

“Missional People | Missions and the Word” | 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican

Preaching Draft | January 12, 2025

(Discussion questions on page 9)

I recently heard a pastor tell a story about a time he was evangelized at a fraternity party. He described himself at that time as someone who “loved his sin.”

In the midst of the chaos of the party, a friend of his named Dave spoke to him about Jesus Christ and what it meant to believe in him and follow him. This attempt at witnessing did not go over well. Soon after he wrote Dave a note. He told him he was worried about him. That he thought he was taking religion too seriously. In short, he blew Dave off and mocked his religious fervor.

Twenty-five years later, this man is now a pastor. He closed this story by saying that he “thanked God for the courage of people like Dave.”

What do you think about Dave-types? How do they make you feel? You know, the person who shares about their faith at a family gathering, or over lunch at work, or with their dorm roommates, or with their spouse or girlfriend or boyfriend.

I must admit that sharing my faith with others is not something I excel in. I struggle with the fear of man. I need to grow in this area. How about you?

The good news is that even a desire to grow in the area of bearing witness to Jesus, is a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work.

As a church, we are leaning into this desire this January in our sermon series, *Missional People*. Mike Weeks started us off last week by reminding us of Jesus words in Matthew 9, that missions begins with prayer:

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest (Matt 9:37-38).

This week we will turn to Paul and a passage about his own ministry of bearing witness to Jesus, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6. The theme I want us to notice this week is the relationship between a missional life and the Word of God. Christians missions devoid of the Word of God is like a food pantry with no food, a micro-financer with no money. And the role of the Word of God in missions is rich and elaborate. I want to help us see today how God’s Word impacts our (1) confidence in missions, (2) calls for a dogged commitment to clarity, and (3) establishes the standard for character: In a missional life, God’s Word relates matters of **(1) Confidence, (2) Clarity, and (3) Character.**

I. Confidence

Confidence is a deep, intensive trust in something. It is hard to get much done in life if your confidence breaks. Many things were threatening Paul's confidence—in both God's mission and in himself as God's apostle.

One of the most dangerous threats seems to have come from issues surrounding the church in Corinth. Paul had a long history with the Corinthians, having planted the church there, pastored there, and written several letters to them. But in many ways, the Corinthians were very hard on Paul.

They poked fun at his appearance and abilities as a speaker: Paul recounts what they say later in this letter: "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account" (2 Cor 10:10).

They question whether the Lord is really working through Paul: "You seek proof that Christ is speaking in me" (2 Cor 13:3).

Worst of all, under these circumstances the Corinthians questioned Paul's motives: "...I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. (2 Cor 12:16).

Added to this were false teachers seeking to undermine Paul behind his back: he speaks of "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Cor 11:13-14).

And the seemingly impossible list of other hardships mentioned in chapter 11:

...far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? (2 Cor 11:23-29).

And pastors today, like me, complained about leading through Covid!

The criticisms and challenges Paul faces are the appropriate context for feeling the force of his words in verse 1 of our passage:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, **we do not lose heart** (4:1).

"We do not lose heart." Paul's ministry was to preach the Gospel to people who had never heard it, and often who did not want to hear it (like my pastor friend at his fraternity party). God

called Paul to this ministry and Paul was faithful. Paul's faithfulness did not mean an easy life. But Paul did not lose confidence—not in God, not in himself, not in his calling to live a missional life that bears witness to Jesus. Where did this confidence come from? I want to take us to the foundation of it: *The Word of God*. We see what this implies if we look at verse 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 (4:6).

This is a quotation from the Genesis creation account, where God creates the world by *speaking*: The term "God said" occurs ten times in Genesis One,¹ establishing the biblical theme that God works by His Spirit working through His Word.

And do you see what Paul is doing in verse 6? Paul is comparing his own coming to faith in Jesus with the power of God's speech in the creation of the world. Behind Paul's calling. behind Paul's mission, behind Paul's life, stands the *Word of God* that created the universe.

God's Word is the declaration of His Will. It brings things into being and establishes what will come to pass. And notice that God's Word does not predict that God's efforts at creating the world or church will ultimately be shrinking and unsuccessful. What we hear from God's word is the promise of growth, increase, fruitfulness:

God calls Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply. To fill the earth" (Gen 1:22, 28). He tells Noah the same after the flood (Gen 9:1). So too with Abraham: "I will make you a great nation....in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed;" "Your offspring shall be as numerous as the stars in the sky" (Gen 12:2, 4; 15:5-6). He tells the Israelites when they are in exile in Babylon, "increase in number; do not decrease" (Jer. 29:6).

