

A Biblical Philosophy of Ministry

2 Corinthians 4:1–6

Introduction

^{3:12}Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, ¹³and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. ¹⁵But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; ¹⁶but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ¹⁸But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

^{4:1}Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, ²but 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. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴in 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. ⁵For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For 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.

Given the climate in the evangelical church today, one of the most important topics of discussion is philosophy of ministry. A philosophy of ministry is a set of principles that anchor all of the efforts we make as we aim to serve God in ministry. It is a set of fundamental commitments that shape the decisions we make and courses we take as we serve Christ's church and the lost world around us. In a sense, your philosophy of ministry concerns your ministry methodology—how it is that you're going to go about accomplishing what you've been commissioned to do.

And the discussion of philosophy of ministry is so important because it's so easy to get it wrong. And getting a philosophy of ministry wrong can have disastrous effects on the faithfulness and healthiness *of* that ministry. And I say it's easy to get wrong because so many people misunderstand the nature of philosophy of ministry. Not long ago, it was very popular—and still is to a large extent—to speak about philosophy of ministry as a fluid concept. People would say things like, "Well, our *theology* is set and fixed. Our doctrinal commitments are held as convictions in a closed-hand; they're non-negotiable. But our *philosophy of ministry* is in an open-hand. It's not set and fixed. We want to be able to hold the convictions of our *theology* while being flexible enough to adapt our *methodology* to the needs of our own context."

And while that may sound plausible, and while there might actually be a reasonable application of that thought, it's impossible to capture the myriad of abuses that have come at the hands of that notion. The concept that one's philosophy of ministry or methodology may be adapted according to the needs of the culture has been the foundation upon which the market-driven church was built. It's the genesis of ministerial pragmatism that reasons, "Well, if we're going to reach people with the Gospel, we need to get them to come to our church! And so we need to survey unbelievers, find out what they like, and adapt our ministry methodology to their tastes so that they'll be attracted to us!"

And before you could blink your eyes, the "seeker-sensitive," "church growth" philosophy of ministry was born. Unbelievers don't have the attention span for hour-long sermons on a passage of Scripture. And so pastors began giving 20-minute, pseudo-psychological pep-talks on living with purpose and finding success. Unbelievers aren't engaged by old hymns with rich theology, so they threw out the hymnals and hired the praise band. The unbeliever was re-imagined to be a consumer, and the church was to ape the advertising techniques of Madison Avenue to sell those consumers a *product*.

Not long after that, the emerging church emerged, and told us that the culture was changing. We're now living in a post-Christian era, and before the 18 to 30 year-olds of this generation darken the door of a church, we've got to show them they "belong before they believe." We've got to "contextualize the Gospel," which really just meant that we were the nerds who had to figure out a way to get the cool kids to like us. If your "target audience" is into punk rock music and body piercing, adapt the worship style and think about a tongue ring. If they're into imported beer, have church in a bar—or at least remodel your church to make it look like one. You see, this is the philosophy of ministry: Once we can show them that Christians are *like* them—that we're human just like them and can like the same things that they like—well then they'll like our church!

As I said, all manner of ministerial mischief has been born of the idea that our philosophy of ministry is a fluid and negotiable construct. And that is based on the misunderstanding that Scripture doesn't give us any specific philosophy of ministry. Now, it's true that Scripture doesn't give us a liturgy or an order of service to follow. But it's terribly short-sighted to suggest that Scripture doesn't give us clear theological principles—the implications of which directly shape and govern our philosophy of ministry. The notion that Scripture only instructs as to *what* we are to proclaim and does not also teach us *how* we are to minister is a concept born of a willful naïveté in entrepreneurial hirelings who want to build a ministry around their own personality and personal tastes.

