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 2 Corinthians 4:1-6  
 Fifth Message  
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## SHARING THE NEW COVENANT

The new covenant ministry is the focus of our study in this series in 2 Corinthians. The new covenant defines a drastically different way of relating to God than the old covenant. Instead of “everything coming from us and nothing from God,” now everything comes from God and nothing from us. Over the past couple of weeks we have noted several differences between the two covenants. Today we will talk about Paul’s, and hopefully, our own, approach to being a servant of the new covenant and sharing new covenant truths.

When we embrace the new covenant in Jesus we become members in God’s family and begin a process of transformation to become like Jesus. But, like Paul, we also become servants of the new covenant. Our goal is not to create an isolated Christian society: we have become citizens of another country. We are here as foreigners for a short time to bear witness of what God has done in our lives and share the gospel with others.

This is not an easy task in our pluralistic, multi-cultural world. We can talk with people about anything—the weather, sports, politics and movies—but something strange seems to happen when we talk about Jesus. Telling people that Jesus is the only way is offensive. Paul himself says that the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23). We are afraid that people will react negatively, so we become awkward or don’t say anything at all.

Why is sharing the gospel so difficult? John Stackhouse, a professor at Regent College, enumerated some helpful insights in a talk he gave at PBC Palo Alto a couple of weeks ago. I will borrow some thoughts from him.

Already a Christian. Many people think they are already Christians because they grew up going to church or were born in America. This was true of my wife when we first met. After a couple of weeks, I finally stammered out that I was a Christian. She told me that she was a Christian too, and became offended when I told her that I thought we were defining the word differently.

Appear superior/judgmental. When we tell people that Jesus is the only way, we are essentially saying that our way is better than theirs. This is not politically correct. The basic assumption in a multi-cultural environment is that all faiths are equally good.

Everyone an expert. In a democratic society, people assume that all are equal. If we talk about God and his plan of salvation, we find that when it comes to religion, everybody is an expert.

Diminishes spiritual experience. Sharing Christ can be offensive to people because it lessens their spiritual experience. Not everyone is religious, but a lot of people are spiritual. No one today wants to appear shallow and materialistic. As consumers,

people think they can choose what they want and don’t want and create their own spirituality.

Don’t accept sin. People reject the whole concept of sin. When we say that they are sinners and that Jesus died for their sins, they feel we are being judgmental. They respond by saying that they may not be perfect but they are not all that bad. People believe they are basically good.

Don’t need a crutch. When we tell people that they need Jesus, they respond by saying they are doing just fine. They don’t perceive themselves to be weak and needy. Sometimes they say that Jesus is all right for those who need him but that they don’t need that crutch.

Don’t have time. People are just too busy. They are occupied with their life and family. They are insulated and it is hard to get them to talk about real issues.

Reject God talk. In our world, Christian language is all over magazines and television. As soon as people hear Christians speak, they give us a label. To them it sounds like a lot of supernatural mumbo jumbo.

Concepts are complicated. Christianity is hard to explain. The ideas of trinity, resurrection, atonement and incarnation sound strange.

All of this might make you want to give up ever trying to share the gospel. But Paul has some very helpful insights for us in chapter 4, verses 1-6, where he sets out a blueprint for evangelism and helping people live in the new covenant. Our text gives us five principles.

### I. The Right Attitude: Not Losing Heart

**Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, (2 Cor 4:1)**

First, we need to have the right attitude, which is to not lose heart. We do not become spiritually tired or weary. Paul could have easily given up, considering all the suffering and conflict he endured. Many were opposed to him and his message. Everywhere he went, Jewish leaders sought to discredit his ministry and bring newly converted Gentiles back under the old covenant of law. This was the situation in Corinth. It was a constant battle for Paul, but he didn’t get discouraged or despair over these difficulties; rather, he maintained a positive attitude.

The apostle gives two reasons for this attitude. First, he had been given “this ministry.” This is the ministry of the new covenant, one that gives life and Spirit rather than law and death. He is probably referring to what he has just said in 3:18. This ministry

transforms people's lives into Christ-likeness, reflecting the glory of God.

