

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR GOD'S MINISTERS

2 Corinthians 4:1–6

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We read 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 from the Living Bible. I have called today's title "Encouragement for God's Ministers." Lest you fear that this is a sermon by the pastor to the pastor in the choice of the word "ministers," let me hasten to say that the biblical definition of a minister includes everyone who is a Christian.

Actually, the word for "ministry" that is used in verse 1 ("Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry") is a root word from which we derive the term "deacon." It means "service given," "service rendered." All of us are God's deacons. That is, all of us serve Him.

Our service to the Lord is given in many different ways. Because there are many different callings, many different gifts that God has star-spangled His church with. But we are all ministers. And all of us face discouragement. One of the great things about 2 Corinthians is that Paul, because he has an unveiled face,—and we talked about that last week—he's able to let us into his inner life and see how the Spirit in him coped with the discouragement that he faced.

Second Corinthians is such an encouraging book because in it all masks are off and we can see an authentic Christian struggle with the authentic problems that come to him, both as a Christian and as a human being.

There are some discouragements in this passage of Scripture which relate especially to the service of Christ and His church. Three discouragements in particular: verse 1 deals with personal pressures as a source of discouragement, verse 2 deals with false ministries and the discouragement that they bring to true ministries, and the third discouragement is the lack of response to the gospel. Let's look at each of these in turn.

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I. In verse 1, we find encouragement for personal pressures.

“Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1, NIV). That term “lose heart” here suggests that, in one moment or another, Paul had had experiences which tested him in regard to whether or not he was going to lose heart. The original word that is used for “lose heart” is actually much different than the English translation. It is a word that is almost impossible to translate. It literally means “to bad out.” “We do not bad out.” Who uses that kind of term? The only way I can think to illustrate it is if you are in the supermarket, looking through fruit, and there is some fruit that's bad, that you don't want to get, so therefore it's out. Paul says, “We do not bad out.”

There are six times that word is used in the New Testament—“to bad out.” And it's used in five different ways. All of them, I think, relate to the matter of perseverance, persistence, and discouragement in our life. In Luke 18:1, Jesus tells us to “not bad” out in prayer. Here He's talking about prayer requests that do not seem to us to get an immediate answer. But He says to be persistent, to not lose heart, to not bad out. Paul uses it in regard to discouragement in ministry (in the passage here, in verse 1). In verse 16 of 2 Corinthians 4—just a few verses coming up in a week or two—he talks about the fact that we do not bad out when our outer nature is wasting away. That's rather discouraging—when you face that your body isn't what it used to be, as a person you say, “I don't understand. I'm getting smarter and smarter, but my body is getting weaker and weaker.” It'd be nice if that would ever come together, wouldn't it? You'd be smart and strong at the same time.

But we do not lose heart. We do not bad out. Why? Because we know that Christ is transforming our nature. Paul says that we can burn out or bad out in doing good, in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not bad out, let us not be weary in doing good.” 2 Thessalonians 3:13, “Never bad out, never give

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up, never lose heart in doing what is right.” Then we can even get kind of “bad out” because things aren’t going better for someone else that we really love. We can get discouraged from that (Ephesians 3:13). Paul knew this was the concern for the Ephesians, so he asked them, therefore, not to bad out because of his suffering for them. This whole idea of being faint-hearted carries with it the connotation of burning out, dropping out, getting weary. And who hasn’t felt that at one time or another? Maybe a lot of you have felt it in your life this past week.

John Sanford, an Episcopalian minister-psychologist, who I think is charismatic as well, in a book called *Ministry Burnout*, identifies nine things that the ministering person must cope with in burnout. Perhaps some of these apply more exclusively to those who are in professional fields of ministry, but I think many of them apply to all forms of ministry—whether it’s being an usher or a Sunday School teacher or small group leader or finding any regular ongoing faithful place of service in the body of Christ. You face discouragement if the job is never finished. No matter how many times you teach third graders, they’re still in need of more. You’re never finished working with people, are you? That can be discouraging. We cannot always tell if there are results. Maybe we’ve done our best, but we can’t see if there are any visible results. Work is repetitive. As ministers of the Lord, we continually deal with other people’s expectations. And sometimes they have different expectations of how we should do something than we ourselves do. We struggle and sometimes become discouraged, because we don’t match up to what somebody else expects. Maybe working with the same people, year in and year out, or perhaps God has recently put you in touch with many people who are in need and it drains your energy. As someone has said, “How many times can you give a blood transfusion in one day?” Often, we’re giving spiritual counsel and ministry to others and it produces that kind of feeling. Sometimes, persons we minister to want to be stroked more and approved, rather than to offer

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solid help. Some of the time, we function on our persona. That is to say, on our public image.