The fact is: Scripture does speak directly to this issue. There *is* such a thing as a *biblical* philosophy of ministry. And I don't know of a passage in Scripture that is more fertile ground for reaping a biblical philosophy of ministry than 2 Corinthians 4. We've mentioned a number of times that Paul writes 2 Corinthians in the context of great upheaval in Corinth. False apostles have infiltrated the church, seeking to peddle their Judaizing heresy. And in order to make way for their *false* teaching, they knew they were going to have to undermine *Paul's* teaching. But because Paul was teaching the Gospel—and you can't undermine the truth—these men attacked Paul himself, seeking to discredit Paul's character in the eyes of the Corinthians, even going so far as to question whether he even was a true apostle of Christ.

And so they hurled all manner of accusations against him. They accused him of being under God's judgment because of his constant sufferings. "Paul, if you were really sent from Christ, you wouldn't be beaten and stoned and run out of every city you go into! You would have God's blessing! God's favor!" They accused him of acting deceitfully toward the Corinthians. They seized the opportunity to style Paul's change of travel plans as evidence that he was "purposing according to the flesh" (1:17)—of saying one thing and doing another. They accused him of being uncredentialed. He lacked authority. After all, he was just this sort of Johnny-come-lately apostle who wasn't part of the original twelve. He had no letters of commendation.

And in the providence of God, these attacks moved Paul to define and defend his apostolic ministry. And so what we have—really from 2 Corinthians 2:12 all the way through chapter 7—is the most glorious treatise on the nature of New Covenant Christian ministry anywhere in Scripture. And in chapter 4, as Paul continues to respond to accusations against his character and his ministry in order to defend the Gospel, he does so in a way that reveals precious realities about what the church is, what ministry is, and how we are to go about it

And so as we look into 2 Corinthians 4 this morning, I want us to observe **five principles** of a biblical philosophy of ministry —**five principles** that (a) inform our understanding of the Gospel and (b) shape our ministry, so that we can be faithful witnesses of Christ in whatever our sphere of influence.

I. Know the Person (vv. 1–2)

And that **first principle** is that we must know the character of the **person** of Gospel ministry, and we must endeavor to be that person. Number one: **know the person** of Gospel ministry. Look with me at verses 1 and 2: "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."

Now, we could spend the whole sermon on just this first point, because this is truly where a biblical philosophy of ministry starts. It starts with the character of the minister. But I'm going to treat these two verses briefly, because we've commented on them a number of times in our expositions of the previous chapters, and we've expounded upon the themes of this passage in other passages where Paul has spoken of these things. In particular, if you'd like a more extended comment on the themes of verses 1 and 2, I'd point you to the sermon on 2 Corinthians 2:16–17.

But I do just want to briefly point out five characteristics of the faithful minister that these verses give us. I won't expound on them, but will just state them for your reflection. First, the faithful minister is marked by humble gratitude. He recognizes, as Paul says, that the commission to ministry that he has received from the Lord is a *mercy*. It may be difficult, but it is not a burden. It may be challenging and wearying, but it is *all* mercy. To be faithful minister is to recognize first of all that ministry is a privilege granted to you by God's own mercy.

Second, the faithful minister is marked by patient endurance. Paul says, "Therefore, since we have this ministry, . . . we do not lose heart." As I said, Christian ministry is not without its significant challenges, trials, and heartaches. But because we understand the glorious nature of the ministry to which we have been called—the glory that Paul has been expounding on all throughout chapter 3—since we have received *this* glorious ministry, we do not lose heart. We find strength in the glory of the Gospel to go on no matter what obstacles come our way.

Third, the faithful minister is characterized by ministerial integrity. And I like the way the ESV translates this. Paul says, "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word." The faithful minister doesn't *adulterate* the Word of God by mixing divine truth with human ideas, man-made ideologies and strategies. He doesn't *water down* or *dilute* the Word of God by softening its hard truths, by seeking to smooth out the rough edges of the offense of the cross. The faithful minister isn't a wheeling and dealing, cunning, crafty entrepreneur, who takes advantage of people to fulfill his own agenda. He is a man of integrity.

