

# The Fragrance of Gospel Ministry

*27 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.  
(2 Corinthians 2:14-17. ESV)*

## **Our New Covenant Ministry**

**September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

**2 Corinthians 4:1-12**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 4:1-12. Last week we ended our series on 'They Speak of Me' where we examined the Genesis narratives and how these testimonies reveal the character of God, who we are, and what God has accomplished for our redemption. Today we will fast forward to look at the Apostle Paul who has comprehended and experienced the new covenant in a way the Patriarchs longed to understand and hoped for all their earthly lives. This pastoral letter that we eavesdrop upon came with a multitude of emotions: joy, frustration, tears, pride, betrayal, and anguish. Paul spent multiple visits to the Corinthians and wrote letters ministering to their needs and clarifying important doctrine. Now he's received word Jewish Christian 'super-apostles', what he called peddlers of the gospel for gain, have infiltrated the church to spread false claims about Paul and the Gospel he preaches. While some stay faithful, others have seemed to doubt as well. As the apostle guards the integrity of these things we get a glimpse into the life of a true gospel minister. Let's see what God would have us see in His Word,

*"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. <sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you."*

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

While Paul primarily guards his apostolic ministry, we discover that what he pronounces is the heart of what Gospel ministry should look like in the lives of all believers who live in the time between the ascension and His return. God models through Paul the bondservant of Christ we should be as pastors, as individuals and also as a church in our pursuit to spread His glory to the ends of the earth. Let's look at four things that God's Word desires us to keep in check as we pursue His Great Commission.

First, we see:

**The foundation of gospel ministry is the work and Word of God**

Look at verse one,

*“**Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God,** we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> 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.”*

The ‘therefore’ and ‘this ministry’ connects the current passage with the context of the previous chapter which aims to declare that we live and minister under a new covenant that is better and more glorious than the old. If you remember a few weeks ago Pastor Paul preached on Abraham detailing the similarities and differences of the old and new covenants. In summary, the foundations are the same: grace alone through faith alone, and the purpose is the same: holiness and mission; but the new covenant is better because we are given new hearts and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is making this argument in chapter 3 as you can see in verses 7-11.

*“Now if the ministry of death, 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 ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.”*

The covenant full of laws, the old covenant, that leads to condemnation and death has now been eclipsed by the covenant that leads to righteousness and life, the new covenant, fulfilled in Christ and available through faith in His work. And it is on this side of the Cross, through the mercy of God who gives us His Spirit that we can carry out the insurmountable task in the most unlikely circumstances. Primarily because we can be confident that:

### **1. Our ministry depends on the Spirit of God**

There are those who wanted to commend themselves, fill resumes with their deeds to be seen as superior. Instead of ticking off the requirement of the old covenant law and signs they simply made a long list of their accomplishments to impress.

Paul calls these out in chapter 11 verses 12-14,

*“And what I do I will continue to do in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”*

They wanted to hold on to the inferior for the sake of self-exaltation rather than depend on the Spirit of God for true transformation. So they fill their lives with activities, rules, traditions, and arbitrary proverbs so that they can establish their sufficiency before man and God.

Paul counters by re-establishing that there is nothing that we can do to please God apart from the GRACE and MERCY of God. For Hebrews 11:6 declares

*“And without faith it is impossible to please him [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”*

We have this awareness because of the hand of God opens our eyes to the knowledge of Christ and seals us filled with the Holy Spirit. If we are doing “ministry” based on any other grounds than the sovereign redemptive work of God then we are doing continual evil, not Gospel ministry.

Be assured! The only way to come to reconciliation with God is through His divinely ordered way and any other way is foolish and insufficient at best. But...

### **2. Our confidence rests in the truth of God’s Word**

Paul exclaims that in the transforming of our totally depraved heart by God through the new covenant we can be confident of what we do and who we are.

Seen again in Chapter three verses, 4-6,

*“Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”*

Because God has determined and executed the work! It is by the mercy of God, not any effort of ours, that we are transformed and have confidence. Our confidence is not in our character, but rather in God’s character. When we proclaim our true identity, we only bolster the glory and power of God, and tell the truth of the gospel in our lives.

The Spirit of God has come in more glorious fashion. The work of Jesus brings freedom from the condemning bondage of the law, and the Spirit of God empowers us for growing in all righteousness. This is GREAT NEWS and we DON’T need to tamper with it!

