

Gospel Centered Ministry

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[0:00] Good morning. Sorry, that was me, not her. I'm Matt. I'm one of the pastors here. We're glad! We're glad you're here this morning. Brief word before we begin. Typically at Trinity, we preach! We preach through sections of Scripture. So we preach sequentially, passage by passage.

And we just finished last week a series in the book of Numbers, and we are going to begin a series next week in the book of Acts. So look forward to that as we look at how God built His church and what that means for us as His people, as His church in the 21st century, continuing to participate in what God is doing in the world. So today we have a one-off sermon, but I hope it's going to continue to model for you or show to you the way that we honor God's Word in this church. So it's a passage near and dear to my heart. It's 2 Corinthians chapter 4. If you want to turn there, it's page 907 or so in your pew Bible. We have a couple of different editions. So it's not there. It's right around there. And we're going to look at that in just... we're going to read that in just a minute. But I just want to give that introduction before I get started. As summer turns to fall and a new season begins, I want to ask you a question. What will be the defining influence of your life? What will you make the center of who you are, of how you live, of what you value, what you pursue?

It's easy for those questions to be influenced by an awful lot of things in our world today. Your family and your home culture will tell you, here are the things you should value. This is what you should be about. We all know that social media shapes us far more than we ever wanted to believe it was true. But it is. The nations and the cultures you grow up in, your career aspirations or academic ambitions, your family situations and trials, whatever they are, there may be things that are shaping you. And again, we would like to think that we are independent of those things enough to be able to make decisions for ourselves. We can choose what's most important.

But I don't think that's actually true. Often we are unaware. Often we have things that influence us that we are not willingly choosing, but are carried along by.

[2:40] And the fact is, we are always going to be influenced by something, whether we are choosing it or they are choosing us.

So this leaves us at a question. What will be the defining thing for you? It's not only a question we ask for ourselves individually, but here at Trinity, we ask ourselves the same question.

What's going to be the defining thing for our church? What will shape us? What will shape the way that we worship and the way we live in community together and how we minister to others?

The Apostle Paul faced a similar situation as he ministered to a church in Corinth that was being asked similar questions. You see, Paul had come and planted the church in Corinth, but after he had been there, false teachers had come behind him.

And though they claimed to continue to believe in God, they challenged Paul, his character, his methods, and most importantly, his message. And they were proposing that they forsake Paul's method and take another one, take up a different worldview.

[3:51] And so in the letters to the Corinthian church, which 2 Corinthians is one of, Paul is explaining and defending his understanding of what God would have be our greatest controlling influence.

He focuses on what God would have been in the Bible. He focuses on what he calls the gospel, the gospel of good news about what God has done in Jesus Christ. That God in love for a sinful, rebellious world like us sent his son into the world so that he might deliver us, save us from the judgment and death that sin deserves.

He came as a substitute, living a human life for us, the perfect one that we should have lived but couldn't live, dying a death for us that we deserve because of our sin, and rising to new life so that we as fellow humans with him might be raised to an eternal life.

This is the core of Paul's message that God in Jesus Christ has done everything possible for us to be forgiven of our sins, renewed to an eternal relationship with God, life now and life eternal with him.

And Paul says, this is the heart of the message. And he explains how it confronts the false teaching of the false apostles who were challenging the church in that day.

[5:35] And so that's what we're going to do is we're going to look at 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and see how Paul spins this out, how the gospel shapes his ministry in his life and how it can shape our ministry in our life as well.

So again, if you want to read it in the pew Bible, the passage will also be up on the screen as I read it. But I'd love for you to pull it out if you have it so that you can look at it again as we go ahead and look at God's word.

Page 907 in the pew Bibles, 2 Corinthians chapter 4. Let's read it together. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.

In their case, the gods 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 shown into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

[7:11] But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed.

Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. Always carrying in the body the death of Jesus.

So that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake. So that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, I believed and so I spoke, we also believe and so we also speak.

Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 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.

[8:23] So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

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.

This is God's word. Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you have spoken to us, Lord, in this enduring way so that we might know you.

Lord, I pray for this morning that we would have hearts that are receptive to your word. I pray that you would help me to speak your word truthfully as I ought.