Fourth, he is marked by bold fearlessness. We are not like Moses, who placed a veil over his face to conceal the glory of God. We all, with unveiled face, behold the glory of the Lord beaming openly on the face of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so our ministry is marked by openness and boldness. He says that we preach "by the open statement of the truth"! No wishy-washiness. No half-heartedness. No compromise. Nothing but the bold, open proclamation of the truth.

Finally, the faithful minister is governed by divine accountability. Paul says we commend ourselves "to every man's conscience *in the sight of God*." The faithful minister consciously lives before the open face of God—entirely in His presence and subject to His constant evaluation and assessment.

This is **the person** of Gospel ministry. Biblical ministry starts with the minister. And we must take care that, by the grace of God, we are men and women marked by (1) humble gratitude, (2) patient endurance, (3) ministerial integrity, (4) bold fearlessness, and (5) divine accountability.

II. Know the Purpose (v. 3)

Now, in addition to the accusations of constant suffering, of being deceitful, of not having the proper credentials, we discover in verse 3 that another accusation the false apostles leveled against Paul was that his message was *obscure*. Now, the accusation of an obscure message was a substantial one in Corinth because the Corinthian culture praised human wisdom and cleverness of speech and oratorical persuasion. They highly regarded those who were skilled in rhetoric and oratory, and looked down upon those who weren't. And so these men were saying, "Hey, look, Paul, only a few people are believing your message. If it was true, and you were really sent from Christ, surely you'd be able to convince more people to believe your message!"

And that sounds just like today. "If you really had God's blessing on your ministry, you'd have more people in your church! If you really had sound doctrine, more people would believe! You'd have more sermon downloads! You'd have a major book deal! You'd be doing more conferences!" It's the numbers game. And in fact, major theological error—and some cases even heresy, denial of the historic doctrines of the Christian faith—is excused in the name of, "Well, he has a *fruitful* ministry. A lot of people are following him. If a lot of people are coming, God must be blessing." And you know what that means? If a lot of people *aren't* coming, God's not blessing. Well that was exactly how the false apostles aimed to discredit Paul's ministry.

And Paul's response to this accusation is so instructive. Look at verse 3. He says, "Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing." From this we derive our **second principle** for faithfulness in Gospel ministry. **Number two:** we must know **the purpose**, the aim. Put simply, our purpose is to call Christ's sheep, not the goats, into the fold.

Do you see that connection there? Paul tells the false apostles, "You don't understand the doctrine of election." It may be that our gospel is veiled—that is, granted: there are many who do not believe our message—but our gospel is veiled only to those who are *perishing*.

That phrase, "those who are perishing," is not just a throw-away phrase. In fact, in Paul's writings you could say that it's a technical term—a term that represents a category of people. He uses it back in chapter 2 verse 15. Flip back to that text. Paul says: "For we"—meaning those who preach the Gospel—"are a fragrance of Christ to God among (a) those who are being saved and (b) among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life." So Paul likens the preaching of the Gospel to the emission of an odor

that finds its way into the nostrils of all people. And among those who hear the Gospel there are two kinds of people: (a) those who are being saved and (b) those who are perishing; (a) those whom God chose in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before Him (Eph 1:4), and (b) those whom He did not so choose. When the elect of God smell the fragrance of the Gospel, it is to them an aroma of life. But when the non-elect hear it, it is an aroma of death.

Note that Paul uses that phrase in his first letter to the Corinthians as well: there is a category of people called “those who are perishing.” To them, the word of the cross is foolishness. To them, the Gospel is veiled. “But,” Paul goes on to say: “to those who are being saved”—the ones he calls in 1 Corinthians 1:24, “those who are the called”—to those who are called and are being saved, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (cf. Rom 1:16).

Christ Himself said the same thing to the Jews in John 10 verses 26 and 27. He said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and *they* will *never* perish. But *you* do not believe because you are not of My sheep.” Grasp that. Not: “You are not My sheep because you don’t believe,” but, “You do not believe *because* you are not of My sheep.” If we put this verse in the language of John 6:37, Jesus is saying: “You don’t come to Me, because you are not of those that My Father has given to Me.”

