

Time to Give Up?

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Preacher: Joshua Russell

[0:00] Okay, thanks. Let's turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 4. The Apostle Paul writes, 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Right, I wonder what discourages you from proclaiming the gospel and doing gospel ministry.

[1:18] Whether that be in your workplace or in your home or at uni or here at church. What weighs you down? What keeps you from boldly, joyfully, faithfully and frequently proclaiming Jesus and throwing yourself into serving him in whatever way is needed?

No doubt there are any number of helpful answers and tracks that we could go down here. But if I may be so bold, I really suspect that a significant one, maybe even the most important one, is quite simple.

It's a lack of success. I mean, sometimes evangelism feels like you're banging your head against a brick wall, doesn't it? And to be honest, church life feels like that sometimes too.

Many of us here serve together to make church work every week. I want to address you particularly this morning. You know, if you're on the welcoming team or the music team, the tech team or the setup team, the morning tea team.

Or you're not particularly on an organized team at all, but you just turn up, switched on, ready to talk to the person next to you, ready to love your brothers and sisters. You turn up each week with that ministry mindset.

[2:36] What drives you to despair? What tempts you to throw it all in, to call it quits, to give up? Again, I know that for some of us it might be sickness and ill health.

It might be old age. We just don't have the energy that we used to have. It might be busyness. It might be little frustrations to do with the resources we have or the systems we're using.

I think personally that El Vanto will eventually be the death of me. Maybe you think that if only we reorganized ourselves a little bit better, this way or that way, that serving at church would become easier and smoother.

And maybe it would, you know, trust me, sort of slowly but surely. We're always working on those kinds of things. I don't want silly little frustrations getting in our way or weighing us down when we're trying to serve the Lord together.

So we'll keep working on that kind of stuff. But surely, notwithstanding all of that, if we were seeing hundreds and thousands of people converted every year, and if every day people were growing in their knowledge and love of the Lord and bounding up to you over morning tea and saying, Oh, sister, praise the Lord.

[3:45] I'm finally free from all the anger and bitterness that's plagued me these many years. Oh, brother, would you like to read the Bible with me? I just have no idea what Isaiah is about, and I thought that we might be able to dig into it together.

You know, I think if that were happening, wouldn't all the little frustrations just sort of fade into the background? And we'd be encouraged, wouldn't we? So what I mean is that I think the thing that weighs me down the most is the lack of success.

It's the number of conversations I've had over the years that seem to amount to nothing. The amount of time and energy that I've poured into things over the years that seem to have borne so little fruit.

The unbelievers where all I've wanted for them is that they might be saved. And in many cases, I've spent hours and hours with them, like months and months of weekly catch-ups, trying to explain the gospel to them, praying for them, opening up the Bible with them, only to see it all come to nothing. The number of people we've contacted on market day over the years, compared to the very few who have actually joined us. The number of times we've run Knowing God, or the Good News course, or the Investigating Christ course, or whatever it's been called over the years, and the pathetic numbers that show up to it, when you consider the vast masses outside, marching steadily towards hell.

[5:10] I think of the thousands and thousands of bulletins I have folded. When I was 16, I became the president of bulletin ministries at my church growing up.

Maybe I was the vice president, because I thought that sounded even cooler and more pretentious. My brother was the president. We were the president of the chair-stacking ministries.

You know, I think of the chairs that I have stacked and unstacked and restacked, and the PowerPoints I've made and the Bible studies I've led, and the talks that I've given. And I know that many of you do just the same.

We do all that together, don't we? Right? As a team. Only to see people respond with apathy, lackluster, ingratitude, confusion, and sometimes outright hostility.

And, gee, it makes me lose heart. So how do you keep going when ministry seems to be so pathetic, small, weak, and futile?

[6:16] Well, thankfully, that's exactly what Paul goes on to talk about in this next section of 2 Corinthians. See chapter 4, verse 1. Having this ministry, by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

And then just cast it right down to verse 16. Paul says it again. So we do not lose heart. Or again, down in chapter 5, verse 6.

So we are always of good courage. In other words, you see how this motif just keeps sort of repeating like the beating of a drum throughout this section? That's what this section is about.

Paul wants the Corinthians to understand how the gospel minister keeps his head up. And actually, it's not just so that they can understand him better, but it's so that they can keep working with him in the cause of the gospel.

One of the most striking things about this part of 2 Corinthians is Paul's consistent use of the first person plural pronouns. Paul says we, us, our, right?

