

Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

Let There Be Light (2 Corinthians 4:1-6)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on March 15, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ For the past few weeks we've been in a sermon series that we're calling *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. We want to be a church known for our evangelism, for our love of those who don't know Christ and our zeal to tell them about his gospel of grace. We want to be a church that disciples its members and equips them to share the faith clearly and regularly.
 - **But we also realize that before we can build up that reputation as a church, we need to build up the theology of our church.** We need rock-solid, deep-rooted, unmovable theological convictions regarding the absolute sovereignty of God over our evangelism and over the salvation of the lost.
 - If these doctrinal planks are not dug down deep and firmly planted in our minds, we as a church and as individual evangelists will be susceptible to downgrade our gospel convictions the moment gospel opposition uprises. We'll be tempted to tamper with God's Word when we realize just how unpopular it can be to our culture.

- ❖ I felt this pull – this temptation to tamper with the message – just the other week on the local missions trip I took with our college students. God opened the door for me to share the gospel a few times. Once with a group of Muslim teenagers from Pakistan and another time with a UH senior from China who never had anyone explain to her anything about Christianity even though she moved to Houston in the 4th grade and went through public school and almost four years of college.
 - I was talking to people completely uninformed of the gospel. I kind of had a blank slate to work with. So when I came to the point in my sharing that touched on an issue that I feared with offend or cause them to stumble, I remember stumbling with my own words.
 - When I talked to those Muslim teens about the divinity of Jesus and the exclusivity of salvation through Christ alone, my thoughts were running wild wondering how they're taking this and whether I should've skipped that part. Or when I was sharing with that UH student and got to the part about God's judgment and the reality of hell, I saw her eyebrows furrow and inside I was worried that it came across too strong. Maybe I should've avoided that part.

- ❖ Now fortunately neither those boys or that girl walked away in a huff completely offended by what I shared. But neither did they fall on their knees and plead with me asking, "*What must I do to be saved?*" They just kindly listened. But I want more. I want to see them saved.
 - **So there is this temptation to tamper with the message to improve results.** Maybe if I tweak the gospel, I'll see more response and less rejection.

- ❖ This is nothing new. Christians have dealt with this temptation for generations because in each generation there's something about the gospel that offends. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians that the gospel of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23). **So this gospel of Christ crucified was never going to be an easy sell.** Not in the first or the twenty-first century.

- Which explains why Paul mentions in our text the temptation to use “*disgraceful, underhanded ways*” to preach Christ. Methods that lead God’s messengers to “*practice cunning*” and to “*tamper with [his] Word*” (v2). The temptations were there in Paul’s day as they are in ours.
- ❖ But the Apostle was not susceptible to them. He faced plenty of opposition and plenty of rejection, but he says he didn’t “*lose heart*” (v1). He didn’t feel the need to tamper with God’s Word or to practice any cunning or underhanded ways. Why?
 - **I hope to show from today's passage that the answer lies in Paul's rock-solid, deep-rooted, unmovable theological conviction that God is absolutely sovereign over his evangelism and the salvation of the unbelieving.**
 - As we study this passage, I want us to consider three exhortations. **1)** Don’t lose heart at the sight of gospel opposition. **2)** Don’t overlook the source of gospel rejection. **3)** Don’t underestimate the power of gospel sharing.

Don’t Lose Heart at the Sight of Gospel Opposition

- ❖ **First, we ought not lose heart at the sight of gospel opposition.** As we’ve said, opposition is nothing new, and it’s nothing that should shock us, and it’s nothing that should deflate us and cause us to lose heart.
 - Listen to Paul in v1, “*Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lost heart.*” This ministry he mentions is referring to the ministry of the New Covenant (3:6), or Paul calls it the ministry of the Spirit (3:8) or the ministry of reconciliation (5:18). In other words, he’s talking about the gospel ministry he’s been entrusted with – to preach Christ, the author of a New Covenant, the mediator of a reconciled relationship with God through which we enter by the life-giving Spirit.
 - Paul does not lose heart. He’s not discouraged when his gospel ministry results in gospel rejection and gospel opposition because he knows his ministry is God-given. It’s by the mercy of God.
- ❖ **Unlike so many others, Paul wont resort to underhanded tactics to impress others or to improve ministry results.** Read v2 again, “*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.*”
 - To fully appreciate Paul’s stance here, you have to understand his predicament when he wrote this letter. We learn in chapters 1-2 that he had canceled a visit to Corinth. There were issues going on, and he wanted to give them a chance to work things out before he showed up to clean house. Paul founded the church, but since then they've been infiltrated by false apostles who were undermining his influence and teaching.
- ❖ These men regarded Paul as weak and inferior (10:1, 10). They considered both the man and his message to be deficient. Paul, in return, sarcastically calls them “super-apostles” (11:5). These guys would boast in their oratory skills (11:6). They rode into town carrying impressive resumes and letters of recommendation (3:1).