Maybe as an usher you had some very devastating news at home, but you come Sunday morning and you greet people and your smile's on and you function at that moment on an outward level rather than an inward, feeling level. Sometimes we become exhausted by failure.

All these are pressures you see building upon the apostle. And the Corinthian church faced every one of them. But he's not discouraged. He's encouraged! He's saying, "We do not lose heart."

Why is he able to say this?

I think the reason he's able to say that is reflected in the word "therefore." Notice that the chapter begins with the word "therefore." Whenever "therefore" is used, it is a connective word that sort of sums up a preceding line of thought and says, "In light of what has been developed,

'therefore,' this is the result." It's like if you're writing a resolution—you have bunch of "whereas, whereas, whereas." You finally get done with all your reasons and whereas, and then you chart a course of action—"therefore." The "whereas's" ought to lead to the "therefore."

Paul, in this earlier part of the Corinthian letter, has given us the insightful reason as to why he's not losing heart. He's not losing heart because he's in a triumphal procession. He's not losing heart because there's an influence we have in that triumphal procession. We are a sweet perfume, a savor of life to those that are being saved. He is not dropping out, because he has a clean conscience—that is reflected in 2:17, where he uses the word "sincerity," which is the same word you can use for a precious jewel that is held up to the light of the sun. When you hold it up, you see that there are no fault lines in it. There's nothing there other than translucent purity. How important it is, when we are being tested from the outside, to have a clean conscience on the inside. I notice in Paul's prison letters, and the later chapters of the Book of Acts, when Paul's in prison so many times, he gives this self-revealing statement that he has a good conscience toward

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God. He has dealt with failures in his life, he's put them under the blood of Christ, and is not behaving in a way that is not clean in his own inner life. When we're not clean in our own inner life, the outside pressures have all the more way of getting at us. It's like if you're bringing pressure against a precious stone, if there is no fault line in it, no crack in it, then it can withstand greater pressures, but if there is a crack in it, it more easily crumbles. It's the same way in our own life, in terms of the purging of our conscience before the Lord.

Paul also recognizes that whatever he does for the Lord and others in the name of Christ has unfading glory. It is a ministry of unfading glory. God has given him this task. It's not something he sought out. It's not what I'm doing for God, but it is what God is doing through me. It's what God is doing for me. "We have received," he said, "this ministry." When there's the sense in our life that whatever we've been given has been handed to us by the Lord through His grace, that it's through that grace that we're able to do anything at all, it brings encouragement. We know that, because of Jesus, we're on the winning side and our labor is not in vain.

II. The second discouragement that Paul faces is the discouragement in the face of false ministries.

That's in verse 2, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways. We do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God" (NIV). Sometimes I hear people say, "If we could just go back to the Early Church and be the Early Church." This is part of the Early Church too. Did the Early Church have people that used the Word of God deceitfully? Who used deceitful techniques? Who manipulated people because there were "ministers" who were doing it out of love for money, love for position, love for power, love for recognition? Did this happen in the Early Church? Yes, it did. In secret and underhanded ways, manipulative and deceitful ways, to get people to come to Jesus—deceitful to get them to give money. Did that happen in the Early

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Church? Sure it did. Does it happen in the contemporary church? Sure it does. Did people distort the Word of God and make the Scriptures fit their own preconceived ideas? Sure they did. Do they do it now? Sure they do. But Paul says the true person does not change his technique to attempt the “success ratio” of those dealing deceitfully or in a distortive way with the Word of God. Rather, he says, “We have renounced secret and shameful ways.” According to him, there is power in a plain presentation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. “By setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (verse 2, NIV).

Today’s great need in the body of Christ is simply a plain exposition of the truth. A great minister of prayer has used a little phrase out of the Scripture about what he wants out of Scripture, “I just want the plain truth and plenty of it.” There are persons in the body of Christ who go to work at finding esoteric themes in Scripture, something that nobody has ever known for two thousand years. The church has never had it for two thousand years, but we just discovered it. I get a little worried with these discoveries. I wonder why they weren’t important enough for the Holy Spirit to have them in the Body for two thousand years. The plain truth is how to get right with God, how to live a righteous life, how to be in touch with God’s people, how to be molded in our character after the pattern of Jesus Christ. We appeal in this way to help people get to that end of their life, and we’re not letting ourselves be distorted by the cheap tricks and the passing things that are used to draw crowds of people into some kind of arena.

What you build your Christian life upon is what you’ll use to maintain it. If you build your Christian life upon searching for sensationalism and showy kinds of things, then that’s what you’ll require to sustain your Christian life. But if you build your spiritual life upon disciplines that are a part of God’s Word, and upon the grace that Jesus Christ gives you, then that’s what

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will be used in your life to keep you growing and going for the Lord. The plain presentation of the truth.

III. The third thing that reflects a potential discouragement to Paul is the lack of response to the gospel (verses 3–6).

