

I have entitled this message, *So We Have This Ministry*, taken from the first few words of our text this morning. I think it is apropos for us because regardless of the election results, our work, our ministry, our calling doesn't change. In the words of Jesus, our foremost calling is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Regardless, we pledge our allegiance to Jesus; we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, serving the underprivileged and marginalized. We become a counter-cultural community and pray without ceasing. As the church, this is our calling; this is our role.

And this calling takes place in the public square; it takes place in the *polis*. I've always found the old adage, "You should never talk politics or religion at the dinner table." an interesting and untenable division. Because politics, in a basic sense, is the working out of a shared common life. And because our faith is always a faith lived in the public space among our culture, we have to consider its implications.

Now hear me on this because we mix up our thinking on politics easily here. The way of Jesus is, in fact, political, but it is not partisan. Too often, we've reduced our political imagination to partisanship, but this is a reduction. So if we are to be faithful to the way of Jesus, it must be expressed in our public life. We cannot love our neighbors or our enemies in isolation, but rather we engage in the common good. We engage in the common life as a faithful alternative community that exists within our culture and our world.

In the same way, we cannot reduce our faith to partisanship. In many respects, to follow Jesus means we are politically homeless. The Kingdom of God does not fit nicely into our partisan political categories because it categorically transcends these labels. The very nature of God's cosmic plan for redemption means it must transcend our finite categories of partisanship. It is not straddling a center aisle but being wrapped up in this cosmic work of the Kingdom of God that is expanding and bringing all that is good into the now. Or as Jesus taught us to pray, the Kingdom of God is coming "on earth as it is in heaven." It is this kingdom that we seek.

And so we have this ministry...this ministry of living in the here and now, attesting to the movement of God, seeking justice and righteousness, and we must take this moment seriously. Regardless of what happened this week, regardless of who is in office, Jesus is Lord of this world, and we are to faithfully pursue the alternative way of Jesus. What role does our faith play at this moment? What changes or doesn't change in light of a changing political space in which we find ourselves?

This brings us to our text, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

This public working of our faith is what Paul is talking about in our text; he is going to center. Paul is going to follow up on the profound reality of the text last week that the veil has been lifted for us. For those who have turned to the Lord, we no longer live under the tyranny of having to accomplish our salvation. He is going to expand on that and detail how we now have this ministry.

But what does this ministry look like? How do we keep from being overwhelmed in our pursuit of this ministry? And how does this ministry take place? Paul will address all these questions in this text.

**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. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6**

Remember, the occasion for Paul writing this letter is for an amalgam of reasons, but none more central than to respond to the severe criticism and challenge of his ministry and authority. Paul was facing a church in revolt. But instead of outright attacks against his accusers, he asserts his weaknesses and insufficiencies as a way of highlighting and centering the work of God as the basis for his ministry. And this is where Paul begins the text, "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart" (v. 1).

### **The Work of Christian Ministry is Draining**

Having been in ministry for a decade and a half, I can attest to the draining effect of ministry. I remember feeling this acutely a few years ago. I was working with a good friend of mine, and for years I had poured into his life, disciplesd him, come alongside him, and watched him grow. He was active in ministry, giving significant amounts of time to working with students and families.

After years of pouring into him and him pouring into students, he grew cold. He grew tired from the work of ministry. Eventually, he gave up. Not seeing the growth in his own life that he had hoped for or in the

lives of those he was ministering, he gave up, or in the words of Paul, he "lost heart." He walked away from ministry and the faith. It was incredibly disheartening and discouraging. I wish I could say that this story is an anomaly, but it isn't. I have watched variations of this story repeat itself.

The temptation to lose heart would have been strong in Paul, the disappointment and setbacks had stacked up against him, but the Apostle stood resolute and felt convinced to carry on and not give in to the pressures his faithfulness presented. The phrase "losing heart" conjures images of giving up, growing weary, and relaxing one's efforts.

Many of us experience this frustration, and we are often tempted to lose heart, but we must, like Paul, resist that urge. Paul said, "I don't give up. I have resisted the urge to grow weary." Paul is speaking specifically about his work as a pastor, but all followers of Jesus are called to ministry, whether in a church or not. Therefore, as followers of Jesus, we all face this level of scrutiny and exhaustion. To claim the title as a Jesus follower in a post-Christian world is to make a decision that will constantly be misunderstood. Faithfulness to this calling will tempt us to lose heart. There will be a tremendous number of times when you want to lose heart. You will be misunderstood; you will be questioned; you will be challenged. But we, like Paul, must not lose heart.

So how did Paul resist losing heart? How did he resist giving up considering all the opposition he faced? He goes on to tell us that *"Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God."* (v. 2a). Paul doesn't lose heart because of the three things he refuses to do.

"We have renounced secret and shameful ways..." This is a fascinating phrase that has many differing translations.

**ESV - "disgraceful underhanded ways"**

**NASB - "things hidden because of shame"**

**NLT - "We reject all shameful deeds and underhanded methods"**

Eugene Peterson's rendering in the message is, *"We refuse to wear masks and play games. We don't maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don't twist God's Word to suit ourselves."* Paul had earlier spoken about preachers who carried motives that were an amalgamation of greed, arrogance, and power-grabbing.

