

“Soul Winning”

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

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Introduction:

I have read that several years ago the New York Transit Authority was missing a bus and a driver—he just never came back from his route. Apparently, the authorities searched for the man for over a week, but could not find him. Finally, ten days after the man had disappeared, he was found, with the bus, in Miami, Florida. The driver said, **“I’d had it with the cold weather, the passengers, and my family! One day after I got off work, I thought, ‘I wonder what would happen if I just took off driving!’”** So that is what he did—he took off for Florida where he enjoyed the sun and the ocean for more than a week—all by himself!

I don’t know if you have ever felt like doing something like that, but I do know that when it comes to passing along the word of God, sometimes we need some gentle encouragement to keep on keeping on. This morning, I would invite you, then, to turn with me to the book of **2 Corinthians**—to **2 Corinthians 4**. **▶PPT▶** In our pew Bibles, the passage is found starting on **page 1807**. In the book of **2 Corinthians**, Paul is defending himself as he was under attack by those who did not want to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and that the Lord had come back to life after the crucifixion. And so in this letter from Paul, the apostle had to deal with some false accusations, and instead of retaliating or giving up, instead of driving to Florida with a stolen bus, Paul decided to remind the church in Corinth about the great and amazing privilege of sharing the gospel with those who are lost. If you will, please look with me at **2 Corinthians 4:1-12**...

¹ Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, ² but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴ in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the

surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸ we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹ For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death works in us, but life in you.

This morning, as we look back over these twelve verses, I would like for us to remind each other of the great privilege we have of carrying the gospel message to those who are lost. But even more importantly, let us consider the question: How can we develop the desire we need to share Christ with those in the world? I would suggest four basic ideas.

I. First of all, I would suggest that we can encourage ourselves to share the gospel by realizing that WE ARE EXACTLY LIKE THOSE WHO ARE LOST EXCEPT FOR THE BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST. ▶PPT▶

The reminder comes right away in verse 1 as Paul says, *“Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart.”* And so the apostle Paul starts with a clear reminder that we ourselves have *“received mercy,”* and instead of lashing out or giving up, or taking the bus to Florida, Paul looks back into the past with just a brief statement encouraging us to remember what we have been given. If we forget where we ourselves have been, and if we start to think about those outside of Christ as terrible, horrible people, and we are so righteous while they are so bad, and if that kind of attitude dominates the way we think, then it seems to me that it would be rather difficult to reach anybody with the gospel. And so instead of giving up, the apostle Paul would encourage us to remember that we ourselves have *“received mercy.”* This is something that Paul never forgot!

The difference between *“us”* and *“them,”* is that someone cared enough to teach us the gospel. Someone cared enough to take us by the hand and lead us out of darkness and into the light. And the reminder here is that God loves our friends and neighbors just as much as He loves us. As Paul would go on to say in Ephesians 2:4-5, *“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us...made us alive together with Christ...”* Evangelism, then, has been compared to one blind beggar telling another blind beggar where to find bread—not a bad comparison at all.

We think back to Paul’s attitude in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, *“It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”* First of all, then, we can develop a desire to pass along the good news

by realizing that we are exactly like those around us except for the blood of Jesus Christ.

II. Not only should realize what we have been given, but we should also try to realize THE POWER OF THE MESSAGE WE ARE TO SHARE. »PPT»

We notice what Paul says in verse 5, *“For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord...”* In other words, the power was not in Paul as a gospel preacher, but the power was in the gospel message. Our main goal is not to promote ourselves. Our main goal is not to simply make people happy. We do not need to use any tricks or any false advertising. But our main goal is simply to pass along the good news of Jesus Christ. Our goal is to pass along the message that all people can be free from the slavery of sin. Again, one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. And this message is from God. As Paul said in verse 6, *“For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”*

Paul knew something about light shining out of darkness, didn't he? The light of Christ blinded Paul on the road to Damascus, the Lord told Paul to wait for further instructions, Paul then prayed and fasted for three days, and at the end of those three days, a man by the name of Ananias shows up and says (in Acts 22:16), *“Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.”* Paul knew the power of the gospel message. Several years ago, I made a passing reference to God sending the “preacher” Ananias, and yet someone pulled me aside and explained that Ananias is never described in the Bible as being a preacher. I remember thinking, **“No! You must be mistaken! Ananias was a preacher!”** But then I looked it up, and Dr. Luke simply refers to Ananias as a *“certain disciple”* (Acts 22:12). Ananias was simply a Christian, and he was chosen by God to preach the gospel to the man who would later be known as the apostle Paul. We are to realize, then, the power of the message that we have been given the privilege of sharing.

