

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Introduction

Paul turns his attention to Christian ministry and Christian service. There is plenty of material here for the ordination sermon or induction service. Yet if we are Christians we are all involved in “ministry” – its most basic meaning is service.

Paul touches on things which find an echo in every heart, especially when we feel discouragement, or are tempted not to be as straight as we ought to be, or when we are occupying centre stage, which is the Lord’s place alone. Paul knows all about this. There are vital clues here about dealing with such problems.

The attitude which Paul adopts

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart (2 Corinthians 4:1). The problem of losing heart and being discouraged in Christian service is a common one. Paul uses the same verb *εγκακούμεν* in Galatians 6:9, **Let us not become weary in doing good.**

Everyone who tries to serve the Lord knows all about losing heart, and often feels like giving up and throwing in the towel - ministers, missionaries, Sunday School teachers, door-to-door evangelists, and those living for Christ at home or at work. We tend to demonstrate two extremes – we whine or we shine! We are aware of being a minority, and aware of the general rejection of the message, for **our Gospel is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ** (2 Corinthians 4:3,4). Those we live and work with do not welcome the Gospel, or see any need of it. And the veil will not be removed until they confess their ignorance and helplessness (2 Corinthians 3:16).

The Christian worker is not only disappointed by the response of the world to the Gospel, but also can be discouraged by the mood among Christian people. At Corinth there were quarrelsome, critical church members. Some men Paul counted on did not back him up (2 Timothy 4:16), and Demas deserted him and returned to the world (2 Timothy 4:10). People we have such hopes for can prove to be deep disappointments. Then we feel inadequate and failures, and the mistakes of the past come back to haunt us. The more sensitive and conscientious and spiritually minded we are, the more we feel the weaknesses, criticism, loneliness and isolation which whole-hearted service brings.

The answer to this is to look to the Lord, consider His dealings with us, and all that we owe Him, and His purposes. We have all obtained mercy. Paul was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, but God had patience with him, saved him, and put him into His service (1 Timothy 1:13ff). He had a sense that God’s hand was on him, and his life was the outworking of divine purposes, he was held by an iron but a loving grip. He found his encouragement, not in circumstances or service, but in the Lord Himself.

There is only one answer to ministerial backsliding – “Be much occupied with Christ.” When things were very difficult for David, and opposition was fierce, David strengthened himself in the Lord his God (1 Samuel 30:6).

Dr Alexander Whyte of Edinburgh was a fearless preacher and he did not spare his congregation their sin and hypocrisy. Voices were raised to muffle him. Things reached a crisis point. When he was walking in the Highlands one day he recalled how “A divine voice spoke with all commanding power in my conscience – ‘Go and flinch not!’ Go back and boldly finish the work that has been given you to do. Speak out, fear not... Spend what is left of your life in your anointed task of showing my people their sin and their need of my salvation.” It was said of Hezekiah, **In everything he undertook he sought God, and worked whole-heartedly, and so he prospered** (2 Chronicles 31:21).

Methods which Paul employed

We have renounced secret and shameful ways, we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God (2 Corinthians 4:2). The standards for Christians work are to be the highest, and to stand the scrutiny of the most penetrating examination. We should have nothing that we are ashamed of. There must be no worldly standards of trickery or dishonesty. No craftiness or deceit. Nothing underhand. Nothing which would have to be hushed up if it came out. We must not twist or water down God’s word to get it to fit with human philosophy to make us popular or win applause, or to suit the prejudice of the hearers.

To bend the meaning of a text in order to make a good point or say something sensational is the temptation of every preacher. Some people will go to amazing lengths to advance themselves and to make a mark with people. What people ought to see is sincerity, honesty and straightness – a man of integrity. And everything should be done and said in the presence and under the eye of God.

In Christian work, consistency is the great challenge. Our lives and methods should be consistent with what we say. What we are speaks more loudly than what we say. It is easier to denounce 1000 sins in the congregation than deal with one in own life. It was once said of one preacher, “When he was in the pulpit, it was a pity he ever got out of it. And when he was out of the pulpit, it was a pity he ever got into it again.” Every man in the pulpit should have the attitude of Christ, **Father, for their sakes, I sanctify myself** (John 17:19).

