THE GLORY OF CHRIST

2 Corinthians 4:1­–18

Key Verse: 4:6

“For 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 God’s glory in the face of Christ.”

So it’s 2015. Isn’t that crazy? How was everyone’s New Year? Usually, the New Year brings us to be pretty introspective. We start thinking about all that’s happened to us this past year, what we’ve learned, and usually what we can improve about ourselves. So we make “New Year resolutions.” Anyone make any this year? “This year, I’m going to loose 10 pounds.” “This year, I’m going to manage my money better.” “This year, I’m going to make new friends.” “This year, I’m going to get all A’s.” These resolutions can be great, but usually most people forget about them in a couple of weeks.

And, New Year’s resolutions can be telling about what we care about. Ourselves. And that’s kind of sad right? Today, through this passage, we’re going to think about the New Year a little differently.

**Ministry: The New Covenant (1-2)**

The book of 2 Corinthians is a letter written by Paul to the early church in Corinth. Let’s read verse 1. Paul writes to the church about doing ministry and says it’s done “by God’s mercy.” Why is saying this? Paul was a man who gave his live to doing ministry. Some people in Corinth had been critical of Paul and his credentials to do that. They were basically saying, “Who do you think you are?” So in verse 1, Paul answers these haters by saying God gave him this ministry, he didn’t choose it, and that it was given to him only “by God’s mercy.” This wasn’t just a spiritual sounding phrase for Paul; he really believed this. Before his encounter with Jesus, Paul was doing everything in his power to put a stop to this ministry of Jesus’ followers. He saw the Christian movement as a threat and his putting a stop to it as a career opportunity. Paul calls himself during this time, “an enemy of God.” He was actually putting Christians to death. So, for him, the fact that God would allow him to be a part of that ministry was clearly nothing he had done or merited, but was only because of his God’s mercy. That’s something anyone doing ministry can learn. There are no credentials, degrees, knowledge, people or speaking skills, or any abilities that earn us in any way the right to share God’s love in the gospel. It’s only by God’s mercy.

So, what is this ministry? The Chapter 3, Paul calls this ministry an awareness of a “new covenant…” (3:6). Ministry is “the new covenant.” What’s that? A “covenant” is “a promise”, or “a contract, made between two parties.” Paul says it’s a “new” contract. If there’s a new, there was an old. In the old covenant, God had made a temporary contract with his people. In Chapter 3, Paul talks about the Law of Moses, which he says brought, “death” and “condemnation” (3:,7,9). The old covenant was God’s deal with us—God said, “Here are a set of standards you need to live by to be okay with me and have a relationship with me; you will never be able to reach them.” Kind of rough, but it showed everyone how far apart we are from God. But then Jesus came, and through him God made a new deal with us. This new deal was that all our sins would be whipped away, and we would be made as white as snow (Isa1). The new deal Jesus said was a new deal in his blood. Jesus’ death on the cross was this deal—God himself paying the price for all of our sins. So, because of that, God could make the deal he always wanted to make with us, which is this, “You’ll never be good enough to reach my holy standards or be in a relationship with me, but that’s okay. I’ve taken care of all your sins. I just want to be with you. Come and be with me.” This new deal, Paul is saying, is ministry. In essence, ministry is the message of God’s love. This message of God’s love through Jesus came to be known as the “gospel” or “good news” and Paul was telling everyone about. Paul says in Chapter 3 that it brings “life,” “righteousness,” “freedom” and is a ministry “of the Spirit” (3:6,8,9,17).

Is this what Christianity looks like today? Is this our ministry? It’s something for us to think about as a community looking towards the New Year—what is our ministry about? Is it one of judging people, trying to fix people by our own standards? Or, is it a ministry of God’s love, his forgiveness of our sins, a ministry that wants to bring life, righteousness, freedom, that no matter what we’ve done or will do, or who we are, God loves us so much, and wants to be with us? We were talking about New Year resolutions; maybe this can be our church’s—to be a ministry of the new covenant, of God’s love.

