

We will turn to 2 Corinthians 4 today.

- Announcements & Prayer

At this time ten years ago we had met for about 7 months in the Dietrich's basement in Henrietta and moved to the German House, and were preparing for our first public service there on September 20, 2009.

And God has been far better to us than we deserved, and in my lack of faith, far better than I expected. We didn't know if it was going to work, we certainly didn't anticipate what it has become, but God has been good.

In 2009, there was no knowing if the church here would survive, let alone thrive. All the church planting gurus said that 80% of churches closed within the first two years. I was warned that all of the people who helped start the church would leave by the second year. We knew that churches in the northeast US had even worse odds. And we had, humanly speaking, very little going for us. We had a shoestring budget, no full-time staff, I had no lead pastor experience and everybody else was green too. Our programs were minimal. We had a few dozen super faithful people, a ton of prayer, and little else.

On paper, this wasn't going to work. But God has been incredibly gracious, and ten years later we are not only still here, but God has brought people to faith every year, hundreds of people with new faith in Christ have been baptized over the last decade, people have grown in their faith, churches have been planted, ministries supported with volunteers and finances, about 120 new families have formed as we've had about that many weddings, about 200 babies have been born, we've given away hundreds of thousands of dollars to church planting, and we can look back and see what can only be described as a work of God's mercy and kindness in Rochester. As a way of looking back and celebrating what God has done, we prepared this video...

PLAY VIDEO

Our scripture text today is 1 Corinthians 4:1-10.

2 Corinthians 4 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. 3 And

even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. **4** In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. **5** For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.**6** For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. **7** But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. **8** We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; **9** persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;**10** always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

I. **Encouraged by the mercy of God (2 Corinthians 4:1)**

This book of 2 Corinthians is written to the Corinthian Christians in large part as a response to the work that God had done among them. So I thought a passage from this book would be appropriate for anniversary Sunday when we are looking back to say thank you to God for what He has done here.

And this is important to do: it's important to reflect on what God has done for a very important reason. Look at verse 1 again:

2 Corinthians 4:1 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

This is going to be important, because there is something in this passage that keeps us from losing heart. Losing heart is becoming discouraged to the point of giving up. Which is a temptation in the Christian life. We experience so many discouragements, things that don't pan out, we have a life that is far harder than we thought, and there is a temptation to let that drain our joy and our zeal and then we give up the Christian life.

Or we look at what we see coming in the future and it all looks so daunting and exhausting that we can't imagine going through it all. You don't know how you could ever go through those changes at the company, the changes in your kids, the health struggles, the financial struggles, the opposition to the faith you see in the culture.

We often think, "I don't know how I can keep doing this, how I can stay faithful to Christ and all of the responsibilities He has given me," and then we let the future overwhelm us and sap our joy.

And as a church that is now no longer a new church plant, that in the years ahead faces challenges in the culture, challenges with buildings and finances, management challenges, challenges to stay on mission - it can be tempting to tap out and think we won't be able to face what's ahead. There are always "I don't know how I can do this"s in the Christian life.

But Paul says, "We have this ministry by the mercy of God, so we don't lose heart."

Everything we ever accomplished in the past, individually or as a church, was not because we were awesome, but it was a gift of God's mercy to us. And if He has given us all the mercy we need up until now, we can be encouraged to keep going and encouraged for the future because His mercy will be there too.

But we can look back and, at every "I don't know how I can do this" in the past, we found the mercy of God.

That's how this whole becoming a Christian thing started. We realized how sinful we were, we realized we had fallen desperately short of God's standard. We realized we deserved His wrath. And we said, "I don't know how I can fix this." And the scriptures said, "You can't."

But then God sent His son to die. There was provision before our need. And if God was merciful in our time of greatest of all possible needs, He can certainly be counted on to be faithful for all other future needs.

And so, Paul says, in looking to the future and looking for strength for today, presume on the mercy of God. Remember all He has done. Trust that he will provide more grace for each day, for each challenge, for every need. That we will certainly feel stretched, and discouraged, and tempted to quit, but we will find mercy. So keep going.

Now if the only mercy we ever received around here was the cross of Jesus, that would be enough to convince us that God would be faithful in the future.

But we can also look at our ministry and see the pronounced mercy of God all over it in all kinds of additional ways. There has been so much mercy here, so we can be confident that God will continue to be merciful to us.

Notice here that Paul didn't say, "I don't lose heart." He said "we don't lose heart." So it wasn't just Paul that had his ministry, it was that "we" - all of God's people - had the ministry.

What God is doing in the world He wants to do through all of His people.