"...we do not use deception..." Evidently, in Paul's day, many were not only turning to secret, shameful ways of ministry, but many were using deception and deceit. The image here is to bait or ensnare. Many were using dishonest means and intentionally tricking people into the faith. Paul would have none of this. Deception has no role in the ministry of the Christian.

"...nor do we distort the word of God." To distort the Word of God is to twist it to fit our particular agenda. A stronger translation of distorting is to adulterate the word of God. The language is strong; it is that some will twist and leverage the word of God to fit their agendas.

What does all of this amount to? How does this help Paul not lose heart? I think it is because whoever uses these means inherently center themselves in the "work" of ministry. These deceitful means of ministry are invoked to gain an appearance of success. And certainly, they may appear successful for a time, but sooner or later, it will catch up with them. The bottom will fall out, and they will no longer be able to carry the lie. Paul says that we do not rely on any of these things because the work and ministry that God has given to us through his mercy is not dependent on our abilities. This level of reliance on God's mercy for their ministry liberates the individual from the weight of having to accomplish that which they cannot.

The purity of the means of ministry in pursuit of the goal of God's work provides Paul with a clear conscience about his work. This connection between the means and ends is something I often study in my academic work. My particular work focuses on the intersection between faith and political space. And one of the axioms that guide our theological, ethical reflection helps process these issues. The means are the ends in the process of becoming.

The means, meaning that manner in which we set out to do the ministry are the ends—the goal of our ministry endeavor in the process of becoming. Every step of the way, every act is a movement toward the ultimate goal, which God is, in fact, bringing about. Put differently; immoral means can never be used to achieve moral ends.

Therefore, as we seek "the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven," and we find our lives wrapped up in that ministry, we can only do so through means that are appropriate to and commiserate with the in-breaking Kingdom of God. To use means that do not align with the ends, what we are seeking is not just illogical but bad theology. The ends can never justify the use of improper means.

If I can speak out of a position of pastoral care for a moment, I want to gracefully offer a reflection on our political moment. One of the disheartening things I have witnessed over the past few elections cycles is the reticence of followers of Jesus to give over our witness and the ministry God has given us to political parties or affiliations. We have placed our allegiance in politicians from all sides of the aisle and allowed "secret, shameful ways" to be okay if the right policies are eventually enacted. Church, Paul says he will have none of this! And we shouldn't tolerate this either. If I am talking about this and you find yourself pointing the finger at the other side of the aisle and not reflecting on your own, may I graciously suggest that we've missed the mark. The means are the ends in the process of becoming.

Paul's counter to this is straight forward. *"On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God"* (v. 2b). Paul makes it a habit of speaking the truth simply and commending himself to everyone's conscience. The case that Paul makes for his ministry is that he presents the truth plainly because he understands, through his own experience, that the truth is enough. The truth is exciting enough without having to resort to other practices of deceit and deception.

There is a freedom that Paul is attesting too when our motives and our conscience is clear in the way we go about the work of the Gospel. Ray Stedman stated in this text,

**When you come to people with the truth about themselves, about their lives, about the world in which they live, when you strip off all the veils of illusion and the delusions by which man in any generation lives and reveal the basic reality of what is there, then you get instant attention.**

I believe, for all of the post-modern secularism that frightens so much of the church, our world is looking for truth. They are looking for an account of reality that takes seriously the problems and shortcomings of institutions and individual failures but constructs answers in light of something more certain. This is the truth that we can attest to as followers of Jesus, and it is this truth that Paul speaks plainly about.

Paul rests his ministry on trusting that God will reach the conscience of all people. He doesn't trust his ability, his cunning strategy, or his personality. He trusts that by "setting forth the truth, plainly," God will appeal to the conscience of everyone because "eternity has been placed in our hearts." Behind the mind is the conscience, and many times the conscience can be reached even when the mind is closed.

C.S. Lewis is a prime example of this. When the great writer and philosopher came to the faith, he claimed that he was "The most reluctant convert in all of England." He had resisted God intellectually for years and years but ultimately couldn't shake his conscience from the reality that God was, in fact, God.

So Paul has addressed why he doesn't lose heart, he has addressed how he doesn't lose heart, But why doesn't everyone come to the faith if the truth is communicated plainly? This is the question Paul is being asked and will address.

*"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing" (v. 3).* Now be careful when you are reading this text. It can be easy for this text to be misread and misunderstood and think the Gospel message is the problem. So let's break it down a bit closer. Remember last week; the veil imagery is the delusion that we can achieve our salvation apart from God. Look at this from a few previous verses.

**But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. vv. 3:14-16**

Note that Paul explicitly states that "whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." The source of their unbelief, the source of their being blinded, is their failure "to turn to the Lord."

The reason not all come to faith is because they resist the "turn to the Lord" that enables the veil to be removed. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, stated that the "wisdom of God is foolishness to the world." The gospel is foolishness to those not believing; it is incongruent to the

one who continues to resist the invitation before them, resting on their own ability and strength.