Lord, that together as we sit under your word, that you would turn our hearts to worship you and to follow you. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

[9:29] Amen. Amen. So what does it look like for the gospel to be in the center of Paul's ministry?

Well, in verses 1 through 6, we see the first thing, and that is that the gospel ministry of Paul is seen to be God's work, ultimately, and not merely ours.

He begins in verse 1, and he says, we have this ministry, that is, we have this thing that God has called us to do, which is to let other people know this good news of the gospel.

But he says, but I do this not because I'm great. I have this ministry because of God's mercy. He starts out by saying, no one deserves to do the ministry of God.

No one, Paul knew he was a sinner saved solely by the grace of God. God reached down into his life and pulled him out of spiritual death into life with him.

[10:28] He said, this is the mercy that God has shown me. That's why I have this ministry. I have this privilege to tell others of the good news of what God has done for me and for all people in Jesus.

So he says, I have this ministry by God's mercy. And then he goes on, and he seems to be defending himself, doesn't he? When you look at the end of verse 1 and 2, it's like, we don't lose

heart.

We've renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways, and we don't want to tamper or cunning. Why does he have to defend it? Well, here's my supposition. Because it's a very weird flow of thought otherwise.

My supposition is that the false teachers were saying, that Paul, he's kind of a backwards kind of a rube. He doesn't really know what to do.

We know how to be really impressive in ministry. We know how to have great strategies and great schemes and great programs. And we're going to build our success by building on those things.

[11:35] And you look at Paul's ministry and look, people don't even always respond to his message of the gospel. This is what it means when he says, even if the gospel is veiled. Right?

Paul is being attacked by saying, your gospel ministry is really kind of weak and ineffective. And we've got something better than that.

That's what it seems like the false teachers were promoting. And friends, if you're a part of the church today, do you see how easily we do the same thing?

Now, look, I want to be careful because none of these things inherently are wrong. But isn't there a pull to be the cool church?

The vibe church? Right? The one with the killer children's ministry or youth ministry. The one with the swag or the X factor. The best strategies, the best programs.

[12:32] The smoke machines, whatever it is. And look, you can do all of those, have all of those programs. Right? And do much of those ministries in an honest way that honors the Lord.

But when we start to trust in these things and think that these are the strategies that are going to finally push our ministry into grand success. Paul would say, no, that's not what it is.

Look with me again at verse 3. Right? Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled. Why? Because of sin. Because of the hardness of hearts. Because of the spiritual warfare.

And the only hope and the only remedy for sinners like you and me and for a lost world is that God would work. That God would take away the scales from our eyes.

Remove our spiritual blindness. So that, as he says, we can see the glory of God in the face of Christ. We can hear with our ears the good news of the gospel.

[13:37] And our spiritual vision is now enlightened or able to understand and see what God has done for us in Jesus. So that they might be brought from darkness into light.

So that they might have this life with God. Just as God created the world and made life for it in the first place. Now he is spiritually recreating people through this saving work of preaching the gospel. And so the gospel ministry is about God's work that we have the privilege of participating in. That's what he says in verse 5. We don't preach ourselves.

This isn't about me. Please remove me and Nick from this pulpit if it ever becomes about us. It's not about us. It's about Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves.

And not just the pastors or the elders. But the church as servants of God for his sake. So this is the first thing we see in Paul's understanding of ministry.

[14:47] And it's a call for us to be sure that this is true for us as well. Oh, Trinity, may we keep the understanding that ministry is ultimately God's work, not ours, in the center of what we do.

Secondly, Paul goes on in verses 7 through 12. He talks about how the gospel ministry embraces suffering as central in God's plan to display his gospel.

So this is what we see in verses 7 through 12. He's talking about the glory of the gospel as seen, you know, the end of verse 6, right? The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This is the greatness of what we have. And he says, and we have this treasure, which is a beautiful treasure, in jars of clay. Now, a jar of clay in the first century was a very common, very ordinary thing.

It was not a particularly valuable item. It might be compared today to like a plastic two-liter bottle or a peanut butter jar, right? Something that has very little value in it of itself.

[15:58] The only value in it would be what is inside. And Paul says, we have this treasure in jars of clay, right? And isn't this important for us to recognize?