[7:18] Because he's not just talking about himself in these pages. He's not just talking about apostolic ministry. Now, he's at least including Timothy and his band of co-workers.

But I think even more than that, Paul is including the Corinthians in what he's saying. And all of us. Because he keeps grounding his teaching and his appeals in the kinds of things that all Christians experience.

He doesn't say, I'm an apostle, so this is how I behave. Of course, we're not all apostles. In fact, none of us are. But we have all been shown mercy. And to some extent, Paul is saying that all those who have been shown mercy and have received, we've all received this new covenant ministry from God by God's mercy.

So we are all to engage in this ministry in accordance with the mercy that we have received. So Paul is exhibit A, if you like. And he's been given that extra special position of being an apostle. But he's certainly not expecting to be ministering alone. Or that this kind of ministry will die out when the apostles die out. So remember how the apostle Peter says much the same thing in his first letter.

[8:27] He says, As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace. Whoever speaks is one who speaks the oracles of God.

Whoever serves is one who serves by the strength that God supplies. Because I think that's very important as we dive into this passage. That we understand that God's mercy is the grounds of all

authentic gospel ministry.

We're not all apostles. We're not all called to be pastors or missionaries or full-time paid gospel workers or whatever you want to call it. But we have all received mercy.

And God is wanting all of us this morning to understand how his mercy underpins and upholds our service. So as discouraged as we may be sometimes, we can draw upon God's mercy.

We can look to God's mercy so that we don't lose heart. And we can keep engaging in new covenant ministry together. So the first thing Paul says is he doesn't lose heart because he has this ministry by the mercy of God.

[9 : 36] Now think about how that works for a moment. I think the guts of it is that mercy trumps incompetence. Mercy trumps weakness.

Now I don't mean of course that God's mercy allows us to excuse our incompetence or something like that. And that's not true. But basically you see what Paul is saying is that if his ministry ultimately rested on his own competence or his own qualifications.

His track record, his rhetorical skills, his impressive credentials, then hardship, failure, or any weaknesses in him would threaten the legitimacy of his entire ministry.

But mercy works differently, doesn't it? Because you can't forfeit mercy by being incompetent.

Mercy doesn't depend on anything in the recipient, but only something in the giver.

Mercy doesn't depend on anything in the recipient. And when you think about Paul's own life, that makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Paul wasn't awarded his apostleship on the basis of his many years of faithful service. No, he was granted his apostleship despite the fact that in his self-righteous, stubborn resistance to God, he was persecuting the church.

[10 : 56] He puts it like this in one of his letters to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 1. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

But I receive mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who would have believed in him for eternal life.

You see, Paul's whole ministry was not granted to him on the basis of his performance, but on the basis of God's mercy. And of course, it's not just that mercy gets you in the door and then after that you've got to sort of continue under your own steam.

Paul is saying that God's mercy sustains his ministry all the way through. By God's mercy, he received his ministry. By God's mercy, he has his ministry. By God's mercy, he doesn't lose heart.

So likewise, brothers and sisters, when you're tempted to give up, when you're tempted to lose heart, keep your eyes fixed on God's mercy. Or on the other hand, you're tempted to think that ministry is really a chore and a burden.

[12 : 07] I hope none of us think this in here, but sometimes that kind of resentment creeps in.

Think about God's mercy. That actually he would recruit and employ unreliable, incompetent sinners like you and me.

What a privilege and an honor to be serving Jesus. To be a doorkeeper in the house of God. To be serving coffees, stacking chairs, folding bulletins, whatever it is, however you play your part.

And to think that he could be using angels or the great ones of the earth to be doing his bidding.

Why didn't he recruit Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or Winston Churchill?

But instead he decided to use you and me. What a mercy of God. All right, so that's point number one. By God's mercy, we don't lose heart.

But on to point number two, Paul says that in God's presence, we don't play tricks. See, it's not just that people lose heart and then give up on serving altogether, though that sometimes happens.

[13 : 17] But we can also, when we lose heart, give up on serving faithfully. Because it's so much easier to take shortcuts and fudge things and play tricks. In particular, in this section, Paul contrasts secretive ministry with transparent ministry.

Right, so there's the way of doing ministry where motives are concealed. Uncomfortable doctrines are held back. The word of God, the gospel, is not denied but distorted.

Pragmatism rules rather than principle. What works trumps what's right. Flattery and public relations and controlling the narrative are the order of the day.

Think of Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20 where he reminds them how, I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable. Do you remember that?

