

Title: A Word of Comfort pt. 1
Text: 2 Corinthians 4-5
Theme: Hope, born from adversity
Occasion: Sunday AM after Patrick's death (before Funeral)
Prop Stmtnt Our hope in this life comes from death, first Christ's, then our own.

We have an infinitely wise and infinitely loving Father, whose love is unquestioned and wisdom unmatched. His wisdom and love were forever demonstrated through his planning and accomplishing of our salvation through the death of His Son in our place. Our wise and loving Father gives us the gift of affliction, not as a gift that we can refuse, nor a gift that we can return, but a gift that we left with no choice, but to open and take what is given. And why? Why would God give us affliction and deem it a gift? Affliction is the means by which God gives us comfort. He not only gives us comfort, but he gives us comfort to share. He has determined to make you a blessing by pouring so much comfort upon you that you have an immeasurable supply to share with others.

This is how we grieve and mourn. It is different than many in our world who run from it at all costs and seek to avoid it, who turn to medication so as not to feel grief, who turn to alcohol, TV, isolation, pity, bitterness, anything and everything that does not help. In turn, their goal is to avoid grief, no matter what. Therefore, if you have loved and you have lost one that you have loved, it is so easy to say, I will never do that again. I will never get close again. I will never risk again. I expect unbelievers to do that because they really believe in their heart of hearts that all of life is to revolve around them.

We are people of the gospel. We are citizens of another kingdom. We believe differently because we see things differently. Life is not about us. We see affliction as a gift. It does not remove the sorrow of affliction. It does remove our grief. We mourn, and perhaps mourn deeper because we do not run from it, numb it, or medicate it. We face our loss. We feel our loss. We own our loss. We embrace our loss. But we also know that those who mourn in Christ are blessed because they will be comforted. God will comfort those who are afflicted in Christ with so much comfort that they will be able to enter into the affliction of others and share with them.

Therefore, for Patrick's service I am going to speak from 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 but I am going give you the introduction to that message, this morning. I will deliver the message, Lord willing, next Saturday evening, and then bring the conclusion to it, next Sunday morning. I think that this will be helpful because we will not only need to hear these truths on Saturday evening, but we need to hear them now. We need to rehearse these truths over and over to ourselves. In fact, I am going to suggest, (that is urge you strongly), to read 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 every day this week. 2 Corinthians, for whatever reason is like a step-child epistle in the New Testament. It does not seem to be appreciated like other New Testament books. Perhaps this mini-series, born in grief will forever change that for you. I pray that to be the case. This letter exposes and addresses so many misconceptions about Christianity, about the church and about those who are called to minister the gospel.

Read text:

2 Corinthians is extremely personal. Have you ever had someone reveal very personal things to you, when you did not think that you had earned the right to hear them? It is as if the Apostle Paul takes us into his very soul and reveals all of his vulnerabilities to us and there is a reason for that. This letter is raw. It is engaging. It is emotional. While there are great theological content and rich truths, they are expressed in the context of deep, soul-feeling. Paul really exposes his soul in this letter and with good reason. Paul went to Corinth (Greece) after his rejection at Athens. He spent 18 months there reaching people with the gospel and forming a church. These people were like his children, but some of them were arrogant, immature, demanding, and self-centered, all while claiming to be extremely spiritual because of the "spiritual gifts" that they possessed. These were very needy people who were often pathetic. Paul initially lived there for 18 months. After Paul left, he received news that things were going very badly. So, he wrote the book of 1 Corinthians in order to straighten things out. Then, he went back to address the problems in person and things did NOT go well at all. That visit, known as the "painful visit" (2.1) was crushing to Paul. Let me explain why. Do you know why parenting is so difficult? Parenting, like marriage is so difficult because of what it reveals about you. Your children do not make you angry; they expose the anger that is already there. Your spouse does not cause you to be frustrated; your spouse exposes the frustration that is already there. Put that on steroids, and you have the ministry. There is hardly anything in life that will expose the extent of your sin, insecurity, arrogance, self-promotion, fear of failure, fear of man, like true ministry will. In the first place, we are dealing with truth that goes to the very depths of our souls. The ministry of the gospel goes to the very core of who we are as persons. The good news is that God, by means of the gospel, reaches into the very depths of our being and changes us from the inside out. The difficult news is that God, by means of the gospel reaches into the very depths of our being and exposes what it is in there, and deals with what is in us by helping us understand what is in there and face what is in there, and admit what is in there, and confess what is in there and repent of what is in there, and accept his forgiveness of what is in there. But, the truth of what is in us is embarrassing. In the second place, we are not only sinners, but in ministry we are dealing with sinners. People can be very demanding. So, in ministry, you are a broken person who is trying to help other broken people, but some people will not tolerate anything less than perfection. That is why relationships can get messy. Without the gospel has a healing ointment applied to our wounds, we will hurt one another.