And so Paul’s defense against the accusation that not enough people are believing his message is simply: the Church’s **purpose** in evangelism—and in all facets of Gospel ministry—is to call Christ’s *sheep*, not the *goats*, into the fold. You shouldn’t expect the goats to believe the Gospel; only the *sheep* hear the Shepherd’s voice.

Now, consider the implications this doctrine has for our ministry of the Gospel. If we continue to take the unadulterated, Biblical Gospel to the world and they continue to reject it, that is not a sign of the weakness of the message. It is the outworking of God’s purpose to redeem a *particular* people: those sheep whom the Father has given to the Son.

Now, that doesn’t mean that everyone who rejects the Gospel on the first hearing is not elect. That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t examine ourselves to see if we’re getting in the way of a pure Gospel presentation—whether we’re distorting its content, or whether we’re adding unnecessary offense to the Gospel by our own personality or manner of presentation. We have to be humble enough to consider those realities and adapt accordingly.

But if we *have* taken the Biblical Gospel to our neighbors and our communities with the patience and the compassion of Jesus, and they’re just not interested, we shouldn’t conclude that we need to start playing rock music and having light shows and performing skits in church to attract them.

Friends, the church is not called to amuse the goats. Our task is to sound the Shepherd's voice, as clearly as we can, in the Gospel message and call *His* sheep who *know* that voice into His fold.

After all, it is the call of the Shepherd's voice that is the means by which Christ's flock is brought into His fold. Didn't He tell us that in John chapter 10? "A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:5). If that's the case, why would we adopt a ministry methodology—whether in our personal evangelism or church wide—other than sounding forth the Shepherd's voice in the preaching of His Word? Why would we implement something else—something that Scripture promises will not attract Christ's sheep, but will attract the goats?

Our gospel is indeed veiled to those who are perishing. And if we understand that our **purpose** in Gospel ministry is to call the sheep, we will learn not to measure success by numbers but by faithfulness to the message.

III. Know the Problem (v. 4)

And so we must know the person and the purpose of Gospel ministry. The **third principle** that we must understand in order to be faithful ministers of the Gospel is: we must **know the problem** we've been commissioned to solve. And Paul states it in verse 4. He says, "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."

Now, what does it mean for unbelievers to have their minds blinded? Well, a few verses earlier, Paul used this same language to describe the Israelites in Moses' day, and even the Jews up to this present day. In 3:14 he speaks about a *hardened mind*. And in 3:15 he speaks about a *veiled heart*. Both of these are communicating the same reality as chapter 4 verse 4. What does it mean to be spiritually dead? I mean, think about your unbelieving friends and family. They walk around, have conversations, make plans, have families, go to work. What does it mean to say that they're *dead*?

Verse 4 tells us. **The essence of spiritual death is spiritual blindness.** What it means for someone to be dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:4), is that the eyes of their heart have been blinded so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.

And Scripture frequently speaks of *spiritual sight* as a metaphor for *spiritual life*. In Acts 26:18, Jesus says to Paul, "I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God." In John 6:40, Jesus says: "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who **beholds** the Son and believes in Him will have eternal **life**, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day." Behold; believe; *life*.

And so when Paul says that Satan has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, he is saying that the nature of unbelief—the nature of spiritual death—is spiritual blindness. It is refusing what is most precious because you are blind to its value. *This* is the world’s problem: **they are blind to glory.**

Consider this miserable tragedy! Everybody in the world—whether they know it or not—stands guilty before a holy God. All have sinned and thus fall short of the perfection of His glorious standard of righteousness. And so they are incapable of doing the very thing they were created to do: namely, to enjoy a relationship with and communion with their glorious Creator. They are doomed to waste their lives; they can’t live their lives according to the purpose for which they were given their lives. And ultimately, they are doomed to go into eternal punishment.

