

2 Corinthians Chapter 4 Paul's Testimony About His Ministry

by A.B. Simpson

Paul's ministry is characterized by simplicity, faithfulness, and a deep concern for the souls of men, and is empowered by God's sufficiency.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:1

Topics: "Humility", "Ministry", "Gospel Transformation"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes Paul's testimony about his ministry in 2 Corinthians 4, highlighting the importance of humility, the transformative power of the Gospel, and the necessity of faithfulness in ministry. He illustrates how true credentials come from the lives changed through one's ministry rather than letters of recommendation, and he stresses that our sufficiency comes from God alone. Simpson also contrasts the old covenant with the new, showcasing the Gospel's ability to bring life and righteousness, and he calls for ministers to communicate with simplicity and earnestness, recognizing the eternal significance of their work. Ultimately, he warns against the distractions of worldly things that can blind people to the Gospel's light.

Transcript

"Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy we faint not; but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, 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. But if our gospel be hid it is hid to them that are lost." 2 Cor. 4: 1-3.

There is nothing more delicate and difficult, even for the most sensitive and sanctified Christian, than to speak of his own work. The writer has never forgotten the impression produced upon him when first listening to George Muller as he told the story of the Lord's dealings with him. There was no reserve; there was no false modesty; there was no withholding of any important fact or testimony; but there was absolutely no self-consciousness, no shadow of vain glory, no trace of his own shadow. One would think in listening to him that he was telling of the work of some other servant of the Lord. He had that perfect humility that does not think meanly of itself, but simply does not think of itself at all.

We have a fine example of the apostle's spirit in his testimony in the present chapter about his ministry.

I. His Credentials

"Do we begin again to commend ourselves?" he asks, "or need we, 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 of all men. Forasmuch as you are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ manifested by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." (2 Cor. 3: 1-3.)

His credentials are the lives that have been transformed through his ministry by the power of the Holy Spirit. What better monument can any Christian worker desire? It is said of the famous Sir Christopher Wren that he was rescued as a foundling child on the very site of that glorious cathedral that he afterwards built in the city of London, St. Paul's. At the close of an honored life his dust was buried beneath its foundations, and by his own directions a plain slab covered his tomb with the simple inscription on it, "If you seek my monument, look around you." That splendid building was his sufficient monument. His work was the memorial of his life. Are we transcribing ourselves, or, better, our Master's image on the hearts and lives of men? Paul did not mean that he despised letters of introduction. They possess a certain value, and we all need to be prudent in guarding against imposters. But he had something better. His work was his highest witness. Can we say it is ours? True character will always discover itself to the world, like a spice ship sailing into the harbor, by the fragrance it diffuses all around it.

It is said that a missionary was sent to an obscure Hindu village to receive a score of new converts into the mission, of whom the report had come that they had all become true Christians. As one by one they were examined the missionary was delighted with their knowledge and experience, and they were all accepted. At last there came a poor, deformed and stammering fellow, who seemed to have little knowledge or character, and the missionary was about to reject him when the natives all exclaimed, "Why that is the man from whom we learned all we know of Jesus. It is he who brought us to Christ, and how can you accept us and reject him?" Truly he needed no letters of commendation after that. They were living epistles witnessing to his work and his worth. It is impossible that we can possess true spiritual qualities without impressing our own influence upon other lives. "By their fruits you shall know them." "Some thirty, some sixty and some an hundred fold." Let us apply the lesson faithfully and searchingly to our influence in our families, in our Sunday school classes, in our social relations, in our work for God.

"There needs not for such the love-written record,

The name and the monument graven on stone;

The things we have lived for--let these be our glory,

And we be remembered by what we have done."

II. The Source of His Power

"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God, who also has made us able ministers of the New Testament." (2 Cor. 3: 5, 6.) Three strong words express the whole volume of testimony and experience here, -- insufficiency, all sufficiency and efficiency. First he had to realize his own insufficiency. This is where every Christian worker must begin, and this is where he must stay, realizing to the end of the chapter that his strength is all imparted and divine.

But the mere sense of insufficiency will discourage and crush. And so we must move on and learn to say, "Our sufficiency is of God." We must see in the Lord Jesus our infinite divine resources in the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit, and all the equipment we need in every kind of ministry. Then it is false modesty to say we are no good; we have but one talent, and therefore it is not worth trying to use it. True humility and faith will finish the apostle's climax. "He has made us efficient ministers of the New Testament."

