

The Glory of Gospel Ministry

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

May 30, 2021

Find your way to 2 Corinthians 4:1. Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians is really the most autobiographical of all his epistles. That letter reveals Paul's deep affection for the Corinthians. It gives us insight into what he suffered as an apostle, as Jesus promised him. And we see in the suffering and in the trial and affliction, we see what's revealed is the heart of this apostle. And you can see the work of grace of Christ in his life in a remarkable way.

He has a deep affection for the Corinthians church and particularly so in view of the danger of false teachers, who had infiltrated Corinth, infiltrated the Corinthian church. And they came in wanting to win followers for themselves. They came to turn the church against Paul, to ruin his reputation and

question his motives. They wanted to gain followers for themselves.

Paul is going to deal with those false teachers later, starting in the tenth chapter, but even in these early chapters of the letter false accusations are there hovering in the background. So Paul uses those attacks of his opponents as an opportunity to teach the faithful, to show the Corinthians what true Gospel ministry really looks like.

So I'm going to work our way through the chapter over the next week or two. And today, we're just going to cover the first six verses. So take a look there, coming off what we just read in 2 Corinthians 3. Paul says this, 2 Corinthians 4:1, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 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.

“And even if our Gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world 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. What we proclaim is not ourselves, but what we proclaim is Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. 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.”

There are two parallel phrases. You may have noticed. There is one in verse 4 and another in verse 6. And those parallel phrase, phrases help us see the theme of this section and to understand the true significance of our ministry in the Gospel. The Christian ministry plays a significant role in God’s work of what we call, spiritual illumination. Illumination, causing the eyes to see and the mind to understand, to reveal and illuminate the truth that’s plain on the pages of Scripture, but to illuminate it and teach it to the mind. That’s spiritual illumination.

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Satan opposes the work, to prevent verse 4, if you look at it there, "the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ" from entering into unbelieving minds. But the sovereign God in his work of salvation he is undisturbed by Satan's efforts. And so he gives to his people, verse 6, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." That's what's at stake in the ministry.

And in fact, that's what the Christian ministry is all about. As slaves of Christ the Lord, we obey him. As his slaves, serving his purposes, we follow his plan for ministry. It's a plan that Paul lays out plainly in this text. And there are other texts in the New Testament that explain his blueprint for ministry. But we do his ministry his way.

We don't innovate. We don't go outside the local church, which is where he does his ministry, is through the local church. We don't modify it. We don't update it for new times. We do his will and we do it in his way. Sadly, so much of evangelicalism over the past half century has not followed this very simple model. It really has departed from a biblical philosophy of

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ministry written down by Christ's Apostles. There's no need for me to waste time going into any detail about that because it's really obvious. The evidence is all around us. The wreckage is everywhere.

All that you, used to make evangelical headlines over the years, all the advice we got from church growth experts, all the self-styled evangelists who went and did their own thing, all the parachurch ministries who said they were assisting the church, but then came to supplant the church, all those unqualified men and women assuming leadership, dictating direction for the churches, so much of that has clearly fallen away. But not without doing great damage.

While shipwrecking their own faith, these leaders were also confusing many. Leading many astray. Leading many pastors astray. And worse of, worst of all they brough reproach reproach, to the fair name of Jesus Christ and his church. I point that out not because I have any concern about any of you men here who are pastors and elders serving Grace Church. You're not going to follow the same course.

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I only point it out to highlight the need for all of us, especially pastors, especially elders to keep on knowing, to keep studying, to keep following and returning time and time again to the Lord's blueprint for Christian ministry, so that we see his plan. His plan is always before us, that we follow his philosophy of ministry.

So elders and you who aspire to leadership in the church, pastors, shepherds, pay attention, because I'm speaking this morning to you. For those of you who are not in formal ministry, not called to eldership, you have a responsibility to know and understand what Christian leadership is supposed to look like as well.

Why is that? Well as church members, you are responsible to obey your leaders and submit to them, Hebrews 13:17. So you should pray for your leaders, certainly. But by knowing the Lord's plan, knowing his expectations for his ministers, you can pray effectively, purposefully. Target your prayers. You can ask the

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Lord to keep these men on course. Protect them. Keep them always faithful.

You can also talk to your leaders, and you should talk to them if ever you see them drifting off course. And if you have faithful elders and a faithful church, God has blessed you with such men as examples, as models to follow, the writers, the writer to the Hebrews again he says early in that same chapter Hebrews 13:7, "Remember your leaders those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."

So every point in today's sermon has implications for each and every one of you as individual Christians and as church members united in a local church body. Every point in today's sermon is applicable to your life as well. So elders, I'm preaching directly to you this morning and by so doing, I hope and trust that all will benefit as well.

I've got five exhortations for you this morning from this text. Five exhortations that if you obey them, if you stay faithfully

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committed to following them, then Christ will count you faithful when he comes to judge your ministry and how you handled the stewardship of his glorious Gospel.