III. When it comes to developing the desire to share the gospel, there is something else to consider from our text this morning, and that is: GOD INTENDED FOR US TO BE THE ONES TO SHARE IT. »PPT»

In verse 7, Paul says, *“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.”* The gospel is the treasure, but the Lord has placed it in earthen vessels—clay pots. We are the clay pots. In most cases, whatever comes inside the box is more important than the box itself. And that's the way it is with the gospel. As Christians, we are the box, and the good news is the valuable treasure that we carry.

And we notice here that Paul put himself in this category right along with the rest of us. Paul was not the perfect preacher. In fact, some people from the church right there in Corinth had been saying, ***“His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal appearance is unimpressive and his speech contemptible”*** (**2 Corinthians 10:10**). Certainly Paul was accurate as a preacher, but he was not the master communicator. In fact, almost everyone who has ever spoken on God’s behalf has had some serious issues. We think about Peter. We think about Moses. We think about King David. All of these men were weak and frail. And so the apostle Paul says that we are ***“earthen vessels,”*** but in spite of our earthiness, God says that He wants us to share the gospel. What a great honor!

As the clay pots, the focus, then, is not on ourselves. The focus is not on what we believe, or what we say, or on what we think, but the focus is on Jesus. And so when people in Corinth attacked Paul for his personal appearance or for his contemptible speech, he basically went along with it, ***“Yeah, I’m ugly, and you’re right, I can’t talk, but that’s okay, because I am the clay pot. I am nothing but the container. I am nothing but a humble cup that carries the Living Water. And if God can use me—as weak and ugly and as I am, then He can even use you people there in Corinth! If I can do it, then any of you can do it!”***

In our Wednesday evening adult class, we recently studied **John 1** and the passage where Jesus started calling the apostles. We learned that God called Andrew, and Andrew then turned around and got his brother, Peter. He did not use any kind of dramatic speech or complicated argument, but Andrew simply said to his brother, ***“We have found the Messiah!”*** (**John 1:41**). The Lord then called Philip, and Philip also then went to a friend—not with a masterful speech, but with the simple statement, ***“We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph”*** (**John 1:45**). Being an ordinary, regular person is not a liability, then, it is an asset. Being nothing more than a clay pot is a good thing.

And whether we appreciate it or not, the privilege and the responsibility falls on all of us as Christians, because God intends for us to be the ones to share it. I am reminded of a story that was told by the president of a health care institution in the state of Kentucky. Apparently he once worked in a hospital where a patient accidentally knocked over a cup of water, which spilled on the floor beside the patient’s bed. The patient was afraid he might slip on the water if he got out of bed, so he asked a nurse’s aide to mop it up. The patient didn’t know this, but hospital policy said that small spills were the responsibility of the nurse’s aides and that large spills were to be mopped up by the custodial staff. Well, the nurse’s aide decided that the spill was a large one and so she called the housekeeping department. A housekeeper showed up and declared the spill a small one. Well, they got into a huge argument, ***“It’s not my responsibility,”*** the nurse’s aide said, ***“because it is a large spill.”*** ***“Well, it’s not mine,”*** housekeeping said, ***“because the puddle is too small.”*** The patient is laying there getting exasperated for a while, and then he took a pitcher of water from the night stand and poured the whole thing on the floor, ***“Is that a big enough puddle now for you two to decide?”*** The point this morning is that God intends for us to be the ones to share the good news. He does

not want us assuming that somebody else will do it. He does not want us arguing about who will do it, but the Lord is saying to us, **"This privilege is for you! As an earthen vessel, I know you are weak, but this responsibility is for you!"** Or, as Paul said in **Romans 1:14-15**, **"I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also...."** God wants us to share it!

