

Relevant Gospel Ministry

2 Corinthians 4:1-7

Introduction:

Over the last few months, we have seen, heard, and felt seismic shifts in our country, in everything from court decisions, revealing videos, and even dealings with other countries. This has left us shocked, saddened, perhaps fearful, and wondering “what just happened” and “how did we get here”? The changed values in our culture are rapidly coming to fruition in a shifting normative. We have moved from a deistic view of ourselves where people acknowledged there is a god, that they were themselves sinners (or at least sinful on some level), and that truth was knowable to a view where *self* rules. Historian Alan Petigny wrote about this shift in his 2009 work called “*The Permissive Society*”. He pointed out that by the 1950’s, ‘Americans were coming to view the self as a boundless reservoir of inherent goodness and potentiality...the perspective of people who look inward to their hearts for moral guidance provides us with the best hope for the future of mankind.’ Now, individual autonomy and self-indulgence trump all else, and Petigny argued that what we see as norms catch up with values, is a cultural commitment to a “gospel of self-fulfillment.”

What does that mean? A shift away from God the way He displays Himself, away from the way Scripture defines us (sinners in need of redemption and forgiveness), and a purpose of worshipping Him has been **replaced or exchanged** for worship of self. This is why a value of self-gratification longs for sexual pleasure without consequence or guilt, which drives laws and decisions about abortion. A desire for unions that God ordained is exchanged for the exact opposite, which drives a court to rule NOT on what stands written (either in Scripture or the Constitution), but what is a person inclination or opinion (see Justice Kennedy’s reasoning for his ruling). Once this shift happens (and now is that time) mankind is only limited to the creativity of his depraved mind for what is possible next.

What does this all mean for us? It means everything, but nothing that is new. Nothing that is happening around us is **unexpected, out of God’s control**, nor a reason to **over-react**. We will, in fact, continue to live soberly, stand firmly, and love fearlessly as we obey by faith all that God has called us to. We are not going through motions, not playing church, and not simply committed to token traditions. We will live with **intention** and **conviction**, looking to Christ both in this life and that which stretches into eternity. In doing this, we seek to faithfully accomplish our mission, since it is the most relevant act we can be a part of, no matter what age or culture we live in.

There are two ways that we will be found **irrelevant and ineffective in our world today**:

- **We walk in fear, disengaging from people, believing that neither God nor the gospel is glorious enough to transform those in our life**
- **We live in compromise, lessening the standard of truth that God set, believing this is loving, all the while draining true hope from desperate, sinful people.**

No surprises, nothing new:

- **The battle has always raged from outside the church** – Our enemy, Satan himself, is the Prince of the power of this air (Eph. 2:2), he deceives, he controls, he concocts. People who walk in darkness run from the light and in their guilt and shame over sin, must find ways to assuage that shame, so they invent evil and not only accept those who do the same thing, but give approval

to them. We should never be shocked or surprised by the level of depravity that mankind stoops to, knowing that 1) we are prone to the same thing apart from God's mercy 2) sin makes a reprobate mind travel to depths never dreamed of or fathomed. This is so important because we then realize that **people are NOT the enemy, but are to be loved so much, we are willing to risk our very lives to reach them with the gospel.**

- **The battle has always raged from within the church** – This is most dangerous. A good chunk of the epistles were written to clarify false teaching as the church was prone to compromise the truth for so many different reasons, most of which seemed sincere. Today, we have churches that are sincerely trying to love (or at least claiming to do so), but are compromising the clear truth of Scripture. The result of this is not love but hatred. Rather than giving sinful mankind the cure for their sin, they receive temporal relief from their guilt (God loves you, you're accepted, you don't need to change) in exchange for an eternally damned soul.

This is exactly why we have spent time clarifying and engaging with what we believe this summer. This was not some competitive exercise that sets us above other churches, nor is it some veiled marketing ploy. It is nothing less than a necessary reminder of what God has called us to in any culture in any age. That is why we spent time talking through:

- Biblical Counseling – That Scripture is sufficient to change us to be more like Christ as we see our sin clearly, repent, and follow Christ
- Biblical Eldership/Leadership – We have shepherding leaders who care for our souls and teach, admonish, nourish, correct, and protect those in the church
- Expository Preaching – We explain the Scripture and apply it because it is relevant, authoritative, and sufficient
- Gospel culture – We live in a community of truth and love, where forgiveness is asked for and given, and where we seek to serve and sacrifice more than take
- Conflict resolution & restoration – We practice confrontation of sin because only then can we be fully restored and reconciled with God and each other
- Living out our mission – Our mission of this church is to display the glory of God by calling people to repentance and worship, and we each engage in this lofty, difficult, and glorious call