But in magnificent love, God sends Jesus to live the perfect life that they should have lived, but could never live; and to die the horrifying, death under the heavy hand of the wrath of God that they should have died, so that the penalty they owed would be paid by a substitute; such that if they simply abandon any claim of self-righteousness and trust entirely in Christ alone for their righteousness before God, they can have the restored relationship with their glorious Creator that He designed them to have. And so you go and you tell these people this most awesome news in the world—the greatest news that anyone could ever conceive of—and they go, “Ehh. That’s great for you, but it’s just not for me.”

That is the miserable nature of spiritual death. People can look directly at the glory of Christ, and see nothing of value. Whether they’re Ancient Near Eastern Jews witnessing healings and exorcisms and resurrections, or whether they’re 21st century Americans reading their Bibles or listening to preaching—they behold *glory*, and they are entirely *unaffected*. Jesus looks foolish. Or He looks like a mythical, psychological crutch made up for weak people who don’t have any other way to get through the day. Or He’s just boring; He’s just nothing special. Because unless we’re born again—unless God shines in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (as we’ll see in verse 6)—our minds remain blind, and we can’t *see* Christ for who He is.

Friends, this is the world’s problem! This is what the Church has been left on earth to solve! At the root, the world’s problem is not that they have bad marriages or broken relationships. It’s not that they don’t feel comfortable and relaxed in church. It’s not that Christians don’t like the same music they listen to, don’t dress the same way, or don’t use the same language. It’s not even that they don’t have enough evidence of the truthfulness of the Bible or the Deity of Christ. They *have* that evidence: God’s eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are *without excuse* (Rom 1:20)! They don’t lack evidence; they lack the eyes to *see* that evidence. The world’s problem is that **they are**

blind to glory! They can't see what is supremely beautiful and glorious and valuable and precious!

IV. Know the Proclamation (v. 5)

And if that is the world's problem, the Church's mission is to preach a message which by the power of God overcomes that blindness. And that's the **fourth principle** for faithfulness in Gospel ministry. We must **know the proclamation**. Paul says in verse 5, "For we do not preach *ourselves*, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake."

What does it mean to "not preach ourselves"? It means that we don't put ourselves forward as the appeal to unbelievers. We don't make our methodology or our style the draw. We don't appeal to what is fleshly or worldly in the unbeliever in order to attract and compel their participation. Instead, we do everything we can to get ourselves out of the way, so as to be merely incidental—just the finger that points to what counts: to the content of the message: that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Keep a finger in 2 Corinthians 4, and turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 2. This is a text that really sheds light on what Paul means when he says that he does not preach himself. Starting in verse 1: "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

Superiority of speech, human wisdom, persuasive words—these were exactly what you needed if you were going to get your message heard in first-century Corinth! Remember: eloquence and oratory were the prerequisites of cultural engagement and credibility in that society. And Paul says, "I determined—I resolved—to be just the opposite. They were seeking wisdom, and all I knew was Christ and Him crucified. They were looking for rhetorical skills and eloquence, and I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling. They wanted someone skilled in the art of persuasion, and my message and my preaching had no persuasive words. Why?! Because if I did that, I'd be preaching *myself*, and then your faith wouldn't rest on the power of God; it would rest on the wisdom of *men*. And that is no sure foundation upon which to stake your eternity."

And friends, as messengers of that same Gospel, we don't preach ourselves! Back in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 7, Paul says, Listen, we are just earthen vessels; we're just clay pots. We don't do anything to make much of ourselves because we want "the surpassing greatness of the power [to] be of God and not from ourselves."

Christian ministry is not about trying to gain a following. It's about trying to win over other people to the same ideology that you espouse. It's not about moral reform, or political activism. The problem that we aim to solve by our ministry is the world's blindness to the glory of Christ. And so we don't preach ourselves, because no matter how slick or clever or nuanced our presentation is, *that's* not what saves people! That's not what opens blind eyes to see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ!

