

Confidence in the Simple Gospel

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Date: 10 January 2021

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. I'm glad that you're tuned in. Please keep your Bibles open or switched on. And let me pray to help us focus and be free from distraction as we come to God's Word this morning.

Father, we thank you that even in the current circumstances we can unite together and hear from your Word. Father, speak powerfully to us this morning by your Spirit and give us confidence in your Gospel. Amen.

If you were going to fill this church with people, what would you do? Now, the answer was obviously cancel the pandemic and move on. But imagine we were in a normal period. We were all normally at church. Regular stuff was happening.

If you wanted to completely fill this building, what would we do? What would we get the most people in? Well, let's be honest. It wouldn't be that hard to fill the building. We could just start free beer Fridays. It'd be great.

The place we packed out in minutes. We could preach about how God just loves everybody, thinks you're amazing, thinks that you are the very best version of you you could be, and we'll make sure we never define kind of anything else outside of that.

[1 : 14] We'd have hundreds of new members after the first week, and yeah, it would look really impressive. The temptation is to think that if we just maybe change the message a bit, well, it would bring more people in.

And that, says Paul, is the problem. Yeah, we could have a building full at every moment and every opportunity, but we'd be giving those people nothing of use.

We wouldn't have a message that could save them. In fact, it would be a message that only pushed them further away. The dead would stay dead. But it is easy to start thinking like that.

Gospel ministry often looks and feels so weak. We long for people to flood in the door and hear the good news. And the temptation for us is that we just think, well, maybe if we just shave the edges off the message.

Maybe if we made it more seeker-friendly, we start to listen to that voice in our head that just says, wouldn't it be more effective if we just talked a little bit less about judgment, ignored the idea of hell, ignored the kind of cost of giving our lives to Jesus, and make it all about personal fulfillment?

[2 : 25] Well, then maybe my friends would be interested. Maybe the masses would flock in. A normal gospel just feels so weak. It so often seems to fail.

We begin to be worried that maybe it isn't enough. And it is to that very real temptation that we feel that Paul speaks in this passage today.

And he's going to tell us to stay confident in the power of the simple gospel. Now, to bring us up to speed from last time we were in 2 Corinthians, this is the last letter that we have between Paul and this church.

He has a clear love for them, but also a long history with them that's been full of obstacles and problems to overcome. Much of this letter is focused on the weakness and humanity of Paul as their gospel minister, and the power of God in the saving word of the gospel.

Weak people, strong God. Weak messenger, powerful message. Now, there are a lot of voices in Corinth who would say differently.

[3 : 38] Surely a strong and effective message would have obvious power. It would look more miraculously spiritual. And people who really spoke on behalf of God would be more godlike than Paul, who just seemed so weak and so rubbish.

These Christians are beginning to turn away from the simple gospel they received and from the messenger who brought it to them to the attractive, the seemingly powerful, but ultimately false

other gospels in Corinth.

Now, like them, we exist in a Christian culture suffused with the impressive and the loud. Voices that tell us that if we just had the new thing, the good thing, the game changer that will finally pack out the churches, well, then we'd make waves everywhere.

Sometimes the gospel just seems like the worn-out old thing. And you look at your gospel workers and you just think you could lose hope. We have the same battle for our minds that they did.

We need to resist the pull towards the impressive and the alluring, but ultimately false versions of gospel ministry and stand firm on the simple gospel. Now, to do that, we're going to need to really get our heads into verse 1 here.

[4 : 57] So again, look down. It says, Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this message, we do not lose heart. This ministry is so essential.

So what is this ministry? What sets apart this simple gospel from all the rest? Well, last week, Martin opened up the previous section and we saw that this ministry is the ministry of the Spirit through the gospel.

It might look weak on the outside, but it is immensely powerful. Unlike the message of the law in the Old Testament that could only bring condemnation, this gospel brings life.

And we have the joy of spreading the news of Jesus' victory over sin and death, knowing that the power to bring dead souls to life is within it. Paul said last time, Who is equal to such a task?