Here's the first exhortation. Number one, identify the disposition of Gospel ministry. Identify the disposition, or we could say the character of Gospel ministry. It's a disposition, as Paul says here, "of mercy toward sinners." Disposition or character of mercy toward sinners.

Look at verse 1. Paul says, "Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God we do not lose heart." "Having this ministry by the mercy of God we do not lose heart." Paul says, we, there. You'll notice throughout the section Paul is using first person plural verbs. "We do not lose heart," verse 1. "We do not renounce," verse 2 and so on.

And Paul isn't referring to himself in the plural, like a literary plural. He is acknowledging that others are helping him. There are others assisting him in his apostolic ministry. Timothy is one of those associates. He's named in the greeting

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of this letter, chapter 1, verse 1. But there are others, too. And he names them and thanks them and encourages them and appreciates God for them in his letters. And you can see that especially in the closing portions of his epistles.

In fact, there is a, there is a true sense by extension that all the evangelists, pastors and teachers, Ephesians 4:1, from Timothy onward, who is a pastor, they are building on this foundation of the apostles. That means that this pattern is the pattern for all Christian ministers to follow. It's the same pattern Timothy followed in Paul's day. And it's what's written down for us, and it's commended to us, commanded of us and we can't depart of, depart from it.

If we're to remain faithful to the apostolic ministry, remain faithful to the will of Christ, this is how we do ministry. This is what we do and the main verb there, "We do not lose heart," it's preceded by a, therefore, at the beginning of the sentence. That points us back to the previous context. That phrase, "having this ministry" makes us ask, what ministry? What's he talking about?

Well it's the ministry that he was describing in the previous chapter, which we read in our Scripture reading. Ministry. It's the word *diakonia*. That's where we get our word for deacon. In this context, though, the meaning of deacon is, or *diakonia* is broader. Here *diaknoia* refers to an administration, like ministries that you've heard of maybe like in the United Kingdom. Departments of Governance are referred to there as ministries. And those who exercise oversight and authority are called ministers. They were servants of the state, but they are ministers with regard to the administration of their ministry. So they're called ministers. Cabinet ministers. You've got the Prime Minister and so on.

So that's the concept here of *diakonia* in this context. And in talking about this ministry, this *diakonia*, Paul is pointing back to what he said in chapter 3. And he uses that word *diakonia* repeatedly. And he contrasts two different ministries. There's a ministry of death and condemnation in the law and then there's a ministry of life and glory by the Spirit in the Gospel.

Look back at chapter 3, verse 6 and Paul says this, "God has made us sufficient, adequate, totally equipped, ready to be ministers of a new covenant." That's that word *diakonia*.

"Ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death," there's the word again, "carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not," the *diaknoia*, "the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?"

If the Old Testament administration had glory but it's a fading, passing away glory on its own, until brought in by the new covenant ministry, *diakonia*, this administration with greater glory. "If there was a glory in the ministry of condemnation," verse 9, "the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory."

So on the one side of that contrast the ministry of death. The ministry of condemnation. On the other side of the contrast, the

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ministry of the New Covenant. The ministry of the Spirit. The ministry of a, a full completed righteousness revealed in Christ. We could sum it up with two words: Law and Gospel. Law and Gospel. The ministry of the Law, but it's completed, perfected by the ministry of the Gospel.

On the Gospel side, verse 6, Paul cites God's promise in Jeremiah 31:31. "I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts not on cold tablets of stone but on soft tablets of human hearts." In the age of the Spirit the law is no longer an externally imposed thing upon God's people. The law is now, because of the Spirit, a matter of internal desire, because of spiritual regeneration, because of new life in Christ, because of the Spirit's indwelling presence.

Continuing in Jeremiah 31:31, God promises in the New Covenant. He says, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." How can that be when all have sinned and broken God's holy law? How can he bring, as we hear so clearly in the waters of baptism? How can a perfect righteous just God bring a guilty sinner to himself and still be counted just? Does he overlook sin?

No. Verse 34, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." That is the New Covenant. That's the New Covenant that's fulfilled in the atonement, the perfect final atonement of Jesus Christ. Both sides of that contrast, Law and Gospel, had glory. Both sides of that, glorified God in what they revealed. On the one said the ministry of death and condemnation, that glorified God's perfections of his holiness, of his purity, of his perfect righteousness. His, his standard of perfection required morally and ethically for all people. His inflexible justice in pursuing accountability and calling people to account for keeping that standard. And that glorifies God, doesn't it? It reveals who he is and what he's like. It tells us clearly what he expects.

On the other side in this New Covenant ministry, the Spirit's regeneration, the ministry of righteousness. These had an even greater glory, superlatively so. Not by way of contrast as if mercy is greater than justice. We don't pit God's, attributes one against the other. All God's, God's attributes are one because God is one. They are all in perfect unity, in

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perfect harmony, because God is in unity and harmony. God is one. His attributes are one.

