

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 21, 2010)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

HOPE - for those who need help

(2 Corinthians 4:1-6)

Study #6

Introduction: “9-1-1 people”...

I need help.

I don't know if I need more help than most people, but I do know that I'm often asking for help. In fact, there is a whole list of folks I'll refer to today as my “9-1-1 people.”

These are the people I call when I need assistance or counsel.

I'm sort of the ultimate “jack of many trades, master of none” guy. I know just enough about lots and lots of things to get myself into serious trouble if left to my own devices. So I've learned (yes, the hard way), to ask for help.

I've got people to call or consult when I get in over my head with computers (actually, I could call most anyone on that one), gardening (Bob Webster), fitness (www.crossfit.com), backpacking (Ryan Jordan), Biblical issues (Dallas Seminary, Trinity Seminary), home improvement questions (Biros' - who else?), car stuff (my father-in-law; Don Torres), general history (Hadley Reed), and pastoring (Eugene Peterson).

Perhaps because of the ease with which I call out for help, I have come to think that one of the marks of wisdom and maturity is knowing who to call when you come to the end of your own resources.

So, who do **YOU** call when you need help?

I don't know if you have as full a rolodex as I do when it comes to getting help when you need it, but I recommend knowing who to call. Having a list of 9-1-1 people can come in really handy.

Yes, it's great to get help with plumbing and electrical issues. But while it is true that household problems are problems, some problems are weightier than others.

You know people who have suffered complex wounds at the soul level. How are they to get those wounds fixed? You have friends, some of whom are trapped by patterns of behavior that are both self-destructive and addictive. Who do you call to get help in breaking that cycle? Others have gaping holes in their hearts that cry, “*No purpose! No meaning! No point!*” Who fills that vacuum?

Knowing who to call when something around the house breaks is important. But it is even more important to know who to call on when you are helping someone with a broken life. Having access to a trained professional who can guide you through a car repair procedure is wonderful. But where do you turn when you want to help someone with a wound to the soul?

This morning, four days away from Thanksgiving, we get a head start on gratitude from the Bible.

Today, the Apostle Paul directs us to the One to whom we can go to service a soul in need of repair or rest. Whether that heart is yours or that of a friend you long to help, there is hope ahead.

Paul starts out on a hopeful note.

To Lose or Not to Lose (heart) (v. 1)

[1] Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart¹

¹ “*Since God has so generously let us in on what He is doing, we're not about to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into occasional hard times.*” (The Message)

Losing Heart

The image of someone losing heart is a sad image.

With the election season over, some politicians who lost their bids for public office have also lost hope. Think about it. A defeated Senate or House candidate walks the streets knowing that thousands of people voted against him. That's enough to cause a guy to lose heart.

Now that the San Antonio Rock 'n Roll Marathon and Half Marathon is over, thousands were thrilled to have finished while another group of those who didn't lost heart somewhere along the 26.2 mile route and failed to cross the finish line. (I know how that feels; been there, done that).

Look back over your life and you may be able to think of times when you threw in the towel, called it quits, surrendered - or at least were tempted to do so.

Some time soon, take the time to thumb through the New Testament with "losing heart" in mind. You'll find that it's a prominent theme.

Once, Jesus told His disciples a parable specifically designed to help them NOT lose heart in prayer, implying that they might lose heart. (Luke 18)

In another place, Paul wrote that we will reap a great harvest if we don't lose heart in doing good. (Galatians 6:9)

Parents are to interact with their children in such a way that the children are not exasperated, because exasperated kids are prone to "lose heart." (Colossians 3:21)

In Hebrews, Jesus is held up as the model of perseverance, the One we are to imitate, the One who never lost heart. (Hebrews 12:3)

And Paul tells us here that he does not lose heart. Now I find that remarkable because if anyone had reason to lose heart in living for God and in serving Jesus, it would have been Paul. He suffered for the Gospel as few ever have.

But if he ever knew the temptation to throw in the towel and lose heart, he never gave in to that temptation. He never quit serving the Lord. He maintained a fervent, zealous heart. How did he do it?

Well, Paul tells us that he had received something from God that energized and motivated him despite the tough stuff he had suffered. And that something was the ministry of the New Covenant.