It’s upon this that Paul continues in verse 2 of our main passage,

*“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.”*”

We don’t lose heart because our joy is found in something greater than our personal circumstances, accomplishments, or feelings. We don’t have a need to lie, cheat, and steal to get to the top of the pack because our identity is not found in other’s acceptance of us. We don’t need to add, take away, glamorize, or make persuasive the truth of the Gospel, because it is more than sufficient on its own terms.

We need to readily discard all the prideful striving and vain accolades of our life because the Spirit of God who gives us a new heart of flesh and changes our inclination from sin to righteousness is the only way in which we will ever be able to have any sense of gospel ministry. GOD initiates, works, and brings to completion salvation through the means of the Gospel of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. That’s more than enough and we need to be content and confident in it. Second we see,

### **The treasure of gospel ministry is the displayed glory of God in Christ**

Starting in verse three we read,

*“<sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> 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.* <sup>5</sup> *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* <sup>6</sup> *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."*

Paul understands by experience and by being a Jew who was formerly hostile against the gospel message that all did not readily accept it. But it wasn't because the message is defective or adulterated. In fact, he tells this church in 1 Corinthians that Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolish to the Gentiles. In this he acknowledges that the worldly effectiveness of his ministry may not seem impressive but his standards of success is met by treasuring faithfully the person of Christ so that God may be glorified. He doesn't need to manipulate anything but rather lift Jesus to the place he deserves. In the same way, as we contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, we need to steward it well. So..

### **1. We herald Jesus as the chief content of our message**

One of the main reasons I think we do less evangelism than we know we should is because we don't truly see that Jesus is the treasure of our message. In a recent study of Canadian Protestant, Lifeway shows that although more than half (58%) of churchgoers feel comfortable sharing their faith, most (78%) have not shared their faith with anyone over the past 6 months. More than half (59%) have not invited anyone to church in that time either. While four in ten (43%) feel a "personal responsibility to share my religious beliefs about Jesus Christ with non-Christians," when asked how many times they'd "shared with someone how to become a Christian", 78% say "Zero" and 10% says they have shared with one in the last six months<sup>1</sup>.

What I see in this statistic sample is that we feel comfortable sharing and know we should share but we often don't communicate the Gospel. And perhaps it's because we've lost the beauty and joy of Jesus. We don't all have to have miraculous, impressive "spiritual" stories to tell because I'm convinced that even the most mundane and average testimonies, if containing the supernatural work of God piercing your heart of stone and illuminating your life with the crucified truth of Christ, is worth shouting from the rooftop!

Our current passage echoes of Paul's conversion where on the Damascus Road, Jesus revealed himself in magnificent glory. The same God that spoke light into the darkness of creation is the same that shines his glorious light into the darkened soul of man by the logos Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lifewayresearch.com/tcdanada/>

Christ. This moment in time, knowing the gravity of sin and the beauty of grace, all things turned to rubbish as Paul saw the person of Jesus as the treasured Saviour.

Putting our gaze on anything else will make our ministry ineffective and stagnant as we lose heart in the frailty of a false gospel. But constant abiding and treasuring of Christ will propel us to shine His light all the more brightly and we will be fervent ambassadors of the kingdom. Rather than another checkbox, burden, or guru, he becomes our Lord. So...

## **2. We behold and exhibit the image of Jesus**

Paul indicates in these verses that the Damascus road was the time that the darkness was illuminated by the power of God but he also explains that the work of God does not stop there. As we treasure the person of Jesus, God continually draws us more and more in his image and display of his glory. In the previous chapter he states this plainly and here uses it to defend the effectiveness of his ministry. Look back at 3:16-18,

*“But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”*

So our goal in ministry is not to create people who follow certain rules, it's not to make obedient children who go through the motions, it's not to meet certain ministry objectives. Our mission is to create disciples who passionately embrace the person of Jesus and begin to grow more and more into his likeness from one degree of glory to another. But as we do, we'll quickly notice that it comes with a price.

Third,

### **The cost of gospel ministry is luxury and life**

If you look at the person and ministry of Jesus you quickly notice that it is bound with temptation, betrayal, suffering, and death. Conforming to his image means that we must accept what Paul already knew. Look at verses 7-10:

*“<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”*

I'm not sure about you but I don't think this makes the best promotional flyer for our church. I'm afraid that our church membership would drop significantly if I began the Membership Orientation classes we hold with, “Do you want to be a worthless, fragile vessel?