He has used an open life and an open book and open methods. He’s taught a true Christ. Why then does not everyone come to know the Lord? Is it because they do not know Him or about Him? Or is it because the messengers who tell of Him have failed? Certainly in some cases that may be true. But in many cases, it’s not. Paul addresses the fact that there are some people who have heard a clear representation of the gospel and yet have not believed in the gospel. What accounts for this? He said, “The God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 4:4, NIV). We must recognize here that there’s a cooperation between the unbeliever and the God of this age. The unbeliever chooses his own way rather than the Lord’s way. God, therefore, allows that person to elect that course of action, within His sphere of freedom of choice. In that course of action, the devil comes then to blind them.

Notice the devil is called “the god of this age.” Be sure that you understand the word “god” here is with a small “g” and not a capital “G.” Paul very clearly says in 1 Corinthians 8, “For we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and there is no God but one.” Satan is not a true god. He is, if you will allow it, a no-god. He’s a no-god. When he is called “god” in the Scripture, “god of this age,” it is not that he is the reigning monarch. It is simply when a person has a god. Like the Egyptians, who used to have a sun-god—as Christians, we don’t carry the slightest idea at all that the sun is a god. But we recognize that, to some, he is god. Satan is a no-god. He’s a nothing. He’s not a fallen god even. He’s a fallen angel.

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But to many, to this world, he is god; he is the god of the course of this age. He is so much in control of things that he can offer Jesus, in a moment's time, all the kingdoms of the habitual world. And John can say, in 1 John 5, that this age lies in the power of the evil one. That he's the mover and the shaker of the world, and he does this by blinding people and cooperating with their own hardness against God and the sin in their own life and rebellion against the Lord.

People are under his sway.

There are so many illustrations of this current age being under the sway of the enemy that time wouldn't allow me to develop every one. I simply will flag one. I was looking through the *Register* last night. Every Saturday, the *Register* has a summary of all the soaps on daytime television. There are thirteen soaps! I can't even read the summary in a church service. People with messed-up lives. What's wrong with the soaps? If you look at the soaps, try to find, if you will, a Christian character. Try to find somebody who is introducing a Christian solution to problems. Try to find somebody who proclaims, in a right and loving kind of way, Christian morality and ethics, rather than being immediately assessed as a bigot and prude and idiot, a bumbling nut. Try to find a minister of the gospel portrayed in some positive role. In fact, the only minister in all thirteen soaps is a Catholic priest who had an affair and is trying to decide whether to leave the priesthood or not. That was the one representation of clergy in the soaps last week.

There are forty million people, we are told, who are born-again Christians in this country. If that's true, that is one-fifth or so of the population. Couldn't at least 20 percent of a soap program be an introduction of a Christian attitude and a Christian model, without any prejudicial points of view towards the gospel? It's not possible. Why? Because he's the god of this age.

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So what you have are people trapped in a misery of infidelity, adultery, alcoholism, drug addiction and meaningless morass in their life—nothingness. The god of this age has blinded them.

Paul is saying, “The veil is over the minds of the unbelievers, not over the gospel. And the god of this age has blinded them.” Just like Hitler used the big lie in Germany. You see pictures of the concentration camps. When a prisoner would go to the concentration camp, there would be a big thing they'd go through, “Work is Freedom!” Totally a false front of what was going on in those places.

So the devil is the one who gives the big phony front as what is the fulfilling life, the glamorous life. When we, in our own conscience, reject the plain truth of the gospel, a veil descends over our hearts. Do you know who the first people are to know about the resurrection of Jesus Christ? It is really the chief priests. Soldiers bring back the word about the earthquake and the missing body and the chief priests were in the best position to assess the evidence and say, “He was the Son of God.” They knew that He had risen, yet they denied it. Why? Because of a wicked conscience. The veil stays on in our life as long as we retain our sins.

A person came to Sir Isaac Newton one day and said to him, “Sir Isaac, I don't understand. You seem to be able to believe the Bible like a little child. I've tried, but I cannot. So many of its statements mean nothing to me. I cannot believe. I cannot understand.” Newton responded to his inquirer, “Sometimes, I come into my study and, in my absent-mindedness, I attempt to light my candle when the extinguisher is over the candle. I fumble about, trying to light it and I cannot. But when I remove the extinguisher, then I am able to light the candle. I'm afraid the extinguisher, in your case, is the love of your sins. It is desperate unbelief in you. Turn to God in repentance. Be prepared to let the Spirit of God reveal His truth to you, and it will be His joy to

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show the glory of the grace of God shining in the face of Christ. Let the extinguisher be removed. Let God deal with our attitudes, and then we'll be able to see God's light penetrating our darkness."