And if there is anything that plagues the modern church today, it is an epidemic of preaching ourselves. One of the greatest marks of the unhealthiness of the visible church is that rather than manifesting the glory of Jesus and the inherent offensiveness and foolishness of His cross, the culture-exegetes of today counsel us to show unbelievers how much alike we are. Show them that Christians are normal people, just like them! One very popular preacher tells Christians that unbelievers should be able to look at them, and think, "Wow, they're just like me. I suppose I could be a Christian too!"

Dear friends, the very *last* thing that unbelievers should conclude when they look at you is that you're just like them and they can be just like you! They should look at you, and see someone so totally *different* from them—so set apart from the world, so free from the bondage to this world's cares and false-pleasures—the virtue and the holiness of your life should be so evident, that the only conclusion they could possibly come to is that something *entirely supernatural* has taken place in your life! And that they have no hope of ever being like you, unless that same miracle takes place in their own lives!

The philosophy of ministry that counsels us to conform to the world in order to win the world is a philosophy of preaching ourselves. It's a philosophy of presenting ourselves to the world, and asking the world to receive us. And then maybe, if they like *us* enough, maybe they'll be interested in "trying Jesus."

That's why so many churches do the dog and pony show and call it church. They have the theatrical lighting, the smoke and the fog, the multi-media presentations, the state-of-the-art children's playground, the rock-star "worship" band, the hipsters with their black-rimmed glasses, v-necks t-shirts, and faux-hawks, and the 20-minute pep-talks on fixing your emotional problems that they call sermons, delivered by a Tony Robbins wanna-be life coach. All of that is the selling point. But Paul says, "We do *not* preach ourselves, but *Christ Jesus* as Lord." *Our* "selling point"—if you could even call it that—is that God the Son was crucified for sinners, and He is risen and now reigning as Lord over all! And by trusting in Him and following Him as Lord, your eyes can be opened, your heart can be renewed, and your sins can be forgiven!

Back in 2 Corinthians 2, verse 17, Paul calls “preaching ourselves,” peddling the word of God. Think about what a peddler is. A peddler is someone who knows that the product he’s trying to move really isn’t all that valuable in itself. He’s embarrassed by his product’s deficiencies, so he deceptively only displays the parts of it that appeal to the consumer. He esteems his product so lightly—he thinks so little of it—that he’s willing to haggle back and forth about its worth. GraceLife, may God keep us from esteeming the glory of Christ *so* lightly that we’re willing to haggle with unbelievers about His worth, by seeking to entice them to Christianity by something other than Jesus, as He’s presented in the Word of God!

GraceLife, as wonderful as you are, you are not the Gospel! As wonderful as Grace Church is, Grace Church is not the Gospel! You and I, in and of ourselves, have nothing to offer people that overcomes spiritual blindness. Theatrical lighting, cutting-edge music, cultural savvy, and even our good works and politeness—none of that will ever open blind eyes to treasure the glory of Jesus. Only the Good News of forgiveness of sins freely offered by faith in a sin-bearing, wrath-propitiating Substitute can solve the problem that the Church is called to solve. Faith comes by *hearing*, and hearing by the word of Christ, by the message about Christ (Rom 10:17). And so we don’t preach ourselves. We preach Christ Jesus as Lord.

V. Know the Prescription (vv. 4, 6)

And that brings us to our **fifth principle** for faithfulness in Gospel ministry. We must know the person, the purpose, the problem, the proclamation, and—**number five**—we must know the **prescription**. Look at 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.”

And when you compare verse 6 with verse 4, it’s easy to recognize that there’s an intended parallelism in these two verses. In verse 4, Paul speaks of “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.” And in verse 6 we have “the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” In these verses, Paul outlines three levels of God’s redemptive work. And as we progress through each level we penetrate to further depth and ultimacy. And if we can understand the implications of this and can push through to all three levels, it will help us perceive the fullness of the Good News, and will keep us from preaching a truncated gospel—a gospel that stops short of its most fundamental and most glorious blessings.