He didn't hold back to protect himself. I wonder if you could say that about the way that you deal with people. Can I?

[14 : 32] Pray for me. And the justifications for such manipulation come thick and fast. Usually, again, it's to do with success, expediency, effectiveness, sometimes unity.

You know, people say, if we talk about that too bluntly or too early, we'll just turn people off. But actually, that's precisely what Paul is saying not to do.

Not to consider or whatever. Don't tailor your message or water down the word of God because sometimes, even oftentimes, it might turn people off.

You know, I was thinking about how to get this across transparently at St. Lucia Bible Church.

We believe in the absolute sovereignty of God in predestination and election. The reality of eternal hell.

[15 : 40] The different roles of men and women. The wickedness of homosexuality. The infallibility of the scriptures.

The blasphemy of the papacy. And justification by faith alone. The exclusivity of Christ as the one mediator between God and humanity.

So that all other religions are false. Lies. And so on. Now, I expect when certain people walk in the door and hear that, they will just walk right out again.

And that's okay. I mean, it's tragic. But at least we were upfront and honest with them, weren't we? No tricks.

No concealing. No managing you or trying to, I don't know, manipulate you. That's the kind of ministry Paul is saying is authentic and anything else is underhanded.

[16 : 47] Unscrupulous. Unprincipled. Unscrupulous. We should renounce disgraceful, underhanded ways. We should not just state the truth, but we should state the truth openly in such a way that people can see how candidly and bluntly we are talking.

Because we are ministering always in the sight of God. And notice there's a second audience in the passage too. It's not the people we are ministering to, but it's their consciences.

It's their consciences. So Paul is talking about that faculty within human beings, within all of us, that is sometimes warped and imperfect, but it's there, that faculty to discern right from wrong, to discern truthfulness and honesty from flattery, manipulation.

Something smells off here. You're not telling me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

So our aim, brothers and sisters, my aim certainly, is not that somehow, through winsomeness, or persuasion, or careful managing, and drip feeding the right thing at the right time, when I think you can hear it or handle it, that somehow we might get everyone to agree with us.

You know, I have no doubt that even in the room now, well, you know, I expect that some of you might disagree with some of the things I just listed off. And that's okay. But have I held anything back from you?

[18 : 26] Have I tried to manipulate or control you, or keep something from you, or hide in the shadows? Now, I hope in your conscience, even if you hate some of the things I stand for and believe in, I hope that you can see that I really do believe it, and I'm just trying to give it to you as clearly and straightforwardly as I can, and we'll just keep doing that.

That's the plan. Okay, but number three, how does Paul understand his failures then? Under point number three, Paul says, So here is how Paul explains his ministry failures.

He doesn't rethink his method. Right? Although, of course, there is some place for that kind of thing sometimes, but that's not what he's going to talk to us about now. He doesn't rethink his method.

He doesn't rework his message. You know, Oh, if I just put more emphasis on this or that, I might have got more traction. No. When he faces opposition and resistance, he sees that Satan is at work.

Now, I think all too often we expect Satan to work in weird and wacky ways. You know, if someone is demon-possessed or they're involved in witchcraft, well, we know that Satan is at work there.

[20 : 00] But when it comes to my friendly neighborhood atheist, you know, politely refusing my invitations to church or my, you know, overtures, do you want to chat about God together? When it comes to my colleagues who are healthy, wealthy, and happy, it's hard to believe that Satan is at work in their life.

In fact, more than that, Satan is ruling their life. That's why in this little section, when Paul is talking about Satan, he calls Satan the God of this world.

Right? Or the God of this age. The ruler. Satan is ruling the world until Jesus returns. And how does he do that?

Well, he does that with lies. Let me just illustrate with one of Satan's powerful lies. We could go any number. I just thought this one was straightforward.

Our Muslim friends believe that Muhammad is a legitimate prophet of God. Now, that's a lie. It's a lie that Satan is using to rule over about two billion precious people across the world.

[21:12] To make sure that they go to hell. And of course, we are Abrahamic, they say. That is a lie.

Remember what Jesus said to the Jews who told him that. In John chapter 8, verse 39, they answered him, Abraham is our father. Jesus said to them, if you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did.

But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did. You are of your father the devil and your will is to do your father's desires.

He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character for he is a liar and the father of lies. You see, brothers and sisters, some vague connection to Abraham is of no consequence.

