



The Light of the Gospel

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Rev. Fred Greco

Good morning. If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to turn to the book of 2 Corinthians, Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. It's the third of the Pauline Epistles in order in your Bible: Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians. This morning we're going to be looking at chapter 4, the first six verses.

Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely without error, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Second Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 1-6:

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 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. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but 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.

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would open up your Word to us, that it would not be merely letters on a page but that it would take deep root in our hearts, that we would be deeply affected, that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would illuminate our minds and our hearts, that we would see the Lord Jesus Christ, that we would see your will, and that we would be drawn ever closer to our Lord and Savior. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Is it today all about success? More and more, I think, we see this. Whether it's in business or in politics or in sports or even in school, it seems that more and more there is an emphasis solely on success. The only thing that matters is winning, winning at all costs. Now, if this were true, we would expect Paul to be the winningest of all time. He would show us victory after victory in his ministry.

But the truth is that Paul has spoken to us of his weakness, of his failures, of his persevering in the face of difficulties. Here in our text this morning, Paul tells us there is something more important than winning. It is, instead, to serve the Lord with integrity and put our hope in him and in his victory. So, this morning, I would like us to see three things from our text.

First, Paul tells us about an *honest ministry*. The ministry he has is a ministry of integrity and honesty. Then the second thing we see is that Paul describes a *hateful opposition*, an opposition that is opposed to the gospel and Jesus Christ. Then thirdly, we see a *hopeful proclamation*, that the proclamation of the gospel gives us great hope that God is at work and is blessing his people. An honest ministry, a hateful opposition, and a hopeful proclamation.

An Honest Ministry

Let's begin, then, by looking at Paul's assessment of his ministry as one of honesty. You'll see here that chapter 4 begins our text this morning. I've said this to you before, but it bears repeating. The chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are not inspired. They did not come with Paul's letter. When this letter was read to the Corinthians, the person who read it would not have said, "And now we move on to chapter 4." They were added later for our help and convenience so we could find passages in the Bible.

These divisions are helpful, but it is important that we not make too much of them. Oftentimes, when we come to a chapter division and we see a big numeral before some text, we assume there must be some radically new topic that is being moved on to, but that is not the case often, and it is especially not the case here. Chapter 4 is closely connected to chapter 3, and we have a friend who helps us to see that this is the case. It is our friend that we've seen over and over again. It is the word *therefore*.

I hope that by this point in my ministry you can complete my sentence as I begin it, but I will tell you once again. When we see a *therefore*, we look back to see what the *therefore* is there for. Chapter 4 is set in the context of chapter 3. What Paul is writing here is grounded in the truth he has just shared with us in chapter 3. That truth is, first, that Paul's confidence does not come from himself. It rather comes from God's sufficiency. Paul is not looking to his own sufficiency for confidence but to God's.

Secondly, Paul reminds us that he does not need a commendation of his work. He doesn't need to be commended for his ability and success. He has, instead, the work of God in the people of God to look to. Then thirdly, even though his ministry is more glorious than the ministry of the old covenant, it is not an easy ministry. There is a veil, Paul tells us, that is over the hearts of people, but God is able to remove that veil in Jesus Christ.

Paul knows this firsthand. If you would have asked Paul before he went on the road to Damascus, he would never have thought in a thousand years that he would change his mind, change his theology, change his view of God and of Jesus Christ. He would have been sure of himself. He would have been absolutely certain of what he knew and would have not been open at all to any modification or change. Yet, of course, that's exactly what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus.

He went from being a persecutor of the church to a missionary and builder of the church. He went from being one who tried to find merit in his own works to finding the only merit that has any value is the work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Paul sums up what he has said in chapter 3 in the phrase shortly after our *therefore*: "...having this ministry by the mercy of God..." Paul wants us to know he has received mercy.

This reminds him that, in any event, he is not worthy. God doesn't owe Paul anything. He is, instead, a living testimony to God's miraculous work, lifting the veil in Jesus Christ. This gives Paul hope. If God can lift *his* veil,

God can lift anyone's veil. If God can crack Paul and make him a missionary, God can do anything in Jesus Christ. So Paul says, "Because I know this, I don't lose heart. I don't give up. I don't get tired and want to quit."

