their conscience
What does this look like today?

One of our commitments to an open display of truth in this church
Is what we call expository preaching
Expository comes from the word expose
We want to expose the meaning of the bible text
By teaching the bible in context
Verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book.
Old Testament and the New Testament.
That's what we're doing right now with this series in 2 Corinthians
And when we finish this book
We will go to the Old Testament
And we will teach through the book of Nehemiah later this year
We preach this way so that everyone can see the text of the Scriptures clearly
We're not trying to hide the meaning of the text as though
Only preachers and pastors have the secret meaning
Expository preaching allows you to read the bible for yourself
To see and test if what we preachers say is faithful to what Scripture says

Now If our staple diet here was topical preaching

Then that gives more room for pastors to preach what they want to preach about
Topics that they think will get a reaction from their hearers.
We'll be tempted to fish around the bible for texts to support our own points
Rather than reading them in the context that they were written in.
But at our church, it's not just expository preaching on Sundays
But we are committed to inductive bible study in our growth groups
And our kids and youth ministries
Inductive bible study is where we observe the bible in order to understand its meaning before we apply it
Deductive bible study is where you've got a point you want to make
And then you look for material in the bible to support your point
Which method is more likely to get you into trouble?
Ministry that God is looking for
An open display of the truth of God's word.

And you see the thing about expository preaching or inductive bible study
Is that it appears to be pretty boring compared to what a lot of churches are offering
Like putting a Toyota corolla next to a Lamborghini
The Toyota is safe and reliable
But it's not very exciting.
The Lamborghini on the other hand is enticing but dangerous
That's what the Corinthians had to choose between
The ministry of Paul – safe and reliable
Or the ministry of the false apostles – enticing but dangerous
Which display of the truth will you choose to build your Christian life on?

In gospel ministry, Jesus is merciful,
so we don't give up.
But we do display the truth
That's our first point

We move to our second point now.
In gospel ministry remember that Jesus is light

Paul's first encounter with Jesus was a flash of blinding light
Acts 9 again

³ As he travelled and was nearing Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. ⁴ Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

⁵ "Who are you, Lord?" Saul said. "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting," he replied.

It's a pretty dramatic conversion story

Before Paul was blinded by this brilliant light that floored him
Paul was blinded by religious zeal to what he had dedicated his life to – Judaism
So blinded that he lived in darkness without the truth of the gospel of Christ
So blinded in fact
That He needed the light of Jesus to open the eyes of his heart to see the truth

In fact before Paul met the light of Jesus
His theology was much more similar with the false apostles of Corinth

But here in 2 Corinthians, Paul is saying that everyone at one stage is blinded like he was
Blinded by Satan
Look at verse 3

³ But if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case, the god of this age 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.

The god of this age is referring to Satan.
Although God has universal power in this age and the age to come
Satan has been allowed a limited power over *this* age until the return of Christ
And Satan's active work to this very day is to blind people from the truth of the gospel.

If I were to go out to a busy area here at Uni Hill or maybe down in Bundoora Square
And started talking to people about Jesus
Many people will reject the message of Jesus
And there are numerous reasons why they might do that
Maybe because I wasn't very clear in my sharing of the gospel
Maybe because I was offensive in my manner
Maybe because it's culturally odd here in Melbourne to start spruiking Jesus in a public place
Maybe because they themselves choose to reject Jesus
But Paul gives us one more *important* unseen reason
Satan is blinding people to the message of Christ
And in that spiritual blindness, they are perishing
Because they face the judgement of God for their sin.

In other words, Gospel ministry involves a spiritual battle.
Just as Paul said in Ephesians 6

¹⁰ Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and by his vast strength. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens.

Satan wants people to remain blinded in sin
And so he is ready to fight for the darkness
But God wants people to see the light
We want people to see the light
The Light of the gospel – the glory of Jesus (verse 4)
And so to engage in gospel ministry is to fight Satan for the lives of people
But in order to engage in the battle
We have to see people the way Paul does in the Scriptures

What do you see when you look at a crowd of people?

What do you see when you look at a cover of a magazine?
What do you see when you look at your social media feed?
Shiny happy people living their best life?
People without a care in the world?
People maybe, whose lives you envy?

According to this passage
People are blinded by Satan's lies
They live in darkness
They live their lives with veils covering their eyes
It's a pretty confronting picture that Paul paints for those without Christ
Most people in this city
In this country live in utter darkness
Blinded by Satan and their own sin
And they just don't realise it
What people need more than anything else is for that veil to be lifted
For blind eyes to see again
They need a ministry of light

If Jesus is Light
Don't proclaim ourselves but do proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord
Verse 5

⁵For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake.
Travis talked last week about the benefit of committing verses to memory
Verse 5 is a great verse to commit to memory
Because it's a great summary of the Christian life and Christian ministry

Here is the very heart of what it means to be a Christian
A Christian is someone who considers Jesus Christ as Lord
To confess Christ as Lord is to acknowledge that Jesus is God
Verse 4 – Christ is the image of God
Verse 6 – in seeing the face of Jesus Christ we see no less than the glory of God himself
To confess Christ as Lord
Is to bow our knees in worship and allegiance to Jesus
To say that Christ is Lord is to say that
No one else in our lives
Is worthy of such honour as that which should only be given to Jesus
Because all authority under heaven and earth has been given to Jesus
Therefore Jesus Christ is everything to a Christian
We live and breathe for Christ
Christ shapes who we are and everything we do
And everything in life works best when Jesus Christ has his rightful place in our lives

