

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, February 9, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 8, 12:1, 363, 348, 38:1-3.

Lessons: Exodus 34:29-35, 2 Corinthians 2:17-3:18, Luke 18:31-34.

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 4:1-6.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

As a Christian aren't you sometimes personally discouraged? Doesn't the pressure, and the attacks, and the bold wickedness of the people of this world create a great deal of discouragement in your life?

As a congregation seeking to believe, teach, and confess the truth about God to an unbelieving world and to encourage one another, don't we sometimes see reasons for discouragement and losing heart? Weekly, as we gather, we see empty seats in church. Our churches are seldom full to the brim. Daily in our lives we hear and see so much that is contrary to all that we believe from the Word of God. And such attacks don't always come from outside of us. We have our sinful flesh tempting us. Tempting us with ideas to set aside – oh, just for this once! – what God teaches us in his Word for our lives.

But Saint Paul and the Word of God today encourage us, reminding us that we have a message that we do not need to distort. Jesus Christ is our message. We have been given a simple message of forgiveness, hope, and comfort from a source that is unchanged and unchanging. We aren't simply working for a boss who may or may not be around next week. We are serving *“Jesus Christ as Lord”*. Today we are reminded again that

BELIEVERS ARE SERVING JESUS CHRIST, THE LORD

- 1. We need not use deceit or distortion to proclaim our message.**
- 2. Unfortunately, our message is not accepted by everyone.**
- 3. But we have God's light, God's message in our hearts and on our lips, namely *“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”***

Believers have been called to serve Jesus Christ and God his Father and God the Holy Spirit, the only true God. When we say that, we are confessing that there is only one true religion which will lead mankind to a “better life” after this life on earth.

Paul is not speaking only of himself, but of all believers. His message was Jesus Christ, for Jesus is the heart and center of the new covenant that Paul and all New Testament believers are to proclaim. That is what makes the ministry of the new covenant a ministry that far surpasses the ministry of the old covenant. In the first chapter of this letter, Paul wrote of the old covenant and compared it with the new covenant, the message of the Gospel.

Remember that the old covenant was the Law, the Law as given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. That covenant made it clear that only by perfect obedience to all of God's laws could a human be saved eternally and receive a better life after this life on earth, that is, eternal life in heaven with God.

The new Covenant is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which tells us that Jesus obeyed all God's laws perfectly – in our place. Then he was punished, in our place, for breaking all of them. And his gospel tells us that all our sins are forgiven.

That gospel, the new covenant, tells us *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

All believers today have received that same gospel, and have been given the ministry of that gospel. Some have that ministry because of a divine call into the public ministry, but all believers have it by virtue of their call as priests of God. Peter tells us *"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."* (1 Peter 2:5)

Paul tells us again about our responsibility to share the message of the gospel in the very next chapter, emphasizing *"that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

Just like Paul, we, too, can be bold in our proclamation of the message of the new covenant, the good news that *"Jesus Christ is Lord"*. That message is just as powerful and effective today as it was when Saint Paul walked the earth, for it is the message that never fades away.

Paul says *"through God's mercy we have this ministry."* God has been merciful to Paul, merciful first in that he had brought him to faith and secondly in that he had given to him the powerful effective ministry of the new covenant. In fact, he wrote to Timothy: *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."* (1 Timothy 1:12-14)

Because he has God's mercy in what he is doing for God he says *"we do not lose heart"*. Even if things don't always go right, even if his enemies try to destroy his ministry, Paul does not have to become discouraged or depressed about what he sees or feels. The gospel will triumph. God the Holy Spirit stands behind it.

Previously Paul had written *"Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God."* (2 Corinthians 2:17) He was not a minister, a servant of Jesus Christ, just for the money. Here he speaks of others who have ulterior motives, or who seek to use deception, and *"secret and shameful ways."* Those who have no confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ will have to resort to manipulative, *"secret and shameful ways"*, ways that are not open and above board to win followers. Paul speaks for true Christians when he says *"we do not use deception"*. Deception includes a readiness to do anything, an "ends justifies the means" type of philosophy.