What a glorious thing to be able to do, to go out with a message that through your words about Jesus can bring people to new life, that it really does have power of resurrection.

[6 : 00] And that's because this gospel really does show people the glory of God seen in the face of Christ. It's a beautiful thing.

It's a powerful thing. It is the good news. It is this ministry that we are called to stay confident in. Now, to clarify, I keep using the term simple gospel, and that's not because it's simplistic, but because it is clear.

It's easy to understand and explain. It's simplicity is part of its glory. You don't have to be an intellectual powerhouse to become a Christian. You don't need a PhD in theology to understand. Children can understand it. Belief in the simple facts of Jesus' death for our sins, resurrection for our life, and lordship forever is enough.

Repent and put your trust in him. Receive eternal life. It's not complicated. And that's part of the glory of the simple gospel, is that anyone can come to Jesus with it.

[7 : 04] There's nothing tacked on, nothing to confuse people. So my question is, if that is the case, why do we find ourselves so hesitant with it?

Why are we so drawn away to what looks impressive? Why do we end up with that lingering voice in the back of our minds that tells us that we need something different and better? If this gospel is so good, why would we ever think about changing it?

What a good question. Because that's exactly what's happening in Corinth. People are getting distracted away from the simple gospel that Paul has given them to the shiny and the new.

Now Paul counters these thoughts in these verses. Again, starting with those words, if by the mercy of God we have this gospel ministry, well if we have it, then there are four things that we do not do.

We do not give up. We do not deceive. We do not get discouraged. And we do not preach ourselves. Don't give up. Don't deceive. Don't get discouraged.

[8 : 09] And don't preach ourselves. So we're just going to look at those four things in short then. Number one, we don't give up. Back to verse one again. Since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

The first thing to notice is that we have this ministry by the mercy of God. It is only through his mercy that we possess this precious message. God doesn't owe us the gospel.

He doesn't owe us life. But by his mercy, he didn't leave us without this ministry. Or just with the ministry that brought condemnation. No, instead, he gave us the ministry of the Spirit which brings life.

Unlike Moses and the people of the Old Testament, we have a ministry that really can bring people into the full presence of God. And that's worth striving to share.

Now we know from reading Acts and from reading Paul's letters that he suffered immensely for the sake of getting the gospel out. But he was able to do that not because he's some sort of superhuman, because he's a kind of evangelistic superman in the Bible.

[9 : 20] No, it's because of his confidence in the message he is taking out. If Paul didn't really trust that this message was able to bring life, then he wouldn't be doing so much for the gospel or suffering through so many things.

Now in your own time, if you want to go and see what this looks like, go to chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, where Paul just lists all of his sufferings for the gospel to these people. What's the point of suffering so much?

Unless this gospel really can achieve something magnificent. unless it really can bring salvation that brings people to life. By comparison to that, how quickly we sometimes give up.

We try sharing the gospel with someone one time, they don't become a Christian, and we think we've proved ourselves right. We think, right, well, it doesn't work. I'm just going to go and try another message. The temptation to give up when we're discouraged is huge.

Now, it might be that, you know, you made an effort for the first time to try and share the gospel with someone in your workplace or in your school or even in your home, and you just got total apathy.

[10 : 35] People just said, that's nice for you. You just sit there thinking, what's wrong with it? Surely, if it's so good, you would come to know Jesus through it, but sometimes it's that perseverance, that endurance, that saying, actually, I know the life is in this message.

I'm going to persevere with it. We must not give up. We must not lose heart because the gospel really is this amazing, so we endure in it, and if we do well, we have the joys of seeing it at work. We have this gospel, so we don't give up. Now, secondly, we don't deceive. Look down at verse 2. Rather, 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 everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

Paul's opponents in Corinth were accusing Paul of in some way twisting the gospel to get people listening. Now, Paul rejects this and says that the gospel he brought was given plainly, without deception or distortion in any way.

[11 : 51] Paul isn't some sort of dodgy, second-hand salvation salesman. He lives with integrity, giving the same message to everyone. Now, Paul is adamant that the gospel must be communicated by a messenger who matches the content of the gospel.

