



2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6

Taught at our Sunday evening service, 20th February 2022 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Romans 7:7-12

Good evening. Let's pray.

Introduction

We're in our third week studying 2 Corinthians; a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the church in the Greek city of Corinth - a letter that sought to address some of the questions and actions that followed his first letter. Tonight we'll study a little more than one chapter, getting as far as verse 6 of chapter 4. Then God willing, next week, we'll conclude chapter 4, and study all of chapter 5.

Overview of 2 Corinthians

As a our weekly reminder, we can summarise this book by breaking it down into 3 parts - though of course many topics are covered within these sections...

- Chapters 1 to 7 - Christian living

- Chapters 8 to 9 - Christian giving
- Chapters 10 to 13 - Christian guarding

Overview of chapter three

Zooming in to chapter 3, there are 4 phrases that may help you to remember the detail:

- You're the fruit!
- Distributors, not manufacturers
- No comparison
- We are being transformed

Overview of chapter four (part one)

Then, as we get into the first part of chapter 4, we see Paul talk about the singular focus of his preaching, that is:

- Jesus, not Paul

And as usual, we'll come back to these at the end of tonight's study.

Context

Now, you may recall that at the end of the previous chapter Paul gives this amazing description of Jesus' triumph, and asks, given the glorious salvation we have, "who is sufficient for these things?" We reAd...

2 Corinthians 2:14-16

Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things?

That is, who is sufficient to be used by Jesus? We'll get to the answer in verse 5 of chapter 3 this evening. But next he writes...

2 Corinthians 2:17

For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

In other words - we're not trying to fleece you; we're trying to feed you. Not deceitfully, but honestly teaching the Word of God, in the sight of God, for the glory of God.

Chapter three

And continuing into this next chapter (note, there were no chapter breaks when this was written as one continuous scroll) we read...

2 Corinthians 3:1-2

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men;

He's saying; we are not strangers to you, that we need an introduction or recommendation. If you're looking for fruit in our lives and ministry - then you're it!! What more proof do you need beyond what God has done through us in you? Or proof in the love that we have for you?

We should note from this, that the proof of any ministry is not recommendation, but fruit. Always consider that when choosing to listen to someone online. It matters not how many YouTube views, or Facebook likes they have. It matters not that someone recommended them to you, or that they have a large number of people in their church, or lots of dates on their conference schedule. Rather, the best evidence is the fruit they are producing.

Indeed, there are a number of popular Bible teachers that, rather than producing disciples of Christ, produce disciples of themselves. Avoid them. And beware of anyone who builds a ministry on their own name, for Paul did not preach himself, but rather preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But back in Corinth, in the midst of a city known for its immorality, this church was known by others for its fruit. In fact, such was Paul's certainty of fruit in their lives, of their willingness to give, of their passion for the things of God, that he'll later write in this same letter...

2 Corinthians 9:1-2

Now concerning the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you; for I know your willingness, about which I boast of you to the Macedonians, that Achaia was ready a year ago; and your zeal has stirred up the majority.

There is fruit in this church! Paul continues...

2 Corinthians 3:3

clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.

Their lives were changed. They did not add Jesus to their lives. Jesus was their life!

And just as with them, how you live, walk, act, talk says something about you (the Bible calls it your conversation). If you are truly born again, there will be a change. JC Ryle comments:

To be born again is to enter into a new existence, to have a new mind, a new heart, new views, new principles, new tastes, new affections, new likes, new dislikes, new fears, new joys, new sorrows, new love for things once hated, new hatred towards things once loved, new thoughts of God, ourselves, the world, the life to come and salvation.

JC Ryle

If there is no evidence of this, are you saved? But be assured, even wrestling with these things is a sign that you are not spiritually dead. In the case of the Corinthians, Paul was sure of their situation. He wrote:

2 Corinthians 3:4

And we have such trust through Christ toward God.

He's saying, we are confident that you are the result of what God has done, not what we have done!

2 Corinthians 3:5-6

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Answering the question from the last chapter, he clarifies that while God entrusts us with ministries, it is still His work. Indeed, we are distributors, not manufacturers of God's Word. Because His Word is sufficient, and His grace is sufficient, so are we sufficient to be used by Him.

And this new covenant that we have, that gives life, is beyond compare. Let's take a look at that for a moment. We're talking about the law vs grace, the old covenant through Moses vs the new covenant through Christ.

And we have this great contrast between the two:

- The law of sin, vs the law of righteousness
- The law of the flesh, vs the law of the Spirit
- The first was not of faith, the second only by faith
- There is the yoke of bondage, vs the law of liberty
- That which brought death was ended by Christ. But what was started by Christ brought life!
- While the law makes guilty, grace makes free
- The law demands righteousness, but grace gives righteousness IMPUTES
- One makes imperfect, the other makes perfect
- The law was powerless to save, but grace saves to the uttermost
- The law through continual sacrifice remembers sins, while grace remembers them no more
- The law gave temporary covering through the blood of animals, but grace pays once and for all through the blood of Christ
- One is faulty, the other perfect
- One is weak, the other strong
- One had a costly program, the other free

- One had no access to God, the other brings personal access to Him!
- The law brings bondage, grace brings liberty
- One cannot justify, the other does indeed justify!
- For one brings a curse, the other frees from it
- The law exposes sin, while grace covers it

So stark is this contrast, that you might wonder what the point of the law is at all. Paul answers that in Galatians:

Galatians 3:19-25

What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one. Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

The law can chase a man to calvary - no further! That's what it is for. It is our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. And when used for it's purpose, it is a wonderful thing.

But, Paul now notes, if the law, which is clearly inferior to grace, looked good - then how good does grace look?!? He writes...

2 Corinthians 3:7-8

But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?

