

Shepherds' Conference
Tuesday, February 28, 2017, 10:00 a.m.
Jubilant — “Great is Thy Faithfulness”

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We Preach Christ
2 Corinthians 4:5

The text begins with “We do not preach ourselves.” Perhaps Paul had in mind the preachers of Jeremiah’s day who preached a vision from their own imagination. Or perhaps he thought of the first missionary journey in Lystra (Acts 14:15) — they tore their robes and screamed, “Why do you do these things...we preach the gospel to you...”

We do not preach ourselves. Listen to the words of our Lord: “He who speaks of himself, seeks his own glory, rather than the one who sent him.”

Paul also says we preach Christ crucified. We preach Christ as the One who all the promises of God are yes and amen. Why is it so crucial to preach Christ? Because of Romans 10 — faith comes by hearing the word concerning Christ.

Paul says we are slaves — not to those who hear and believe, but we are slaves to them *for Jesus’ sake*. He is the constant theme of our preaching. That was Paul’s calling and passion, and he extended it to all who followed in his wake. Paul was faithful to do that until the end of his days. The person who had the most influence on me over the years is the apostle Paul — I felt like a Johnny-come-lately Timothy.

Of the most interesting words to me is 2 Tim. 4:6-8. To come to the very end of your life and to be able to say, “I have fought the good fight...” He followed Christ to the very end. Incomprehensible suffering internally and externally. But he was faithful to the end for the sheer love of the Lord. Paul reached the summit of loyalty to Christ to the very end.

Paul’s final words don’t sound triumphant at all (vv. 9ff). There seems to be a pervasive loneliness in those words. How do you go through what he went in ministry and still abound in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58)? How do you get there through all the obstacles — both inside and outside of you? The answer is in 2 Cor. 4.

How could he be faithful in preaching and ministry?

Notice vv. 1, 16 — both contain the phrase, “we do not lose heart” (ἐκχακέω) — the verb denotes malignity; “we do not give in to evil.” It’s not so much about being cowardly and slipping, but giving in to evil. Kittel denotes it, “to act badly.” It’s a sinful defection. Paul says, “we do not defect and give in to evil in any way.” What prompts him to say this?

His experience with the Corinthians had the potential to lead him to defect. Their sin was heartbreaking to him. He was concerned about impurity in the church. The Corinthian church was so bad that Apollos wouldn’t stay, though Paul wanted him to. It was the church no one wanted to pastor.

He wrote four letters to them and after the painful letter was reluctant to go back. It was the kind of thing (going on) that could tempt a leader to defect. He was being slandered in many ways. It was a depressing experience to work with that church (cf. ch. 7).

This epistle was written by Paul to defend his own apostleship at an agonizing time of his life. He talks repeatedly in this book about the trouble he experienced through this church. It is a disappointing congregation of people. He did not, nonetheless, give in to evil. He was true and faithful to the very end. This chapter summarizes the convictions that enabled him to be faithful.

1. An Unwavering Conviction About the Superiority of the New Covenant Over the Old One (v. 1)

Note the transition *therefore*. This was not a change that Paul looked at from the outside, but a comparison that Paul lived through on the inside. Cf. Phil. 3 — the old covenant legalism became manure to him.

He has a new ministry — the new covenant ministry; it is the ministry of the Spirit (ch. 3). It is very different from the old covenant — the ministry of death. The new covenant gives life (3:6). The old covenant could only kill. The new covenant is a ministry of life because it is a ministry of righteousness (3:9). The old was temporary (vv. 10-11); the new is permanent. The old had no hope; the new covenant has hope (v. 12). The new covenant is clear rather than dark (vv. 12-13). The new covenant is about Christ (v. 14). It is empowered by the Holy Spirit (v. 17) and transforming (v. 18). Here was a man who came out of the old covenant into the new covenant and — listen — he never lost the reality of the new covenant and what he'd been delivered from. It was a staggering honor to him (cf. 2:14).

We talk often about the gospel; this is another reason why we need to look into the glories of the gospel, so we never forget the privileges of being drawn into the new covenant. He never got over the privilege of proclaiming the new covenant. If no one ever heard or believed, if only an aroma of death to death, it was still an honor and the joy of all joys to minister.

2. An Unwavering Conviction That Ministry Was a Mercy (v. 1)

Notice v. 1 — *received as a mercy*. For Paul it was staggering to have this ministry — cf. 1 Tim. 1:12-16. It was a *mercy* that Paul received the ministry. Ministry is a mercy. You are there because you are better than others but because you demonstrate mercy and grace. We know our own hearts and we know our sinfulness — we are there by mercy.

Don't overestimate your importance in ministry. It is a mercy. Everything that comes to us is a mercy. To the Philippians Paul said Epaphroditus was sick unto death; but he and Paul received *mercy*. All of ministry is a gift of mercy to the undeserving. You didn't earn it and you don't deserve it and your imperfections won't destroy what you didn't earn.

3. An Unwavering Conviction That He Needed to Have a Pure Heart (v. 2)

Paul didn't start down the road to evil. He renounced the things of shame. He had no hidden life. There was nothing that couldn't be seen by anyone else. Was he perfect? No. He also wrote Rom. 7 — "O wretched man that I am..." How does that reconcile? He *doesn't hide his wretchedness*. He can say "I have had no hidden life of shame."