The greater glory of the New Covenant is in the fact that it completes God's redemptive glory. It started in the Old Testament, completed in the New. It reveals how God can be just and the justifier of the one who puts his faith in Jesus Christ. It's a full and final reconciliation with God from the heart based on full and final forgiveness from God provided by God. It's the forgiveness that God provided by the perfect all-sufficient and final atonement of Jesus Christ.

Now back to 2 Corinthians 4:1. What does Paul mean there that he and his associates have this ministry, the phrase, "by the mercy of God." It's not the ministry itself that they are pursuing that is the mercy. That's not the mercy. The granting of a ministry from God, that's called grace, not mercy. The word, mercy, means, not getting what we're due. The word, grace, that's, unmerited favor. It means we get what we don't deserve, right?

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So Paul had received both from God: Mercy and grace. But here he's talking about mercy. The fact that God gave him the New Covenant ministry, that's called grace, not mercy. And here he's focused on mercy. So what does he mean? "Having this ministry by the mercy of God." What does he mean there?

Simply this: The fact that Paul and his associates are conducting Gospel ministry, that is evidence of God's mercy to an unbelieving world. The very fact of their existence, the very fact and existence of a ministry like this, the fact that Gospel ministers exist at all, is proof that God is being patient because of his mercy. He's giving people time to repent. He's being forbearing.

The fact that sinners are not immediately extinguished like snuffing out a dying flame at the very first thought of sin, as it takes form and shape in their mind. The fact that God does not snuff them out immediately at that moment is a mercy. The very existence of Gospel ministry, then, is a mercy of God. And our work as Gospel ministers is a mercy of God.

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We are God's mercy to the world. And listen, it's vital that we as ministers, shepherds, pastors, elders, you as Christians, that we identify the disposition of our ministry. That we identify the character of Gospel ministry as a disposition of divine mercy toward sinners. Why is that? Why is that so important?

When we establish the fact that the character of our ministry is God's mercy, it does two things for us. It keeps us from becoming discouraged, from losing heart, from giving up because of two things. First, we recognize that the ministry is far bigger than us. It's not about me and my thing. It's not about you and your thing.

This has something to do with God's intent from before the foundation of the world to glorify himself. To show his own mercy. Just by the fact that we minister the Gospel to people, it's his mercy. We're a part of that. All things considered, us being faithful, obedient, and speaking the truth and living holy lives. Our apparent success or lack of success is relatively unimportant in the, in the broader scheme of things.

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And knowing that, it really does give us great confidence in the ministry because this ministry is about God's greater plan to bring all glory to himself. God didn't need your help in creating the world and yet, when you use the world that he created, when you give thanks, it brings glory to him. In the same way, God doesn't need your help in the ministry of the Gospel. But he grants us this ministry by his grace. And it's because of his ministry broadly speaking.

So as you do your part, as you play your position, as you minister the Gospel, you bring glory to him. Knowing that you may be a very small player in God's program, as we all are. We're like "flowers of the field that are here for a little while and fade away," knowing "our life is vapor, here today, gone tomorrow." Knowing that your existence in ministry is daily proof, though, of God's mercy. That takes all the pressure off. It encourages you. And never lose heart. Never be discouraged. Never give up because the sovereign God is over you, pleased with your ministry of his mercy to people.

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And second, so another way that this keeps us from becoming discouraged and losing heart. Since ministry is a mercy, we are continually reminded, aren't we, of our own participation in the Gospel? The day that God visited us with his mercy, showed mercy to us. This, this changes, and it ought to, it changes the way you deal with other people.

For Paul, he never forgot the fact that God spared his life. He never got over it. God did not give him what he had deserved. God showed him mercy. Paul saw himself rightly as the chief of sinners, 1 Timothy 1:15. That's because he was the chief of sinners. He persecuted the church of God in full knowledge and understanding of what he was doing.

1 Corinthians 15:9, Philippians 3:6, Galatians 1:13, he rats himself out. He says, I did that! It's recorded in Scripture for all time. In Galatians 1:13, he even admits to doing that persecution violently. He was trying to destroy the church. If, if that Paul visited this church, he'd want us dead. He'd want us carted off to prison and brought upon trial.

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It says God showed him mercy, 1 Timothy 1:13. He says this, "Because I was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." And Paul never ever forgot that. The forgiveness he received in Christ, that was the mercy of God to him.

Fellow elder, pastor, shepherd, why is that important to remember? As we conduct ourselves as ministers of this Gospel? Because as Gospel ministers, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, we know we're heading into a deadly storm. We know persecution is coming, affliction. We're ministers, we represent God and his Christ and so people will, as Jesus promised, people will hate us. They'll exclude us. They don't want us in polite company. They're embarrassed when you bring up what you do in service of the church. They revile us, they spurn us, and our names as evil.

And these days, we're becoming a threat to public health and safety. What does Jesus tell us to do in return when people

treat us like that, spitefully? Find an opportunity to exercise our Second Amendment rights? No. Jesus said in Luke 6:27, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who persecute you, pray for those who abuse you." "Be merciful," he said, "Just as your Father in heaven is merciful."