Maintaining Heart

As we have seen over the past couple of Sundays, the New Covenant is the arrangement under which we now serve God. The New Covenant is God writing His message on our hearts. It makes us adequate as His servants. The New Covenant allows God's power to flow through us.

And a New Covenant approach to life is tailor-made for anyone who is ever tempted to lose heart.

The Old Covenant (Mosaic) said, "*Do the best you can to measure up to a standard. It's all about your works.*" The New Covenant is all about and Jesus and His work.

The New Covenant specializes in making something beautiful out of something wretched, something holy out of something wicked, something useful out of something wrecked. And so, it is just what people like us are looking for. New Covenant power is unleashed only in the lives of those who admit to their own weakness.

And far from responding with a towel-throwing-in ceremony, Paul's response to tough times was to remind himself of New Covenant realities. That's how he was able to NOT lose heart.

But I look around me - and sometimes in the mirror - and I see Christians who are often dangerously close to losing heart. Some HAVE, seemingly, lost heart.

The fire to serve Jesus flickers. The pain of a hard marriage, the demands of a challenging job, a sudden reversal in fortune all contribute to a temptation to quit following Christ.

The burdens of life and failures in life are like layer after layer of wet blankets piled on the bonfire of spiritual passion.

And it may be that you are sometimes tempted to lose heart. You may have friends others who are tempted to lose heart. And knowing that God's people face these temptations, Paul wrote what we read today. He tells us how he - the great Apostle Paul - deals with the temptation to lose heart.

What follows is one of the most helpful descriptions of an apostolic ministry mindset we find anywhere in the New Testament. We listen as Paul defines his ministry methodology.

Jesus Makes the Difference (vv. 2-6)

A New Covenant Style of Relating (v. 2)

[2] but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness² or adulterating the word of God³, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Styles to renounce

Refusing craftiness

Paul is contrasting his own relational style with that of those who oppose him in Corinth.⁴ He has renounced certain ways of dealing with people and certain ways of presenting Christianity.

Listening to him describe how he refuses to deal with people is really helpful as we consider how we will interact with others.

² Craftiness: (Greek, *πανουργια*)- craftiness; a readiness to do anything; to stop at nothing to accomplish an end; this word and its cognates are used in the sense of adulterating medicines.

³ Adulterating Scripture = twisting, watering down; taking out of context.

⁴ He might even be defending himself against those who accuse him of using underhanded, shameful ministry methods. Paul is not, though, admitting to having practiced shameful things. He is renouncing their use.

Now Paul regularly sought to persuade people to place their faith in Jesus. He was an evangelist. And he routinely interacted with believers, seeking to persuade them to lead holy lives. That was also an important part of his life.

But Paul was careful to never cross the line from persuasion to manipulation.

He was determined to never use a method, never employ a strategy that he would not be glad to explain to curious onlookers. He was not ashamed to explain how he dealt with people to the people with whom he dealt!

He refused to use emotional pleas, heavy-handed demands, or self-promotion. He never would have told tell stories that bring tears to people's eyes to "soften them up."

That would be "crafty." To be crafty, is to be willing to use any method to accomplish a goal. It is the ultimate "end-justifies-the-means" mentality. Craftiness is blind ambition unfettered by principle.

Craftiness is manipulative - and Paul didn't manipulate people. He also refused to manipulate God's message.

No tricks with the text

That's what he's talking about when he mentions not "*adulterating the word of God.*"

He didn't try to play tricks with the text to make it say what he wanted it to say. He didn't proof-text Scripture to twist it to prove his point.

He didn't alter the message to fit this or that audience. Change the illustrations? Sure! Mix up the speaking style? Not a problem. Change the content of the Gospel? Never!!

Here is how we say it in our church **Mission Statement**, "*We seek to become a community of believers who **SUBMIT** to His inspired Word,*"

Paul put himself under Scripture, under God's Message.

One way to get a really great response to your message is to alter it based on your audience. Another way to gain a favorable response is to “work” your audience with laughter or tears.

But Paul was unwilling to either be a chameleon who changed his message or a huckster who manipulated. So, what was his strategy for gaining a positive response to the message?