Do you want to be afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and always carry death? Come on, don't worry, we promise you won't be completely crushed, driven to despair, forsaken, or destroyed." Yet, that is what Paul states and even calls us to do in this passage. We must count the cost of the Gospel ministry and for the sake of the precious treasure in the field, as Jesus stated in his parable, be willing to sell everything to possess it. When you think of it, that's the only way ministry can and should be.

### **1. Our brokenness displays God's power**

Whatever one might be convinced of, it is blatantly obvious that we are simple, dull, and weak. Some of us have been able to fool each other, but these pretences melt away as we see the frailty and dependence of the elderly, try to grapple the doctrine of the Trinity, or attempt to sail a boat in a gale. But by God's great plan, he has determined to show his great power through our weakness. The more I decrease the more He increases. And the more he increases the more this silly pot can do!

One of the hardest things about living the Christian life for quite some time is the temptation to want to reinforce and fix our clay pots. We read a classic work and decide if we can put that finite wisdom in our vocabulary then we'll be or at least appear to be more effective or impressive. We hear a song or a phrase and think that this will beautify our lives, and we'll be more appealing to God and others. Eventually we end up having such "ornate", self-promoting pots that the fire inside, Christ, is obscured.

Or perhaps you're on the other side and you see that your life is broken and appears to be in irreparable pieces. You look at your new brothers and sisters only to find that they have lavish pots and you seemingly have nothing to offer. You don't even know where to start and the clay that you do slap on only seems to make those holes deeper and less fulfilled.

Looking around this church, recognize that every person you see that trusts in Christ, regardless of how they might appear, is a powerless, insufficient, dying person. BUT in God's infinite power has raised them to newness of life and works wonders to show His glory, majesty and might to the reaches of the world. So we ought to be broken even unto death for when the pot is broken the contents are more clearly exalted.

### **2. Our death shows Christ's life**

Looking again at verse 10,

*<sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."*

The paradox of gospel ministry is that death and life are always happening within us. We are dying anew and manifesting more life. As we grow more into death, the cruciform image of Jesus and denying of ourselves, then we gain life as we submit to the power of God and resurrection work of Jesus displayed in our life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains this succinctly,  
*“The earthly form of Christ is the form that died on the cross. The image of God is the image of Christ crucified. It is to this image that the life of the disciples must be conformed; in other words, they must be conformed to his death (Phil 3.10, Rom 6.4) The Christian life is a life of crucifixion (Gal 2.19) In baptism the form of Christ's death is impressed upon his own. They are dead to the flesh and to sin, they are dead to the world, and the world is dead to them (Gal 6.14). Anybody living in the strength of Christ's baptism lives in the strength of Christ's death.”*<sup>2</sup>

Ministers of the gospel must die to themselves daily, re-enacting the symbol of baptism as their first step of obedience in Christ. Upon this, the life of Christ will be manifest and proclaimed for all the see. This is the means through which God desires to minister and bring people to reconciliation.

So lastly,

### **The task of gospel ministry is to share the life of Christ**

*”<sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. <sup>11</sup> For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.<sup>12</sup> So death is at work in us, but life in you.”*

When we get to the last verse we see that Paul makes a small but very pungent point. The Corinthians and “super apostles” wanted to live for themselves and make much of themselves. But Paul stands in direct contrast to that. To this point, he’s been shipwrecked three times, been beaten multiple times, and whipped five time. The misery, frailty, even expected death that he embraces is not only that he may have the light of Christ and be content but that God may use that as the means to give life to the Corinthians! Paul’s love for the Corinthians is evident in his ministry. He tells them plainly that his purpose in constant proclamation of the gospel, suffering, and death was for their salvation and edification for the glory of God.

In Chapter 4 verse 15, he states it outright,

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, pg. 231



*“For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God”*

In the same way,

### **1. Our desire is to see gospel transformation**

The question we must ask: Do I love my neighbour, family, friend, and even the one across the ocean enough to risk all things for the sake of their salvation? We may not have to suffer to the point of death but our love should be deep enough to allow for it and we should see the eternal glory and honour that far outshines the temporary sacrifice.

This morning we see the gospel ministry of Paul and what is needed for revival, gospel ministry in our hearts, in this church, and in this city. We must fall before God in dependence that he would first change our hearts and fill us with His Spirit. We must proclaim boldly the gospel of Jesus in our lives and on our tongues. And we must take drastic, seemingly foolish, and sacrificial measures to spread God’s glory through the work of Christ.

If we are to be a light unto Orillia then we need to open our eyes and see the eternal darkness of this city, embrace our weakness so that Christ may shine, and never lose heart in the power of the gospel.

Let us pray.