

Help for Telling the Good News

From 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Though some people are especially gifted and called to tell the good news to others, the Scriptures indicate it is something any Christian can and should do (cf. Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19-20; 15:35; 1 Peter 3:15-16). In his classic work, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green estimates that 80% of the evangelism in the early days was done by regular folks and is a key reason why the word spread so rapidly. If you have never told anyone the good news about Jesus, I hope you won't feel guilt or shame about it but will instead just take some little steps toward doing so.

There are some divine insights in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 that can help us. I didn't know about these for many years, and they appear to be neglected by many people. But if we can hear and heed them now, they will help us share the gospel in a way that will please God. I pray this won't come across as just another list of five spiritual tips but will instead provide some real help for people who want to actually tell God's message.

Here are the five truths:

1. **The essence of the message is that Jesus is Lord** (2 Corinthians 4:5). What we want to tell people is not that they need to get baptized or go to church. They do, of course, but neither of this is the gospel message. Baptism is a response to the message and church is a result of the message. The gist of the message is not even that Jesus died for our sins. He did, of course, and that truth is vital to the gospel. But Christ's death for our sins is a specific, "zoomed in" aspect of the gospel message and is not the essence of the gospel as a whole.

Instead, the essence is that Jesus is Lord (v. 5). Similarly, in the language of v. 4, the gospel is the truth that Christ is glorious. That is, it shines a light or enlightens people giving them knowledge about the true, glorious nature of Christ. It shows them that he is the supreme, exalted one. In addition, by seeing who he is, we can also see the glory of God himself (v. 6; cf. Hebrews 1:3). The essence of the gospel is the supremacy of Christ.

This understanding of the gospel may not make sense to us at first, but it does when we think of it this way: The good news is that God has sent a wise King to liberate and lead us. That's the gist of the gospel indicated in 2 Corinthians 4 and elsewhere (Acts 2:36; 5:42; 10:36). There are also some vital specifics of his kingship, including the fact that the King sacrificed himself for his people's sins, that he leads us to peace by his royal counsel, and that he empowers us through his Spirit to put his teachings into practice. But the essence is Jesus is the King, the Christ.

The way the early spokespersons communicated the truth of Jesus' special identity is by telling the story of his death and resurrection (see Acts for several examples). We can and should learn to do this as well, but even if we are not ready to do that, we can simply tell people the good news that God has sent a wonderful King to deliver us out of the deep trouble in the world. That's the gist of the gospel.

2. **Satan is working actively to prevent people from seeing the true identity of Jesus.** Second Corinthians 4:4 states this overtly. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus stated it too, both directly (Mark 4:15) and indirectly (Mark 4:19).

Are we aware that Satan is actively opposing us when we tell the good news? If we are, it will help us use weapons that are effective against him instead of relying on secular resources. It doesn't help to use water on an electrical fire, and it doesn't help to use secular techniques against a spiritual force (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). We should use the best techniques and methods we have, but overall, we should focus less on such things and more on prayer. This leads to a third divine insight that is often neglected.

3. **God is working actively to help people see the true identity of Jesus.** Oddly, some people believe that Satan is still working but that God has ceased! Yet a close reading of Acts and the rest of the Bible will show that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all at work in a variety of ways to accomplish God's mission.

The aspect of God's work that is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 4 is that he shines in the hearts of people so that they can see God's glory in Christ (v. 6). That is, he helps people see who Christ is, which, in turn, helps them see who God is (cf. Hebrews 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15; John 1:14). People don't see who Christ by mere human persuasion. Rather, God works to help people see it. God did this in a very dramatic way when Saul was on the

road to Damascus. He literally "saw the light." But that is not what he is referring to in 2 Corinthians 4:6. Rather, the plural (shone in "our hearts," v. 6) shows that he is referring to something God does for many people. God helps them see the true identity of Christ and consequently of Himself. This same truth is indicated elsewhere as well (Matthew 16:16-17; Acts 16:14; 1 Corinthians 12:3).

The fact that God is working reminds us that we are not on our own when we seek to tell others the good news about Jesus. The greatest power in the universe is with us (Matthew 28:20). And, as noted previously, it reminds us to pray. This leads to a fourth divine insight that is sometimes overlooked.

4. We must not tamper with the message but instead trust it.

When we believe it is up to us to convince people of Jesus' true identity, we are tempted to use ignoble or downright deceptive approaches (2 Corinthians 4:2). We are also tempted to subtly change the message to something that may sound more desirable, like "how to be happy and prosperous," or "how to go to heaven absolutely free of charge," or worse. But when we believe the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16) and God is the one who shines his light in people's hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6), we resist selling it (2 Corinthians 2:17) and don't pressure ourselves to "make it work." We simply offer an "open statement of the truth" (v. 2) and trust God to work.

When we take this approach, some will reject the message, some will reject it and also persecute us, some will embrace Christ initially but then fall away, and some will embrace him, live under his lordship, and bear fruit in their lives. Though many will respond negatively, those who embrace him wholeheartedly will become authentic subjects of the King. These various responses are taught in the Parable of the Sower and were experienced by the apostles and even Jesus himself. We cannot and should not even try to produce a "better" response than them. This leads to yet a fifth frequently neglected truth.

5. We should be encouraged and continue to tell the good news *for the reason that we are involved in the most magnificent endeavor in the world.* This is the meaning of 2 Corinthians 4:1 in context. The reason Paul didn't lose heart is that he had received "this

ministry" by God's mercy. The word mercy indicates he knew it was a privilege to be a part of it, which contrasts with the way we sometimes view it as an unwelcome burden. The word "therefore" (v. 1) is also significant because it shows this verse is based on the previous chapter. According to chapter 3, "this ministry" Paul was involved in (4:1) is one in which the Spirit writes on people's hearts (3:3), gives life (3:6), is the ministry of the Spirit (3:8), gives righteousness (3:9), has surpassing glory (3:9-11), is permanent (3:11), gives freedom (3:17), and includes the Lord transforming us into his image by the Spirit (3:18). For Paul, the privilege of being called by God into such a magnificent ministry as that was enough to keep him from losing heart (4:1).

If Paul had focused on things that are seen, like his afflictions, he would have lost heart (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Likewise, if we focus on things that can be seen, like meager results, rejections, and lack of interest, we, too, will likely become discouraged. Measuring success in these ways sounds very American, but it doesn't sound very Christian. The fifth neglected truth is not merely that we shouldn't get discouraged. Nor is that we shouldn't get discouraged because we're probably doing more good than we realize. Rather, it is that we shouldn't get discouraged because we have the privilege of participating in the most wonderful endeavor in the world.

These five truths give us a way forward if we want to grow in telling God's good news in a way that will please him: Recognize that the essential message is that God has sent a great King to liberate us and lead us out of the mess we've made of the world. We can learn to communicate the truth of his identity by telling his story, especially his death and resurrection. As we tell the story we can also fill in around that essential message some of the other details we have learned about him. But we must clearly grasp the essence.

Remember, Satan is at work opposing us. But God is at work with us! So, we trust in God's working, and we pray. We resist trying to make the message more effective or tampering with it in any way. We pray and watch for opportunities to provide people an open statement of the truth about Jesus Christ. God can and does shine his light in people's hearts through our doing so. Don't get discouraged. Instead, remind yourself of what a privilege it is to be a part of such a glorious enterprise as this. And take some little steps!