The Christian who is serious about his salvation will seek some way in which he may open the door to an opportunity to bring another person the saving gospel of Christ. Paul wrote that he has *"renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God."*

But there are those who do use deception in pretending to preach and teach the Word of God. Here's one example: pretending one has a certain agenda in mind and then to spring something entirely different on the person to whom you are pretending to teach the Word of God. Some people twist Scripture in an attempt to motivate audiences. Some take it out of context to proclaim their own views. This is using craftiness or trickery to gain an intended result. Today one horrible example of that is the denial of certain parts of Scripture, particularly those parts which speak of the sinfulness of mankind. Another example is that men today will distort, that is, twist scripture to try to change its meaning. Paul in writing to Timothy warned about those who *"will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."* (2 Timothy 4:3) Paul had personal experience with such men who pretended to be interested in the welfare of the Corinthians. He specifically writes about them in the last 4 chapters of Second Corinthians.

Paul on the other hand had nothing to hide. In his ministry he had been *"setting forth the truth plainly"*, openly, to every man's conscience in the sight of God, to whom he is ultimately accountable. Paul had nothing to conceal either from people or God. His message was always open and transparent. It was a message that healed the guilty conscience, since it was the message of the new covenant, of the good news of the forgiveness of sins.

He writes *"we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."* He is not boasting, but presenting himself as honest and not using deception. He is not two-faced, saying one thing to one person and saying something different to another person to try to gain their approval or favor. He lets his words stand open *"in the sight of God."*

But Paul realized that not everyone will believe the message of Jesus Christ that he – and we – proclaim to men. ***“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”***

Paul knows that his message will not be accepted by everyone. He writes that this is the doing of the god of this age, an obvious reference to Satan, whom Jesus calls the prince of this world. Although Christ came to destroy the works of the devil and has accomplished this work, the devil, within certain limits, is still powerful. Peter warns us that ***“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”*** (1 Peter 5:8)

The devil holds a veil over the hearts of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light. What is the light? It is the gospel. The gospel is the message about the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. God’s greatest glory is to be seen in Christ, who is God incarnate, the image of God. On Mount Sinai Moses saw the glory of God as the giver of the old covenant. In Christ believers see the even greater glory of God as the author and fulfiller of the new covenant. Of course, the devil wants no one to see that. And in many cases he is successful in keeping the veil firmly in place so that the light which is the gospel of the glory of Christ does not penetrate to the hearts of sinful humans.

How does Paul present and describe the gospel? ***“For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”***

Paul has taught the truth plainly. He was not the important one. To him, Jesus Christ was the most important one, and he was a mere servant of Jesus Christ. He was simply preaching ***“Jesus Christ as Lord”***.

Paul says we do not preach ourselves. Many of his opponents were really serving themselves. In contrast, Paul says that he and his coworkers were not serving themselves. Rather they were servants of the Corinthians for Jesus’ sake, literally ‘because of Jesus’. In view of all that Jesus had done for him, Paul was compelled to preach Jesus to others.

That is why Paul does not lose heart, even though the gospel remains veiled to some. If Jesus Christ could bring light to his dark heart he could do it for anyone.

Finally, Paul thinks back to what the Lord had done for mankind at the time of creation. God said ***“let light shine out of darkness”***. That same God had removed the veil from Paul’s heart and brought light to it. He personally experienced ***“the glory of God in the face [or person] of Christ”***. We could think of the day of Paul’s conversion when quite literally a light from heaven penetrated the darkness of his heart. On that day he came face-to-face with God’s greatest glory. He saw Jesus and, seeing Jesus, saw the glory of God’s love. As one who had received that light, he could say that he is one of those ***“who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*** (2 Corinthians 3:18)

So, despite much opposition from people, from Satan himself, and from his own sinful flesh, Paul did not lose heart or become discouraged. The joy of his salvation did not depend on what he did or what happened to him on earth. The joy of his salvation was Jesus Christ. May the joy of our salvation always be Jesus Christ, for God has ***“made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”*** Like Paul, when we have ***“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ,”*** we have all we need for time and for eternity. Amen.