A few of us started talking about planting this church in 2007 and I know I get way too much credit for it's beginning. I wasn't at all convinced that I should be a lead pastor or that I should preach, but a couple of our current elders encouraged me in that calling. They kept saying, "we should do this."

And a mercy of God was that when they said "we should do this," they really meant "we."
What God is doing in the world He wants to do through all of His people.

I decided not to name too many names this morning, just because I know there have been so many people God has used in key ways, that I would inevitably leave out more people than I would include. God has gifted our church with so many servant-hearted, humble people, who have seen everything they have as given to them by God to push back the darkness and God has used so many to make Grace Road a reality.

The fact that so many have been here is evidence of God's mercy to us.

You look back at the story and you see Gods mercy all over it.

It's the mercy of God that a young married couple like the Dietrichs would open their new house to host a church that on a big night had over 90 people with lots of kids. Without kids, houses stay nice. Who says, "Let's turn these pristine bedrooms into Sunday school classrooms indefinitely." It was God's mercy.

Then we moved to the German house, and a handful of people who were starting families, starting professional careers, were showing up early in the morning, setting up chairs, cleaning up from whatever happened the night before. And one Saturday a month the German house used to do a pro-wrestling smack-down event on Saturday, so the cleanup on Sunday was substantial. Here were people with lives and grown-up jobs, who could have gone to a church with a Starbucks and parking spaces were showing up to clean up the vomit and beer cans on Sunday morning.

And faithful families like that represent the mercy of God to us. That people with that much confidence in the power of the Gospel, in the local church, and that much hope for

this ministry would make sacrifices like that for years (and still be here serving faithfully a decade in.) That's unheard of, and is a gift of God.

God was clearly building this ministry by giving us mercy after mercy so we could keep going. And so I am so thankful for so many of you and the unique contribution you've brought to making Grace Road a reality. You are a gift from God.

And again, I get too much credit.

So we have this ministry by the mercy of God. The steady elders, the dozens of group leaders, the kids teachers, hundreds of volunteers, the staff, the resources, are all the mercy of God.

We can look at the cross and look at the last ten years and know that God loves to shower his children with mercy. So whatever the future holds, we can trust that God will be ready with his mercy in the future, mercy for every need.

For Grace Road to continue to thrive for another 50 years, we are going to need another 50 years of God giving us better than we deserve and blessing us despite ourselves.

And Paul says, "Count on that to keep you encouraged. If He did it in the past, there is no reason to think He won't continually provide into the future."

God's past mercy is the grounds for our hope in His future mercy. And it's the ground of our encouragement.

There is no future without Jesus for us or our church. There's no guarantee of measurable success, but that's not what we're after anyways. The guarantee is that there is no future without God's mercy. That can be depended upon in all things going forward, and God has more than shown His faithfulness to us in the past 10 years.

But what Paul is focusing on in this passage that he has by the mercy of God is not primarily the containers of the ministry, but the content of the ministry. He certainly expresses his thanks for the people in Corinth as part of the ministry he has by the mercy of God. But his focus is on what the ministry is all about.

In context here, Paul is talking about the ministry of the Gospel, the calling that God had put on his life to speak the message of the Gospel that brings life as opposed to the

message of the law alone that brings death. And he counted it a tremendous mercy that God would reveal that Gospel to him and call him to tell others about it, like God has us.

That Jesus would save Him and call him to share Him was a profound mercy of God to Paul. It was a joy and a delight to know the Lord and make Him known, and that God would transform him into someone whose role was to go throughout the world being what he called in chapter 2 the “aroma of Christ.”

That God would take us, the people who were his enemies, and reconcile us to Him to include us in this missionary family called the church is an incredible mercy.

II. Avoiding the Modification of God (2 Corinthians 4:2)

And knowing that keeps us from trusting any other power to get God’s work done in the world:

2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

The fact that God actually is alive and active and merciful and that His word has proven to be so powerful should keep us from thinking we need something else in the future to make His word powerful.

There’s a temptation to practice cunning - to use deceitful practices to get people to respond to the teaching (intentionally playing on emotions to create emotional decisions, for example.) To try to psychologically manipulate people to respond, to say they got saved, to give. But if the word is powerful, we have to refuse to do things that way.

If it was the straightforward statement of the truth that got us to God and got us this far, we can’t rely on any method primarily more than we rely on straightforward statement of the truth.

There’s also a temptation to tamper with God’s word to make it more acceptable. To make a cooler, more toned-down version of Jesus who never talked about money or sex or hell so He can be shrink-wrapped or packaged for the masses. Then, maybe, we could overcome whatever it is that keeps people from believing.

But look what he says next:

3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Yes, there are people blind to the glory of Jesus. An open statement of the truth, plain teaching of God's word doesn't satisfy them and doesn't seem to reach them. But their problem is not just that they need better video screens to hold their attention - their problem isn't attention span. It isn't that they need a dumbed down message, their problem isn't a lack of intelligence.