Level 1: Light

The first level of God’s redemptive work is light. Now, remember the predicament that humanity is in: All are dead in trespasses and sins, in need of forgiveness. Without it, they cannot know the God they were created to love and worship and enjoy. But God has acted in the person of Jesus

Christ to provide that forgiveness! And He has sent His messengers to declare that forgiveness! But because the essence of spiritual death is spiritual blindness, when people hear that wonderful news, they don't see it for what it is. They see no glory in it. It's simply foolishness. And so they continue to disbelieve and resist it.

What is the **prescription** for that hopeless predicament? Paul says, in magnificent love, God Himself—the same God who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness”—shines in the hearts of His elect to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. To be sure, unbelievers resist the grace of God in the Gospel. But in this act, God *overcomes* our resistance to the Gospel by giving us the light needed to see things as they actually are. The **prescription**, or the remedy, **for man's spiritual blindness is God's sovereign work of regeneration**. God sovereignly causes us to be born again! He imparts spiritual light to the blind mind! He gives us new eyes, and new affections, so that we see sin for what it is, and Christ for who He is. And as a result of that regeneration, we turn from the filth of sin and embrace Christ with the arms of saving faith.

This is so radical of a transformation—something so far beyond natural man's ability to accomplish on his own—that Paul compares this sovereign act of God to the creation of the world! He says, “the God who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’” is the One who has shone this regenerating light in our hearts. In the beginning God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Paul is saying that the new birth—the conversion of a sinner from his spiritual blindness to faith in Christ—is just as much a sovereign miracle as was the original creation of the universe! Now I ask you: how active or cooperative was the creation in its creation? It wasn't. It didn't exist, and then by God's sovereign grace it did. That's why the metaphor of being born again is so apt: just as an infant contributes nothing to his first birth, so also those who are born again from above are “born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). And so this first level of God's redemptive work is regeneration. God sovereignly accomplishes what only He can do: He shines light where there was once darkness.

Level 2: Knowledge of the Gospel

But notice the second level: God shines the light *of the knowledge*—or, as verse 4 says, the light *of the gospel*. Again, these are parallel, and so they're referring to the same thing. We can understand this second level as the knowledge of the Gospel. See, before this light shines, the story of the angelic announcements, the virgin birth, the perfect life, the miracles, the betrayal, the unjust trial, the horrific crucifixion and death, and the resurrection of Jesus—all of it is just a story. You understand the components of the story, but the eyes of your heart are blind to the glory of the story—to the true significance of the story. But now the light of regeneration has shined, and the eyes of your heart are opened, and the nakedness of your need has been exposed.

And so now, you see this old, old Story for the treasure that it is—the greatest news that you could ever imagine! Christ! the Son of God! born, crucified, and risen for me! Level two is the knowledge of the Gospel.

Level 3: Glory

And you know, for a lot of people, this is where their Gospel preaching stops. “Jesus died for you, and you can escape punishment.” And if we’re not careful, we can give people the impression that the loving purpose of God in the Gospel terminates finally upon man—that the Gospel is *man-centered*. But Paul knows better than that. He knows that the Gospel is fundamentally *God-centered*. And so he digs even deeper: God has shone in our hearts to give the Light (that’s level 1) of the knowledge, or of the Gospel (that’s level 2), *of the glory* of God in the face of Christ! *This* is the deepest level of the redemptive work of God! *This* is the most foundational reality of the Gospel message! *This* is what salvation is about!

Can you see that in the text? Paul calls the Gospel “the gospel *of* the glory of God in the face of Christ.” This is the Gospel *of* the glory of God! It is the Good News which *consists in* gaining access to and enjoying the glory of God in the face of Christ!

And Scripture frequently speaks of salvation in these terms. Turn with me to 2 Thessalonians 2:14. We’ll read verses 13 and 14 for the flow of thought: “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel”—so we’re about to learn the purpose for salvation. What was God’s purpose or goal in saving us? “It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain **the glory** of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Do you hear that? The Gospel is the means by which you will gain the glory of Christ! It is the Gospel *of* the glory! Seeing and enjoying the glory of God in the face of Christ is what makes the Good News good news!