The Gospel minister must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. That's the disposition of Gospel ministry. That's the character. It's a divine mercy to others. And we understand that because we were recipients of that same mercy. We get it. And we must never forget it.

Here's a second exhortation, for you elders, pastors, number two, clarify the convictions of Gospel ministry. Clarify the convictions of Gospel ministry. In light of a ministry saturated with divine mercy, Paul is telling us at the end of verse 1 and getting into verse 2, he says there is nothing that can cause he and his associates, his fellow ministers, nothing that can cause them to lose heart. They cannot become discouraged.

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This is ministry performed in full conviction, verses 1 and 2. "Therefore," he says, "we don't lose heart," verse 2, "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."

It may not be as clear in the English text, but if you kind of ignore the verse division, you can see there are two main verbs held in contrast by the word, "but," "We do not lose heart," on the one hand, "but we have renounced," on the other. Those thoughts are joined together, and they really are a piece. The verb "we do not lose heart," when it's used in military context, it refers to a warrior, a soldier who has lost his nerve. A soldier who shrinks back from doing his duty.

Or, in less flattering terms, we would call such a one who retreats in the face of battle and doing shameful acts of running away, we would call that person a what? Coward. It's cowardice. Paul is saying, "Having identified the role of God's mercy in what we do, we know our place and we are resolved never

to cave in. Never to give up. Never to shrink back in a spirit of cowardice.”

That leads not quite naturally here to the deep conviction we hear coming out of the next verse. “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.” “But we have denounced, renounced, disowned. We have nothing to do with disgraceful, underhanded ways.” Literally, it’s, we’ve renounced hidden things of shame or secret things of disgrace. Things of, of dishonor. Things which, if revealed, would leave a lasting humiliation, a stain on our lives.

Irredeemable embarrassment. That’s what Paul’s talking about here. He’s talking about hidden motives of the heart, sinful desires, secret evil thoughts, sinful intentions, secret habits and practices. Renounce that. It’s a conviction about the nature of this ministry. And that has nothing to do with it.

False ministers, pseudo pastors, decept, deceptive deceitful shepherds, the Bible calls them hirelings. They harbor secrets in their hearts. They have things that are hidden because

they're shameful. Sadly in our calloused day, we've seen that these ministers and false pastors and pseudo shepherds, they're blatantly and flagrantly committing these sins in public. Their church rejoices in that.

They have lost heart. That's who Paul's talking about here. They have, they are the ones who've become discouraged. And they're now given over to religious sins, which are the worst sins of all. They're ministering under the cover of duplicity and hypocrisy and deceit. They're resorting to what Paul identifies in verse 2 as cunning and craftiness and adulterating God's Word. What are such people like that, religious people, what do they hope to gain?

"But they commend themselves to others." They hope to get the approval of men. They hope to gain people's trust, hope to get their favor and a little bit of their money. They're covetous of a good reputation or a good standing. They covet maybe money or prominence or fame or influence or power. Whatever it is. Paul says, We've nothing to do with, our ministry has nothing to do with that. It's from a sense of deep conviction. It's from this

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indignation he feels about that kind of stuff going on, calling itself faithful, calling itself Christ, representing Christ.

He has an abhorrence of all that duplicity, an anger even about that hypocrisy. And it's because Paul does not lose heart and become discouraged. He renounces in no uncertain terms any and every unfaithful approach to ministry. No cunning. No trickery. No bait-and-switch tactics. No tampering with God's Word.

That's an interesting expression, tamper. It's *doloo*. It means, to change something, but, but not obviously so. It's to do it ever so slightly resulting in a, in a distortion that completely falsifies and reverses the intent. So the, the noun, it'll, it'll help to illustrate it. The noun is *dolos*. It's the word for, bait. And the word, you know what bait is. It's to catch a fish. Bait looks good and juicy to a, a fish swimming up to eat it. But it hides a hook.

So the very thing that they think they're going for that's going to give them sustenance and life and joy turns out be the exact opposite. It turns out to be their doom, their death, their

demise. That's what false shepherds do with God's Word. They shade its truths. They shave off its hard edges. They file down a bit here and a bit there. To fit it into a cultural milieu. And when they do that, they obscure its meaning entirely. Their intent is to turn the clear Word of God, which people trust, they turn it into a bait to ensnare the unsuspecting.

Why is Paul saying all this? Why is he talking about this? Because this is how the false teachers, who infiltrated the Corinthian church, this how they were characterizing Paul. Remember Paul was there for a year and half, he, they knew him, they loved him, but then he went away, and he was gone. And so in his absence without him there to defend himself, to demonstrate his character and his honesty and his integrity, they took advantage of his absence. They accused Paul, slandered him. Oh, he uses flattery, smooth words. Don't trust him. He's beguiling you with his learning and his speech, but don't trust him, makes false promises. He can't be trusted.