The second reason Paul doesn't lose heart is because the new covenant is based on God's mercy and compassion. Paul had experienced this mercy personally while he was an enemy of the gospel. He wrote to Timothy: "even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief. . . . Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life" (1 Tim 1:13, 16).

My oldest daughter swam competitively when she was growing up, and I sold advertisements to local businesses to raise money to support her. I was turned down on many occasions but I never got discouraged. I had a personal interest in my daughter. I believed in her and she was worth all my efforts. A salesman with a good product will never get discouraged, even in tough times, because he knows that the product sells itself.

As servants of the new covenant we aren't selling anything, but we have something wonderful to share. In the process we will face rejection and conflict. We will be misunderstood and mislabeled. Relationships with family and friends might become awkward. We will offend some. We should expect this kind of reaction but we can keep a positive attitude because we have something to share that is life saving and life changing.

## II. The Right Method: Renouncing and Recommending

**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. (2:2)**

The second principle has to do with our approach to sharing the new covenant. Renouncing and commending summarize Paul's methodology. He sets out both a negative and positive aspect of how he goes about his work as an apostle.

On the negative side, Paul refuses to employ devious means to win converts. He "renounced the things hidden because of shame." The ESV puts it this way: "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word." Renounce means to disown, forbid or give up as a habit or practice. Paul refuses to practice hidden, shameful tactics. These hidden things include craftiness and adulterating the word of God.

Craftiness means cunning, trickery, guile and deception. It involves setting a trap or baiting people into something. Craftiness in evangelism includes using gimmicks or false pretenses to get people in the door. Adulterating the word of God means to tamper or corrupt the word. It implies mixing in impure substances that would distort the purity of the gospel. Paul is probably referring to those in Corinth who were "peddling the word of God," a phrase he used in chapter 2. Later in chapter 11 he will call them false apostles and deceitful workers. For Paul, the issue may well have involved underhanded ways of seeking money.

Sadly, the religious world we live in today is no different from the world of Paul's day: it is full of tricksters and deceivers. Religious leaders and spiritual gurus resort to all sorts of gimmicks and schemes to sell their products, attract loyal followers and gain financial resources. Church leaders rely on catchy slogans. They go to conferences on how better to market their church. Pastors study books about successful management techniques rather than going deep in the word of God. Even well meaning Christians can subtly adopt the ways of the consumerist society simply because everyone else is doing it and this is the way the world operates. Paul refuses to cross the line into questionable methods of sharing the gospel, and we should too.

What he is committed to is "commending himself by the manifestation of the truth to every man's conscience." His method is simply to make visible the truth of the gospel, to hold this up next to another's conscience without relying on tricks and gimmicks. But he also commends himself. He invites people in and shows them his life. He allows others to see first-hand how God had changed him. And he does this in the sight of God, aware that God is present and watching.

This is such a helpful truth for us. We think we have to come up with some spectacular argument to win someone to Christ, or we have to water down the truth to make it more palatable. We resort to arm-twisting and threats. We try to scare people into the kingdom. But we don't have to do any of that. We simply share the truth of the gospel and let others see how the new covenant has affected our lives. Hopefully what they see in us will influence them to ask about God.

When I met my wife, she was not a Christian, nor was anyone in her family. Shortly after we met, Liz did come to Christ. Her family became concerned. They wondered about this strange young man who was taking her to church. Early on we had some heated debates about God. They would have liked to send me back to Nebraska. But eventually they observed how Liz and I lived and they met our friends. Over the years, every person in her family embraced God to some degree. After some very difficult years, her mother began going to PBC Palo Alto. She accepted Christ and joined a women's Bible study. She became my biggest fan.