First, he aimed straight at the heart of his hearers. Two, he proclaimed truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

A style of relating to embrace

We deal in truth

The test of any approach to life and God must not be, “*Does it feel good?*” or “*Is it comfortable?*” or “*Do people like it?*” but “**Is it true?**”

Paul was banking on the power of an open, unapologetic statement of the truth. There is a winsome beauty to simple truth-telling.

So, wherever he went, he relied on truth. He proclaimed truth as God had revealed it in Scripture and in Jesus. He counted on God using His truth to make a difference and he very purposefully did NOT count on his own winning personality or debating skills to win the day.

And then, as he spoke truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, he aimed that truth at what he calls every man’s “conscience.”

We deal with hearts

In the Bible, conscience is the seat of a person’s volitional life. Paul bypassed the external veneer and targeted the core.

When we talk with people about spiritual issues and present truth about Jesus we aren’t simply interested in an emotional response.

One of the great preachers, pastors, and scholars of American history was Jonathan Edwards, who lived in New England in the 17th century. Edwards was pastoring in Northampton, Massachusetts when the First Great Awakening, a remarkable revival, broke out.

You may have heard about one of the sermons that he preached during that period of revival, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Judging from the title, it sounds like a sermon that should be shouted, screamed. In fact, it was read by Edwards from a manuscript, almost in a monotone.

God powerfully used that sermon, but Edwards didn’t try to bring an emotionally charged message.

There is nothing wrong with emotion, of course, and tears are fine, when they come. But an emotional response to the word of God is not the goal. We’re aiming deeper than that.

Nor is intellectual agreement the end game. Getting someone to nod in agreement is helpful, but we aim deeper.

We are aiming for heartfelt conviction.

Our fondest hope is that following our Sunday School lesson, sermon, conversation, there would be deep change.

We are hoping not just for rehabilitation or a reform but for a metamorphosis.

We long to see a change from spiritual apathy to passion, from half-hearted commitment to pedal-to-the-metal dedication to Christ. Not just an external whipping of the flesh into shape, but a God-empowered transformation that conforms to the image of Jesus!

That’s what we desperately hope and dream and pray happens as we serve.

And there are forces at work that are just as desperate that none of that happens! We have an enemy and our enemy fires real bullets.

Our Enemy Fires Real Bullets (vv. 3-4)

[3] And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, [4] in whose case the god of this world⁵ has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

The “the god of this world” and his work

Calling Satan the “god of this age” may seem a bit bold, but it is completely accurate. Satan holds sway over the world during this present age.⁶

We certainly recognize that Satan’s sway is a usurped, temporary rule, and is in no way absolute.

But when Paul refers to Satan as “god” he means that the one true God has allowed Satan some freedom to exercise his power in our world.

There are wicked spiritual beings at work today wrecking havoc. And while I wouldn’t want you to think that Satan and his forces are behind every negative thing that happens, they are completely behind one aspect of the world’s problems.

They are committed to contradicting God’s truth as it is delivered. They actively influence people’s thinking and cause people to think certain thoughts about the Gospel of Jesus that prompts them to not respond in faith.

People are perishing because they do not believe. And they do not believe because they are blinded by the devil.

How is the Gospel veiled?

People who have heard the Gospel and rejected it have been blinded in that they have not seen it as the glorious good news it is. It is not at all that someone who doesn’t believe can’t understand the truth. It is not an intellectual thing.

They just fail to see its GLORY.

Satan convinces people that the Good News is “so-so” news, or even that it is BAD NEWS.

He blinds them with the veil of personal adequacy. He convinces people that they can make it on their own. *“You can be loving, powerful and godly all by yourself!”*

Thus blinded, people see themselves as adequate. And so they see the Gospel, which proclaims deliverance to people who are **IN**adequate, as irrelevant.

So, what hope is there that anyone who has been blinded by the devil will ever believe the good news? It looks hopeless, doesn’t it?

A veil lies over their hearts, a veil that is only removed when a person turns to the Lord. And yet, in order to turn, men must see the glory of Christ that the veil obscures - where is hope?

Why not just give up? Why should we not just give up, lose heart? Our task is impossible! Our communication skills against the forces of Satan? I quit!

Not so fast...

