

Jesus Without Distortion

April 22, 2007

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

I want to start by simply reading the passage:

1Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend 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. 4The 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. 5For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6For 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.

Let me remind you that last week, Paul was talking about how God's glory is our business. We as Jesus followers have the privilege of taking the truth about God to people in such a way that they experience God. It's a glorious service: to share with people how they can be made right with God. It's glorious because we share a message that lasts forever. It's glorious because it brings real freedom to people's lives. And it's glorious because it shapes people more and more into the living image of Jesus.

But there's another side to this. Maybe you remember way back to January what I said about how the gospel of Jesus really wasn't a good "fit" to the Corinthian culture. They

worshipped success, sex and good health. They had oodles of teachers, self-help gurus, who made a good living on peddling faith as a way to get what you want.

Some of the Corinthians were tempted to turn to Good News of Jesus into another self-help cult. They wanted to turn Jesus into the 55 AD equivalent of Oprah or Dr. Phil. This was something that Paul just couldn't stand for. It was pulling down Jesus to human size and pulling up human pride to God-size, and that's just not right.

Here Paul says, we're not going to distort the Message just because some people don't like it. And we're not going to use the methods of the self-help gurus just because they're popular. What we're going to do is put the message of Jesus out there simple, straightforward and true and leave the response in the hands of God. We're going to do that even though Satan himself messes with human minds, confident that God Himself can punch through anything to communicate the truth of the message of Jesus.

Now you realize that this isn't easy. Paul, like all preachers of the Jesus message, me included, wants to communicate to people in a way that they can relate to and understand. That's a passion. We as a church have a passion to present Jesus as He is. We don't want to distort the message, but we want to make sure He gets a hearing. And balancing the two—faithfulness to the message and clarity to the people—can be tricky.

When I was in college, we had a couple of Buddhists, two brothers, who came to the college from Thailand. The Christians on campus befriended these guys and hung out with them. They seemed to be inching closer to the gospel of Jesus each day. But then

something happened. One person, in their zeal to share Christ, asked one of the brothers, "If I said that Jesus died so you wouldn't have to be reincarnated anymore and to break the law of karma, what would you say?" It took a while to find out that the one brother went to the other and said, "Christianity isn't different than what we have in Buddhism. I guess we don't need it." This person who spoke that way to the young man from Thailand went too far: they over-identified with their listener and distorted the message in the process.

This would be the same if Paul had decided to "peddle" Christ like the self-help gurus in Corinth. He could have set up shop and charged money to dispense "Jesus blessings" to make all your troubles go away. I guaranteed he could have made a nice living.

And someone could even talk themselves into justifying it. This is how we can communicate to the Corinthians in ways that they'll really understand and accept. But it would be just like my friend who actually distorted the message of Jesus in the zeal to communicate Him.

Does this happen today? Do I have to ask? Sure it does. Jesus is presented as the one who gives you health and happiness. That's what all the surveys say Americans want. Give me a happy home and health. Give me "success" (whatever that is) and I'll be happy. A Jesus like that would be just fine.

In 2 Corinthians 4:1-3, Paul says,

*1Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.
2Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we*

commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

No, he says, we're not going to distort the message. We won't resort to secrets to "shameful ways." We won't use deception or engage in distortion. What we will do is speak the truth of God plainly.

Another illustration: back in the 80s I served in an area of the country where the Baptist churches there had developed a close contact with the Baptist conventions in Australia and New Zealand. We tend to bracket those two places together, but they're very different in many ways. They are also very different spiritually.

Church attendance in Australia is now under 10% of the population. It's not much higher in New Zealand, but the health of the church there is by in large much better. Evangelicals in Australia tend to be very isolated and separatist. They tend to be more rigid and legalistic. Believers in New Zealand are more cooperative and informal and have a more informal style of life and worship.

The church in Australia is led by a disproportionate number of people who have come from England, Canada and the US. The church in New Zealand is almost entirely led by New Zealanders.

The people who study this kind of thing for a living are convinced that the big problem for the church in Australia isn't that they don't speak the truth of the gospel, but that they don't do so in a way that Aussies can relate to. In a very independent, masculine culture, the gospel comes across as a kind of feminine import from the US.

We can have the truth of the gospel of Jesus down cold, but if we wrap it a package foreign to the people around us, we can throw up a barrier to communication.