That's a beautiful statement, by the way, which Paul offers for encouragement to the discouraging news that many do not receive. The encouragement is that we're to have a right view of Jesus. He is the Lord. Verse 5 says, "We preach not ourselves." If we were doing that, if it was our own message, we'd get discouraged about the success ratio. But we're preaching Jesus, the Lord of lords, King of kings. We have a right view, therefore, of ourselves. We're servants. We're not little lords. We're not big lords. We're servants, and He's the Lord. And God has made the light of Jesus Christ shine in our life. Paul here thinks of the creation when all was without form and dark, and God let His light shine. Then he thinks, too, about the Damascus Road, when he was walking in darkness and the light of the Lord shined upon him. And he's saying, "The light of Jesus Christ comes into our life when we open our hearts to Him." We see the glory of God in the face of Christ.

How do we see the face of Jesus when we've never seen Him physically? We see Him as He's revealed to us in the Scripture; and as the Holy Spirit ministers to us in our hearts. When I think of Jesus Christ, I realize that Jesus, in His earthly life, had many different ages. There's a beauty in His face at each age. An innocence and vulnerability in His face as a baby. If you're looking for the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ in the Bethlehem manger, you have to realize the daring love of God that would be vulnerable for us. If you want to look into the face of Jesus when He was twelve years old and teaching the doctors of the law in the temple, you will see the adolescent—the pre-teenager, the wisdom and maturity and fire of a life that is already ahead of the physical years. If you look at the face of Jesus when He was working at the carpenter's bench

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in Nazareth, you will see a face that gave attention to detail, that was concerned with the common things of life, that did not regard ordinary chores and work as a disgrace. If you see Jesus' face when He is casting out demons, you will see in His face the power and the look of one who has all authority over evil. If you look at His face when He's cleansing the temple or denouncing the scribes and Pharisees, you will see in His face the one who has zeal against all hypocrisy and religious fraud. If you see Him holding children in His arms, you will see the look of playful tenderness. If you look in His face at the cross, you will see the glory of the love of God. For there, in His face and in His eyes, is God's love for us. If you look in His face when He appears after His resurrection, you will see in His face triumph and power. And if you will look up to see in His face when He returns again, you'll see resplendent glory: all the glory of God in the face of Jesus. It's to Him that we look. And when we look at Him, our discouragements fly away.

I was reading the *LA Times* yesterday—the Sports section. I thought a story in there was especially magnificent. It was the story of Steve and Cindy Howell. Steve Howell is one of the great relief pitchers in baseball, a young man who had the most saves for the Dodger staff last year. The Dodgers had really pinned their hopes on him for the future. But Steve had real problems with drugs last year, so he has to sit out this year in baseball. It was neat to see in the story that Steve mentions the fact that he had the support of a number of Christians who had been sharing with him. I thought, “That rings true, because wherever you find, in the media, someone who's in some severe problem, if you look very long at all, you'll find some Christians who have come to encourage them and help them and give them hope for a different life.” In the very empathetic interview with the Howells, Steve recounts his struggle of getting over his drug addiction and his promise for the future. The interviewer closed with this beautiful story that

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Steve told. It was a reflection of how he's seeing the importance of change in his life and getting things together.

After reading a newspaper and his young son pestering him to play, the little boy wouldn't take no for an answer. He wanted to play with his daddy. Finally, the dad, in order to get the boy off his back, saw a big ad that was in the newspaper that had a picture of the world in it. He tore it out of the paper and then tore it up into a bunch of little pieces and handed it to his son and said, "Go put this together, and when you've got it together, we'll go out and play." The boy went out and, just a moment later, he was back and he had it all together. His father was so surprised and he said to his son, "How did you get the world together so quickly?" The little boy said, "Dad, it was easy! On the other side of the world, was the picture of a man. Put the man together, and the whole world falls into place."

That's the message of the gospel. Jesus has come to put the person together. If the person's together the whole world fits in place. If you'll receive God, through His grace, if you'll let Him put you together, He'll put everything in your world in the right place. Look to Jesus and see, in His face, the glory of God,

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we pray now specifically for those who have come to this service discouraged.

Perhaps discouraged by personal pressures in their life, discouraged by the poor example of other Christians—maybe even of Christian ministers and leaders. Discouraged by the seeming fruitlessness of their life or response to You. Others have come and their life has not been open to You, and their world is not together, because they're not together yet. Lord, put the pieces together, in this moment of prayer, while we're here in this atmosphere of worship and adoration of You. It's Your purpose of life to come and make a whole new person. Lord, it's when we

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come to an honest recognition that we need You, that we have sinned against You, that only Your help and Your grace can put us back together again, it's only then that a new start can be made. We pray, Lord, that there will be many starts of that kind in the service today. We're so grateful, Lord, that we know You and that You are the King of kings and Lord of lords. Be exalted now. Be Lord over this time, while we respond to You. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.