- ❖ If it were happening today, these guys would be the ones with verified Twitter accounts boasting tens of thousands of followers and Paul would be that guy who still has an egg as his profile picture. **If you have no idea what that means, just know that these super-apostles were really into boosting their image and growing their platform.**
 - They were gaining an audience at the expense of Paul and his reputation. So throughout the letter of 2 Corinthians, there's this tone of uncertainty. He's not sure what kind of reception he'll receive the next time he visits. So of course there's this mounting pressure (temptation) to shift into a defensive posture, to begin a campaign of self-promotion to boost his own image.
 - But Paul's not going to have any of that. He's not going to lose heart. And he won't resort to underhanded tactics. And he won't tamper with God's Word. Because he has deep-rooted convictions about the sovereignty of God.

- ❖ God, in his sovereign mercy, saved Paul and entrusted him with a gospel ministry to the Gentiles. So his calling is to faithfully preach Christ crucified to dry bones and trust in God's sovereign mercy and sovereign power to make those bones come to life.
 - **Equipped with this theology, Paul was not overly concerned with the opinion and praise of man.** His concern was to do the best job he could in offering an open statement of the truth. His focus was on faithfully, clearly, and openly communicating God's gospel. He resolved to preach nothing but Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

- ❖ And that really should be our primary concern. Our central focus. To get the gospel right and to rightly share it. You need a **clear message** that's faithful to the gospel. That's the first priority. And then you need a **contextualized method** – a means of getting that message to those who need to hear it in a way that they can understand it.
 - Now some methodologies call for you boldly approach anyone, even strangers, in order to engage them with the gospel. While other methods like relational evangelism are more personal and slower paced. Others are more event-driven and centered on a rally or program. And it's hard to say if one is right or wrong.
 - It's true that a particular method of sharing the gospel can be poorly received. It depends on your audience. Maybe going door-to-door in your neighborhood will do more harm for the gospel than good. But in some cultures and even some neighborhoods in Houston, door-to-door is kindly received.

- ❖ **That's why I'm more concerned with the clarity of your message and the fact that you're actually sharing it – than with the particular method you use.** Of course that's not to say methodology makes no difference. That's not to deny that some methods of sharing the gospel are, as Paul puts it, disgraceful and underhanded and cunning.
 - So if you invite your non-Christian friends over to your place under the guise of a dinner party, and then they show up to discover they've joined your small group, that's underhanded. You just bait-and-switched them.

- Next time just invite them to your small group or else throw an actual dinner party and invite your non-Christian friends and a few small group members as guests. Then as new friendships form between your different friends, you're better positioned to invite the non-Christians ones to visit your small group.
- ❖ In the end, what's important is knowing your audience, understanding your neighbors, your colleagues, your friends, and adjusting your methods accordingly. But the most important thing is that you don't tamper with the gospel message just to make it easier for them to accept it or for you to share it. You're responsible to faithfully share a faithful message.
- So let me ask: *Do you know how?* **Do you know how to share the gospel message faithfully and clearly?** Perhaps that's a first priority for you. On the second Sunday of April, we plan on holding a training seminar on evangelism open to all. Maybe that's something to put on your schedule, something for you to attend.

Don't Overlook the Source of Gospel Rejection

- ❖ But remember, you can share the clearest, most faithful, most illustrative, most powerful presentation of the gospel of Christ crucified, you can be totally sensitive to your audience and rely on a perfectly contextualized method of getting that clear message across – and yet still be rejected. And still see opposition. But don't let that get to you. Don't be daunted.
- Paul wants you to know that it's not the content of your gospel that's to blame. That's what he came to realize. He came to see the true source of the opposition. This leads to our second point: **We mustn't overlook the source of gospel rejection.**
- ❖ According to Paul, the blame falls on two culprits. A clear message communicated through a contextualized method can still be veiled to **hardened minds** that are blinded by **a cunning enemy**. Together they explain why those you've tried to share the gospel with time and time again still refuse to believe. Chances are it's not because you were unclear or because your methods stink – it's because their minds are hardened and the enemy is actively blinding them from seeing the truth.
- That was Paul's conclusion. Look at v3. "*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.*" So here Paul acknowledges that the gospel he preaches is often rejected, and the reason is because it's in some sense *veiled*. **There is a veil covering the gospel message that keeps unbelievers from seeing its truthfulness, its power, its beauty.**
- ❖ Now this imagery of a veil is an extension of the metaphor he was using back in chapter 3. There he alludes to the Old Testament when Moses used to put a veil over his face after meeting with the LORD because the skin of his face would shine with glory, which made the Israelites afraid to come near him (Ex. 34:29-35).
- **And that veil ended up symbolizing how inapproachable the LORD is due to our sinfulness.** We can't stand before his glory. We can't even handle his glory reflected off the face of another man.