And again, turn to 1 Peter 3:18. Peter says, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous.” So there is the judicial reality of the cross: that Christ pays the penalty of our sin as our Substitute. But then the next phrase tells us the “why” of Christ’s penal substitution. “Christ died once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, *so that* He might bring us to God.” That’s what salvation is about! Getting us to God! Restoring us to the all-satisfying, unspeakably glorious, consummately delightful God that our sin cut us off from! Propitiation, redemption, justification, forgiveness of sins, freedom from punishment—all these things just get stuff out of the way so that we can get to Him!

What makes the Good News good news is not simply that our sins are forgiven, or that we get out of hell, that we don’t feel guilty anymore, or that we get to see our friends and family in

heaven. The bottom of why the Gospel is good news is because it reunites us with the glory we were created to enjoy (Isa 43:7; 1 Pet 3:18).

So GraceLife, I charge you, as ministers of the New Covenant: Preach *that* Gospel to the world! When you preach the Gospel to your friends and family and neighbors, don't just present Jesus to them as fire insurance! You don't have to be born again to want to escape punishment! You don't need new eyes and a new heart to want to be reunited with friends and family! But you do need new eyes to worship and treasure Jesus.

So when you preach the Gospel to your friends and family and neighbors, don't present Christ as just the ticket to bigger and better things. When you go to the movies, you need a ticket to get in. But once you're in to see the feature presentation, what do you do with that ticket? You don't treasure that ticket! You find it in your pants pocket three weeks later after it's been washed in the laundry two or three times!

Brothers and sisters: Jesus is not the ticket! He's the movie! He is not just the way *into* Paradise; it's seeing and knowing and enjoying Him that *is* Paradise! He is what makes Heaven *Heaven*. So preach the Gospel in a way that makes clear that Christ Himself is the great end and ultimate blessing! The Good News is not that if you believe in Jesus you can go to a place where you can play endless rounds of golf, or to a place with a hall of mirrors where you can admire how valuable you are! The glory of Heaven isn't even that you can be reunited with lost loved ones—as sweet as those reunions will be. No, the Good News is that God has made a way to cleanse you from your sin, so that, you can be reconciled to a relationship with Him—and in Him know true joy and eternal satisfaction!

The loving, atoning work of Christ in the Gospel is a *means* to a greater *end*: that the people God has created would finally **glorify** Him by **enjoying** and being **satisfied** by His glory—the glory for which we were created (Isa 43:7). As we proclaim this Gospel, dear friends, let us never forget that it is the gospel of *Christ's glory*.

Conclusion

And so as we close, the question to you is: Do you see Him? Is He glorious? Is the bottom of your joy rooted, not in the exaltation yourself, or ultimately in God's *gifts*, but in the magnification of God's own glory? Are you satisfied most, not by being made much of, but by making much of Christ?

If not, get on your face and beg God to shine light of the knowledge of the Gospel in your heart. Ask Him to open your eyes to the beauty of the miraculous birth, sinless life, substitutionary death, and undeniable resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, sent to ransom a

remnant of worshipers who would proclaim the glory of His grace forever. Pray that God would grant you the eyes to see this Jesus for who He is.

And for those of you who answer, “Yes,” to those questions—“He is glorious. I find all my joy in the exaltation of Christ and not myself.”—heed these principles from the Apostle Paul as you seek to faithfully minister the Gospel. Remember the **person** that Christ has called you to be, because the faithful ministry starts with the faithful *minister*. Remember that your **purpose** is to call the sheep, not entertain the goats; and so you must measure your success by faithfulness to the message. Remember that the **problem** you’ve been commissioned to solve is that the world is blind to glory. And therefore remember that your **proclamation** must not be *yourselves*, but Christ as Lord. And remember that the **prescription** is God’s sovereign regenerating grace, which He dispenses through the preaching of the Gospel, whereby He overcomes the problem of spiritual blindness with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Preach the Gospel of the glory.