

THE NEW COVENANT OPPOSED FROM WITHOUT

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Doug Goins

Many of us, at times, will ask ourselves “can I be the person God wants me to be?” If we’re honest, we’re usually aware of our limitations—conscious of our sinful inconsistencies and imperfections—and that awareness can gnaw away at our sense of worth and value in being used by God. We care about our life counting for Jesus, and want to have an impact for him, but so many times there seems to be reason for discouragement.

People that we love and try to connect with can be very indifferent about Jesus in our lives, especially when we try to share the gospel with them. Perhaps you struggle with close friends and family members who have seen Christ in your life. They’ve heard you share who he is, but they’re still uninterested in the gospel. Or you become discouraged because someone you love, who has been following Christ, perhaps even for a number of years, chooses to give up on their commitment of faith and walk away from the Lord.

It’s also easy to feel discouraged when we see how aggressive evil is in our world. Or when we look at the church, the body of Christ, and see disunity, competition, and a lack of love among believers. These types of experiences can take the edge off of our desire to serve, to speak out for the Lord, and to live boldly in His name. But when we read about the lives of those first century believers, we discover that it’s always been this way.

In the passage we’re looking at, the apostle Paul addresses these issues—issues that can reinforce our doubt. The text answers our discouragement-driven questions. There are several themes that Paul weaves together in this little paragraph. First, Paul says that God has saved him from discouragement, from being demoralized by the difficult things, the hard things in life and ministry. Then, he does acknowledge that there is an enemy, one who keeps us from seeing Jesus, opposes us living out of the new covenant as a lifestyle. He is defeated, but we’ve got to understand his strategies. Third, the same God who spoke the world into being, speaks spiritual life into our hearts and shines light into our hearts. Finally, it is God who changes us, and it is God who changes the people we love and the people we want to come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Let’s now look at the passage we are studying, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, 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. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake. 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.

No discouragement in ministry

At the beginning of the paragraph, Paul mentions “this ministry.” Looking back in 2 Corinthians 2:12, Paul defines this lifestyle as one that’s lived out of the new covenant. He teaches that it is a lifestyle of triumph. God is always leading us along in the triumph of Jesus, regardless of what it feels or seems like and regardless of the circumstances.

In 2:15, Paul says it is also a lifestyle of influence: “For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing...” Everywhere we go, we leave behind the unforgettable fragrance of Jesus.

In 2:17, Paul says that it’s a lifestyle of sincerity. In that same verse he also says that we are not peddling God’s word. We don’t offer truth to people and then bail out like a salesman, or try to sell the product without first connecting with the person. We are called to personal involvement.

Then, in 3:3 Paul says we live our lives in cooperation with the Holy Spirit of God. The Spirit of God writes on human hearts when we witness to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. The Holy Spirit validates our witness.

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 3:6-18, Paul defines it as a lifestyle of unfading power, unfading glory. Paul tells us that when Moses went up on Mount Sinai and received the law, then later came down, his face reflected the glory of God. It was so bright that he had to put a veil over his face so the people of Israel would not be blinded by the glory. In retelling this event, however, Paul picks up something in the text that isn’t real obvious in the Old Testament passage. Moses left the veil on longer than he needed to, certainly long after the glory had faded away because he was embarrassed. Paul contrasts his own life and ministry to that of Moses when he says in 3:13, “...[we] are not as Moses...,” and in verse 18, “But we all, with unveiled face...” In essence, we are to live our lives without pride, without trying to cover anything up and in simple trust in the Lord. In contrast to Moses, who had to go back for a recharge, we always stand in the presence of God. We are dependent on God and his strength to live the way he wants us to, and as a result, he is changing us into people of glorious freedom. Not people in bondage, not people who live in inhibition, but people who understand freedom in life, relationship and ministry. Everything we need is available in the power of the God-head; the Father, Son and Spirit are all committed to this wonderful change in our lives.

Our ministry is from God

That is why Paul says,

“Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart....”
(4:1)

Paul understood that God alone is the one who gives us our lifestyle of ministry, and he is the one who sustains our lifestyle. Literally, it says that we have received and continue to receive mercy. Mercy is needed for people without resources, for people who cannot help themselves. And Paul defined himself in the same way when he wrote to the young pastor, Timothy. He talks about his desperate ongoing need for the merciful patience of God in his life when he writes, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am the foremost of all” (1 Timothy 1:15). Notice that Paul uses present tense. He understood he is still a sinner, desperately in need of God’s grace and mercy. “And yet for this reason” Paul writes, “I found mercy, in order 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” (1 Timothy 1:16). Paul never

considered himself to be some sort of super saint, or super Christian. He understood how totally dependent he was on God's resources. Paul says he didn't lose heart. He was never demoralized. The phrase, "not losing heart," literally means to act badly in the face of difficulty. We lose heart when we focus on our own activity for God, or depending on how we're doing emotionally, we focus on what we are not doing for God. Either way, the results are demoralizing. Paul saw himself as an instrument of God at work. His life and approach to ministry was undiscouraged because he learned to completely trust in the Lord for everything.

