

Don't Lose Heart

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Do you ever feel discouraged when it comes to gospel ministry? If you're part of this church you should know by now that being a follower of Christ isn't just about getting saved and going to church or Bible study; it isn't just about your own personal growth. It's also about reaching out to others and making disciples – making a difference for Christ in your family and school, and work. Christians are people who spread the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere they go – we saw that two weeks ago.

But when you engage in that kind of mission, you're going to find out that not everyone has open arms and ears to the gospel. I've encountered several people who seem uninterested, turned off, or resistant to talking about Jesus. I still haven't gotten over a conversation I had with one of my neighbors. I invited her to a Bible study at our house and she made it clear she wasn't interested in talking about God – ever. I'm discouraged about another neighbor with whom I've tried to open doors to gospel conversations for 20 years with no response. I've all but given up on the newer neighbors across the street who won't even wave or say "hi" when we've tried to be friendly on numerous occasions.

I admit there are times when I've lost heart when it comes to gospel ministry among unbelievers. It feels like it just isn't going to work. Maybe you can relate?

We're in 2 Corinthians 4 this morning and the theme that runs all the way through it is why Paul and his team didn't lose heart in gospel ministry, even when they faced rejection, persecution, and hardship. In verse 1 Paul says, "We do not lose heart" and in verse 16: "So we do not lose heart." He shows us it's possible to lose heart in gospel ministry. It's possible to feel discouraged and give up.

Paul faced rejection, hardship, and persecution and felt discouraged, and we will too if we're following God's call in our life to make disciples. What's going to get us through those low times? Paul explains what helped him in chapter 4

and today we're going to look at some of those things and next week we'll look at the rest.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.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.³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled 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.

So he begins with a statement about not losing heart and he indicates two reasons in that statement for why he and his team don't lose heart. One has to do with the glory of the ministry they were involved in and the other has to do with the merciful calling they received to be involved in that ministry.

He says in verse 1: "*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*" By starting with "therefore" he shows us he's thinking about what he just wrote, which was about the ministry God had given he and his team. So, because of having that ministry, they do not lose heart...

We saw in chapter 2 that their ministry was about spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere – a fragrance from death to death for those who are perishing and a fragrance from life to life to those who are being saved. In chapter 3 he wrote how the ministry of the gospel is the ministry of the Spirit, the ministry of righteousness, and the permanent ministry of the new covenant with a glory that surpasses that of the old covenant. They were ministers of a new covenant where those who turn to Christ have the veil removed so they can behold the glory of the Lord and are being transformed from one degree of glory to another.

So here in chapter 4, he indicates that one of the reasons he didn't lose heart was because of the surpassing greatness of this ministry. There's just nothing like it on earth. It's greater than any career or calling. Being part of the ministry of the gospel is the greatest thing we can do. And there are times when we need to remind ourselves of that because it's easy to get discouraged by those who don't receive it. We are bringing the good news of salvation and new life and eternal life and forgiveness and purpose and hope to people lost in darkness and in bondage to sin. Therefore, we do not lose hope.

So that's one reason. The second is in that same statement where Paul says: "*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.*" So the other thing he has in mind is how they received their calling to this glorious ministry by the mercy of God. I think Paul was thinking about his conversion and his calling into ministry, which for him happened at the same point in his life. Paul was one of the foremost and most aggressive opponents to Christianity in the world, actively involved in trying to crush the Christian church through terrorist activities. By doing so, he was heaping up God's wrath over himself because of his sin. But one day everything changed. God had mercy on him. He powerfully confronted him when he was on the way to persecute Christians and did so in a way that Paul did a radical 180-degree turn. He went from being a persecutor to a preacher.

Read 1 Timothy 1:12-16.

I think Paul always kept that in mind as he went through his life as a minister of the gospel. I think that was something that motivated him more than most. God had great mercy on him, the foremost of sinners, and not only brought him to the point of receiving Christ, but also gave him the privilege of preaching the gospel to thousands of unreached people.