Do you feel like that sometimes? Do you feel like it's all just a waste of time, that you'll never change people, that you'll never make an influence or an impact in your neighborhood, in your family, in your community? What Paul tells you is not to give up, not to lose heart. Don't be discouraged. Instead, look to the Lord. If you think the Christian life should be easy, you need to think about Paul and all of the hardships he went through.

Paul's success is many times greater than anything *we* experience, yet he is constantly encouraging himself and others not to quit. He keeps reminding us. Now, why would Paul keep harping on this? Because it's hard. Life is hard. Ministry is hard. Telling others about Jesus is hard, and Paul wants us not to give up. When you are not able, remember instead that God *is* able. It's not your job to save others. It's not your job even to save yourself. It is God's job. It's a ministry that God has given to us. We receive it by mercy.

Because of this, Paul tells us that our ministry must be an honest ministry. If it were just to be a "win at all costs" ministry, then anything we would do would be okay. After all, the ends would justify the means. But Paul rejects this strongly. Look at verse 2. "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways." This is the strongest way in the language that Paul can raise a contrast. He is directly attacking his opponents in Corinth who are busy talking about how good they are and how easy their ministry is. He says, "But we don't have any part of these disgraceful, underhanded ways."

Paul's opponents would have been the kind of men who said things like, "Follow us. We're successful. Don't follow Paul. Paul is a failure." Again, they would emphasize their own success, and they would have gotten to that success in any way they could. So, when Paul says, "We have renounced these things," what does he mean? He is making a conscious and public decision. There is no coming back from this. It's almost, the way it is phrased, like a vow. "I won't do this, and I never *will* do this."

The verb here means to speak out against, to disown something, to forbid something. Paul is saying, "This is something I will never do." I think we're all familiar with this way of thinking and speaking, but usually, we're more familiar with it in the breach than in the keeping. We say things like, "I will never eat dessert again. I am going to stick to this diet. Never once will a piece of dessert cross my lips." Or if you've ever spent too much time out in the sun and been burned from head to foot, you'll say to yourself, "I am never going out in the sun again. That's it. I'm done. Never going to happen again."

Of course, the reason we remember this is we *do* eat dessert again and we *do* go out in the sun, but it's different here for Paul. Paul is not speaking of things like eating or going outside. He's speaking of eternal, spiritual matters. He says, "I am renouncing these things." What is he renouncing? He is renouncing underhanded things, disgraceful things, hidden things. He's renouncing deceiving others or deception for the greater good. These are things that are shameful or disgraceful.

Oftentimes, we will engage in shameful, disgraceful things because we think something better will come out in the end and that people won't remember the means we used to get there. Paul says, "I will not practice cunning." We might put it *this way*. He says, "I won't walk in trickery. I won't live my life in a way to deceive other people."

When we read here in our English text that Paul *renounces* underhanded ways and *refuses* to practice trickery, it's actually the same verb. The verb only occurs once. It's a list of two things that go together with that. Paul gives up on a life of trickery. Now, why is this important? Paul says he will not live falsely for success. He will not live as if the only thing that matters is the result. That's what this word *cunning* means. It means to do anything. It means cynical readiness to do whatever it takes to get a result.

As a matter of fact, later in this letter, Paul tells us that cunning is a sign of the Devil, the Devil who will do anything to get his way, the Devil who, Paul tells us, used cunning to deceive Eve. Your integrity matters. It's not important just to win, but it's important how you act, even in the most important, eternal matters...*especially* in the most important, eternal matters. Don't take shortcuts. Don't take shortcuts with your family. Don't try to trick others to convince them. Renounce that way of thinking and acting. An honest ministry.

Paul makes clear that he is thinking of the context of ministry and evangelism here, that he will not walk in falsehoods, and he will also, he tells us, not tamper with God's Word. He specifically references the gospel message, God's Word. This is very important. Why would anyone be tempted to tamper with God's Word? This gets us back to the idea of success at any cost. There are, after all, many things in God's Word that are hard for people to understand, that are hard for them to bear.