Our ministry needs nothing phony

In verse 2, he says he doesn't need any kind of devious supports, and no phony props to make life and ministry work.

"...but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God,..." (4:2a)

There are three strategies that Paul says he has renounced. The first is no underhandedness—things hidden because of shame. No dishonesty. Nothing to hide in his personal life or in public service for the Lord. What kind of things do we hide from other people? We hide the things that we are ashamed of. If we live veiled lives, trying to keep up appearances by relying on religious pretense, it becomes exhausting and demoralizing. And if we're trying to create the illusion of spiritual success, eventually our deceitful heart is going to be revealed. Paul says he's renounced that lifestyle and he's resolved to live openly and honestly.

The second is no cunning practices, literally walking in craftiness. That word means "capable of anything" or making up our own rules for life and ministry, believing that the end justifies the means. It means living like the peddlers or hucksters that we looked at in 2 Corinthians 2:17. When we live this way, it proves we don't trust the Lord to be at work through us. Rather, we try to influence relationships or people with guilt trips, psychological manipulation, with emotional pressure, or maybe with the strength of our personality and our presence. Paul says he's learned not to rely on any of that religious cunning anymore.

The third strategy is no tampering with scripture. There is no distorting the scriptures. Literally, adulterating the word of God. It comes from a word in the first century marketplace. Merchants would dilute their products by mixing it with something cheaper so they could drive up the profit, and effectively cheat the customer. We can end up cheating ourselves, or people around us, in how we apply or how we use the word of God in different settings. We soften God's word so it won't be so severe, so absolute. We try to make the word more acceptable to people. We diminish the themes of repentance from sin or cost of discipleship, or the Lordship of Jesus Christ because we want people to be more comfortable. However, we end up with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes as "cheap grace." Paul declares his absolute resistance to the temptation to tamper, dilute or adulterate the scriptures.

Our ministry depends on God at work

In the first half of verse 2, Paul summarized what he refused to trust in ministry. In the second half of the verse, he summarizes what he bases his lifestyle on. It's a very simple vision statement or philosophy of ministry. Paul has learned to depend completely on God at work.

“...but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” (4:2b)

This is an open statement of truth—a straightforward communication of the word of God into any human experience. Literally, full disclosure. Today we would say, “telling it like it is.” Martin Luther said that the word of God is like a lion. You don’t have to defend a lion. You just turn it loose and the lion can defend itself.

God’s word deals with real life issues. Important concerns about our sexuality, about guilt, business ethics, marriage and family, as well as fear, friendship, discipline, anxiety and depression. The word of God speaks into every one of those issues. An open statement of truth is powerfully attractive. Remember how people were attracted to what Jesus said? They were amazed that he taught so differently, authoritatively. We still have the privilege today of opening up the Word of God with people so they can see the truth about themselves and about their life circumstances, and about the world they are trying to live in and deal with. Paul says it’s addressed to the conscience. The conscience is where the conviction takes hold and that what you are hearing is the truth. Paul doesn’t try to commend his message to a person’s ego, emotions, or intellect. He appeals to their capacity to distinguish between right and wrong. At issue, always, is the human will.

While attending a college conference at Mount Hermon nearly 30 years ago, Dr. David Hubbard, who was then the president of Fuller Seminary, was asked a question about why so few research scientists were Christians. His answer was, for the same reason that so few prizefighters are Christians. It has nothing to do with the intellect. It is a question of the will. C.S. Lewis, the great apologist of the Christian faith in England during the earlier part of the 20th century, described his conversion in the book *Surprised By Joy*. He said that when he became a Christian he was an intellectual agnostic. When he came to Christ it was like he was dragged, kicking and screaming, trying to escape, darting his eyes in every direction. He said his mind was fighting it all the way, but his conscience had been captured by the Word of God. Lewis described himself as the most reluctant convert in all of England.

God is able to reach the conscience, the mechanism of choice, the will, even though the mind and emotions may reject the truth. In the first two verses, Paul says he is not discouraged, not demoralized because he understands that it is only in God and the work of God, that he finds the confidence to relate to people, to minister on behalf of the gospel.