The messenger and the message must have integrity. He doesn't advertise salvation and hide the repentance and judgment. And same for us. We don't make the gospel palatable by saying, oh, just come to Jesus.

You'll get everything you want. You'll be healthy and happy and wealthy forever. Now, we might be tempted to just think, well, if we just tart it up the message a bit, maybe give the old, old story a new paint job, maybe it'd just be a bit more effective.

We've got to face the fact, though, that those temptations to adjust or kind of veil the gospel are really just efforts in deception. We can't add or take anything away from the gospel to make it more exciting or in our minds less offensive because then it's just a human message and that can't bring people to life.

A few years ago, the illusionist Derren Brown made a TV show called Fear and Faith where he manipulated someone into having what he called a conversion experience for a mix of psychology and trickery.

[13 : 18] If you go and watch it, that person really does seem to have a hugely emotional reaction. She starts crying and talking about her family and asking for forgiveness and saying that she knows she's loved and she loves God and it seems like it's real but then Derren Brown comes in at the end and says, it's all a trick.

None of this is real. And what it was meant to be from him is proof that conversion experiences are just a lie but I think it's better proof that emotional reactions aren't that hard to engineer.

if that's all we want, it's not that hard to make it happen but it's not a response to the gospel, is it? A huge emotional response doesn't change people's hearts and lives.

Yes, when we come to know the Lord Jesus, it is emotional and huge but it isn't an engineered response. It is being brought to new life and everything that comes with that.

if all we're aiming for is to try and see people respond, to try and pressurize people into making a decision in some way, we're not actually getting anywhere.

[14 : 29] We have to understand the difference between people responding to a human message being manipulated into believing something versus people responding to the actual gospel that

brings them to eternal life forever.

Those are different things. So we must not distort this message. As Paul says, we set the truth forth plainly to commend ourselves to everyone's conscience and the sight of God.

The simple gospel, nothing added, nothing taken away, is the only thing that will bring the dead to life. Now, third thing, we don't get discouraged when people reject the gospel.

or at least we don't get discouraged for the wrong reasons. Look down at verses three and four.

And 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 that displays the glory of Christ who is the image of God. When people reject the gospel, it isn't some deficiency in the gospel itself that is the issue.

[15 : 39] It's the fact that it goes out into a world full of blind people. Now, when Paul says the God of this age there, notice the lowercase g on God.

Paul is talking about Satan, the liar, the one whose entire goal is to have people not believe in and not trust God. In calling Satan the God of this age, Paul isn't claiming that he has power equal with God in any way, but he's telling them that every time someone chooses to live by a lie rather than by the gospel, they are putting their trust unwittingly in the devil himself, living by lies rather than by truth.

By comparison, see what the gospel does in the second half of verse 4. Now, we know from the earliest pages of our Bibles that human beings are made in the image of God, but here we see that Jesus is the image of God.

We are made to be like God, but Jesus is God himself. If you want to know what God is like, you look at the sun. This gospel doesn't leave us floundering, wondering what God is like, or trying to invent him for ourselves, or just trusting our own minds of what we would like God to be.

No, this gospel leads us to God, seen in the face of Christ. Only that message could open blind eyes, and that's why it matters so much that it's communicated clearly.

[17 : 12] When people don't respond to the gospel, then, it isn't because it's powerless, but because it is opposed. It's always discouraging when we make an effort to share the good news with someone, and they reject either aggressively or apathetically, I know that discouragement hugely from times in my own life when I've tried to share the gospel with someone, and it just seems to sail through and have no impact.

But it isn't because the gospel is in any way weak or deficient. People's rejections might be discouraging to us personally, but they must not discourage us from our task or from our confidence in the gospel.

Just because someone responds negatively doesn't mean you need to trade your gospel in and get a new one. It just means that we must rely on God to intervene, to have mercy, and to open blind eyes.