What matters is doing the works that Abraham did. What matters is trusting the God that Abraham trusted and the promises that that God made concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

[22:22] We don't have time to go through all the lies out there that might be worth thinking about. But Satan rules by lies big and small, some blatant and some subtle. Materialism, secularism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, communism.

These lies hold sway over billions of people, dragging them down into death. But lies like, that don't end in ism, but like, family is the most important thing.

That's a subtle one, isn't it? It's almost right. It's so true. But it's just as destructive. I think the idolatry of the family holds sway over millions and millions of Australians.

Science and religion are irreconcilable enemies. Righteousness is boring and straightjacketing.

How could a loving God ever be wrathful? Right?

We could just go on and on and on, couldn't we? Maybe you could talk about this over morning tea.

What do you think are some of the most powerful lies that Satan uses to keep people from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God?

[23:40] Now you see that string of of's there and then the punchline. What people don't see is the light. Right? It's a metaphor for truth. Right? They don't see the light means they don't understand the truth.

The truth of the gospel. That is, the momentous good news. And the news is about the glory. That is, the radiant majesty or something like that.

The bright, shining spectacularness of the Christ. That is, the King. The Anointed One. And the reason Satan blinds people to seeing the glory of Christ or the gospel of the glory of Christ is because Christ is the image of God.

God. Which should remind us of Genesis 1. Right? Human beings are made in the image of God. But of course it means more than that. Jesus is not just a man made in the image of God, but he is the image of God.

The image of the invisible God. The exact and perfect expression of God. If I can put it as carefully and strongly as I can, God the Father only ever and always relates to his creation and his creatures through his Son.

[24:58] Jesus is the contact point. God the Son is the contact point between God and man. So you can only ever see God through Christ.

Through the Word. The Word that became flesh. That is why Satan blinds people to the gospel of the glory of Christ. Because if people are blind to that, then there is no hope for them through any other means to find God another way.

Okay, but that finally brings us to point 4 in verses 5 and 6. When the gospel is preached, God's glory shines. Remember back in chapter 3 last week, Paul talked about how when someone turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

Now we know that Satan's veil is the one over people's hearts. Satan's veil is removed. So of course, what Paul continues to do in the face of unbelief and blindness is to preach the gospel.

And unlike the peddlers, unlike the super apostles, unlike the men back in chapter 3 with letters of commendation, Paul says, what we proclaim is not ourselves. Now I think, I noticed in the commentaries, for instance, that sometimes we imagine that Paul was being accused of proclaiming himself, perhaps.

[26:22] And so maybe that's the problem he's answering in this verse. But I wonder if that's actually a sort of very Christianized way of thinking. There may be some truth to it because it's a bit complex, this idea, but if you can get your head around this, I think the problem is more likely to be that Paul was being accused of not proclaiming himself enough.

Like the super apostles or like the cult of the emperors in Rome, you know, it was all about swagger and celebrity propaganda. In our own day, not to be too harsh here, I don't want to take a cheap shot, but I think you'll get my point, if I mention American culture, sometimes, you know, that sort of USA, USA enthusiasm, there's so much more self-confident and self-promoting than Australian culture.

America is the greatest country in the world. And I'm not saying it's all bad either, you know, there are heaps of problems with our tall poppy syndrome, but I think it's just helpful to understand that the Corinthian culture was a lot more like that.

Corinthians esteemed celebrities, you know, celebrity preachers, traveling preachers, promoting themselves, but Paul says, no, we don't engage in that kind of thing, because it's not the good news about Paul's glorious apostleship that gives light to the blind and sets the captives free.

And it's not that powerful people point to a powerful God. No, it's the good news about the lordship of Christ that has power to save.

[28:08] And it's actually the weakness of God's servants and captives that show off his power. Now, notice again how Paul describes his gospel.

The news, because this is so obviously important and so commonly misunderstood, the gospel is not primarily about you and your salvation or about the atonement, we were just reading about in Isaiah 53, or about forgiveness of sins.

Now, please don't misunderstand me here. I believe that these are the most important, most wonderful, precious truths and doctrines. I hope and I trust that by God's grace, I would be willing to die for these doctrines.

that our Lord Jesus Christ paid for our sins on the cross and offers us full forgiveness freely by grace and so on. But if you want to know what the New Testament means when it uses the word gospel, it means the news that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Or in fact, Paul puts it even more strongly in the Greek here, he literally just says, what we proclaim is Jesus Christ Lord. So, some translations go for as Lord, some translations go for the Lord, but either way, Paul is contrasting proclaiming himself, so a person he doesn't proclaim, with Christ, a person that he does proclaim.