So that was another reason he didn't lose heart, and I think we can take hold of that as well. God has shown us great mercy by saving us and calling us to join him in his glorious mission of making disciples. Were it not for his mercy we would be lost and writhing about in sin, objects of wrath for all eternity. But because of his mercy we've been found, forgiven, adopted and commissioned to be his ambassadors in the world. Therefore, having received such great mercy, we do not lose heart. Even when a neighbor says they're

not interested. Even when a family member despises you for your faith. We press on because of the glory of the gospel and the mercy we've received to be saved and called by God to be ministers of it.

Now there's one more reason I think Paul has in mind for why they would not lose heart and he talks about it in the rest of the verses I read. We can be encouraged by how awesome the gospel is and how much of a privilege it is to be called into gospel ministry by the mercy of God. But if the people we're trying to reach reject it, it can still be very discouraging. Rejection is discouraging. And Paul faced rejection all the time. How did he not lose heart because of that?

Let me read these verses again... *"Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 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. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled 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.*

One of the reasons Paul didn't lose heart is that he realized there were forces at work in the spiritual realm leading to people's responses to the gospel – things he knew about but couldn't see, and it was because of these things that there would always be rejection and opposition by some, yet receptivity and acceptance by others.

He indicates by what he writes in verse 2 that he knew it wasn't the proclamation of the gospel alone that would lead people to turn to Jesus. Paul could speak to a crowd of people, like he often did. He could deliver a persuasive argument, using the Hebrew Scriptures, and explain clearly why Jesus was the Christ and that he had to die and rise again. He could prove that Jesus was God's plan of salvation from the very beginning. A clear and solid

gospel presentation... Paul did this everywhere he went. And yet, time and time again he could see that most of the people in the crowd rejected his message, sometimes getting so angry they'd try to kill him, while a handful of people would have their lives changed forever. And there wasn't a pattern to who believed and who didn't – it could be Jews or Gentiles, men or women, slave or free. It wasn't the proclamation of the gospel that made the difference. That was necessary, but there were other things going on in the spiritual realm – invisible things – that would make the difference for why some rejected and some were saved.

So in verse 2 he says he wasn't about to change his method of delivery to twist or water down the gospel to try to make it more palatable for his listeners with the hope that there would be a better reception and more converts. Those would be false converts – people who were won over in their flesh by a manipulative sales pitch even though nothing changed in their spirit. Paul wasn't looking for those kinds of converts. He was looking for true converts in whom the Holy Spirit was working and bringing about spiritual regeneration. Therefore he wouldn't tamper with the message. He delivered it with an open statement of the truth and let the Holy Spirit work where the Holy Spirit was going to work. And Paul knew that would not happen with some people. He says in verses 3-4: *“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In 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.”*

When people rejected the gospel in every city that Paul went, and Paul faced persecution and hardship because of it, he didn't lose heart because he knew it was going to happen. Many of the people he shared the gospel with wouldn't receive it because there was a veil over their eyes. They couldn't see the beauty and the glory and the truth of what he was preaching. Their hearts were hard, their spirits were dead, they were perishing. They were under the blinding influence of Satan and they couldn't see the light of the gospel. They couldn't see the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. They only saw Jesus as a lie. It wasn't that they were just rejecting Paul, they were rejecting Jesus.

The difference between them and those who believed is in verse 6 where Paul describes what had happened to him and his team and why they weren't still

blind and opposed to the gospel: *“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.”* God had removed the veil and shone in their hearts to open their eyes to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why they believed. That’s the mercy Paul talked about in verse 1. That had to happen in order for people to not reject the message.

So Paul expected to be rejected everywhere he went, but also knew that because of God’s mercy, the veil would be lifted for some and when they heard, they’d believe. And because of that, he didn’t lose heart.

Some of my neighbors may never believe. They may perish in their sin and remain in spiritual blindness. That’s discouraging, but it shouldn’t surprise me or cause me to lose heart in gospel ministry. It’s going to happen. But God’s mercy is also going to happen. I don’t know when, or with whom. I don’t know God’s timing or plan. But I do know that it will happen, and the veil will be lifted. And when it does, they will believe. So I must not lose heart. I must not give up. I must continue to pray, look for opportunities, and share the gospel.

I hope these things are an encouragement to you. We’ll look at one more big reason to not lose heart next week in the rest of chapter 4. May the Lord encourage you with these things today and revive your efforts to join in gospel ministry with the people around you.