- ❖ **Paul's point is that the ministry of the New Covenant mediated by Christ is much more hopeful than the Old Covenant mediated by Moses.** Because in Christ, the veil is lifted. Let me read chapter 3:14-16, "¹⁴*But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. ¹⁶But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.*"
 - It's no longer needed because those who are in Christ can boldly approach and behold the glory of the LORD. We don't need a veil. But if you reject Jesus, the veil remains, and you're still cut off from God.

- ❖ So for his fellow brethren who opposed his gospel ministry, Paul saw their minds as veiled and hardened. **So one source of gospel rejection is our own sin that has hardened our minds and caused us to reject the gospel as foolish, as implausible, as irrational.**
 - But then in our passage in v4, Paul goes on to further complicate the situation, "*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.*"

- ❖ **So yes he's essentially blaming the devil.** We often forget about the devil and overlook both his power and his presence in this world. Modern man sees himself as a rational, highly evolved, and intellectual creature. So he says to himself, "I reject religion because I'm too enlightened to fall for such superstitions or to have any need of them in the first place."
 - But Paul says, "***No, the reason you reject spiritual truth is because a spiritual being who hates you, who hates the truth, and who hates the Source of all truth is blinding you. He's preventing you from contemplating and comprehending the reasonableness and beauty of the gospel.***"

- ❖ Modern skeptics don't like to hear that. They don't like to be called blind. And they especially don't like to be told that the devil is at work in their lives. But that's Paul's assessment. The devil is keeping unbelievers from "*seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*"
 - **Non-Christians are being kept from seeing the glory of Christ**, from seeing Christ as glorious, seeing him for who he is, the Son of God, the Crucified and Resurrected Savior who atoned for sin, defeated death, and conquered the devil.
 - Because of the devil's blinding effects, the lost look at the gospel and only see folly. They see a superstitious tale. They see a man of history who was a great philosopher and teacher but who met an untimely end. They don't see Christ Jesus for who he really is.

- ❖ This is what we mean by **spiritual blindness**. And this is the condition of every person who does not believe in Christ. That's the reason why they don't believe. The devil is keeping them in the dark, keeping them from seeing the truthfulness of the truth. And on top of that – what's more fundamental – their own minds have been hardened to the truth.

- ❖ So that means even if the devil were to one day quit and give up blinding the lost, they still won't run to Christ with hearts full of faith because those hearts are already hardened. **It's not just that the lost can't see the light of the gospel. Even if they could, they'd immediately recoil in disgust.** This is what Jesus said in John 3:19, "*This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.*"
- ❖ Humans, in our natural state, love the darkness and hate the light. Think about what that means. **We lack the *ability* to believe, but that's because we lack the *desire* to believe.** So we have no excuse. The devil should take some blame, but his blinding effects are still no excuse. They don't get us off the hook.
 - **Jonathan Edwards would say that the sinner's inability to believe is not a *natural* inability but a *moral* inability¹.** What he means is that if you are unable to do what's right because of a *natural* inability, then you'd be excused from blame. But if you were incapacitated by a *moral* inability, then you're still morally responsible.
 - So for example, if you fail to rescue a drowning child from a rushing river because you can't swim (you have a natural inability), then we wouldn't blame you. But if you don't rescue her because you don't care (that's a moral inability), then you deserve all condemnation.
- ❖ **So don't imagine the devil blinding perfectly good minds and perfectly good hearts that would naturally turn to Jesus in faith if not for the devil's wicked works.** No, all the devil is doing in his efforts to blind is to keep a *hardened heart* hard towards truth, a *distracted mind* fixed on the things of this world, and a *rebellious spirit* defiant and proud. We do a fine job putting ourselves in a bind without the devil's help. He just comes along and keeps us enslaved. Keeps us blind. Keeps us crippled in our *moral* inability to believe.