We pray that he will, and we stay confident that he has given us a gospel that is so powerful that we need not be discouraged by rejections. so finally then, our last thing that Paul says we don't do, our fourth thing, we don't preach ourselves.

Paul's message is just simply not about Paul. It's about Christ. And it seems that Corinth was filled with big personalities that were looking for followers, people very willing to criticize Paul for looking weak and say that they themselves, well they are better, they are stronger, they are more interesting.

[18 : 46] Their ministry must be better because look at how powerful they are. But Paul has no interest in getting a following for himself. Rather, his goal is to serve the Corinthians with a message about Christ for Christ's sake.

Paul is showing them that authentic ministry is when Jesus Christ is proclaimed as Lord and when those who proclaim him see themselves as the servants of those that they minister to for Jesus' sake.

The spotlight is just always on Jesus and not on us. Now you might think there's just no way that we're going to fall foul of the same problem as the Corinthians here. We all follow Jesus.

We're not going off after celebrity preachers. But have you ever found yourself thinking if only I was more exciting, if only I was more of a dynamic or more of a confident person then maybe my gospel efforts would have more power?

It's so easy to slip into the mindset of thinking that the thing missing from the gospel is you. But all that shows us is that the confidence that we have is not in the gospel and in the word but in ourselves.

[20 : 01] It's just so easy to slide into. But look at what Paul says in verse 6. God who said let light shine out of the darkness has made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

This again sends us back to Genesis. God said let there be light and there was. God created the sun, the moon, all the stars by just speaking their name.

The gospel that we have been given does the same for us. It causes light to appear in the darkness of our hearts. God creates bright new life in us so that we may know him through Christ.

Paul can't shine in your hearts. Martin can't shine in your hearts. I can't shine in your heart. Only Christ can. Belief in Paul or any other messenger won't help only in Christ.

And the same goes for us. We must remind ourselves that the task of sharing the gospel is to get out of the way so that Jesus can be seen. Our confidence need not be and must not be in ourselves and in our own ability but in the gospel.

[21 : 20] So if you feel like if only you are more confident in sharing Jesus maybe the gospel will get out there. Let me say you do not need to be confident in yourself or competent in yourself in any way.

Your competence and confidence comes from the gospel. The power is in it and not in you. And friends that is great news. In all these things Paul has been showing us that his confidence and ours should be in the simple gospel.

We don't give up on it. We don't deceive people of other words. We don't get discouraged by rejection and we don't preach ourselves. None of those things make sense if we have a gospel as good as the one we received.

I received it we have. This gospel has led to the glory of God shining in our hearts through Christ. Our confidence couldn't be in anything else.

Why would it be? Yes, it's a huge battle for us to keep that mindset. Every day we need to wake up and tell ourselves that the gospel is still true.

[22 : 26] And actually we need to do that every single day. When people respond aggressively or reject our attempts to share the gospel again we come back to the gospel is true my confidence is in it alone.

I will not be discouraged. And even if you've been a Christian for many, many, many, many years and you know this sometimes we just need the reminder not to be discouraged that the task is hard but to be excited that the task is even possible.

Yes, it's hard but it's bringing dead people to life. So why would we get discouraged? Let's continue to power on telling people the good news about Jesus.

And if we needed one final encouragement well just think who's telling you this. This is Paul the arch persecutor of the church who when he became a believer was blinded by the light of Christ and then someone was sent to preach the gospel to him and the scales fell from his eyes and he spent the rest of his life serving the Lord by taking the gospel out there.

He knows better than any of these Corinthians what it means to come face to face with the light of Christ and it's a simple gospel that changed him it's the one that changed us and it's the one that will go on out from us to change others.

[23 : 53] God builds his kingdom through the sharing of the simple gospel so why would we put our confidence in anything else? Let's pray.

for I thank you that though we are weak you are strong that though we are weak messengers your powerful message still goes out through us to bring life to a dying world father would you strengthen us in that knowledge give us confidence in your gospel help us to stand firm and not to waver and to give thanks to you that you have shone your light into our hearts and brought us to eternal life in Christ amen