The verb is a gnomic aorist — there is a timelessness to it. He used to be good at hiding shame; he was a skilled hypocrite, but that has been renounced. Note 1:12 — "our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience..." I.e., he has a clear conscience in the midst of the accusations; he is not perfect, but he doesn't hold onto sin and doesn't hold on to the secret life of shame. He has a clear conscience. That's what you want. No accusation sticks if you have a clear conscience.

How do you keep your conscience clear? By winning it on the inside. He has moral purity and transparency. You have to win the battle on the inside. Wesley: "I want a principle within...awake my conscience; keep it still awake" (one of the few hymns on the conscience).

If you don't deal with sin on the inside, then it will conceive and bring forth death.

4. An Unwavering Conviction to Accurately Preach the Word of God (v. 2)

He is aware of the priority of not adulterating the Word of truth. He is not πανοργεια — being deceptive and doing anything needed to achieve goals.

We're not like many, peddling the Word of God — hucksters and phonies. He is not watering down the truth and cheapening it. I don't adulterate the Word. Rather, "I will be faithful to divine truth." The truth is his relentless effort.

If you tamper with the truth you may make a friend but you will not change a heart.

You don't have to defend the Word of God — Hodge: "it has self-evidencing power..." You don't have to change it. You *can't* do that. He was certain of his responsibility to preach the whole counsel of God rightly divided. That was a conviction that led him to keep from defecting.

5. An Unwavering Conviction that the Results Did Not Depend on Him (vv. 3-4)

The results did not depend on Paul *at all*. Altering the message means we think that we are the issue. But note v. 3 — if the gospel is veiled, there is a reason: we are talking to a category of people called the perishing. People in that category are the dead and spiritually blind — blinded by Satan — they are doubly blind and cannot see the blazing light of Christ.

Welcome to the ministry. This is who we're talking to. Cf. 2 Cor. 10 — they are in a kind of tomb and prison — they are in fortresses. They are captive to any idea raised up against the knowledge of God. They are impenetrable.

If the gospel is veiled it is veiled because they are in the category of the perishing. They can't respond. And if they do respond, it is because of the wondrous work of God (cf. ch. 1 — let him who boasts, boast in the Lord).

The doctrine of depravity is an encouraging word. It is encouraging to me that I can't awaken a dead sinner, so I just preach the Word that the Spirit uses to awaken the dead sinner. It is *God who said 'Light shall shine out of darkness' is the One who has shone in our hearts...* The only way a blinded dead sinner will ever see the light when He does a miracle in the soul like he did in creating light in Genesis. God stepped into infinite darkness and said, "Let there be light." In the same way only God can step into the human soul and say, "Let there be light." If I thought salvation depended on the effectiveness of my preaching, I'd be paralyzed; I couldn't do it. I just preach, and leave the results to the Creator.

Paul was faithful to the very end because He depended on the Lord.

6. An Unwavering Conviction of His Own Insignificance (v. 7)

We have this treasure in clay pots! What is beyond Paul's comprehension is how the Lord could take this gospel and put it in a clay pot like him!

What did they use clay pots for? To bury valuable things in the ground. And to take out household waste. They are distinguished from vessels of honor (2 Tim. 2). There was no intrinsic value in those pots — they were ugly. Luther was called by a critic a "privy pot." Luther might have said, "yah." Isaiah acknowledged he was a man of unclean lips. Paul saw himself as the least of all apostles (cf. 1 Cor. 4:13).

This is Paul's self-humiliation. We are plain, fragile. But such weakness does not prove fatal to the power of the gospel!

How does Paul sustain himself against defection? By these set of convictions.

7. An Unwavering Conviction of the Benefit of Suffering (vv. 11-12)

"My suffering is to your benefit." He is never abandoned by God. In all the suffering there is benefit for the Corinthians. How? Note 12:7-8. The Lord didn't remove it in order to humble Paul. Some trouble in our churches is to humble us.

False teachers were tearing up this church; demons have been allowed to tear through this church. Paul asks for it to stop and the Lord said, "No — you need to be humbled and you need

to learn that your strength is found in your weakness.”

For Paul to carry the dying of Jesus (4:12) has a purpose — the manifestation of Jesus in his body. This is how we have to embrace our suffering. If we don’t embrace suffering in this way we are more likely to fall in ministry.

God was working powerfully in Paul’s weakness. Paul could never be the explanation for his impact. They saw he appeared to be nothing. He was tormented in his soul by false teachers. And yet the power of God came through his weakness.

8. An Unwavering Conviction of the Need for Courage (v. 13)

I only think of one thing when I speak: “Is this true?” If you believe it, say it. So it brings suffering? I will not change the message. I can’t believe something and not say it, no matter what persecution comes.

We’re bound to speak what we believe. Paul wasn’t afraid of death — cf. v. 14. So they kill you — you’re going to be resurrected. The sting is out of death. I say what is true so that the grace that is spreading will abound more and more in conversions and to the glory of God. I say what’s true 1) if they kill me, the Lord will raise me; 2) if people here the truth and believe the truth they are saved and that will result in greater glory to God.

9. An Unwavering Conviction that Future Glory was Better than Anything This World Could Offer (vv. 16-18)

Even in the midst of being battered and bruised he is confident in the resurrection and he looks for the eternal weight of glory. He is looking for the reward that comes from the hand of his Savior. That has to be the goal. We don’t look at the things that are seen.

You will not lose heart or defect when you live by these convictions.