This is how Eugene Peterson paraphrases these two verses in *The Message*:

Since God has so generously let us in on what he is doing, we’re not about to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into occasional hard times. We refuse to wear masks and play games. We don’t maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don’t twist God’s word to suit ourselves. Rather, we keep everything we do and say out in the open, the whole truth on display, so that those who want to can see and judge for themselves in the presence of God. (1)

I saw this illustrated powerfully one night as we gathered together with our high school students to hear a report on a recent week-long ministry in Mexico. I was amazed at their transparency, openness, vulnerability, and their admissions to weakness and struggles and failures in their walk of faith. A few even professed coming to faith in Jesus Christ within the past year because of the relationships of their friends. Not because of pastors or evangelistic programs, but because kids from this church shared the love of Jesus on school campuses, and they were drawn into that circle. They talked about how difficult the time in Mexico was with horrible weather, freezing cold rain, and many things to demoralize and discourage them. But, repeatedly, these kids would talk about God at work and how God was greater than the difficulties.

That evening, as we listened, one of the repeated themes was the centrality of the word of God—the scriptures, bible study, and discipleship groups had transformed these kids' lives. It was amazing to hear unchurched kids talk about how the word of God had changed them.

There was one sad story that came out about a girl on the trip whom everyone believed had opened her heart to Jesus Christ while in Mexico, only to return home and walk back into the darkness of a sinful relationship. She disavowed her commitment to Christ publicly. It was demoralizing, discouraging, and confusing, for a number of kids.

Enemy opposition

This story raises the earlier questions of discouragement over why more people don't believe the gospel? If truth is known, and if people's minds and emotions are open to it, then why does the conscience refuse to respond? The answer is the work of Satan, which is addressed in verses 3 and 4. Satan is a defeated enemy, but he is still active, and we've got to understand his strategies. Paul says,

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

What Paul is talking about here is satanic blinding. People are perishing because they don't believe and they don't believe because they are blinded by the devil, the one that Jesus called the ruler of this world. We have all met people who seem unusually obtuse. We try our best to share the gospel, but it's like our persistence never seems to pay off.

Satanic veiling

Paul says in verse 3, that Satan's strategy is the veil—the human delusion that they are adequate to handle life on their own. They do not see their desperate need for a savior, and tragically, it also blinds them to the ultimate judgment, the condemnation, and the death that awaits them at the end of all things apart from Jesus Christ, apart from his salvation.

The apostle John, in his first letter, tells us “the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Satan is external to us, and therefore, cannot get inside of us. But the tragedy for the victims of his blindness is that they don't have Jesus inside of them to resist him. Paul calls those people “unbelieving.” He also calls them “those who are perishing”—worldly men and women who may have heard the good news about Jesus but haven't responded, and as we saw in 2 Corinthians 2:16, it's death to them.

Satanic purpose—hide the glory of Christ

Satan's purpose for this veil, this blinding, is very clear, “that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (4:4). He wants to hide the light, the glory of Jesus Christ. Satan doesn't want people to see Jesus for who he really is, his beauty, his love, and his saving concern for them. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through me” (John 14:6). Satan knows that Christ himself is the image of God. In Paul's personal testimony at the end of his life before King Agrippa, he said it was his consuming passion to open the eyes of unbelievers, that they might turn from

darkness to light and from the power of Satan to the power of God (see Acts 26). Apart from the work of Christ in our lives, all of us are blinded to this truth.

The power of God

What about “those who are perishing”? Perhaps there are people you can think of whose minds are still blinded to what we see that is so glorious, so real to us. Are they hopeless? Is there a way to reach them in the darkness? How do we respond to that blindness? The last two verses reveal that we do have a role to play, but the ultimate responsibility lies with our Father God. He is the God of creation. He is the God of spiritual re-creation. Hope for change lies not in us, but in God.

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. 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. (4:5, 6)

Our proclamation

We need to keep on telling people who don't know the Lord Jesus, is that *he* is the Lord. Literally, it's not ourselves we proclaim, but *Jesus* is Lord. It's not about making ourselves indispensable to them so that we become some sort of fount of all relational and spiritual insight and biblical understanding. Jesus should always be our central focus in our conversations, our council, and in our communication with non-believers. We need to echo the heart of John the Baptist as he watched Jesus' life and ministry unfold. John said his desire was for Jesus to increase and for him to decrease (see John 3:30).

Only the Lord Jesus can save the perishing. He's the one who removes the veil. He's the inescapable one. Sooner or later, everyone ends up in confrontation with Jesus Christ. In Philippians, Paul says, “...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...” (Phil 2:10, 11). Jesus Christ is Lord, whether or not people want him to be the Lord, or whether or not they feel like he is the Lord. You have a choice to either acknowledge his sovereignty now, to enjoy in gratitude with a full heart, or you can do it at the end of time in grief and regret.