Then in the prophecies about Jesus and Jesus' kingdom, we read, "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end" (Isa 9:7). In Acts the church isn't just born, it grows and increases: We read that the "number of disciples keeps increasing" (Acts 6:1, 7); the "Word of God increases and spreads" (Acts 12:24); "The Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power" (Acts 19:20).

Our confidence does not lie in our abilities, or in a favorable culture, or in fancy strategies. Our confidence lies in what God has said: "Of the increase of [my Son's] government and peace there will be no end" (Isa 9:7).

To be sure, there are times when the people of God are reduced to a remnant (see 1 Kings 19). And God is certainly against the wrong kind of growth or growth for the wrong reasons: "Do not be overawed when a man grows rich" (Ps 49:16-17). And the way growth happens is often

¹ See Genesis 1 verses 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, and 29.

counter-intuitive to us—growth comes by sacrifice and suffering: “If a seed falls into the ground and dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24-26).

But, God did not make the earth to remain void, nor did he send his Son to die for a church that ends up empty or a kingdom that ultimately dwindles. What John sees in Revelation is what *will* come to pass: it is “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, tribe and people....worshiping the lamb” (Rev 7:9).

Like Paul, our confidence to live a missional life—bearing witness to Jesus—lies in the fact that the God who spoke the World into being, has said that His Son’s kingdom will increase.

That is Paul’s and our confidence—God who will make his kingdom grow. Second, we move to clarity.

II. Clarity

Clarity draws out attention to our own handling of God’s word. A missional life must conduct itself in a manner that handles rightly the word of God. Notice what Paul says in verse 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. (2 Cor 4:2).

There seems to be a lot in the background of this verse.

On the one hand (as we noted a moment ago), people were accusing Paul of bad-motives and of mishandling the Word of God: I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. (2 Cor 12:16). It’s likely that some Jewish teachers were accusing Paul of mishandling the Law of Moses by not enforcing Gentile Christians to keep all of it.

On the other hand, however, Paul is aware that there are false teachers who are twisting and misusing the Word of God to achieve their own purposes. Paul wrote in chapter 2 of “peddlers” of God’s word—hucksters that preach for their own profit:

we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (2 Cor 2:17).

The Bible has sharp warnings against tampering with God’s Word:

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Rev 22:18).

And this is so, because the clear preaching of the Word of God is often the means by which the Spirit works to bring new life: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

Why is it so tempting to tamper with God’s Word?

I think the number one reason today is fear of man. We don’t want to look like a fool, or unkind, or be unpopular.

Some years ago, I was at an event in downtown DC for Cambridge University alumni (I had previously done graduate work at Cambridge). About ten of us were standing in a circle and someone asked that we go around and share what we are doing with our Cambridge degree. When I shared that I was a pastor, a woman quickly asked, “are you a bigoted Christian or nice one?” I felt my face flush as everyone awaited my answer. I asked her to elaborate what she meant. She then put me in a corner about my views about marriage and sexuality.

I told her that I don’t label people in the abstract, so if she wanted to know my views about people, she’d have to bring up specific human beings—not some abstract group. But eventually I acknowledged that my fidelity to Jesus meant fidelity to the plain meaning of His Word, with everything that came with that. I felt very unwelcome the rest of the evening.

We don’t need to explain every implication of faithfulness to Jesus every time we talk to someone. We often should focus on why Jesus is *Good news!* But we often will be tempted to tamper with the word of God.

Today, we see this when churches no longer teach about the wrath of God. Or say nothing about the need for repentance. Tampering can happen when the Word of God is twisted to support someone’s political persuasions or social agenda.

Clarity centers around being clear on the Cross of Christ. The Cross tells us that the Son of God paid the penalty for our sin. It tells us that Jesus died in our place, as a substitute—meaning that the wages of our sin are death (Rom 3:23). And the cross tells us that Jesus did this to reconcile us to God—meaning, that without Jesus as our substitute, we will die for our sins and spend eternity without God.

Of course, there is more to the Gospel—so much promise and so much future. But there is not less.

Apply: Preachers, Bible teachers, small group leaders, parents: do not let fear of the culture, or your own pet agenda, or your frustration with a church or a leader, lead you to be less-than-clear when you teach the Scriptures. We can tamper with our own words all we like. But we have no right to tamper with God’s Word.

God's Word establishes our confidence, and calls for us to handle it with courageous clarity. Finally, God's Word requires that the missional life be one marked by godly character.

III. Character

Paul is not preaching himself. He says as much in verse 5, "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (4:5). But Paul is aware that as God's appointed messenger, how the Corinthians come to respect him is not a matter of no importance. So notice what he says at the close of verse 2, and how he attaches his own character to his proclamation of God's Word:

by an open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (4:2).