But, even then, we must still remember that our efficiency is not our own, but must be continually drawn from the ever-present Christ by a life of dependence and faith. How exquisitely true are the superb lines:

"My hands were strong in fancied strength,

But not in power divine;

And bold to take up tasks at length,

That were not His but mine.

The Master came and touched my hands;

And might was in His own;

But mine, since then, have powerless been,

Save His are laid thereon.

And it is only thus, said He,

That I can work My works in thee."

III. The Glory of His Ministry

In the remaining verses of this chapter he contrasts the Gospel with the old dispensation and shows its incomparable superiority.

1. The one is the letter; the other is the Spirit. The law is a mere set of tasks and penances which only affect the outward forms of life. The Gospel reaches the inner heart of things and purifies the spirit, the heart and all the fountains of life.

2. The one is a ministry of death; the other of life. The law can only condemn; the Gospel can quicken. The law can tell us what we are not to do; but the Gospel imparts the power to do things.

3. The one is the ministry of condemnation; the other of righteousness. The law shows us where we are wrong, but cannot make us right. It is the mirror that reveals to us the defilement upon our face, but as has been well said, no man would think of trying to wash his face in a mirror.

4. The law was transient; the Gospel is permanent and abiding. It was but a parenthesis in the revelation of God's plan, like the clouds that gathered round the brow of Sinai, and then passed away and left the sunshine of heaven to gather upon its head. When we accept the Gospel we feel by a deep intuition that we have reached our true resting place and we need seek no further for God and truth and heaven.

5. The law is a mere mechanical and external attempt to reform conduct and cultivate character. The Gospel is a vital process by which we are transformed through the vision of Jesus Christ into His own image by the Holy Spirit. This is brought out in a most beautiful figure in the last verse of the chapter. "But we all, with open face, beholding, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord." The figure reminds us of the difference between the old and the new process of engraving. Our cuts used to be slowly carved by hand on blocks of wood, and were tedious and expensive. A few years ago the process of photoengraving was discovered by which, in a moment, the image was transferred to a metal plate, and then in a few minutes a penetrating acid cut away the metal and left only the lines of the picture, thus literally engraving in the solid metal by light and chemical action. It is thus that God paints His pictures; not by a clumsy process of our poor striving, but by the flashlight of the Holy Ghost and a vision of the face of Jesus Christ, transferring the picture instantly, like the photograph on the film, to our heart, and conforming us to His likeness. No wonder Paul gloried in such a Gospel. He felt that a great secret had been revealed to him for lifting human lives into glorious transformation, "the secret," he said, "which had been hid from ages and generations, but now is made manifest to the saints, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." When that mystery was first revealed to some of us we felt we must go and tell everybody we had ever known, and we expected them at once to bow to its glorious light and accept its message. Dear reader, have you looked upon that Face until its light has shone back into your own, and you have been "changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord"?

Two very fine figures begin and end this chapter. The first is the figure of the epistle, and the second the figure of the photograph. The Christian is described first as a book, and secondly, as an illustrated book. Each of us is a volume telling forth the story of Jesus, and on every page His face should shine so that the world shall not see us, but Him, and shall so see Him in us that each shall want to make the experience his own.

IV. The Simplicity of His Ministry

"Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech." (v. 12.) The law was dim and men saw `through a glass darkly.' The Gospel is so plain that "he that runneth may read." The true minister will always be characterized by great simplicity, and make it his object so to preach that every message shall reach the lowest understanding among his hearers, and be plain enough to make Christ real and Christ possible to every man. How solemn the reproof in the story of the famous painter, who had invited a friend to see the unveiling of one of his canvases containing a painting of the First Communion Service. The eyes of the visitor were fastened on the brilliant colors, and his first exclamation was, "What beautiful cups!" But the countenance of the artist fell. He saw that his work had been a failure. He had failed to make Christ the center of the picture, and he drew his brush across the canvas and covered it up, and then started anew and painted it over again. How much of our preaching is just like these beautiful cups -- everything in it but the Savior.