This is referring to the time Moses came down from Mt Sinai with the law, and he covered his face so that they could look at him properly - for he literally glowed from being in the presence of the Lord. The problem was, the glow faded! And Paul is saying, if something so temporary was glorious, how much more that which is better and permanent. Verse 9...

2 Corinthians 3:9-11

For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

That is, if the law which was good, but which kills (because we are not good) was glorious. Then how much more will the Spirit, this gift of grace, look glorious?! The law kills - the gospel gives life... there is no comparison. And it is because of this confidence of God's grace, and God's goodness, that Paul then writes:

2 Corinthians 3:12-13

Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech — unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away.

In other words - what we're preaching won't fade away! It's not a temporary fix to our problem - it is THE solution to our problem! However, Paul notes...

2 Corinthians 3:14-16

But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

That is, Israel, nationally at least, can't see the forest for the trees. They still don't see the Messiah for who He is. Just as we have been reading in John's gospel. Yet, some will turn, and the Bible teaches that the nation will one day turn again to Him.

But note the principle here too. That the veil is removed upon believing. And we see some people say "I'll believe when I understand". But that's not how it works, for you'll never understand it all unless you believe.

2 Corinthians 3:17

Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

So there is freedom because of the grace of God. However, we rEad...

2 Corinthians 3:18

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

God's goodness once condemned us - now it changes us - it transforms us. We're already sanctified - that is, set apart for Him. We are already forgiven, already saved. But, as we read in Romans chapter 12:

Romans 12:1-2

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

I like what Jon Courson notes. He says; "We are changed not by a program, a practice, or a procedure. We are changed by a Person. We are changed by looking at Jesus—by spending time with Him, learning about Him, and worshiping Him."

Indeed the root Greek word used both here in 2 Corinthians and Romans is metamorphoo - the idea of changing from one thing, into another. So we too should be transformed, leaving the old life behind. Remember these words to the hymn we sing?

Turn your eyes upon Jesus;
Look full in His wonderful face;
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.

Given the great exchange of Christ paying for our sin in our place, and the great change He then brings about in us, this sanctification then transformation, could we be discouraged by the temporary things around us? Only, I suggest, but taking our eyes off Jesus.

Chapter four

As we begin chapter 4, Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 4:1

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart.

Paul says, we are not discouraged. That very word coming from the French word *cour* meaning heart. We are not discouraged. We do not lose heart. Why? Because of this ministry God has given us. Because this is not manmade religion that says "do". It's the completed work of Christ which says "done". Two letters that make an enormous difference! It's all about what God has done, not what we have done, as Paul notes when writing to the Philippians:

Philippians 3:7-9

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

And as we've already considered this evening, that grace changes you. It transforms you. We read in verse 2:

2 Corinthians 4:2

But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Picking up what he wrote in chapter 2:17, Paul says; we are speaking the truth - we're not hiding anything - we're not teaching you and telling you *not* to check it out! We're not in it for our own ends. But rather we simply want to make the truth visible to you.

Likewise for us, what we teach - whether to the church, to our children's and youth groups, or to our own children - should not be contradicted by the way we live our lives... because it is possible for our lives to say so much, that it drowns out what we're trying to say with our words. Our love of sin can get in the way of people hearing the gospel. But also, a person's love of sin can also get in the way. We read...

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

The gospel is unintelligible for some - why? Because they love their sin so much that they are unwilling to entertain anything that would require them to part with it. That is, believing would cause the light to expose their sin - which they avoid at all costs, even at the cost of their soul.

One commentator on this passage notes an account about Sir Isaac Newton, the scientist who actually wrote more about the Bible than he did about science:

One day someone said this to him: "Sir Isaac, I do not understand. You seem to be able to believe the Bible like a little child. I have tried but I cannot. So many of its statements mean nothing to me. I cannot believe; I cannot understand." This was the reply of Sir Isaac Newton: "Sometimes I come into my study and in my absent-mindedness I attempt to light my candle when the extinguisher is over it, and I fumble about trying to light it and cannot; but when I remove the extinguisher then I am able to light the candle. I am afraid the extinguisher in your case is the love of your sins; it is deliberate unbelief that is in you. Turn to God in repentance; be prepared to let the Spirit of God reveal His truth to you, and it will be His joy to show the glory of the grace of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ."

Charles Spurgeon noted, as directly as ever:

The only real argument against the Bible is an unholy life. When a man argues against the Word of God, follow him home, and see if you cannot discover the reason of his enmity to the Word of the Lord. It lies in some sort of sin.

Charles Spurgeon

And Paul continues in this letter, writing:

2 Corinthians 4:5-6

For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This is surely another reason Paul was not discouraged - because he wasn't trying to amass followers on Instagram. He wasn't counting Twitter likes. He wasn't trying to trend on TikTok. While I'm sure he would have used these tools, he was only interested in preaching Christ, for Jesus' glory, and for the benefit of those he preached to - devoted to others, ahead of his own interests. What an example!

Summary

Next week, God-willing, we'll conclude chapter four, and study chapter 5 - and we'll see Paul talk much about the frailty and temporary nature of our flesh. And see where several songs we sing are taken from in scripture.

But by way of summary of this evening, here again are the 5 phrases we began with, to help us remember the detail of these 24 verses:

- You're the fruit!
- Distributors, not manufacturers
- No comparison
- We are being transformed
- Jesus, not Paul

Application questions

As always, I have a few application questions I believe worth us all pondering this week - and by way of reminder, these do get added to our web site along with the audio each week:

- Are we bearing fruit? (should either be a source of encouragement or urgent call to action)
- Have we grasped how amazing God's grace is?
- Have we really turned our eyes upon Jesus?
- Are our lives speaking louder than our words?
- Are we more interested in promoting self, than we are Christ?

Let's pray.