Paul goes on, *"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" (v. 4).* So part of the issue for why people don't believe is their own refusing to "turn to the Lord." The second reason Paul details is "the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers..." Satan has swayed, distracted, and blinded people from seeing the light of the Gospel. The very purpose of Satan is to blind people from seeing that Jesus Christ is the way to God-likeness.

The blinding prevents unbelievers to "see the light of the gospel." It is this light that breaks down the blinding failures and delusions of the places we seek salvation from now. Whether it is our own abilities or our societal structures, it is this light that "displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." The light of the gospel illuminates clearly Christ as the image of God.

To be an "image" is to be the truest representation. So when our eyes are opened by the gospel, what we see in Jesus, the gospel reveals that Christ is the true representation of God. What you see in Jesus is what we know of God. It is the clearest manifestation of who God is and what God is like, which is found in the person, character, teaching, and work of Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God.

In every generation, the temptation will always be to turn to things other than Jesus as the center of our hope. It is to make penultimate things ultimate things. If you just get this person in the office, or if the market conditions were just right, or if this group was silenced, or that ideology elevated, then we will arrive.

Friends, this is the myth that is peddled out before us, and too often, we buy it hook, line, and sinker because it is couched in religious jargon. But it simply isn't true. If we are to properly pursue God-likeness, we do so only through Jesus Christ. For it was Jesus who said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).*

Thus, the center of our discipleship should not be political slogans or policy positions, but rather the life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is what informs our living; this is what informs our politics. So why don't more people believe? They allow a veil to remain over them, and the "god of this age" blinds them from seeing the light of the gospel. This can seem pretty hopeless. This can seem like there is no way out of this situation. So the last question Paul addresses is what hope is there for those who have been blinded to see the good news?

**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. vv. 5-6**

Our hope that the veil can be lifted is in none other than Jesus Christ, and this is why Paul states that he is not preaching himself, but Jesus

Christ as Lord. Here is the foundational statement of the Gospel. Jesus is Lord. This is Paul's message; this is the summary of all that Paul preached in a few short words. "Jesus is Lord." Notice the tense of this statement is Lord. Not one day, he will be Lord but is currently ruling on the throne as Lord of the universe.

There is a tendency to romanticize this phrase. It is not a platitude, but an ontological claim, Jesus is Lord. Think of Jesus' words at the end of Matthew 28, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus is Lord, right now, in power, in control, in charge.

*"For God...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" (v. 6).* For all followers of Jesus, there was a moment when the light broke into the blind and darkened recesses of our hearts. And it is this light that enabled us to see Christ and come to the truth. It is only through the work of God that our darkness is extinguished, and the light of Christ enters our lives.

Notice once again that it is God who is removing the blindness. It is God who is enabling the light to shine. We don't need gimmicks; we don't have to take up immoral means to try and accomplish our work. We don't need deceit and deception. Our calling is to faithfulness and to love God and neighbor without discrimination. It is to give love and grace as liberally as it has been given to us. And then we let God do his work. We trust the work of the Holy Spirit to carry his gospel forward.

This is our ministry, and by the very mercy of God, we have this ministry. For Paul, it didn't matter who sat in Rome; for us, it doesn't matter who sits in the oval office; we have this ministry. And if it is God who unveils hearts and enables us to experience the knowledge of God, we are free to love anyone without restraint. Because it is not our role to save, but rather it is our role to love, embrace, and fill the world with the very mercy that has been shown to us.

Commentator Judith Diehl stated:

**The light of the gospel must take the form of human compassion toward both our fellow believers and the unbeliever alike. In an unjust world, Christians must make a difference in big and small ways. To put it mildly, Christian ministry is extremely difficult in a darkened world that is filled with selfishness, greed, a lack of human justice, unfairness, and immortality. ...In the same way, we must attempt to heal the hopeless, care for the careless, and be patient with the rebellious. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we can extend a helping hand to those in need in a broken world, whoever they are, and leave the judgment to God.**

The temptation for all of us is to outsource the ministry that we have been given by the mercy of God to political parties or agendas. Regardless of which side of the aisle you identify with, to elevate the establishing of the Kingdom of God through partisan agendas is to reject the gift of ministry that has been handed to us. To resort to power, politics is to resort to coercive means to do the work that only God can do.

### **So we have this ministry...**

That we do not coerce; we do not lie; we do not distort the word of God but declare our hope and the plain truth that Jesus is Lord. A ministry that takes seriously and names the broken realities of ourselves and this world and offers a way forward in Jesus.

### **So we have this ministry...**

To preach Christ alone and not ourselves. To preach a message that centers the agenda of Jesus, that seeks first his Kingdom, and to think of ourselves not as the role of savior but of servants to the world for the sake of Christ.

### **So we have this ministry...**

To display the face of Christ in all we do. That seeks to be the light of the world in a world filled with darkness. For we are liberated to give this light freely to any and all because we are not the ones who save, but merely give witness to the beauty of the Gospel that Jesus is Lord.

This is our ministry, every act of kindness, every movement of love, every embrace of that which is good, every word that speaks of the reality of Jesus as Lord. And it is because of this ministry, because of the hope that we hold in Jesus Christ as Lord that we do *"...not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up"* (Gal. 6:9).

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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