We see that all the time today. People generally do not like the idea of a holy, sovereign God, so we might be tempted to downplay that aspect of God when we speak to them about the Bible. We may be tempted to leave it out entirely. We may even be tempted to tamper with God's Word and make God other than he is so that he's more palatable to others.

Many in our world today do not take well the idea of an exclusive nature of salvation, that salvation is only found by faith in Jesus Christ, so we are tempted, once again, to tamper with God's Word, to say, "Well, there are many ways to God. There are many ways in which you can relate to God. Jesus is great, Jesus is good, but he's not exclusive."

Or we might take the ways of living, like the fact that the Bible speaks that marriage is only between one man and one woman. That almost has become hate speech in our day and age, so we might be tempted to downplay that truth of the Bible, to hold it back from people because we're afraid it'll affect our success. All we have to do is to look at so many so-called churches in our land today, churches that downplay the authority of Scripture, that contradict Scripture in order to pander to the culture of our day.

Paul says, "I'll have none of that. I renounce it completely." I think more importantly for you and me today is Paul is telling *you* to do that, to renounce tampering with God's Word. We won't change God's Word. We won't dilute it. But Paul says something even more than that. He says, "We'll stand by the truth of God's Word." He says, "By

the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." It is by an open statement of the truth that we operate.

Hear what Paul is saying today. It's shocking for our day and age. Paul is saying that there is truth, that truth is real, that there is *the* truth. Not *a* truth, not *my* truth or *your* truth, there is *the* truth. There is truth for everyone at all times. Rather than shy away from the truth, Paul says, actually, we are to highlight it. By an *open statement*, what Paul means is an announcement, a declaration.

The word has as its root manifestation, bringing it to light, to make it clear. Paul says rather than shying away from the truth, we are to bring it into crystal clear focus for others. An honest ministry is what we must have. We have to do away with tricks and deception, and we have to declare the truth. That is true success. That is how we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience.

A Hateful Opposition

We might say to Paul then, "Why aren't we more successful?" After all, that was the charge from Paul's opponents. "If God is with you and God has called you, Paul, why don't we see more success?" We can think about that in our own day and age. Why isn't the gospel triumphing in America? Why isn't it triumphing throughout the world? Why aren't people coming to faith in great numbers?

Or we might even think about it closer to home. Why don't my family hear the gospel? Why don't my friends believe the gospel? Why do they refuse to believe when I share with them and when I live for Jesus in front of them? I *would* say this is an American attitude, but it is more than that. It was the attitude of people in Paul's day as well. Everyone loves a winner. We want to be on the winning side.

If God is sovereign and if he has given to us this ministry, why isn't spreading the gospel easier for you and me? Why does it seem to actually be getting harder in our day and age? Paul reminds us that the problem is not what we think it is. Our first instinct for this problem is to blame ourselves. "If only we were better at presenting the gospel. People don't embrace the gospel because we've failed. We haven't done a good job of explaining it to others. It's our fault, not God's. We need to be better at this. We need to work harder for God."

Is this your instinct? Does it even keep you from trying in the very first place? We think about this, and we think, "I haven't memorized enough of the Bible. I don't have all of the answers to give to people. No one is going to listen to me. I shouldn't even bother. I'll just fail." Our second instinct is to say that it's a matter of understanding and clarity. This is related to the first instinct we have.

The problem, we think, is an intellectual problem, that people just don't understand what the Bible is saying. If only we could find a way to better communicate biblical truth. After all, who would reject facts when they're presented with facts? But Paul tells us it's not an intellectual problem. It's not a factual problem. It's a problem of the heart, of a veiled heart, of a veiled mind.

The problem is not that I *can't* understand it; it's that I *won't* understand it. Do you see the difference? It's a crucial and important difference. Paul says those who are perishing, those who are lost, have the gospel veiled to them.

He's repeating what he said in chapter 3. Their minds are hardened. They do not want to see the gospel. They do not want to hear the gospel. They will not submit to the gospel.