The truth of it is, and this is the case with sinners, you see it all the time. They're projecting upon Paul their own hearts.

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They're accusing him of the things that they themselves are guilty of. They assume that he's as bad as they are. That his motives are as corrupt as theirs. So they start to voice that. They start to unseat people's confidence in his shepherding, as his apostleship.

You know a cowardly shepherd, one who has come to distrust God's Word, one who has given into unbelief, by the way he preaches, by the way he teaches, by the way he interacts or doesn't interact. You found cowardly shepherds and cowardly people as well, pulling to the sidelines, more comfortable on the fringe. They don't want to live in the light. Shepherds, they commend themselves to audiences because they want to gain a following.

You hear the way they preach, teach, counsel, minister the Word of God. And you can hear that that ministry lacks God's authority. Therefore, it lacks God's power, God's blessing. The reason that they are there to speak to an audience is to commend themselves. And so because they want to keep the audience and hold onto the audience, they say nothing that will offend. Nothing hard. They use smooth speech to tickle the ears.

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All their words are couched in tentative tones, soothing people, assuring them that the Bible may not really mean all that stuff about sin. It's not so hard. Hey, I struggle too, don't you? There's a false friendliness there. And it's calculated. It's designed to please people. Making no waves, upsetting no one. So they refuse to ascend, offend any sensibilities. They, they don't want to trouble anybody's conscience. They don't wanna, don't wanna go against the cultural flow and speak to cultural public sins.

True shepherds are exactly the opposite. They do what Paul does. They renounce all that falsehood. They disown it. They refuse to walk in those ways. They refuse to twist and distort and shape God's Word. Instead, like Paul, like it says there in verse 2, "By the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

That phrase "the open statement of the truth," it's a word that means, full disclosure. There's no fine print. Everything is large caps, bold font. It means, to make a clear, public

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announcement. In light of modern technologies, we might say the word means, to publish the truth, to put all those ideas from Scripture out in the open so everybody can examine it. We could say it means, to broadcast the truth, to put the plain truth out there, floating in the airwaves so that anyone can hear it, download it, listen to it, and examine it, to see if these things are so.

We do this because true ministry, it's about getting the truth out and targeting the conscience of every hearer. Calling every man, every woman, every child to listen, to understand, to examine the truth. And then to repent and believe it. Elders, shepherds, come to a deep conviction about the power of the truth, the power of God's Word, believe it deeply, believe it without hesitation, entertain no doubt whatsoever. Preach it! And let the Spirit of God go to work on the conscience.

Charles Spurgeon said this, "Suppose a number of persons were to take it into their heads that they had to defend a lion, a full-grown king of the beasts. There he is in the cage and here come all the soldiers of the army to fight for him. Well, I should

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suggest to them, if they would not object, and feel that it was humbling to them that they should kindly stand back and open the door and let the lion out. I believe that that would be the best way of defending him for he would take care of himself. And the best apology or defense of the Gospel is to let the Gospel out. When you let out the lion of God's Word, when you let it out of the cage, when you give the whole counsel of God, when you soften no hard truths, when you back away from nothing difficult, God's Spirit will press that into the conscience. You just leave the results to God."

So we might wonder then, why so many consciences seem to be, particularly today, seem to be impervious to the truth that we proclaim. Brings us to a third exhortation. Number three, elder, pastor, shepherd, minister, Christian, number three, you need to demystify the rejection of Gospel ministry. Demystify, that is remove the mysteriousness of it, demystify the rejection of Gospel ministry.

I've seen this so many years, how Christians trouble themselves unnecessarily as to why so-and-so just can't seem to live in

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holiness. And as they ponder, as they kind of wring their hands and trouble themselves, they make excuse after excuse for this rebel. Oh, it's his bad background. Oh, it's his poor relationship with his parents. He didn't know his father very well. He was always busy, always working. His, his mother didn't rock him enough. They used formula, not, you know, the real stuff. Never succeeded in school, wasn't successful in sports. He didn't have any friends. He was raised in a rough neighborhood. And on and on it goes.

So much of that bad theology, bad ecclesiology, especially in what create the seeker movement, came from the mission field. Discouraged missionaries in India succumbed to unbelief because they weren't, resee, seeing results on the mission field. So they, with an unbelieving posture toward God's Word; shape it a little bit, they adulterate it, they make it more palatable to their target audience, and as they do that, they walk away from all faithfulness.

As I said, it happened in India. As that missionary was seeing that Indians did not like to come to faith because those in the

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higher castes would have to associate with those in the lower castes. And so what that Indian missionary did, he said, You know what? You can come to Christ and stay within your caste. Hmmm. Does the Gospel not mean that we are all one in Christ? Is our identity not in Christ? Are we not all equal in Christ? Does that not obliterate the caste system? Should you not preach with vehemence against the caste system? Indeed.