As a young Christian, working as an engineer, I felt pressured to share the gospel. Conversations about God and religion and church seemed to abound in the workplace. In such a setting I would break out in a sweat and feel the pressure of coming up with a great one-liner that would win the day for Christ. But that approach never seemed to work. Finally, I realized that all I had to do was speak truth, plain truth. One of the most effective ways of doing this was sharing the truth of the gospel in my life. Instead of telling people what they needed to do, I simply told them what happened to me and how I came to believe in Christ. When you use the "I" word instead of the "You" word, it sets people at ease and allows them to listen.

## III. The Realistic Obstacle: A Powerful Enemy

**And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in 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. (2:3-4)**

The third truth we must be aware of is that when it comes to sharing the new covenant, there is an enemy, the “god of this age.” He is the devil, who “prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). He is a liar and a murderer and has been so since the beginning.

Satan’s method is to blind the minds of people so that they can’t see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. “The Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light” (John 3:19). This is what Satan is trying to do: keep people in the dark.

Here Paul alludes to something he said in chapter 2, that we are a fragrance of Christ to those who are being saved and those who are perishing, an aroma of life to life and death to death. There are only two camps of people in the world: those in the process of being saved and those who are perishing. There is no third camp for really nice people.

Paul also refers to the veil that he referred to in chapter 3 that lies over the old covenant so that people cannot see the temporary nature of its glory, and that it points to the permanent glory of the new covenant in Christ. The veil that concealed the truth from the Jews in the past is now extended to the Gentiles in the present. Spiritual blindness is now universal and demonic.

But notice that if there is a veil, it affects only the ones who are perishing. Satan can only blind the minds of the ones who will never believe. The implication is that the devil has no influence over those who are being saved, i.e., God’s chosen, God’s elect. This means that even though we have an enemy, he is not of equal power and authority with God. God and Satan are not fighting it out to see how many people they can get in their camp. Satan is a tool of God. He can only influence those whom God has not chosen.

Paul is a realist. He knows that not everyone will respond to his ministry of the new covenant. There is an enemy that works to create mental darkness and disorder so that people cannot see the light or the truth of the gospel. But he also knows that Satan has limited powers.

This is very helpful for us. There is an enemy who blinds the minds of the unbelieving. This explains why people can’t see and understand the truth that is so obvious to us and why they don’t want to talk about Jesus or are closed to spiritual things. But we don’t know who is being saved and who is perishing. For some, the veil will always hide the glory of God in Christ, but there are others who will hear the truth and respond.

#### **IV. The Right Message: Jesus is Lord**

**For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake. (2:5)**

The fourth guideline for sharing the new covenant pertains to the message. Paul wants to make his message clear. Jesus is Lord—and he is not! Proclaiming Jesus as Lord means that Jesus is deity and identifies him with Yahweh, the God of Israel in the OT. Jesus fully reveals the glory of God. He is the image of the

invisible God. Philippians declares that Jesus existed in the form of God, but he emptied himself and took the form of a slave and became obedient to death. But God “highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11).

Jesus was fully human. He is a wonderful example of how to live. He was a good teacher and full of wisdom. He was tempted and suffered as man. But he is much more than that. He is also fully divine. English mountain climber George Mallory said of Mt. Everest: “Lord of all, vast in unchallenged and isolated supremacy.” Mt. Everest is not Lord. This is a term reserved for Jesus alone. He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is the Christian message. We do not preach that Jesus will make life wonderful and solve all our problems instantly. The confession is this: “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).

This is why the gospel is so offensive—the fact that Jesus is Lord and he is the only way. But what we need to understand is that Jesus is the only one who can set things right. He had to be fully human because the problem of sin is a human problem. And he has to be God because the solution had to come from outside of this world. When we say that Jesus is the only way, we are not saying he is better than all the others. There are no others. Jesus is in a class by himself. He is the only one we need to be Lord and Savior.

Paul also wants to make his own identity clear. He is a servant or slave for Jesus’ sake—a contrast to the super apostles in Corinth who claimed superior status. They were trying to convince the Corinthians that they shouldn’t follow Paul, since the apostle was always being made to suffer. Rather, the Corinthians should follow the super apostles because they demonstrated their superiority through extraordinary powers.