I read about a Jewish lady who had a Christian neighbor who would share her faith. This kind-hearted soul had a habit, whenever she mentioned Jesus, of referring to Him as "our Lord Jesus Christ." She didn't realize that she was driving her Jewish friend crazy. Finally one day she burst out and said, "Stop it! He's not 'our' Lord; He's your Lord. And I don't think He was the Messiah either, so He's not 'our' Christ, either!" Her terminology was putting up a wall to share her faith. She probably shared the solid truth, but without thinking, she rubbed her friend the wrong way.

Problems of culture and communication were part of the story of the church from the beginning. Acts 15 is all about a culture clash. Some wanted non-Jewish believers to adopt Jewish practices if they wanted to be recognized as real, genuine followers of Jesus. This idea was thrown out. If you're a Greek, God doesn't want you to pretend to be Jewish to be part of His kingdom. If you're a Roman or from Africa or an Arab, God wants you to be a real Jesus-follower as what you are.

I'm happy to say that today, the vast majority of missionaries know that it's not their job to "westernize" or "Americanize" the people they share the gospel with. God doesn't want to Americanize anybody. God wants to rescue people from eternal death and make them into bearers of His image—into full moons, as I said last week. That's the mission of God, and that's the mission He's assigned to us, His people.

So you can **over-identify** with people and distort the message (like my friend did with the

Buddhist student) or you can **under-identify** with people (like in Australia) and people won't hear the message at all. It's like of a Goldilocks problem, isn't it? The soup is cold or too hot. Can we get it just right?

Well, God did it just right with Jesus Himself. Jesus is the ultimate communication of eternal God. He is called "the Word" in the gospel of John because He so clearly shows what God is like. In Him, you have the message clear and undistorted. He is one of us, and beyond us at the same time. He gets it just right. His face shows God's glory and character "just right."

Remember last week, about Moses' veil? He wore a face covering when he would come down from Sinai because his face would actually shine with God's glory. Paul goes on to say that in a sense, the Jewish people still have a veil separating them from the full blast of God's truth.

He picks up this idea of the veil in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4:

3And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4The 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.

The "veil" isn't just a matter of intellect. It's a spiritual blindness. It's a spiritual blindness that has two parts, only one part he mentions in these verses. The part he mentions is the satanic element. Satan hates the message of Jesus. He hates it because it undermines his own effort to be the "god of this age."

The other part of this spiritual blindness is that each person turning the message of Jesus down does so out of a willful blindness. No one would blame someone who was born blind

of the so-called "sin" of being blind. Spiritual blindness is different. You actually have to consent to being spiritually blind.

John 9 tells the story of Jesus' healing of a blind man, and all these elements of spiritual blindness come together there. At the very end of the story (John 9:39-41), we read:

39Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

40Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"

41Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

The "blindness" of those who reject Jesus is such that you are a participant. Satan may blind you, but he does it with a hood our own hard-heartedness toward God has made.

So when we represent Christ, we're called to do so in a way that doesn't distort Him. We're called to do so with the right motives. But even when we represent Him truly, there's a behind the scenes spiritual struggle. We quietly conspire with the devil to put our own spiritual eyes out. If that were the last word, that would be terrible!

But, praise God, it's not the last word. Look now to vs. 5-6:

5For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6For 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.

Jesus is overwhelming. He is (vs. 4) the Image of God and now (vs. 5) the Lord. And in vs. 6, He is the Creative Light of God, "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Wow. That just piles up powerful words upon powerful words. No veil on the face of God's glory now. We see it perfectly in Jesus.

In the New Living Translation, vs. 6 reads:

For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

Paul goes back to Genesis, when God first made light, and says that in Jesus, God is making light again—spiritual light so that we can see what life's all about, what God is really like, and how God wants to really know us as and be known by us. That's the message. It's not about the messengers, it about the Lord Jesus. It's about how wonderful and beautiful and powerful and glorious and full of love He is. It's about how He came to earth to live among us and die for us.

Several months ago, your pastors were meeting and we were talking about how it's easy to fall into the trap of commercializing the message of Jesus. Churches often communicate that they have all these neat programs and great music and great Bible teaching and all these things. But wasn't the New Testament message simply, "We know Jesus, He has captured our hearts, and now we share Him humbly with you"?

What we concluded was that we needed to focus on representing Christ Himself as the

most important thing we can tell the watching world—not about this or that program, but Jesus Himself. This simple faithfulness to what we're taught in the Bible.

I believe we can win a hearing among people by our humble, authentic deeds, but the message is still simply Jesus, wonderful Jesus. All the wonders of God become clear with Him. Nothing is greater than Him, nothing is beyond Him. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Give me Jesus, without distortion. Share Jesus, without distortion. Love Jesus, without exception. Serve Jesus, without hesitation.

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