IV. There is a fourth basic idea concerning soul winning in this passage, and that is: We are to realize that ANY PERSONAL SACRIFICE IS WORTH IT. »PPT»

Starting in **verse 8**, we find that Paul does not paint some kind of rosy picture, but he is realistic, because the truth is that obeying the gospel and sharing the good news will most likely cause us some kind of discomfort, perhaps even pain and suffering. He refers to being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. The idea of being **"afflicted"** is that we are being pressed or pinned down, that our options have been limited. One reason I enjoyed the unit of wrestling in high school was that gave me a skill I could actually use at home, but of course the point of wrestling is to pin the other person down. Paul basically says here that he feels pinned down. His life isn't over, but he's very uncomfortable, **"...afflicted but not crushed."** The word **"perplexed"** in **verse 8** refers to being **"at a loss,"** literally, **"without a way,"** like someone hiking in the wilderness who has lost the trail, **"...perplexed, but not despairing."** In **verse 9**, the word **"persecuted"** refers to being pursued, to someone who is being chased down. Paul, the great persecutor, is now on the receiving end. Paul is now on the run, but we notice that he has not been **"forsaken."** **"Struck down but not destroyed,"** down but not out. And then, in **verses 10-11**, Paul even talks about being **"delivered over to death for Jesus' sake."**

But thankfully, the sacrifice is worth it. I know we didn't read it yet, but please notice **verse 17**, where Paul says, **"For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison."** In other words, when compared to the reward, the affliction is **"light."** But it's not just a matter of putting up with affliction for a while, but notice he says that the affliction has a purpose, that the affliction is actually **"producing for us an eternal weight of glory."** The affliction causes the reward to be that much greater! The affliction produces the glory!

Conclusion:

This morning we have very briefly studied the question: How can we rekindle our desire to share Christ? We have looked at a passage written by the apostle Paul.

- We have discovered that we are just like those who are lost in sin...except for the blood of Christ. Therefore, we are not to look down on people, but (in

thankfulness for those who taught the gospel to us), we are to reach out in love. Just as we have *“received mercy,”* we are to pass it on.

- We have been reminded of the great power of the message that we’ve been given to share. The power is in the gospel—it’s not about us—and so we are not to be held back. We do not preach ourselves, we don’t trick people into coming to church, but we tell people about the cross of Jesus and what He did for us.
- We have been reminded that God intends for us to be the ones to share it. This is not something we can pass on to those who are more eloquent, this is not something we can outsource to those who are more outgoing than we are—but this is something that God has given us the privilege of doing. Just as you will not come over to my house and tell my neighbor, so also I will most likely never meet any of your neighbors. We each have an individual responsibility.
- And then finally, we have realized that any personal sacrifice will be worth it. If we are rejected, if we are looked down on for being religious nuts, that’s okay. We may be afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down, but we are still in the game until we are called home to our reward with God.

As we close this morning, I would simply ask that we think about one person, one lost friend who we would like to see as a Christian—perhaps a friend or a neighbor, maybe a child or a parent, a spouse, a co-worker. All it takes is, **“Come and see! Look what we’ve found!”** You know, there is a lot of weird stuff out there in the religious world—a lot of things that are just plain wrong. We have something special here. If we are not doing something the way the Bible tells us to, then let’s change it! That’s the beauty of the Lord’s church. We have no headquarters. We have no earthly hierarchy handing down orders. It’s just us and God, us and God’s word. And as children of God, God has entrusted the good news to us. I know it’s frustrating sometimes, but let’s not take the bus to Florida—let’s dig in and stick with it. As one of our members pointed out to me last week, **“We are on the front lines in a hand-to-hand battle with Satan.”**

If you would like for us to pray for you as a congregation of God’s people, we can do that. We would encourage you to write it down, pass it forward or bring it up here to the front. We will go to God together.

On the other hand, if you are not yet a Christian—that is the most important thing you can do today. If you believe in Jesus, if you are ready to turn away from all forms of sin, and if you are ready to be immersed in water as God has commanded—for the forgiveness of your sins, we would encourage you to make the decision to do it right now. If you are ready to obey the good news, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

A helpful resource: *“I Want to Be a Soul Winner for Jesus,”* by Neal Pollard; Daily Bread (September 9, 2009)

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org