It makes sense then that Christian ministry
Is to *proclaim Christ as Lord*

It is not to preach ourselves
Gospel ministry is less of self and more of Jesus
Christ receives the glory when the preacher forgets themselves
When the bible study leader leaves people thinking more about the study
When people leave church thinking more about Jesus
And not the one proclaiming Him

That's why Paul describes himself as a servant for Jesus' sake
When we minister the gospel of Jesus
We do so for the sake of Jesus and his people
Not for our own selfish gain and glory

Paul had to make this clear because the Corinthians
Were easily swayed by the self-promoting false apostles
Rather than serving the people they ministered to
The false apostles were exploiting the Corinthians
This is 2 Corinthians 11

¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I will also boast. ¹⁹ For you, being so wise, gladly put up with fools! ²⁰ In fact, you put up with it if someone enslaves you, if someone exploits you, if someone takes advantage of you, if someone is arrogant toward you, if someone slaps you in the face.

Self-promotion and glory-seeking is acceptable in the world
But it can easily weasel its way into the church
The temptation for anyone in gospel ministry
Is to try to claim the glory that only Jesus deserves.

I've served in this church as an assistant minister for 19 years
And it has been my great privilege to do that
But I'm now a middle-aged man of 50.
At this stage of life, the world tells me that I should be at the very least in senior management
If not the CEO of something
Over the years, different people have encouraged me to be the senior pastor of my own church
And yet here I am – still an assistant
A couple of weeks ago the Anglican church of Melbourne elected their new archbishop
A key position in the Anglican church
And the funny thing is, I was in classes at bible college
With a few of the ministers who were nominated for that role
I mean surely *that* is the kind of senior position I should be aspiring to in ministry

In reality there is only one title that matters in ministry
Servant of our Lord Jesus Christ
To *him* be the glory
Great things *He* has done
What am I but a *slave* of the master
And a *servant* of his people
Less of me and more of Him.

So in your ministry, don't be jealous of the glory that belongs to Jesus
Don't compete and compare your ministry with that of others
For all the glory belongs to Jesus alone
DON'T proclaim yourself
But DO proclaim Christ the light

Verse 6

⁶ For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Satan's power in blinding people is that of a petty criminal.
The real power belongs to the God who at Creation said let there be light in the darkness
And now in salvation, God with the same power
Shines the light of Jesus into darkened hearts
And it is only in Jesus that the veil can be lifted
So that blind eyes can see
Listen to these verses from last week in 2 Corinthians 3

Whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Today is Pentecost Sunday,
Where we remember the outpouring of the Holy Spirit by God on believers after the ascension of Jesus
And the primary work of the Holy Spirit is to point people to Jesus
By convicting people of their sin
Drawing them to Christ in repentance and faith in Him alone.

My job in ministry is simple
It is to pray for God to pour out His Holy Spirit into people's lives
And then it is to open the bible and to proclaim Christ
And then the results are up to His Spirit
And it has been my joy in ministry over the years to see God shine the light of Christ into people's hearts
To open their eyes so that they begin to see Jesus in His glory
To watch them grow in love and dependence on Jesus
To see them move from a slavery to sin to the freedom that comes from being a slave to Jesus

What a encouragement it has been at this church over the years
To see people getting baptized
Young and old alike
People who have come to know Jesus as Lord
Some very new to Jesus, confessing their faith in him after hearing about him for the first time
Or young people who have grown up in the church
Owning for themselves the gospel of Jesus that they have heard a thousand times.

The results of ministry are not ours
They belong to Jesus the light

Not to our eloquent words or clever analogies
So don't stress about the results of ministry.
Your job in ministry is simply to pray and to proclaim Christ
Trust that Jesus the light is more powerful than the darkness.
That he can lift the veil and open the eyes of the blind.
He did it for you and he can do it for others.

It's estimated by CBS news that the hymn Amazing Grace is played 10 million times annually
It has been recorded more than 7000 times by different performers
And it has ministered to countless people since it was first published by John Newton
On New Year's day in 1773
The song is very much an autobiographical hymn
That reflected John Newton's own life
Who denounced the faith he had as a youth
Became a captain of a slave trading ship
Who almost died in a terrible storm at sea
when he began to ponder the mercy of God in saving someone like him
Eventually Newton left slave trading to become a minister of the gospel in a town called Olney
Where he wrote Amazing Grace to accompany a sermon on New Year's Day
I think the song is so popular because we relate to John Newton
We know how undeserving we are of the mercy and grace of Jesus
And how only he can open blind eyes to see His glory
In his sermon notes on this day Newton wrote

Blinded by the god of this world. We had not so much a desire of deliverance. Instead of desiring the Lord's help, we breathed a spirit of defiance against him. His mercy came to us not only undeserved but undesired. Yea few of us but resisted his calls, and when he knocked at the door of our hearts endeavoured to shut him out till he overcame us by the power of his grace. It was the Lord against whom we sinned and who showed us mercy. He needed not. What just cause of admiration, that he should appoint such salvation, in such a way, in favour of such helpless, worthless creatures.
And then Newton penned those famous lyrics

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch; like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Jesus is merciful, so don't lose heart in ministry but display the truth.
Jesus is light, so proclaim Christ as Lord and not yourself.