Our attitude

So how do we tell the truth to non-believers? What should our attitude be toward them? We have got to see ourselves as servants, bond-servants, or slaves of Jesus Christ. We are to give ourselves in sacrificial love to people with whom we share the gospel. We are not to talk at them or talk down to them, but we are to talk with them. Apart from Jesus we are right where they are. We don't have any reason to feel superior. In our proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we've got to accompany our message with grace, with love, with patience, and with concern for the individual, whether they respond to us or not. And in the face of rejection, we can tell ourselves that the story is not over yet.

Remember when we read about God's merciful patience toward the apostle Paul? If you would have asked a first century Christian, who was suffering under the persecution of this brilliant Jewish Rabbi, then known as Saul of Tarsus, who was having Christians thrown into prison, and executed, would they have believed that Paul could become a follower of Jesus? They probably would have said “No way! Not a chance at all!” But Paul said God was mercifully patient with me to bring him to myself (see 1 Tim 1:16).

God's glory revealed

When a person turns to Jesus Christ and sees him for who he is, the Lord of life, then God's creative power begins to operate in his life. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:16, "but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." When you finally see Jesus Christ is the Lord, light shines into darkness. God's glory is fully revealed and amazingly, spiritual transformation is accomplished.

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. (4:6)

He is our creator God and He is our redeemer. Philip Hughes, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, offers an insightful perspective. He begins by quoting 1 John 1:5, "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." Then he continues,

...thus as Paul reminds us in this verse, at the dawn of creation the darkness was dispelled by the word of Almighty God. And it's the same God who in the spiritual sphere drives back the darkness of sin and unbelief from the heart of men. The God, who commanded light to shine at the creation, is the same God who shines in our hearts at the new birth. (2)

The face of Jesus

That's where we look to see this powerful creator, savior God. Jesus said of himself that that was his purpose in coming to earth: "When man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness" (John 12:44-46, NIV).

The apostle John watched Jesus very closely for a number of years, and later wrote: "The word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

So, we don't have to be discouraged. We know our own struggles, our own inconsistencies and our own limitations and, at times we do experience indifference toward Jesus. Satan is real and as Martin Luther said, "this world with devils is filled." And we may, at times, experience coldness from some people in the church. But we are reminded of the kind of new covenant ministry that we've been given. We have a Lord who never fails us and who never abandons us. He alone is our source of adequacy and sufficiency as we move through our lives. We are privileged to lovingly and patiently communicate Jesus Christ as Lord with the people that we connect with. We are to trust God to turn on the light of salvation in that person. And he will. We will see people respond to the gospel. But we must remember that we have no control over who will respond and under what circumstances. Our Savior God is in charge of that.

There was recently a wonderful event here at PBC that illustrates the Savior God at work among us. Mark Ledwith, one of our elders, has a dear friend. They grew up together, went to high school, and then college together. Mark found Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in college, but his friend didn't. During the past 20 years, the friendship had continued with Mark trying to connect, trying to share his faith, and hoping that his friend would see Christ in his life, but there had been very little response. After these many years, his friend finally began to ask

questions. That led to a study of the scriptures together every week for almost a year. Sometimes, Mark would be very discouraged and frustrated, thinking he was wasting his time, not really sure if his friend was truly interested or just going through the motions. But over time, Mark could see the effect of spiritual light and life in his friend's life. Eventually, his friend began attending PBC—every Sunday morning just sitting and listening. One Sunday, Steve Zeisler preached a great message from the gospel of Mark entitled: "Who do people say that I am?" (see Discovery Paper #4662). The disciples answer saying, "you are the Christ," (Mark 8:27-38)—the Messiah, the Living God. At the end of the sermon, Steve gave an invitation to the body to respond. This man came forward in tears and said "I'm ready to answer the question. I know who he is and I can give testimony." His conscience and his will had been arrested by truth. He has continued coming to church every Sunday, he's taken Discovery Seminars here at PBC, and is excited about a new life in Jesus Christ. But, remember there were times when Mark wondered if anything was ever going to happen. So, whoever it is in your life that you are concerned for and frustrated with, wondering if God is ever going to do anything, don't give up. Our God is a Savior God. He cares a lot more about their salvation than you do, believe it or not. And he'll be true and faithful to himself.

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart...For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:1, 5).

NOTES:

(1) Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message : The New Testament*. © NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 441.

(2) Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. ©1962, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. P. 133.

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