

April 18, 2021

PAUL'S MINISTRY AND GOD'S LIFE-GIVING POWER

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

*(7 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)*

In Matthew 19, after Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler, Jesus said to his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." His disciples responded by asking, "Who then can be saved?" This is a fair question after Jesus' lays out a metaphor that communicates how impossible something is. Simply look at a camel and the eye of a needle and if you don't say to yourself, "That's impossible," then something is wrong. However, in acknowledging this, Jesus answers, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26), showing that God does the very thing that man cannot do. But this raises another question, doesn't it? We might voice this question, "*How* then can one be saved?" That is, if God is able to do what is impossible with man, how does he do it? What happens so that someone can be saved?

That question will come up as we look at our text today, and thankfully our text also provides the answer to that question. As you look at 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, you can see that these verses clearly flow out of what we saw in the text last week as we looked at 3:4-18. Paul again speaks about his ministry, the gospel being veiled, the minds of unbelievers, the glory of Christ, and proclaiming Christ. But how are these two texts connected in addition to repeating multiple themes? I think the answer is that in our text Paul takes the issues that he introduced in 3:4-18, and he takes a deep dive into them. He brought up having a ministry that was superior to that of Moses in our previous text, and now he gives us a deeper look into what that ministry looks like. He mentioned unbelievers having veiled hearts, and now he shows us more clearly what's going on in the spiritual world as that veil remains over their hearts. He mentioned the veil being removed as one turns to Christ, and now he's going to show us what has to happen for one to turn to Christ. In other words, he moves from some general realities to some specific ones. And as he does, he answers some questions for us that I want to ask and answer as a frame for the sermon this morning. The first question he answers for us is, "What does this new covenant ministry look like?" And his answer is that it's a ministry where by God's mercy we proclaim his unadulterated truth.

**It's a ministry, by God's mercy, where we proclaim God's unadulterated truth**

After speaking of this glorious ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness in 3:8-9, Paul stays on this topic in verse 1, writing, "Therefore, having this ministry, by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." He'll outline the rest of what this looks like in verse 2, but already we can see a few things. As those who are called to minister on this side of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, we first should recognize that we've been shown mercy. That's where Paul begins. There's no pride in being the ones who get to proclaim God's glorious truths. Paul will make this clear in our next section, saying in 4:7, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

According to Ephesians 2:1-3, we are all born dead in our sins, “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air,” living “in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” In other words, we weren’t the good ones of the world. Our righteousness is not why we get to know God and be used in ministry by him. We were enemies of God who have been shown mercy. That’s who we are, and that’s why there can never be any arrogance in ministry or thoughts that we’re better than those we minister to. Our ministry of declaring the glories of Christ Jesus is a ministry of sheer mercy.

But we can also add that it is a sustaining mercy that God has shown us. Notice how Paul says, “having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.” Being shown mercy, we press on in boldness as Paul does. What this means is that the mercy God has shown us to make us his own and make us ministers of his glorious gospel is the same mercy that he makes available to us all along the way so that we are not overcome and lose heart. His mercies are new every morning as we need them. That’s where Paul starts, and it’s a point we shouldn’t skip over too quickly. We have this ministry by the mercy of God. But then in verse 2 Paul dives more into the nuts and bolts of the ministry. He writes, “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.”

Because we are representatives of God—who is perfectly trustworthy, true, and holy—we do not practice deceit or craftiness or cleverness as we minister. Now, it may well be that Paul knew that those challenging him in Corinth (trying to direct the Corinthians’ attention away from Paul to themselves) were acting deceptively. We know that Paul had run into this in the past. He once told the Galatians that some people were making much of the Galatians, but then he added, “They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them” (Gal 4:17). In other words, they had deceitful motives that they weren’t up front about. Even to the Corinthians, Paul had said that he was not—like so many—a peddler of God’s Word, no doubt suggesting his opponents were. So, in our ministry to others, there must be no deceit or underhanded ways. Nor do we tamper with God’s Word.