Paul is a slave of the One who became a slave for our sake. This is our identity as well. We too are servants of the new covenant. We are not seeking position or status in God’s kingdom. We are not the authority over people’s lives. We are simply offering life in Jesus, pointing to him as Lord. Jesus made this clear to his disciples: “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

#### **V. The Right Miracle: “Let There be Light”**

**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. (2:6)**

Finally, Paul says that salvation is a creative act by God. He is referring to the story of creation in Genesis: “In the beginning

God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:1-3).

God spoke a word into the darkness and created light. But God also re-creates when he speaks into our hearts. He says, "let there be light," illuminating our dark hearts to know that the glory of God is in the face of Christ. This is the same thing as the glory of Christ mentioned in verse 4. We note Paul's continued use of the word glory that he used so often in 3:7-18.

Paul is saying that mankind is entrenched in the darkness, in the chaos of human sin. Spiritually, we are formless and void. In order for us to see the glory of God in Christ it takes a miracle of God, an act of creation. This is what happened to Paul on the Damascus Road. The light blinded him so that he could see the light. That is what happens to every person who comes to faith. There is a new covenant and there is a new creation.

This is really a key point. We take too much on ourselves when we assume the responsibility to convert people. Sometimes all we succeed in doing is turning them off the gospel. Our efforts cannot bring salvation. We can't argue someone into the kingdom. We cannot make it happen no matter how much we try. It takes an act of creation, which is only possible from God himself. We are but associates of God. Our responsibility is to manifest the truth and proclaim the right message. We put the truth in front of someone's conscience and trust in the creative powers of God to speak into the person's heart.

Some people are very gifted at sharing the gospel and leading people to Christ. My wife has shared Christ with every person she has ever worked with or spent time with. But that is probably not the case for most of us. And yet we are all servants of the new covenant. God plants us in neighborhoods, schools and jobs. He brings people into our lives with whom he wants us to have relationships. The primary work of evangelism is through the friendships that we build. We don't have to know all the answers. We don't have to feel adequate. We don't have to preach to people. We listen, and ask questions. We invite them for a meal. We focus on the things that really matter. We become interested in their lives and invite them into our life. Eventually life is going to knock them over the head and then they will come looking for us.

Years ago, I felt a burden to share the gospel with my neighbor, so one day I brought over a couple of sodas and tried to share with him. It was awful. I was awkward, and he was not receptive. But about a year later, he telephoned me late one evening and asked if he could come over. He told me that he was scared to death he was going to lose his marriage. That is when I had an open door to love him, pray with him and share the life of Jesus.

I will close with this quote from Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones that I have always loved:

We tend to regard certain people as being 'beyond hope', and assume that they must of necessity continue in their grooves as they are and die unrepentant and unredeemed. We just shake our heads over them and express our sorrow. We have talked to them and tried to persuade them. We have appealed to them and preached to them. Everything that human agency can possibly do has been tried and has failed. We cannot get them to come our way, so we feel that their case is hopeless and desperate. Ah! What lack of faith all that reveals! How different from what we find her in the New Testament and always in the church during days of revival and true faith! If you and I are to save men and women, then indeed the case is hopeless. All our efforts will most certainly fail. But that is not our gospel. It is Jesus Christ who saves! There is no limit to what He can do! His methods are not confined as ours are. There are no prescribed and definite ways where He is concerned. Ah! What a shock those Jews had when they found these Gentiles suddenly converted! And what glorious shocks do we also get here from time to time! Straight from paganism to Christ! Yes, quite easily, for there is no limit at all. He creates anew. His power is endless. Do not give up hope for any sinner. Pray to God to save them. Let not any conversion astonish you; be astonished rather, that anyone should possibly remain unconverted.<sup>1</sup>

*Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21 TNIV)*

<sup>1</sup> Iain Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, The First Forty Years, 1899-1939* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 226-7.

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