This is what the Bible tells us over and over again. It is a problem of the heart. The truth is that outside of Jesus Christ, we don't want to give up our sin. We love it too much. We don't want to submit to God. We want to *be* god. We're rebels by nature in our sin. It's not a matter of us being more persuasive. The only solution, Paul tells us, is the lifting of this veil from the minds and hearts of unbelievers. And who can lift that veil? Well, Paul has told us. It is only Jesus Christ who can lift that veil.

So, if you are here today and you have not put your faith in Jesus, know that it's not because you don't have enough information. It's because you are not willing to give up everything for Jesus. But the only way to have life, the only way to have hope, is to give up on yourself and turn to Jesus. You can have that life and hope. Pray to the Lord right now to lift that veil over your mind and your heart and bring you to Jesus. He can do that. After all, Paul himself is proof.

We're not just opposed by our own hearts. We also have an active Enemy. There is nothing that Satan loves more than misery and blindness. After all, that's his existence. He rejected God, and he is constantly at work to see others reject him also. Paul tells us in verse 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."

Satan works hard to blind people even to the fact that they are blind. That sounds odd, doesn't it? But it's true. The first step of living as a blind person is to know that you are blind. Have you ever seen a blind person's home? It's incredibly organized. Everything is in its place, because the blind person knows they can't look around and see something. They must know where it is by habit and custom, so everything is organized in its place. To be blind is to know you have certain limitations and to seek to overcome them. Blind people don't try to drive a car.

The idea here is that by understanding and knowing who we are, we can overcome our blindness, not through our own efforts but through the work of Jesus Christ. If we know there's a veil over our hearts and minds and we know the veil can only be taken away by Christ, we must go to Christ. We must pray to Christ. We must ask Christ to remove that veil, but Satan wants people to remain ignorant of their blind hearts and minds.

Paul calls Satan here the *god of this world*. Now why does he do this? You will notice that in our translation the word *god* here is all in lowercase. It's not capitalized to be confused with God, the one true God. Satan is called the *god of this world* because he seeks to establish himself as a god. We see this, for example, in his attempt in Matthew, chapter 4, to get Jesus Christ to worship him in the great temptation, but also, Satan is the one who is worshipped by unbelievers.

All false worship, the Bible tells us, is the worship of the Devil, the Enemy. Any worship that is not given to God to whom all worship is owed is worship of the Devil, of demons. This is not very correct in our culture to say this, but it's true. Whenever anyone worships Allah, they are worshipping the Devil. Whenever anyone worships Buddha, they are worshipping demons. Whenever anyone worships any false god, they are actually worshipping the Devil. Paul says this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 10, where he tells us that pagan worship is actually demon worship.

Finally, Satan has a temporary, non-absolute authority in this world. This is opposed to God who has a permanent, absolute authority in this world. Now what do I mean by temporary, non-absolute authority? What I mean is that Satan has some authority over those who are lost, those who are unbelievers in this world. Jesus, for example, in John, chapter 12, calls him the *ruler of this world*. John tells us in 1 John 5 that the world lies in his power.

Satan does not have absolute power. As Luther said, even the Devil is God's Devil. But Satan does have power over those who are in rebellion against God. He has blinded their minds. He is the god of this world because they worship him. He's operating specifically in the case of those who do not believe, and his intent, Paul tells us, is very clear. It is to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel. Satan is at work. He is an adversary to the gospel.

What this means is if you are ministering to others, if you are sharing the gospel with others, you can expect opposition. Satan will not take that lightly. Satan does not like when that happens. He opposes it. He is hateful. The more we are active in the work of Jesus Christ, in the ministry of the church and the gospel, the more we can expect opposition and the harder it will get. If you want to see your life get easy, stop telling people about Jesus. Think that the Bible isn't important. Don't feel any need to share Jesus with others, and then Satan will leave you alone. You're no threat to him.

But the minute you start reading your Bible, praying, memorizing the Scripture, taking opportunities to share the gospel, encouraging others, praying for others, Satan sees that you are an enemy. You are a soldier of the cross, and he will oppose you. We have a hateful and a powerful Enemy, an Enemy that works with our own blind minds and hearts to keep us from seeing the glory of Christ. This explains why the gospel is not a series of wild successes.