Because as human beings, we're so easily look at one another and think, oh, that's an impressive person. We live in the backyard of Yale. There are a lot of superly impressive people.

Some of you are superly impressive, right? You're very extraordinary in the world's values. But Paul says, no, all of us are simply jars of clay compared to the all-surpassing power.

And so if you're one of these extraordinary people, beware not to be puffing yourself up. And if you're someone who feels like, oh, I can't, those people are so impressive. I have nothing.

You have the same treasure in you. In verses 8 and 9, he has increasing terms.

[17:19] We are afflicted, but not in every way, but not crushed. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Persecuted, but not forsaken. Struck down, but not destroyed. Right?

Paul says, this is the path for the ordinary jars of clay in life, is that we will suffer. Now, we don't really like this, do we?

Let's be honest. We don't want to suffer. And we need to put a couple of caveats, right? We're not supposed to choose suffering. We're not supposed to put ourselves on the top of a hundred-foot pillar in the middle of the desert to suffer, right?

And thinking that that's going to glorify God. We also need to beware, because the Scriptures warn us, not to suffer for being sinful or ungodly or stupid.

We should not suffer because we're being needlessly offensive and then say, oh, look at how bad my suffering is. Right? Right? Right? But suffering is central to God's plan because of what we see in verses 10 and 11.

[18:26] Always carrying around the body of, in the body, the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

This is a fundamental gospel dynamic. Just as Jesus, because he died for us and then rose from dead, when we by faith are joined with him, we walk this path of dying and living that God is working in us.

Right? We have this death every day as those who follow and engage in this gospel ministry. We die to our own plans so that we might live to God's plans.

We die to our own preferences so we might live to serve other people. Right? We die to having easy relationships so that we might love those who are a little more difficult in Jesus' name.

We choose righteousness in following Jesus, even when it's incredibly costly to our social standing or even our career. We stand for righteousness and die to the praise and glory of the world so that we might live rightly with God in the ways that he has given us.

[19:58] The suffering that we experience is producing in us life. This is the pattern.

Die to sin, live to righteousness. Die to self, live to God. And it's not just for us, is it? It's also for others.

Did you see verse 12? So death is at work in us, but life is in you. So it's not just that we do this for our own. This is not a very warped, twisted plan towards self-care.

Right? We want the life of Jesus. We're going to suffer more. This is the part of the pattern. But the end result is that it would overflow from us. That the life that he's producing in us as we pursue the gospel isn't just for ourselves, but it's for others as well.

So we experience this life and death dynamic in the gospel because it's God's plan for us to display.

[21:04] How does this work? Well, you've got to go back to verse 7. You noticed I skipped over it, right? We have this treasure in jars of clay. Why? So that the all-surpassing power would be seen to be of God and not ourselves.

Right? This is why suffering and death are a part of God's plan. Because we in our human nature, just like Adam and Eve did at the very beginning at the garden, we are arrogantly grasping towards being equal with God and promoting ourselves.

And suffering humbles us again and again. Humbling makes us embrace the reality of our weakness that we want to deny. As Paul says later in 2 Corinthians, God's words to him as he was suffering.

God said to him, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. And Paul says, therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

So just as the ministry is about God and his work, so even suffering. It's about how God wants to use us to display his power by sustaining us, by daily giving us new life, by enabling us all the time.

[22:35] Friends, how different this is from some of the pictures of Christianity in our world today. There's a picture of victorious Christianity where faithfulness is equated with material abundance and personal ease.

Or triumphant Christianity that denies that suffering could be a part of God's plan and says if you're suffering, you must lack faith. Or a powerful Christianity where we want to own our enemies and scorn the weak, seeking to seize the reins of power and to control and impose on others. How different is this from the modern gospel of progress is going to lead us to easier and better lives with comfort and accommodation where suffering is avoided at all cost.

The gospel tells us something very different. And we need to recognize that. We need to embrace it. And we need to not be ashamed of it. But we need to see that it is in fact the very way that God is going to do this.

Some of you are young. You haven't suffered very much yet. I want to plant this cornerstone in your life now so that when it comes, you'll be ready.

[23 : 56] Some of you have lived through the storms. And maybe you feel battered. And maybe you feel like you're hanging on by a thread or you're just about to give up.