The message which Paul preached

We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Corinthians 4:5). Paul was not there to draw attention to himself. It can be so easy to do this – to turn the conversation, to preach a particular sermon, to use a personal illustration, that draws people’s attention to the speaker’s ability, achievements, position. In the pulpit some men feel they are “6 foot above contradiction”, and sadly many congregations let them get away with it.

The message we preach must be Jesus Christ is Lord. There is no need to elaborate this. But note the arresting way in which Paul describes the Gospel – **The Gospel of the glory of Christ (glorious Gospel A.V.)**. He sets forth Christ's glory. Here is the sum and the substance of the Gospel. He was the perfect revelation of God, glorious in His atonement, resurrection, seated at God's right hand, and coming again. Glorious in the salvation He gives from past guilt, present power and future presence of sin.

This Lord requires total submission and obedience to His absolute claims. When Christ has seized us, arrested us, subdued us and made us wholly His own, how can we ever stoop to the art of self-advancement as His servant? "No man can bear witness to himself and to Christ at the same time. No man can give the impression that he himself is clever, and that Christ is mighty to save." (James Denney).

*"Tis all my business here below
To cry, 'Behold the Lamb'
Oh let me commend my Saviour to you
And set to my seal that Jesus is true."*

The story goes of an American visitor to London last century, who heard two different preachers morning and evening at the same church. His comment after the morning service was "What oratory, what dynamic preaching and personality!" His comment after the evening service "What a wonderful saviour Jesus is."

Notice Paul uses the lowliest term, servant, to describe his position before those to whom he ministers. We belong to the people of God, not the other way round. The minister is the servant of all – but he has only got one master.

The experience from which Paul speaks

For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). Paul seeks to preach and commend Christ because God has first of all shone into our hearts and shown us the glory of God in the face of Christ. Only what comes from our own heart and experience can reach the heart and experience of others. "We do not deal in unfelt truths but we find ourselves that strong consolation when we encourage others to expect from it" (John Newton).

God revealed his Son in me that I might preach him (Galatians 1:15). We must speak of what we know and have experienced, else our speaking will be remote, academic and irrelevant. The more we tremble at God's word and feel its power in our conscience, the more we can speak with conviction to others. The Bible will come alive to others when it has first of all come alive to us. The congregation does not want second hand religion, but a message throbbing with first hand knowledge and experience.

George Whitefield said, "You will never preach with power feelingly while you deal in a false commerce [writing unclear] with unfelt truths. For my part, I would not preach an unknown Christ for 10,000 worlds". F.B.Meyer tells preachers that they "must preach all your sermons over to yourself. Remember that your heart must be

your first congregation.” And John Owen comments “No man preaches his sermon well to others if he doth not first preach it to his own heart.”

There is need for first hand experience daily if to be up to date and effective. Not enough to have a testimony about what matters meant to us 20 years ago. Is my confidence still in Christ? Is He the Lord of my life now? Is the Holy Spirit active and powerful in my life now? Do I trust in my heavenly Father now, to supply all my needs? Is this guidance and direction true for me today and not just yesterday?

Conclusion

Discouragements and setbacks in Christian service can be very disheartening. We must hold firm by encouraging ourselves in the Lord and trusting ourselves to the outworking of His purposes in our lives. Our methods must stand strict scrutiny. Everything will be done in the Lord’s presence, and done so that the most hostile critic will have to admit that we are genuine.

Our message is not about ourselves, but Jesus Christ is Lord, and publishing His glory and His Gospel. Behind our message must be personal experience of God Himself. We should, in the best sense, know what we are talking about.

We are saved to serve, **an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master, and prepared to do any good work** (2 Timothy 2:21). This is only possible when rightly related to God. He is the source of our strength, His assessment of the work is all that counts, His glory is our theme, and His power captures our hearts.