A Hopeful Proclamation

But has Paul gone too far now? Are we going to be discouraged by the Enemy we have? I thought Paul had told us we were not to lose heart, and then he tells us we have supernatural, powerful, hateful opposition. Well, this brings us to our third point this morning. In the last two verses, Paul shows us where our hope comes from, that we have a hopeful proclamation and that that proclamation comes from proclaiming Jesus, and our hope comes from knowing that it's not *our* work but, rather, the work of God.

Let's look at each of these in turn. First, we see that our hope is not in our ability but in proclaiming Jesus himself. In verse 5, Paul begins the verse with the word *for*. He wants us to see what the gospel is. He wants us to see that it is connected to the main idea of verse 4, that the gospel is the glory of Christ, that the gospel is Christ, the image of God, and by *image* we mean the exact representation of God. Jesus is more than an example to us. He is how we see God.

Do you remember Philip in John, chapter 14? Philip came to Jesus and said, "Lord, show us the Father." Jesus' response was, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." To see Jesus is to see God. He's not just a picture of God. He's not just a type of God. He is the exact representation of God. This is what the Bible teaches us over and over again. It teaches us that in John 1 and Colossians 2 and especially in Hebrews 1. He is the express image of God.

The hope for a blind and lost world is proclaiming Jesus. Because the gospel is the glory of Jesus, we don't go about proclaiming ourselves, Paul says. This would be a direct attack on his opponents in Corinth, because they were often fond of talking about who *they* were, how important *they* were, and what *they* had done, and what they *could* do.

Paul says, "I don't do that. You can know that I suffer. You can know that I'm weak. You can know that I'm not as successful as I might want to be. I don't care at all about any of that. What I do care about is that you know about Jesus. What I proclaim is Jesus Christ as Lord." This little phrase is shorthand for the gospel. Think about it. *Jesus* means God saves. He is named Jesus, Matthew tells us, because he will save his people from their sins. Jesus is the one who saves us from our sins.

Christ means he is the divine Messiah. He is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. From the very beginning of Genesis 3 to the promises of Exodus to the promise of an eternal, everlasting kingdom to David to the work of the prophets, Jesus is the fulfillment of every promise of God. And we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. *Lord* means that Jesus is God himself in the flesh. Jesus is the Great I Am. He is the first and the last. He has been declared Lord through his resurrection from the dead. Even death could not hold him. Sin had no hold upon him.

Do you know this Jesus? Do you speak about this Jesus? Is Jesus your hope? With all that's going on in the world, are you tempted now to take your eyes off Jesus? Are you afraid for the church? Are you afraid for your family? Well, don't be, because Jesus Christ is on the throne. He is Lord. That's the message of hope that we have for ourselves and to share with the world.

Paul then concludes with a second *for* in verse 6. He says, "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." This word *for* is a slightly different word than the word in verse 5. We might translate this word *because*. Why do we proclaim that Jesus is Lord? Why is that the gospel? Because that is God's work, Paul says. "We are not important," Paul says. "In fact, we are your servants for Jesus' sake."

The work of the gospel is so unbelievable, so God-centered, the only thing Paul can compare it to is creation itself. The same God who said, "Let there be light" is the one who has shined in our hearts. The story of creation is all of God. There was nothing. Everything came from God at his word. So it is with the recreation. The work of the gospel is all of God. If God can create everything out of nothing, he can lift the veil. He can make the blind see. He can give the light of Jesus to those who are in darkness. That should give us hope, because it doesn't depend on us; it depends on God.

It's important for you to have your hope in the right place. Don't place your hope in success. Don't place your hope in your abilities. There's only disappointment there. But if your hope is in Jesus, you will see that even though the opposition is fierce, even though the work seems impossible, Jesus is victorious. Jesus is Lord. Do you believe that? Then begin by proclaiming that gospel to yourself and take that message of hope to a world that needs the light of the gospel.