There is a temptation in every age to make God’s Word more palatable to the culture. During the Enlightenment, when man’s reason was exalted to an all-time high, you had churches and so-called ministers saying that things not able to be explained by reason could be dismissed. They were teaching a Christianity without miracles, for example, which doesn’t work when we consider that creation, the incarnation, and the resurrection are central tenets of the Christian faith and are all utterly miraculous. During times in our culture when social activism becomes greatly applauded, the gospel can be reduced to loving our neighbors and doing good in society. We saw that with classic liberalism. And we could run through every age and show the same. In our day there are so-called ministers saying that pursuing homosexual activity is okay or abortion is okay or the like, because they’re telling themselves that this will appeal to our culture. Churches can have rainbow flags hanging outside the church building, thinking somehow this signals to unbelievers that what that church teaches should be more appealing to them. But

Paul says that we do not tamper with God's Word. Rather, by "the open statement of the truth" we declare it.

It is true that God's Word can be greatly offensive to man in his sin. To say that Jesus is the only way, or that God has defined marriage and what we do with our bodies, or that unbelievers will be cast into hell are all utterly offensive. But it's not our Word; it's his. We are merely to proclaim what God has revealed. We add nothing to it and take nothing away from it. We speak God's Word, God's truth, God's gospel and we do not apologize for it. The mercy we've been shown is not to alter God's Word but to be messengers of it.

So what did Paul's ministry look like, and what does our ministry look like as believers under the new covenant? We realize it's ours by the mercy of God. We do not practice deceitful ways or schemes. We don't alter the teaching of God's Word to make it more palatable to the culture. Our ministry is simply to proclaim God's Word in an open and clear way, with a clear conscience. That's the glorious ministry Paul had been referring to in 3:4-18.

Well, then, this raises another question. If we're simply proclaiming God's unadulterated truth as we proclaim his Word and apply it to others, then why do so many reject it? I mean, what we declare is truth. Yet, we could proclaim it as clear as day, and Jesus still says that the way that leads to destruction is broad, and many find it. That is, many will refuse to believe. Why? The answer Paul gives us is that unbelievers have veiled hearts and eyes blinded by Satan.

### **Unbelievers have veiled hearts and eyes blinded by Satan**

Paul wants us to see there's more going on when one rejects the gospel than we see. He writes in verses 3-4, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world have 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." Paul had mentioned in the previous section that unbelievers have a veil over their hearts so that they are—in and of themselves—unable to see the glory of Christ as we share the glorious gospel. Now, he pulls gives us further insight into their veiled hearts, showing us that the devil himself is working to blind them.

Now, we might hesitate for a second before identifying Satan in this text. After all, Paul refers to the "god of this world," and do we really want to attribute that title to the devil? But, yes, I think he's referring to the devil for a few reasons. First, notice that the work that he's doing is evil. He's blinding the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Second, similarly powerful titles are attributed to Satan in other places. Paul refers to the devil as "the prince of the power of the air" in Ephesians 2:2, and Jesus calls Satan the "ruler of this world" multiple times in the gospel of John (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). So, it's quite clear that this is referring to the work of the devil himself, and that Scripture treats him as a powerful figure.

But Paul brings up the devil to show his role in keeping people in unbelief. He is working to blind their eyes so that they don't see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Sometimes when we speak the gospel to someone, and they don't believe, we can be tempted to think the issue is just that they don't understand clearly or perhaps we haven't explained it as well as we should have. In other words, we think their refusal is just an issue of misunderstanding. But the Scripture makes clear that there's more going on here than we see with our eyes. Again, using very similar language in Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul had described all people as "by nature, children of wrath" who are dead in their sins, following their sinful passions and desires, and following the course of the devil who is working disobedience. Now, he adds that one way the devil continues to keep people in a place of unbelief and disobedience is by blinding their eyes to the gospel. That's where men are. That's where you and I once were.

So Paul has a good answer to those who say, "If your ministry is so glorious, then why aren't more people convinced to follow Jesus when you speak to them." His answer is that unbelievers are being blinded by Satan and kept in unbelief.