Each of these matters. We are driven to faithfully do all that God has commanded in the way He calls us to do it, willing to sacrifice all for the joy set before us. This is nothing new. This is exactly what Paul face as he wrote a letter to the church at Corinth, a place where the gospel was being attacked and he himself was being questioned. What did Paul do? Clarified what true, relevant, gospel ministry was all about. That is what we want to look at this morning from 2 Corinthians 4:1-7. We will see the **confidence, confession, clarity, and clay pots required for this ministry.**

1. **Confidence in Gospel Ministry (2 Cor. 4:1)**

2 Corinthians 4:1 *Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*

What was the ministry that Paul was referring to? He laid it out in chapter 3:

- **Transformative (3:1-3)** Paul's opponents would show pieces of paper to prove their validity – certificates, diplomas and other pages you can fit on a wall – but Paul offered the church itself as proof of commendation. They were to be known and read by all

- **Sufficient, which bred competence & confidence (3:4-5)** Paul did not defend his own sufficiency, but stood on Christ's, which not only made him a competent minister, but a confident one
- **New & glorious (3:6-11)** – Paul engaged in something far more glorious than what the Law was in the OT. This **new covenant** ministry brings life (not death), is not about the letter but the Spirit, and can bring about righteous out of condemnation. The Law exposed sin but could not change it. He was given the keys to something new and full of glory
- **Boldness (3:12-16)** – Boldness came from an understanding that only Christ can lift the veil off an unbeliever's eyes, but when Christ lifts it, they can then turn, repent, and follow Christ. The boldness was based on Christ's supernatural, sufficient, and effective power, not his own.
- **Freedom (3:17-18)** – The gospel brings freedom: freedom from our enslavement to sin, freedom in relationship to the Father, freedom to be transformed

What is the basis of our confidence, or why do we not lose heart?

We have been given mercy by God Himself. We did not deserve it. If God can change a stubborn, prideful, selfish heart like mine, He can change anyone's. He is the lifter of the veil, and He is powerful enough to do this with ANYONE, no matter what they have done, believed, or involved themselves in. Paul knew this better than anyone else, since he was a recipient of grace when he was killing Christians and called to be a missionary of the gospel.

2. Confession in Gospel Ministry (2 Cor. 4:2)

2 Corinthians 4:2 *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.*

- **We confess hidden shameful and disgraceful things**
 - The gospel frees us to confess hidden sin that bogs us down from passion and effectiveness in ministry. How many true efforts in ministry have been thwarted by sin unconfessed, fearful that people would find out the inconvenient truth: *that we are actually broken sinners like everyone else!*
 - The gospel frees us to confess wrong motives in ministry – we don't have to operate in competition, pride, or selfishness. We are not trying to make ourselves great, but magnify the name and person of Christ. This frees us to remember that ministry is NOT about me, nor what I get out of it.
 - The gospel frees us from feeling shame about proclaiming an **offensive gospel**. There is no way around this one. When we proclaim the true gospel, it will not be welcomed by many. It will seem unloving and be spun as hate speech, being judgmental, narrow minded, old, broken, and offensive. If we are not ready for that, we will revert to disgraceful and underhanded attempts at giving the gospel, including telling people they can stay in their sin and have Jesus.
- **We refuse to tamper with, distort, or adulterate the Word**

One of my favorite theological terms is the *perspicuity* of Scripture. I like it because of the irony. It basically means the clarity that the Bible was written with, to be understood by all people (which makes the choice of "perspicuity" so funny – at least to nerds like me). The Bible has hard parts for sure, hard concepts and lofty concepts, but it is given to be understood. The word Paul uses here for tampering or

adulterating had to do with adding inferior ingredients to gold or wine, moving them from purity to impurity (like cheap gasoline).

We adulterate God's Word when we **add or take away** from what God has stated. When we only speak in half truths or represent only one part of the gospel, or rip things out of context, we distort God's Word. This is so easy to do when we are well intentioned by self-loving. No one likes having people NOT like them. We'd rather tell someone that everything's ok rather than the truth, that because of their personal sin they stand condemned under God's righteous hand. That is a tough message, but a loving one.

- **We commit to doing this on macro and micro scales**

This point cannot be stressed enough. We declare the truth on a macro scale, not compromising the truth even when it is offensive, and proclaiming sinful the things God says are sinful. This is a loving message because until we define sin, we cannot offer the hope that Jesus gives in forgiveness of sin. Paul says that **"by the open statement of truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God"**. The truth is what invades the heart, that changes someone from the level of the conscience, and is where transformation happens.