Paul tells us why he doesn’t lose heart, and why we shouldn’t either. He has broken the code. He knows what needs to happen if people who have been blinded to God’s truth by the devil are going to see.⁷

⁵ Cf. Jn 12:31; 16:11; 14:30; 1 John 5:19; Eph. 2:2 for ways to refer to the devil.

⁶ A consideration which adds impact to our Lord’s third temptation in the wilderness as recorded in Mt.4:8f.

⁷ Remember, Paul knew something about being blind, too; check out Acts 9

Effective Ministry (vv. 5-6)

New Covenant ministry is all about Jesus (duh) (v. 5)

[5] For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord⁸, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake.⁹

Paul knew the danger of being so committed to ministry that he might be tempted to offer himself as the remedy for someone's need.

Such thinking is common today and those who are guilty of this kind of thinking are said to have a "messiah complex." The problem, of course, is that there can only be one Messiah - and it ain't me/you/us!

We can point people to all kinds of places to find help. We offer ourselves as resources or we commend the Christian way of living. But unless we point people who are far from God to Jesus, the veil will never be removed from their blinded eyes. Unless we point our brothers and sisters to Jesus, there will be no metamorphosis.

In the New Testament we never read things like, "*The church can help you with your problems.*" No, it can't. The only One who can help you is Jesus.

So, Paul preached Jesus. And so we agree with Paul that it is all about Him. And the most helpful thing we can offer people is the declaration that Christ Jesus is Lord!

In Him is the discovery of purpose. In Him is the forgiveness of their sins. In Him, deep wounds are healed and in Him self-destructing, addictions are broken.

⁸ Are we saying that a person must receive the Son of God as Lord to be saved? Yes! Only a Lord can save! Are we saying that a person must cease from their sin to be accepted by this new Lord? No! All we are saying is that when a person comes to the cross to receive Jesus' salvation, they take Him - and He is Lord. To receive anything else or anything less is to receive something other than Jesus.

⁹ Paul didn't serve the Corinthians because they were such easy to please masters, but "*for Jesus' sake.*"

It is when we get out of the way and proclaim that this Jesus who died on the cross and was raised on the third day is THE LORD that the veil is ripped away from the spiritual eyes of the unbelieving and they see the glory that is in Christ.

The Gospel turns on the light bulb in the unbelieving mind and shines GLORY. And that thought makes perfectly reasonable a reference back to Genesis 1 in the middle of 2 Corinthians 4!

Heart-impacting, New Covenant service is God's work, start to finish (v.6)

[6] For God, who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

At the very beginning, God commanded the darkness to produce light. And out of the darkness, light sprang up in obedience to the creative word of the living God.

Paul says that the same thing has to happen before there is any transformation in a human life.

If your friend is going to become a new creation in Jesus, God must speak that creative Word - "***Let there be light!***" - or the darkness will never give way.

If you would be God's conduit of blessing to a brother or sister in Christ, God must work. It can't be just you, in and of yourself.

And His power flows through us when we stop preaching ourselves and our adequacy and our answers - and preach Jesus. THAT is New Covenant ministry!

Bottom line? Relax. Ministry impact is not ultimately up to us.

Clearly, Satan doesn't want people to see the glory of the Gospel, and has blinded their minds so that they won't see it. A hopeless, disheartening situation, right? Wrong.

We don't lose heart because the responsibility for changing hearts and lives is God's, not ours.

We don't lose heart for making real impact on people, because impact is made as we preach Jesus (not ourselves). It is the message of Jesus that unleashes the power of God.

Conclusion:

We have seen enough to give us heart this morning. We have seen that the One to whom we must turn when life throws its ugly worst at us is Jesus.

And, we have seen that the One to whom we can reliably direct those we love when they are tempted to lose heart is Jesus.

So simple. So New Covenant-ish. So powerful.

We are learning to take the spotlight off of ourselves so that the light of Christ can shine.

Why? Because -

- nothing brings glory to God like a Christian who rests in the super-adequacy of God while admitting to his his/her own weakness;
- nothing bring healing to a sin-sick soul like the power of Jesus;
- nothing will help your friend mend a broken life like the New Covenant's resources unleashed.

HAPPY THANKSGIVING, INDEED!!