Don't Underestimate the Power of Gospel Sharing

- ❖ So just think about how difficult the situation is. If you want to see your non-Christian friends saved, you have these two things working against that aim: **Their minds are hard and the devil is active.** If there's any hope for any unbeliever to be saved, we need a miracle. And that's exactly why Paul says not to lose hope. Because as Christians our hope is found in a God of the miraculous.
 - We believe in a God who spoke a few words and created everything that we can see in the entire cosmos. He spoke and it came to pass! This leads to our third point: **Don't underestimate the power of speaking God's words, of sharing his gospel.**
- ❖ This is exactly where Paul's logic flows. Look in v5, "*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* So unlike his critics, Paul felt no compulsion to preach himself. To promote himself. To boost his own image to win a following. To amass a large crowd. To attract a big church.

¹ Sam Storms, "The Will: Fettered Yet Free (Freedom of the Will)," in *A God Entranced Vision of All Things*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 209.

- ❖ He knows you can get a lot of people to congregate each week around funny stories from your own life. People will be attracted to you and to your church because you're clever and cool. **But if all you proclaim is yourself, people might be sitting in your pews but they'll still be in the dark sitting in their sins.**
 - What non-Christians really need is for Christians to deny themselves, to stop proclaiming themselves, and to start proclaiming the gospel, to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Because that word has power. That message can save.

- ❖ Look how Paul goes on in v6, *"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 what he's doing is drawing a parallel between the miracle of Genesis 1 creation to the miracle of new creation every time a sinner is saved.**
 - Just as God spoke the words, *"Let there be light"* and light suddenly shone in the darkness (Gen. 1:3), in the same way, when we speak words of gospel – when we proclaim a message about Christ as Lord and Savior – God shines spiritual light into the dark recesses of sinful hearts.

- ❖ And suddenly the eyes of the heart are open. Scales come off, the veil is removed, and hardened minds and darkened hearts are transformed. They're reborn. It's a new creation! The converted can finally see and savor the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. And they now see it in the face of Jesus compelling them to rush forwards towards the irresistibly beautiful light of the glory of Christ.
 - Just listen to the words of Charles Wesley's famous hymn. ***"Long my imprisoned spirit lay / Fast bound in sin and nature's night; / Thine eye diffused a quickening ray / I woke, the dungeon flamed with light; / My chains fell off, my heart was free, / I rose, went forth, and followed Thee."***
 - That's a beautiful picture of sovereign grace overcoming the moral inability of the human heart. Of Jesus breaking bonds, removing chains, quickening in us new life, new faith, new affections to rise up, go forth, and follow him.

- ❖ *So what is all of this going to mean for our evangelism?* If God is completely sovereign over conversion, if he alone is capable of removing blinders and granting new sight, if he's the only One who can remove the chains and free the heart, then ***do we have any part to play?***
 - This is where I want you to listen to Paul out of Acts 26 as he stands before King Agrippa recounting his conversion. He had this Damascus road experience where he was physically blinded so he would come to grips with his spiritual blindness, and then Ananias was sent to speak gospel to him, to pray for the Holy Spirit to fill him, and then suddenly the scales fell off and Paul was given new eyes with new sight. I'm sure that informed his theology here.

- ❖ Now in **Acts 26:15-18**, he’s recounting Jesus’ commission to him. “*And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you’*”.
 - Now listen carefully to what he was sent to do. “*to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*”

- ❖ He knows God is the only one who can open blind eyes. Paul has his theology straight. And yet now God is telling *him* to go to the Gentiles to open *their* eyes! Did God misspeak?
 - No. There’s no contradiction here. **God is always the One who sovereignly opens the eyes of the blind, but according to his sovereign design, he works his miracle of new creation *through* your preaching of the gospel of the glory of Christ.** He’s going to use your meager gospel sharing to powerfully open blind eyes.
 - That’s so liberating. That means our central task in evangelism is not to save anyone. We can’t open anyone’s eyes no matter how hard we try or how convincing our arguments and answers can be. That’s beyond our ability.

- ❖ And yet at the same, it should be our passion and life mission to go into our campuses, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our city – with the aim of opening the eyes of the blind. That’s what Paul was commissioned to do and we are too. **Don’t give up or sit on the sideline just because you can’t actually open their eyes.**
 - As John Piper likes to say, you can’t create electricity and yet that never stopped you from flipping a light switch. **In the same way, you can’t open blind eyes, yet that should never stop you from sharing the gospel.** We *do* have a part to play.
 - So let’s humbly play our part. Let’s faithfully proclaim the word of God without tampering, without cunning, without disgraceful or underhanded methods. Let’s put before unbelievers an open statement of the truth and leave the miracle up to God.