For some reason, telling people God loves’ them and wants to be with them, is difficult. If you walk down the street and say to someone, “God loves you.” Some of them might freak out, call the police, or get upset. People have a lot of personal baggage around the message of God’s love. A lot of people here have given a good portion of their lives to try to share the Gospel of God’s love. But it all can be disheartening. Looking again at verse 1, a lot of things can dishearten us from living in and sharing the ministry of God’s love. It can just be something personal, family issues, health problems, financial problems, personal mistakes we’ve made in life. A lot of times it’s the difficulty of sharing the message of God’s love—misunderstandings, persecutions, rejections. A lot of times it’s a combination of these personal and external things. In the original Greek, to “lose heart” meant to lose enthusiasm, to become afraid, to give up, to become burn out. Anyone feel like that about ministry? Just burnt out? Over it? Sharing God’s love, to this neighborhood, to college students? Do you feel burnt out and just over it? Paul reminds us that it’s easy to lose heart when we rely on ourselves and what we’re doing and forget that this ministry is very simple—it’s a all about sharing God’s love. There are so many other things we can get focused on, but it’s simple, God’s did everything possible for us to be with him. There’s nothing we have to do to prove it, or earn it; he wants us as we are. We’ve got to know this personally and keep it at the center of what our ministry is about.

Paul goes on to talk about being a part of ministry. Look at verse 2. It’s important to take the sins in our lives seriously, and to renounce the “secret and shameful” of our sins. Basically, we shouldn’t be dualistic in our lives, but if we’re sharing about God’s love and grace, that should reflect in our personal lives. If we have trouble with this, we should really think about participating in ministry. Paul also says that we shouldn’t “use deception” in ministry. So, we shouldn’t be sneaky, or manipulative. Doing ministry shouldn’t be run like a marketing department of a business. We shouldn’t be trying to get people to “buy” the product of the Gospel, and use deception or guilt. We should just share it for what it is. He also says we shouldn’t distort God’s word. In Greek, the word for distort was used for people who sold wine, and they would water down the wine to turn a better profit. We shouldn’t be watering stuff down, telling people what they want to hear so they’ll buy into something, but trying our best to set “forth the truth plainly.”

**Veiled (3-4)**

Did you ever make tents when you were a kid? I used to put my blanket over my head, and used to bring all my toys under the blanket with me, and just look at them. Hold a dim flashlight underneath, and pretend there was no other world outside of my tent. It felt good, and safe, even though it was just a blanket covering me. Paul says in this passage that, without looking at what we’ll learn is the Glory of Christ, “sin” is pretty much under a tent.

Look at verse 3. Paul talks about being veiled to this message of God’s love. And Look at Chapter 3. Paul talks about Moses, who was the minister of the old covenant. Moses had to wear a veil over his head, because God’s light on his face was too bright. It’s like when someone turns on a light while you’ve been sitting in a dark room for a while. It’s just too intense. Pretty much like spiritual sunglasses. Paul uses this idea of a veil between us and God and having it over our hearts. And according to verse 3, if we have this veil between us and God, we’re perishing. This veil, wrapped around our hearts, keeps us from seeing, understanding, and so accepting God’s love. Look at verse 4. The veil comes from the “god of this age.” You could simply say that that’s “Satan’s doing,” and so pushing away any blame from ourselves, but I think Paul’s wording here is significant. Being wrapped up in a “god of this age” is to have something or someone that we worship, or set up as a god. Whatever is of most worth to us, we’re worshiping, and that our hearts and can blind us from seeing God’s love, or really anything outside of ourselves for that matter.

And so, this is our state of being without knowing God’s love. We could say this is only for “the perishing,” but I think whether we’ve seen God’s love before or not, we can easily slip back under our veils. It’s like we want to slip back under the comfort of our blankets in the morning, our veiled state without God is what we’ve known to be comfortable. And our veiled reality is self-obsessive. Our focus is inward, to ourselves, our little fascinations, to only seeing that all the time. The Bible talks about this veiled-state-of-being as being like we’re drunk with the glories or splendors of this world, craving whatever satisfies us, whatever captures the lust of our eyes, and boasting in what we have and what we do (1Jn2:16). The word glory too significant in this passage, and it comes from the idea of shinny armor. So the things we obsess about are whatever shinny things catch our eyes.

It’s like raccoons. Raccoons love shiny things. They’ll steal coins, earrings but also worthless things like scrap pieces of shinny metal, forks and bring them to their little dark hiding places where they’ll keep them safe for no one else to see. We’re like that. We look around us and try to see what’s shinny, what looks glorious, whether it is or not also like It’s like we’re each under our own blanketed tents, and obsess over them.