The life of Christ is being manifested in you as you suffer. As you carry around death in your life. In your everyday life.

Hold on to this. This is how the gospel shapes us as we think about ministry. So that's the second thing that Paul says. The third thing we see in verses 13 through 15 is that the gospel calls us to join in the ministry of God's mission of bringing life in Jesus to others.

Right? So in verses 13 through 15 he says, Okay, so I'm experiencing this death and life dynamic. So since we have the same spirit of faith, that is we believe that God is bringing life to us.

We're going to speak. We're going to speak the gospel. We're going to speak the good news about what Jesus has done for us. Right? And he does so with great conviction.

[25 : 10] Right? Verse 14. Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus.

So this is the basis of his confidence as he speaks. He says, we have the best news because we know that Jesus rose from the dead. And if Jesus rose from the dead, that means that no matter else what happens, we have a good news to say.

And it's worth saying. Right? It's rooted in that. But notice, did you notice how he worked in a couple of different pronouns at the end of verse 14 and 15?

It's so awkward in Greek and in English to read these sentences. Right? But he says, Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you.

Do you see where Paul's heart is at? This isn't just about him knowing he's going to heaven. He sees that God's desire is that more and more and more.

[26 : 15] He wants the Corinthian church to not be led astray by a false gospel. But he also, as you keep going in verse 15, right? For it is all for your sake so that grace extends to more and more people.

He has his eyes lifted up from his own life to see the world the way God sees it. And to see sinners perishing without Christ. To see those who are lost spiritually bearing the consequences of sin. Destroying their lives in various ways. And he has compassion on them. And he says, There's another path. There's a path of life that's in Jesus Christ. And I want more and more and more of you to know that.

So the gospel calls Paul to live not for himself but for the sake of others. And to frame his priorities and his energies.

And the way he thinks about the world through this lens of, I want more and more people to know God. And look, if you're uncomfortable with that because it feels like we're just another club trying to be the biggest club on campus.

[27 : 27] Trying to be the most. That's not the point at all. Because do you see the end of verse 15? It's not about us. It's about God.

Because as more and more people hear and respond to this gospel. As they know this great promise of resurrection with Jesus. Of life with him. They will what?

Abound in thanksgiving to the glory of God. God. This is what the church should be. Not about us and our place in society and our power and what we can influence.

It's about giving thanks and praise. Bearing witness to God and how great he is. And the salvation that he has given for us. Friends, if you're here this morning and you're a follower of Christ, does this picture capture your heart?

Do you want the glory of God to cover the world? Do you want to see the hearts of other people come to know the good news of the gospel?

[28 : 38] Do you want your own heart to be renewed in joy and thanksgiving that God has saved you? Oh friends, I want that for you.

We want that for you. And if you're here this morning and you're exploring Christianity and you're not sure what you think about this. I invite you to come and examine.

Because Paul has based his whole life and gospel on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. If Jesus was raised from the dead, then all of this makes sense.

And if he wasn't raised from the dead, then it doesn't. So friends, come and explore that. Come talk to me. Talk to Pamela at the welcome table. Talk to Nick at the back door as you go out.

Talk to your friend who you came with. Whatever it is. Explore whether Jesus really did rise from the dead. Because if he did, it makes all the difference.

[29 : 42] All right, finally, at the end of this passage, Paul tells us that gospel ministry is sustained by an eternal hope that is beyond compare.

Verses 16 through 18. Paul reiterates, we do not lose heart. Now, why would he have to say that again? Why is he concerned that he or the Corinthian church might lose heart in this gospel ministry he's been talking about?

Well, you know what the greatest source, I think, is for us losing heart? It's when we have false expectations and then are disappointed. We might believe that the gospel will produce great material success in this world.

And when it doesn't, we feel like the gospel has failed. We might think that the gospel will save us from suffering. And if it doesn't, we think the gospel has failed.

We might think that the gospel will give us a great purpose in life of having a self-fulfilled, happy life.

[30 : 56] But the gospel, if the gospel doesn't produce this, then we are disappointed. The final expectation that I think comes behind this section is that we think that the gospel tells us that we will have the fullness of the blessings of eternity now in this time.