But that was ported back to America where Fuller Seminary in particular, that was turned into a method for church growth. Don't make people feel uncomfortable coming to Christ. If they're yuppies, keep them yuppies. Christian yuppies. If they're hard rockers, keep them hard rockers. Christian hard rockers. And on and on it went. Every caste in our society.

That's walking away from faithfulness. That's becoming discouraged, losing heart, becoming a coward on the battlefield. Listen, it is not a mystery when people reject the Gospel, when they disobey the Bible, when they continue walking in their sins. The only reason that might trouble someone is if they keep trying to consider that person and reconcile with them or with

themselves, how that person is still a Christian. Because they said they're a Christian.

We're going to be faithful Gospel ministers in our own minds and in our ministries, we need to demystify the rejection of the Gospel and disobedience to the truth. Paul helps us with that in verses 3 and 4. It says, "Even if our Gospel is veiled."

Remember that image of veiling in, in Israel from chapter 3? "Even if our Gospel is veiled, it's veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world 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."

"Those who are perishing." It's a single participle there. It's, it's constructed in such a way as to point to the character of that person. So Paul is talking here about those who are perishing as a group of people, it's what characterize, it's their identity. They are the reprobate. They're steeled and hardened in their unbelief and they're heading, happily, by their own free will down the path of destruction right into hell.

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So Paul's talking about here, this is someone who has heard the Gospel and rejected it. They understand. They clearly understand it and they've walked away. Perhaps they even professed faith for a time, but now they walk in disobedience decidedly so. They may still say, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior," but their deeds deny him. They follow their own desires, and they demonstrate by that that they remain in slave to sin. They've handed themselves over, in some cases, to judicial blindness. A hardening of the heart.

The agent in that blinding is the god of this age. We don't know when that judicial blindness, when God will judge somebody and hand them over. We don't know when that will happen. It's different with different individuals. We heard a couple testimonies this morning about people who seemed so hard, hearing the Gospel, seeming to understand it, but walking in their own ways. But God could still show mercy. He's not bound. But his judicial hardness can seal it using Satan himself as agent in blinding.

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I said this at the beginning that the result of Satan's agency, blinding the minds of unbelieving, is that they are cut off from God's gracious work of spiritual illumination. And that's the word that's used here. It's *photismos*. It refers to an active, dynamic, effectual energy that's in the Word of God. And that energy and power is there because it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel, to activate that in a life.

The minds of sinners, dead in their trespasses and sins, the minds of sinners are dark, unenlightened and they so desperately need the light of God's truth. The source of that is spiritual illumination. As Paul is saying here is the Gospel and this is what Gospel preachers bring to the unbelieving sinner. But the forces of darkness are there to throw over that unbelieving mind a thick impenetrable veil. Kind of like a blackout curtain that lets nothing in. No light penetrates.

When that happens, it is remarkable sad because these are people who are missing out on the greatest glory ever known to mankind. The light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. It's been said that the glory of Christ makes him the

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radiant point in the whole universe, the object of supreme admiration, adoration, and worship. This is so true.

So distorted is the image of God in these unbelievers. So hardened they are in unbelief. So blinded are they by the god of this age that they're fallen reason can never ever elevate to perceive the truth about Christ. He's the only one who is himself the very image of God. The only one who makes visible the invisible God.

So why is it so important for us as ministers, shepherds, pastors, elders to demystify the rejection of the Gospel by the unbelieving? Because not only is it fruitless to try to figure out what God has so clearly revealed about the rejection right here, it can easily turn into disobedience, discouragement, not believing what God has plainly said. It can breed discouragement in the ministry as we lose heart, as we're tempted to cowardice, to distrust the efficacy of the Gospel. To doubt the true power of God's Word and resort to our own human energy and effort to persuade.

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When the sinner rejects the truth, that which we have commended to his conscience, the truth that we have given in full disclosure, publicly publishing the truth, broadcasting the whole counsel of God leaving nothing out even the hard parts. When the sinner hears that, rejects that, listen, it is not the fault of the minister. It is not weakness in the Gospel. It is not the, a deficiency in the power of God's truth. What we're seeing there is a sinner under condemnation when he rejects. We're seeing a sinner in danger of a judicial hardening by the agency of Satan.

So what's the answer to this impervious conscience? What is the answer to this rejection? Well, Paul's answer was to double down on preaching the truth. He never budged from that. And specifically, this aspect of the truth that comes up in the next verse, the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So with that in mind, here's a fourth exhortation, a fourth exhortation for you pastors, elders, shepherds, and all Christians. Number four, magnify the dominion of Gospel ministry. Magnify the dominion of Gospel ministry.

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Again, apparent success or failure of our ministry, that is in terms of the number of those getting saved and all the rest, that is not about us. The real contest going on, the real issue at stake, it's between the god of this age, on the one hand, and the eternal Lord of heaven and earth on the other hand. That's the one who said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

This is why Paul said, verse 5, "For what we proclaim, not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." As Gospel ministers, we have only one bullet in our gun and it's the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Satan is too much for us. His demons are too much for us. Wiley sinners are too much for us. A rebellious four-year-old, too much for me. That's why we're committed to preaching. Its' not about us. That's why we're committed to public proclamation of the Word of God, the truth of God, which is the power of the Holy Spirit.