It's that the god of this world has blinded their eyes - the god of this world being Satan. He is better at cunning than we are and better at tampering with Gods word than we are.

That's a problem we could never overcome with emotional manipulation. There's a bigger power that's needed. Which is why, verse 5:

III. Empowered by the Gospel of God (2 Cor. 4:5-6)

5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

He says we proclaim Jesus.

Because what made us Christians, if we really are Christians, was not emotional manipulation, it was not someone selling us a watered-down edge-free palatable Christianity. We are Christians because someone told us about Jesus.

And no, that wasn't enough for us either. Because our hearts were dead. We were enemies of God. By nature, we hated Jesus.

But God took that seemingly foolish, weak message of Jesus and did the same thing in our hearts that He did in Genesis 1 - He said "let there be light." And, ex-nihilo, from nothing, out of the darkness of our hearts the light of Christ shone.

And all of a sudden what had seemed so foolish became wisdom.

What looked only like a restrictive, narrow road, now because a restrictive narrow road that we wanted to take because of the wide expanse of life it led to.

What sounded awful before now became our delight.

In our minds, Jesus was the enemy of everything we wanted. Then He became everything we wanted.

For us to come to faith in Jesus took an absolute miracle.

We were his enemies - we didn't want anyone else to rule over our lives. It was just darkness in our hearts and minds. And we heard the truth - which does nothing for someone who hates truth. But God said "let there be light." And there was light.

And it wasn't the multimedia that made that happen.

It didn't happen because someone watered down the message of Jesus and tampered with it just enough to make it non-offensive. It offended us and demanded our repentance.

And it all worked because it was the power of God.

Romans 1:15-17 "15 So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

It is the preaching of the Gospel and the power of God that made us believe.

It always takes a miracle of God for anyone to believe. But because we have this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. God loves to bring people to Himself, He has shown His mercy in bringing us to Himself, and we can presume on God continuing to work to be just that merciful in the hearts and lives of others when we speak the gospel message to them in an honest, straightforward way.

IV. Embodying the Gospel of God (2 Corinthians 4:7)

2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The container for the gospel that is Grace Road is a blessing of God to us. But ultimately it is a clay jar. Not that impressive, blemished, cracked, and plain.

But we have this treasure in the gospel. And when there's a bucket of gold, you aren't too concerned about the bucket, you are interested in the gold. And the hope for the next ten years is that we'd see more of the same - a clay pot - an imperfect church with weak and sinful people, embodying the treasure of the Gospel and sharing it with the world.

Which allows us to live out the complexities of the Christian life - a life of sin and difficulty and sorrow and loss and persecution, but a life of joy and celebration and laughter and a sense that in all of it, somehow Jesus is winning:

8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

We want to continue to carry this message and manifest the life of Jesus in more places, more neighborhoods, more offices, on more campuses, and in more congregation in the years ahead. It won't be pretty, it will be grimy, it will take more waves of people who grasp the "we" of ministry ownership. But God was merciful in the past and we can presume that He will be just as merciful in the future.

Our Hope for the Next Ten Years is that We Would Be:

- I. Encouraged by the mercy of God (2 Corinthians 4:1)**
- II. Avoiding the Modification of God (2 Corinthians 4:2)**
- III. Empowered by the Gospel of God (2 Cor. 4:5-6)**
- IV. Embodying the Gospel of God (2 Corinthians 4:7-10)**

And if today you sense that you are far from God and need forgiveness and have a desire for Jesus, God is working on you. And he will forgive and redeem everyone who trusts in him through the gospel.

The Gospel, the heart of the Christian message that we preach here every week, is the message that, though I'm more sinful than I could ever know, because of the death of Christ on my behalf, I can, by faith in him, be more loved and accepted by God than I could ever hope.

So if today you will turn from sin and trust Him you will be forgiven.

Sermon Outline:

Our Hope for the Next Ten Years is that We Would Be:

- I. Encouraged by the mercy of God (2 Corinthians 4:1)**
- II. Avoiding the Modification of God (2 Corinthians 4:2)**
- III. Empowered by the Gospel of God (2 Cor. 4:5-6)**
- IV. Embodying the Gospel of God (2 Corinthians 4:7-10)**

Discussion Questions for Small Groups:

- 1) In 2 Corinthians 4:1, Paul says "we" have this ministry. Do you have personal involvement in the ministry of the gospel somewhere?**
- 2) How does God's past mercy keep us from losing heart?**
- 3) What does a life of relying on the gospel look like?**
- 4) How do we share the gospel?**