V. The Faithfulness of His Ministry

"We have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, 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." (2 Cor. 4: 2.) What a picture of an earnest, conscientious, heart-searching ministry that deals with human souls, as one who realizes that God is standing at our shoulder and eternity is just before us. All true soul-winners are characterized by this direct and holy earnestness. The writer recalls one fearful

night when he had been so pressed by the Holy Spirit to call upon a certain ungodly man, of wide influence and great indifference, and speak to him about his soul. He tried to shake off the impression, but could not, and, late at night, in a howling blizzard, he rang the bell and asked him to see him. The man was surprised at such a call at that hour, and still more surprised when he heard the message that brought him. He quite broke down and yielded to God, and before they parted said, "To think that you should come this wild and stormy night to seek my soul, while I have lived in this world for nearly seventy years and never thought of it myself." The very directness of the appeal seemed to reach his conscience as no ordinary method perhaps would have done.

The story is told of Mr. Moody that he was requested by a Christian wife to go and talk with her husband, who was a vaunting infidel. Mr. Moody hesitated because the man had glorified in the fact that he had silenced many such messengers before. But he prayed over it and in his own blunt way made up his mind to go. As he passed into the inner office the clerks smiled to think of the humiliation with which he would soon come out. He took the hand of the gentleman, which was offered with a cynical smile, and said, "Mr. Blank, I have been asked to come and talk with you about your soul. Now, there is no use of my talking about the Bible to a man who knows a hundred times as much as I do, but I just want to say this, that when you get converted to God, please let me know it. Good morning." The man was thunderstruck, and Mr. Moody walked out without being greeted with the usual contemptuous smile from the long row of desks. Sure enough, the day came when through the power of prayer that proud heart broke down. Two nights in succession the rich infidel sneaked off to a prayer meeting and slipped back into his home, and went to bed without telling his wife where he had been. But the third night he confessed to her that he had given his heart to God, and the very first thing that he did was to send a telegram to Moody.

Let us bring men face to face with God. Let us remember that we speak with the authority of divine ambassadors. Let us not use our worthless intellects trying to gild the sunshine, but let us bring them into immediate dealing with their Maker, their Judge and their Savior, and leave them there, commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

There is implied here the idea of great faithfulness and deep concern for the souls of men. Paul was always seeking for souls. Even before King Agrippa he could not help but plead, "I would that not only you, but all that hear me this day, were not only almost, but altogether such as I am except these bonds." Who can measure the deep significance of that solemn appeal, "I could wish myself accursed from Christ for my kinsmen according to the flesh"? Dear reader, do you know any such earnest travailing for the souls of men? Perhaps that is why some very dear to you are yet unsaved. The incident was related recently in New England of a young lady that had somewhat suddenly died, and a Christian friend who was deeply attached to her was unspeakably concerned about her soul. On the day of her funeral he sought out her minister and asked him if he could tell him whether she was saved. The minister confessed with a good deal of pain that just three weeks before he had been very strongly impressed to speak to her about her soul, but he had allowed something to deter his mind from the purpose and now he could not tell. He then sought out her Sunday-school teacher and asked her, and the young lady said with deep emotion, "Just two weeks ago I felt strangely and strongly impressed to talk to her about her personal salvation, and I allowed myself to be diverted from it, and, alas, I cannot tell whether she is saved or not." At last he sought her mother and asked her. The mother quite broke down as she confessed that just one week previous she, too, had felt some strong impression to talk to her daughter about deciding for God, but shame and sensitiveness had kept her silent, "and now, alas," she said, "it is too late, and I know not whether she is lost or saved."

Such solemn lessons need no applying. Let them speak to each of our hearts and arouse us to holier earnestness and more conscientious faithfulness in dealing with the souls of men.

VI. Hindrances to His Ministry

"But if our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost." A better translation of this remarkable passage is, "it is hid by the things that perish." The word 'lost' means 'perish,' and the preposition 'to' in the Greek has also the force of 'by.' The sentence, therefore, would read, "If our Gospel be hid it is hid by the perishing things of earth." The idea is that Satan weaves a beautiful blindfold and holds it before our eyes to keep us from seeing "the light of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ."

The writer will never forget the first impression given to him in his boyhood of an execution. He did not witness it, but the description was repeated to him by one who had. He said the unfortunate man was blindfolded and then led along the scaffold, not seeing where he went, until suddenly the fearful drop fell, and, without a moment's warning, the man was hurled into eternity. What a picture of the way the devil is blindfolding men and then taking from beneath their feet the sands of time, and plunging them into ruin and despair. Oh, shall we learn the lesson which our message brings not only for the minister of the Gospel, but for the hearer of the Gospel, too, and come "with open face" to the light of His love and the grace that will so gladly save us if we will only allow it.

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