[29:42] And he's contrasting his position as a slave with Jesus' position as Lord and Master. master. And even, I think, in that word there, we're meant to pick up on Jesus' divinity again.

Jesus is not just any Lord or Master, but he's the image of the invisible God. He is the Lord, Yahweh of old. He's saying, we proclaim Jesus Christ Yahweh.

Jesus Christ, God. Jesus Christ, Lord of Lords, King of Kings. Like when Thomas falls down before Jesus and says, my Lord and my God.

And then in verse 6, you see the logic of verse 6, we proclaim Jesus Christ Lord because 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.

In other words, we proclaim Jesus because we know who he is. God overcame our blindness and the darkness in our hearts. Because of God's powerful new creation work in our hearts, when we look at the face of Jesus Christ, we see the light.

[31:05] When we look at the face of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the gospel, we see the glory of God through the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is light from light.

He is the radiance of the glory of God. Jesus said to Philip, didn't he, when you've seen me, you've seen the Father. So Paul says it's that new creation work in our hearts, that powerful enlightenment that comes through the gospel, that then has led him and his colleagues and leads all of us to proclaim the gospel.

When someone hears the gospel and believes it, it's not because of anything in them, that prepared them or preconditioned them to be receptive to the gospel or anything like that.

It's not because of prevenient grace. They were in darkness. The God of this world holds universal sway over all people under his dominion, over their hearts, the very center of who they are.

God but when God chooses to enlighten a person by his powerful word, nothing can stop him. It's just like in the beginning when he called light out of darkness.

[32 : 20] Can you imagine? The darkness never could have resisted or called back. No! Once again, you think of Paul's own experience on the road to Damascus, don't you?

Where he saw the glory of the risen King Jesus and he was stopped in his tracks and his whole life was turned around. But Paul isn't just talking about his own experience here.

No, he's still talking in those first person plurals, isn't he? Because this is actually just how it works for all people who come to believe. In your life, a miracle has happened if the veil has been removed.

Because the only cure to satanic blindness, is the power of the gospel, the power of the word of God that demands, let there be light in this person's heart.

The power of the word of God that is the Lord Jesus Christ. The power of the word of God that is the gospel that proclaims the lordship of Jesus and even the divinity of Jesus.

[33 : 24] And actually, just as a sort of minor aside before you move to wrap up, but can you see how in that way the gospel actually flatly contradicts Satan's biggest lie. Satan's biggest lie, the lie that underpins all the other lies, is that God isn't God.

And the gospel reestablishes God in his rightful place by proclaiming that Jesus is Lord. God is God.

God is God. Okay, so let's return to the question we began with. Is it time to give up? What discourages you from proclaiming the gospel and doing gospel ministry?

What keeps you from boldly, joyfully, faithfully, and frequently proclaiming Jesus Christ Lord and throwing yourself into serving him in whatever way is needed?

Brothers and sisters, Paul says keep your eyes fixed on the mercy of God and that will sustain you. Conduct your ministry with integrity and transparency, doing everything self-consciously in the sight of God and recommending yourself to other people's consciences rather than bending or twisting your message to their preferences.

[34 : 48] When you seem to be banging your head against a brick wall, take note, when it seems like ministry is futile, you're not actually banging your head against a brick wall, but a veil, a veil of Satan's lies.

And the only thing for it is to keep preaching the powerful gospel, the powerful truth of Jesus' lordship, and keep trusting God to work through his powerful word, to do his new creation work in people's hearts, to enlighten them, so that through Christ they can see his radiant glory.

Let's pray. loving Father, we thank you for this wonderful little passage, that is so full of riches.

We pray that you would work in our hearts, especially help us if we are feeling discouraged or losing heart. We pray, Father, that your powerful mercy would sustain us.

that your word would fill us up so that we can keep proclaiming the gospel through difficult days and good days. Help us never to give in to temptations, to tamper with your word, or practice cunning, or minister in a way that is unprincipled.

[36 : 22] And we pray, Father, that you would have mercy on St. Lucia, the suburbs around here, on our neighbors, people at Ironside, the people at the university.

Please have mercy upon all those people around us who we know who are blinded by Satan's lies. Even if they are seemingly content and happy, we know that they are in grave danger.

And we pray that you would help us to love them, to share the gospel with them, and just please have mercy upon them and make your light shine in their hearts. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.