But this raises another question, then, doesn't it? It's the question I posed at the outset of the sermon, namely, how then is anyone saved? I mean, if you think about it, how can you take the description of Ephesians 2:1-3, combine it with Paul's note in verse 4 of our text that the god of this world is blinding them from seeing Christ, and have any hope that anyone can be saved? Well, here's the answer: through the preaching of the gospel, God can give life as he did at creation.

### **Through the preaching of the gospel, God can give life as he did at creation.**

In verses 5-6 Paul explains how people are then saved. And he starts with the preaching of the gospel. He writes, "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (v. 5). Unlike Paul's opponents, who were spouting all their successes, wealth, prestige, letters of recommendation, and the like, Paul makes clear that as he speaks to others, he's not concerned to proclaim himself. He doesn't care whether he gets exalted or not. Rather, he preaches Jesus Christ as Lord. And he sees himself simply as one who is a servant of those around him.

This means that when Paul preaches, he's not saying anything about his own greatness. He's saying that God the Son took on flesh and lived among us in perfect obedience, died on the cross for our sins, and was raised from the dead on the third day so that anyone who repents and believes will have forgiveness of sin and eternal life. That's what he proclaims.

But he tells us that something miraculous can happen as we proclaim that gospel, and something miraculous *has* happened if indeed we're believers. He writes, "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" (v. 6).

Now, let's break down what Paul is saying here. When Paul makes reference to God saying, "Let light shine out of darkness," he is talking about what God did in creation when God said, "Let there be light" and light shone in the darkness. Well, why bring that up now? It's because Paul is showing us that the same divine power that created the world is the same creative divine power at work as God gives life to people through the gospel. In other words, as you and I speak the gospel and someone comes to faith, something miraculous is happening. God is powerfully keeping the enemy from blinding us any longer, unveiling the heart to see the light of the gospel, and producing life where there was only death before. That's the miracle that happens every time someone repents and believes. This is what Charles Wesley was talking about in the song "And Can It Be." He wrote, "Bound my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night. Thine eye diffused a quickening [i.e. life-giving] ray. I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed Thee." He's exactly right. From the outside it may simply look like that person makes a decision to repent and believe, but the reality is that God has performed a miracle equivalent to the act of creation he did at the beginning. And if you're a believer, this is precisely what has happened with you.

Moreover, just as further evidence that Paul was showing us the miracle that God does so that we might be saved while the enemy is working to blind the minds of unbelievers, consider the parallels that we see between verse 4 and verse 6.

<u>v. 4</u>	<u>v. 6</u>
"god"	"God"
"of this world"	(of creation—implied from the creation language)
"has blinded"	"said, 'Let light shine'"
"blinded the minds"	"shone in our hearts"
"to keep them from seeing the light"	"to give the light"
"of the gospel"	"of the knowledge"
"of the glory of Christ"	"of the glory of God"
"who is the image of God"	"in the face of Jesus Christ"

Do you see how it's almost a perfect parallel? What Paul is showing us is that in light of overwhelming odds—with people dead in sins, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, following their desires and passions, and blinded by the god of this world—people can and still will be saved through the miraculous work of new creation that God brings about as we preach the gospel to people. But, it only happens through the preaching of the gospel. This is God's ordained means of saving people.

So the reason it is so important that we understand this dynamic is so that we might not lose sight of our need to preach the gospel. If you get the diagnosis wrong, you'll get the solution wrong. If you think men simply need convinced to be better, or see the appeal of a happier life, or have some misunderstandings corrected; you'll approach them with steps to improvement or an appeal to have greater happiness or some corrective thinking. But if you realize it's going to take a life-giving supernatural work of new creation that God performs through the preaching of the gospel, then you'll see that we have no other choice but to proclaim to all mankind that

Jesus lived, died, and was raised, exhorting them to repent and believe, praying that in this very moment God is removing the blinders and letting the light shine into their hearts. And may we commit ourselves afresh to proclaiming that message now as we come to the table. Amen.