Just as tampering with the Word of God calls into question the character of a missional life. So too, the open statement of the Word calls forth a higher character for the missional life. We don't want our lifestyle or character to sit awkwardly alongside teaching and preaching about Jesus.

The character of the witnesses to Jesus is important.

This does not mean, however, that a witness to Jesus will always be thought highly of. To follow Jesus into his mission is to court trouble: Jesus says to his disciples, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (Jn 16:33). Jesus concludes the beatitudes in Matthew 5,

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt 5:11-12).

Darkness does not always welcome light. The Gospel is an offense to some. Paul says here, that Satan ("the god of this world") is actively "blinding people to the glory of the Gospel" (2 Cor 4:4). Being missional people is not a recipe for being the most popular people.

However, it is also the case that Christians are to be salt and light; we are to "blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world" (Phil 2:15).

Our personal lives, our conduct with neighbors, co-workers, friends, should not give unnecessary offense to the Gospel.

John Stott tells the story of a former President of India, himself a Hindu Scholar. He is said to have commented about a group of Christians in his country trying to witness to Christianity:

“You claim that Jesus Christ is your Savior, but you do not appear to be more ‘saved’ than anyone else.” “We must exhibit what we proclaim,” Stott concluded.²

I was recently speaking at a mission’s conference geared toward 18–25-year-olds. After a breakout talk I did on evangelism, a college student wanted to talk with me about how best to share her faith with her roommate. She had invited her to church a few times and shared the basic contours of the Christian faith—but thus far the roommate had shown no interest. As we talked, I reminded her that it wasn’t her job to bring about faith in her roommate. Having shared about her faith once or twice, it was now her job simply to love her well and to set an example through her life of godliness and holiness.

It is often the example of a life—the aroma of holiness and godliness—that continues to bring to mind the message of the Gospel to a person. The character of our lives should cohere with the content of our message—The Word and the one witnessing to the word.

I’ll close with a two points of application and a story.

First, for families: the most common way God brings the Gospel to people today is through parents. Most of us who are Christians have to long-term witness of our parents to thank. Even if it was a ministry at college or friend who seems to have made the decisive appeal, if we look into our lives, it was our parents who did the most sowing, watering, and praying. So parents, continue to faithfully read the Bible with your kids. Share your own testimonies with them. Pray with them. Let them know how you are relying on Jesus.

Second, for Churches: another common way God brings people to faith is through the church community. The people of God are to put skin on the Gospel; they are how and where the power of Jesus shows up. Our church should be a place where you find it easy to invite a friend—I believe that it is. Perhaps your small group could put in a BBQ this summer to invite friends to. But it is not enough for the church to *merely* be a nice community. We must preach the Word of God clearly. This is largely the job of the ministers on Sundays. But you, also, in your time with friends, should work to be comfortable in walking a friend through Marks’ Gospel, or passages in Romans that summarize the Gospel.

I have shared with you before my story of being evangelized by two Korean missionaries while in college. Hyeri, the lead missionary, had come over from South Korea to do missions in Philadelphia. On a rainy day while I was walking across campus, Hyeri and her translator approached me to ask if I ever thought about God. Little did they know I was going through an intense season of searching and pondering what it would mean to know God. Hyeri led me in a 40-day Bible study. It changed my life. She was tiny, spoke poor English so we always had a translated. But she was a force of nature. The Spirit of God was working mightily through her.

² John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, revised edition. (IVP), 163.

This is a preaching draft.

I thank God for people like David, and Hyeri, who bear the waves of shame and rejection, courageously, so poor beggars like me can find our way to God's banquet table. Let us, too, take the Word of God into our hearts, and share about Jesus with others.

DRAFT

Small Group Questions

1. Jesus' people are often described as his "witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Paul's calling centered around being a witness: "you will be a witness for him [=Jesus] to everyone of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:15). Based on 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, what role did the Word of God play in Paul's life as a witness to Jesus? In our own lives, what role does the Word of God play in how we are witnesses to Jesus?
2. In verse 2 Paul says that he and his colleagues do not "tamper with God's Word." What are some ways God's Word is tampered with today? Have you ever been tempted to do this?
3. In verse 2, Paul says that "by an open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." This suggests that Paul's sense of integrity and character were important to him, even if they were at times questioned by others. In speaking about his character, why do you think Paul concludes with the phrase, "in the sight of God"?
4. How has the character of a Christian impacted your own walk with Christ?
5. Prayerfully think of two ways you could bear witness to Christ in 2025? Do certain persons come to mind?