We declare this truth, but we also impart it in love that is manifested personally. There is no greater example of this than Jesus Himself, who gave a hard message, calling out hypocrisy (Matt. 23:27), but doing it person to person. Every situation, every person, every past has nuances that must be listened to, cared for, and with compassionate understanding. The gospel message is offensive but that does not mean our approach should be. We never compromise, but we act with patience in understanding that only when Christ lifts the veil can someone truly see clearly. Until then, they are acting only in the light that they know.

I'll give you 2 examples of what I mean:

- I talked with one of my relatives this summer, and she talked about how she grew up in a Christian home, went to church, believed in Christ, repented of her sin, but was staunch in her view that God created the world not like He said, but by evolutionary processes (which she was taught and indoctrinated in school). It was not until she was older in her faith that she began to read and understand Genesis 1-2 the way that God gave it, and now she firmly believes in a six day, literal creation.
- Our friend Florent uses the Genesis account of creation in every evangelistic conversation he has, and he has yet to have someone agree with him at first. It is not until that person yields to Christ, repents, and submits to Christ's Lordship that they see with new eyes what Scripture clearly teaches.

Why is this: **Hebrews 11:3 – *By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of thing that are visible***

Why does this matter:

We are patient with people who don't agree with what Scripture says – As faith grows, so will confidence and conviction of what Scripture says

We understand that our truth statements cut to the core to those we are speaking to – This is especially true in areas of ***abortion and homosexuality***. Both of these areas are clear in what Scripture says, but each of these areas carry with them deep issues of pain, hurt, shame, guilt, confusion, doubt,

sadness, and isolation. We must always reinforce our macro truth statements with hope, love, and personal interaction. The same truth opens eyes and softens hearts in preaching, but often it takes the type of interaction like Jesus gave the woman at the well (John 4), which answered questions, went against cultural norms, and showed a personal touch to the weight of the truth.

3. **Clarity in Gospel Ministry (2 Cor. 4:3-6)**

2 Corinthians 4:3 *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.* ⁴ *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.* ⁵ *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* 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 Jesus Christ.*

The temptation to compromise the message is nothing new. Paul's opponents were claiming that he was preaching an antiquated message (sound familiar). They said he needed to say something different because it was not effective enough to draw everyone.

Paul countered with what the reality of the situation really was. We preach truth and life to dead people (Eph. 2:1-3). They are blind in their own sin and blind because Satan tries desperately to keep them that way, through ignorance, pride, and misinformation. That is why we simply preach the message, but we are NOT the miracle workers. We have no power or ability to change people or force people, but simply rely on the same God who created light out of nothing at creation to shine in the hearts of men and women to give the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This is our job. This is our mission. This is our hope.

4. **Clay Pots in Gospel Ministry (2 Cor. 4:7)**

2 Corinthians 4:7 *But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

Finally, it's important to remember who we are in all of this. Paul's suffering and personal weakness was seen as an invalidation of his ministry credentials by the false teachers. They believed that if God were really for him, he'd see more success, less pain, and more popularity (sound familiar). However, for Paul his weakness was a badge of loyalty and a source of power. Our weakness in the gospel does not make us ineffective, but is actually essential to success.

Jars of clay were used for everyday things. These were common, cheap, run of the mill jars. Think WalMart sale items more than Ethan Allen home collection. These would store trash, refuse, and other items, not precious valuables. They were easily broken and thrown away. Paul's point is clear and glorious: we possess an utterly valuable, powerful, and glorious message, and God stored it in the most common of containers: *us*.

3 Reasons this is important:

- **We graciously offer what we received by grace** – we are not better than anyone else, we have simply had our eyes opened. This should color how we approach others.

- **We will sin and fall short, so we must be willing to confess, turn, and forgive** – Our goal is perfection, but we are still clay. We must quickly acknowledge sin, confess it, and be reconciled. We grow in our hatred of sin, but we know we are still fallible
- **We show that the surpassing power belongs to God, not us** – Our weakness is strength, our frailty is power, and our lowliness magnified the glory of God.

We approach this relevant ministry with confidence, confession, clarity, and in clay. There is nothing easy in this, but it is glorious. We will continue to speak the truth, call sin what it is, so that we can offer hope in Jesus Christ. We will do this relationally, imparting love in a tangible way to people, including listening to their story. We will do this all knowing that it will come at a cost, but that cost pales in comparison to the treasure that we possess and will one day fully realize. To reinforce the reason for our confidence, Paul closed out this section with the reason that we do not lose heart:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.*¹⁷ ***For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,***¹⁸ ***as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.***