The word here is *kerysso*, cry out like a herald; to cry out publicly, to cry out loudly, because we represent a great king.

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We run before him. Run before the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the commentator R.C.H Lenski who said this, "Christ Jesus as Lord is not only the center, but the entire sphere. Not only the central doctrine, but the sum of all doctrine, omitting none. Christ Jesus as Lord means every word he spoke or gave by his apostles, dropping not one. To preach him as Lord means to serve his interests alone and since this preaching is the preaching of the Gospel, it is serving only the interests of the Gospel."

So what does this mean preaching the Lordship of Christ? First of all it means, we never preach ourselves. We never preach ourselves. Shepherds have gifts, pastors, leadership ability, competency in eldership, experience over time, there's some level of charisma, a way with words, ability to read people, to discern intentions, to encourage and strengthen, and an ability to interact with people appropriately. But listen, we never preach ourselves.

We don't foster groupies or followers or fans. In fact, we discourage that kind of behavior. Why is that? Because we are miserable, powerless, substitutes for Christ. What are we? We

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have no power at all. None. Zero. We've no power to convert, convert sinners. We have no power to move the needle one dot over toward belief. We have no power to overcome, skate, Satan's schemes. We have no power to change hearts. That is the province of Christ and his province alone.

And that's why, second of all, we preach Jesus Christ as Lord; not ourselves. Him as Lord, not ourselves. Him as Lord of the universe, his dominion. We preach Jesus Christ as Lord. Start with Jesus, we preach Jesus. We preach the historical man whose life is the subject of the Gospels. We preach his true humanity, born of the virgin Mary, raised to maturity by Mary and Joseph, proving what we know from the very beginning that he's sinless and perfect and that he fulfilled all righteousness. We preach Jesus Christ.

Christ the Savior, Son of Man, Son of God, promised son of David, fulfilling all the promises God made to the patriarchs to his people, to David. Sitting on the throne of his father David, ruling over the whole world. He's the Messiah. He is the Savior.

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He's the Redeemer. He's the ruler of the world. We preach Jesus Christ is Lord, *Kyrios*.

He's Lord of heaven and earth. Lord over angels and men. He is Lord over governments, over all authorities, whether local, state, national, international, and maybe one day universal. Lord over dollars and cents and bitcoin. He rules over every molecule at the smallest level and every star and galaxy at the greatest level. As Abraham Kuyper so memorably put it, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our whole human existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all does not cry, 'Mine!'"

So we preach Jesus Christ as Lord, not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. And then, thirdly, we preach ourselves, it says, seems like a contradiction with what I just said. But "We preach ourselves," Paul says, "as your slaves." So we don't preach ourselves in the sense that we don't preach ourselves as anything. But we do preach ourselves, if we speak about ourselves at all, we preach about ourselves as your slaves.

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Elders, pastors, shepherds are not slaves at human command. They're slaves at Christ's command. That's what it says there, "ourselves as your slaves" because of what? Jesus. He's the Lord. He's the Lord over his slaves. What is the significance of all this for us as ministers? It means that the Lordship of Christ, it doesn't just apply to the people to whom we preach. We're not just calling sinners to repent and bow the knee to the Lordship of Christ; we bow the knee to the Lordship of Christ. It applies to us, first of all as ministers.

We, we don't even, we shouldn't even open our mouth without acknowledging Jesus is Lord over my heart, my conscience, my words, my time, my effort, my energy. Consider ourselves to be slaves of Christ, under his orders. Bought and paid for by him. Deployed by him. So we're not allowed to say whatever we want to. We're not allowed to do our own thing. We're not allowed to innovate ministry. We're not allowed to update the Bible for modern times because we are owned by him. We're his property. We belong to him. We must obey our master.

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Christ has chosen to give us ministers, shepherds, pastors, elders, elders. He's decided to give us as gifts to serve his, the rest of his slaves for the sake of his people. We're his gifts to the church. Ephesians 4:11, I commend myself to you, and all of us elders, everybody in leadership here commends, we commend ourselves to you, publicly, as your slaves because of Christ. We're here to serve, equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. We're here to expend ourselves for you. That doesn't mean we're at the beck and call of all people. We're slaves of Christ; not of men.

And as slaves of Christ, it's our solemn duty to command the consciences of Christ's people. It's our duty to command them to obey the will of the Lord, their Lord, and our Lord. Those who lead, along with those who follow, we're all united under the same head, aren't we? We under the same Lord Jesus. And we're all responsible for reading what he's revealed clearly in Scripture and obeying it, just as he's written.