This is what the Corinthians were faced with. In fact, this is what the false teachers were saying. You have the Spirit of God. You have it all.

And if you have weakness, if you have suffering, if you have trials in ministry, then you're not really in God's plan. Because you should be able to have it all now.

And friends, I'll tell you what. This is an impulse that is both in our culture and in the church today. Where we think that we're going to get the kingdom of God in its fullness now.

And as we hold that expectation, how prone are we to become disappointed? Right? While facing the reality of a life that the scriptures describe as a now and not yet.

[32 : 15] God has begun to bring the gospel in his kingdom, but he hasn't brought its fullness yet. And so as such, we still live in a fallen world. Right?

But there's a spirit in some of our social movements today that think, we have to be done with sin. There will be no more abuse.

There will be no more suffering. There will be no more corruption. We're going to eradicate it all. Friends, this is not a realistic view.

We are to work for righteousness and justice and bless our world. We are to bring the aroma of Christ wherever we go. But we need to recognize that we will not bring in the kingdom by doing those things.

And we need to recognize that the church is not going to be the place of perfection. And I don't say this to excuse the sin of the church.

[33 : 13] But I say it to recognize that we are all sinners saved by grace. And as we pursue righteous living, God allows a fallen world to continue because of his loving pursuit of more and more souls.

That wasn't even my notes. That was a little bit of a discursus. But here we go. So what does he say instead? He says, this is what it looks like. So we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away.

This is what we experience. Life in a fallen world. Some of you are older. You know what it feels like to literally feel like you're wasting away. Your body does not do what it used to. Some of you are young.

You haven't gotten there yet. But you see a society that is wasting away. You see a world that is wasting away. You see institutions that are wasting away. You see relationships that are wasting away.

Marred by sin and leading towards death. This is the world we live in. Outwardly we experience all this. But Paul says that's not the end of the story.

[34 : 17] Because there is instead in this gospel hope. Inwardly we are being renewed day by day. How does that renewal happen? For these light and momentary afflictions.

He calls them light and momentary afflictions. When you look at what Paul has suffered. They're not light nor not momentary. He has been beaten. He has been imprisoned. He has been shipwrecked. He has been scorned. He's been stoned. He's been thrown out of places. So he does not say this lightly. If you think Paul is saying, Paul doesn't understand.

I'll tell you what, Paul does understand. He has suffered greatly. And even if Paul doesn't understand, Jesus understands. Because he went to the cross to bear not only the guilt but the weight of the sin of the world.

He does know every suffering and every trial. And he says these light and momentary afflictions are not worth comparing to an eternal weight of glory that they are achieving.

[35 : 27] That our suffering now, the trials that we face. It's not just we endure them to the end, but they're actually achieving. They're producing something.

Because as we cling to the gospel in the midst of this fallen world. As we cling to the gospel in the midst of the suffering that you are facing today. Your children are unhinged.

And you're pulling your hair out not knowing what to do. Your career path has completely been derailed. And you're adrift. The relationship you long for so much has been totally destroyed and blown up.

Your body is wasting away and suffering. And you find yourself daily with less and less capacity to do what you used to be able to do. Whatever the sufferings are.

As you cling to this gospel. You are achieving a glory. Because you are glorifying God in his promise. To redeem and to resurrect you to eternal life.

[36 : 39] And this is why he says. We do this not by looking. At our daily circumstances. Not by looking at the trials and the obstacles and the hard things.

Not by looking at the realities of everyday life. But we lift our eyes to the eternal and unseen truths. That whatever this is.

It is but for a moment. And the resurrected life of Jesus will be forever. And the redemptive plans of God are more certain than the hardest thing that you face today.

And he will take you home. And friends. This is Paul's heart for the gospel. This is what we hope to be as a church.

A church that treasures the gospel the way Paul did. And as we treasure it. We live it out to be a gospel-centered church. In this city and to the ends of the earth.

[37 : 43] We talk about it here to be gathered. Transformed and sent by the gospel into the world. And my prayer is that you may be caught up in what may it be true.

What God is doing in our midst. Through the gospel for his glory. Let's pray together. Lord we thank you. We thank you because you are a great God above all gods.

And you have worked in us a salvation that is beyond comparison. Oh Lord help us. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

[41 : 12] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.