We talked about New Year’s resolutions, and how that’s so showing to how self-obsessed we are. Think about how much time a day you think about yourself—what you’re doing, what you’ll eat, your relationships, your aspirations, your struggles, what you want, how much you want people to like you, how much you wished life was a little better, etc. I remember studying that psychologists charted out that on average 60% of our thoughts are self-directed, 30% of our thoughts are about our own relationships and how they affect us, and 10% of our thoughts are about others. That’s how we think as human beings. And yet such a thought-world of self-obsession makes us pretty dark, muddled and nihilistic. Solomon talked about doing everything under the sun, anything of significance that we could try to do or attain—relationships, achievements, money, knowledge—that it’s all kind of meaningless, like chasing after the wind. Paul says that when we’re like this, we’re perishing. Because, although we’re just thinking about ourselves all the time, we really are never satisfied, we’re never good enough, never shinny enough. Do you ever get sick of that? Thinking about yourself all the time? So, how do we get out of this “trap”?

**The Glory of Christ (5-18)**

Let’s read verse 5. For the veiled to be lifted, Paul says, Jesus Christ has to become out Lord. What does that mean? A change has to happen. No longer should we be our own lords, our own rulers, the kings and queens of ourselves. Instead, we make Jesus our King. We look to his guidance, his advice, see our lives as his. It’s a big transition for anyone to have. The real message of the gospel, of God’s love, is that we lay down our own rule over ourselves, and give our lives over to God.

But why would we do that? What would compel anyone to give up the rule of their own lives and give it to God? Let’s look at verse 6. Let’s read it. Paul has been talking about a spiritual darkness, ignorance, being under a veil. But to get out of that, is an act of God. Paul reminds us of how, when everything is dark, God spoke saying, “Let there be light,” and it happened (Ge1:3). God’s light broke through and penetrated the deepest darkness of nothingness. In the same way, God “makes” his light shine to us even when we can’t see anything, we’re blinded by the veil of our sinful state. How? In Jesus. In who he is. In looking at him, in seeing who God is in him, his life, his character, what he did for us, the darkness beings to slip away and we begin to see. It says in John 1 that Jesus came into a dark world as a light. It’s a splendor that blows everything else out, including the veil we’ve been under, and we begin to actually see outside of ourselves. We see God, we see his love, we see how he loves us, we see how he loves others, and we see others too. And then, our worldview is completely expanded by the Glory of Christ. Instead of trying to grab the little shinny trinkets, we’re overwhelmed with the glorious light that is Jesus—God’s love for us revealed in him. And this really is revealed in the cross. We look at Jesus, and what God did through him on the cross.

Paul explains in 3:18. To have the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ, Paul says here that we have to “contemplate” it. We have to really think about it, meditate on it. That’s how we get out from underneath the veil, and that’s how we stay out from it—thinking about the glory, the splendor of who Jesus is and what he did for us.

Honestly, how much time do we spend doing that? Do we even have time? To have the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ, Paul says here that we have to “contemplate” it. So I think it takes some effort. We have to make time to do this. It doesn’t really come naturally, because we never knew how to do that in sin. In 4:6 Paul says we look at the face of Christ to see his glory. Of course, this doesn’t mean having a painting of Jesus we stare at everyday. It implies something personal. We get to come to him, look at him, get to know him, study his face, what he’s like, he’s features, which are things like his compassion, patience, his fearlessness, his devotion, his love, when we aren’t contemplating him, we actually remember his face, what he’s like. Ultimately, we see this glory of Jesus in what he did on the cross, by in our places, as God’s great love for us. That’s his luster.

Look at verse 7. Here Paul describes seeing Jesus’ glory has having “this treasure in jars of clay.” It’s easy for us to try to think we’re more than we are. “I’m at least good at this, or at least I look good, or at least I’m pretty smart, or accomplished something.” But really, we’re pretty insignificant. We’re born, we die, and it’s actually rather sad when you think about it. So, we try to bedazzle ourselves with accomplishments, other people, whatever. But Paul’s reminding us that we’re just jars of clay. But inside, that’s what’s priceless. Who we are, is so loved by God in Jesus. He thought us worth giving his own life for, he saw us as invaluable. And so keeping that within us, is holdinging onto that splendor. And that’s a priceless treasure. We essentially live lives where we’re pouring out the glory of Jesus, we’re sharing who he is, his attributes, his love his compassion, his tenderness. And it gives life so much more meaning and value.

Look at verses 8-18. Living like a jar of clay is a tough life. We’re tossed around, we’re wasting away outwardly (8,16). It’s a very different kind of life than what we lived as veiled people. Instead of self-preservations, we live a life of giving, of sharing God’s love. Paul encourages us to do this by, “ fixing our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (18).

So, here’s a New Year’s Resolution we can all think about for 2015. Am I looking at myself? Or, am I looking at the Splendor of Jesus?