So the disposition of Gospel ministry is mercy. The conviction of Gospel ministry is what we, is that we tell the truth, that

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we give a full disclosure, straight forward preaching of the truth. We're not mystified by the rejection of those who deny the Gospel ministry because the devil is at work in judicial blindness. We understand that people are born sinners, live in sin, love their sin, and hate the Gospel. We get that. The dominion of Gospel ministry, absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ.

One more. A fifth, exhor, exhortation to you pastors, elders, shepherds, number five, glorify the sovereign of Gospel ministry. Glorify the sovereign of Gospel ministry. The god of this age may have active agency in the judicial blindness of the reprobate sinner. But the god of this age is not the sovereign of the universe. The devil is on a chain held by the hand of a sovereign God. Even the devil in all of his rebellion, he's accomplishing the ultimate purpose of God, the one who holds his chain.

It's the sovereign God who has the final say. We understand, when we understand God's sovereignty in salvation, when we recognize what he is actually granted in salvation, this infuses our ministry with zeal and with passion and with deep and strong

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abiding confidence. So we go out preaching Jesus Christ as Lord, verse 5, and for this reason, verse 6, "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, of Jesus Christ."

At first glance, it's may, may be hard to pick up the parallel that Paul is making. Maybe he's making a parable, maybe he's not, but considering some possible parallels, they, they kind of unravel a little bit into interpretive subjectivity. I mean is Paul drawing a parallel about God's power on the one hand to create light in the beginning? And on the other hand to create faith in our hearts? Is that what he's saying? It doesn't say anything about faith. Though it's assumed, it could be a bit forced.

Is this a parallel between light, physical light on the one hand shining in the universe so we can see. And spiritual light on the other hand shining in the heart. If so, what's the point of taking us back to creation? Talk about that? Perhaps it's about the efficacy of God's word. Speaking light into existence at the

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beginning by divine fiat. And then the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, causing us to be new creations. It's all implied in the text, but it may be reading too much into the text to say that that's exactly what Paul's getting at.

I think the key is in following the verbs; realizing following the verbs, that the subject of these verbs is God. In the first instance, God is the one who speaks. "Let light shine out of darkness." Right? Paul reminds us of how the glory of God is revealed in an instant, at the moment of creation. The single essence of the simple God, like a single beam of light shining through a prism refracts into a multitude of discernable colors. And yet, every refracted beam of light shares exactly the same properties on either side of that prism. God's singular essence, in the moment of creation, it refracts in the glory of divine attributes discernable to all who worship him.

That's what he's saying. And as he leads, then to what really, what makes this verse such a crescendo of splendor and a climax of divine glory in this ministry of the Gospel, that the God whose essence became known through creation, now, in this Gospel

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that we're preaching, notice in the second instance, God is the subject of that verb, too. It is none other than the triune God. He himself is the one who has shone in our hearts.

Not light shining in our hearts, but God shining in our hearts. What was external in creation becomes internal in salvation. What can the god of this age do to prevent God shining in the hearts of his elect? Answer: Not a thing. Nothing. He stands aside because God will be God. What the devil seeks to prevent, verse 4, "The light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." He seeks to prevent and keep that light from shining in human hearts. That only works on the reprobate. That only works on those who are perishing, those who have been handed over to that blindness.

But, but the elect of God, nothing will thwart God's sovereign initiative. Not just to give light, but for he himself to shine in the hearts of his people. And when he shines, he puts the spotlight at his son Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He helps us to see clearly what he himself loves, who he himself sent, Jesus

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Christ the Lord. The very subject of all our preaching, the main topic of all of our teaching and ministry.

And in this sense, Gospel minister, pastor, shepherd, elder, listen, in this sense, we are partners with the triune God in the salvation of sinners. He makes our preaching effectual for his chosen people. He gives them the privilege of seeing the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. The knowledge, knowing him, understanding him so that we might worship him. And in worshiping and praising and giving thanks to him, we bring him glory.

That light of the knowledge of the glory of God shines most brilliantly in the face of Jesus Christ. We look at him. My fellow elders, my fellow Christians, are there any greater motivations for engaging the ministry of gos, of the gospel? Is there any reason we should ever become discouraged, lose heart, become weary? And God forbid that we should turn and run in cowardice. Is there a reason we wouldn't want to let the lion out? Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord over all.

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And our gospel ministry is characterized by mercy. It's clarified for us in the conviction of the truth. It's unaffected by the reality of rejection by the unbelieving. We understand that. Our ministry is submitted wholly to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are confident and rejoicing at the privilege that's ours to partner with the sovereign initiative of God to save and sanctify his people. What a blessing we share in ministry together. Amen.

Bow with me for a prayer. Our Father what could we say in what Paul has taught us here by the Holy Spirit who authored this? What could we say to thank you? What could we do but rejoice in wonder, in worship and what must we do, but be obedient to do your will, in your way, never adulterating the truth, never using trickery, or cunning, or bait. Let us publish the Word of God. Let us broadcast the Gospel. We ask for your help by the Spirit to do that for the sake of Christ, for your glory. Amen.