That is why every church has a choice. We can be a bag of marbles, or a bag of grapes. A bag of marbles only affects the others, when we happen to collide from the jostling that happens because we are all in the same bag. Each marble retains its own shape, color, and design. No one marble changes the life of another marble. And, honestly, it really does not matter if there are 41 or 42 marbles in your Adult Bible Fellowship or 1150 or 1151 marbles in the Worship Center on Sunday morning. But, a bag of grapes is different. When a bag of grapes are in that bag for a while, pretty soon, the skin begins to break down, the very grapes themselves begin to mesh with each other, until every grape becomes part of the whole. Eventually, there comes a time when you cannot tell where one grape ends and other begins. If you took one part out, you would take out a part of every grape that was originally placed in there. Now, that sounds sort of special, poetic, and even attractive, until you realize that every grape that goes into the bag is rotten. The whole thing can end up being a rotting, stinking mess.

Ministry is living inside this mess, as one of the stinking grapes and that is part of the tension. There are few things in life that will put you under such relentless scrutiny like the ministry. People talk about you. They talk about what you wear, what kind of car you drive, where you live, how your children behave, or don't behave. People scrutinize your hair, your weight, your choices, your habits and your hobbies. There is absolutely no way that you can please every single person. There is no way that you can handle every situation in a way that will protect you from disappointing someone or protect you from the criticism of others. When that truth finally hits you, it can be devastating, because your inadequacies are now publicly displayed for what feels like your whole world to see. So, what is that natural reaction to that? Most people would want to run and hide. I do not want you to see my inadequacies and weaknesses. You do not want me or anyone else to see yours. So, instead of being a bag of grapes, we chose to be a bag of marbles, where we "do" church but we really are not church.

In doing church (vs. really being church) we pretend to be church, we are involved, active, but true heart issues are never addressed, which means that while some behaviors may change, heart-change does not take place. We settle for happiness to be found in the numerical success of a ministry instead of engaging in that which will actually make our souls sing. Church becomes a corporate tool, like life-coaching in order to make my life go better. Ministers are now coaches who get professional training to help you get along in life a little better. We look good, pretend to feel good about ourselves, but are not really changing on the inside, because change at that level means that we risk too much. But that is not how Paul ministered the gospel. He went for the heart and that is how he ministered to the people in the church at Corinth. He loved them so much that he told them what they needed to hear, even if they did not want to hear it. But, when he was gone, there were some people who rose to prominence who told people what the people wanted to hear. Instead of pointing people to Christ, these people that Paul calls "super-apostles" were pointing people to themselves. Now, be careful, because they were pointing to their successes. They were exalting themselves and parading their abilities and gifts and basically telling the people that if you want to be successful like they were, then you needed to follow them. It was very appealing because these "super-apostles" were not blatant heretics. They did not teach things that were obviously wrong, but subtly off the mark. They were deviant. They used the church as a means of self-promotion. They told people what the people enjoyed hearing so that they in turn would get from the people what they (the super-apostles) wanted; admiration, attention, affirmation, money, etc. And they were good. They were not only educated, they were skilled. They knew how to use rhetoric. They knew how to work a crowd. They knew how to artfully use language in order to manipulate people one way or the other. If you are eloquent, you can make many people not only think well of you, but if you use your eloquence to make them think well of themselves, then they will think even higher of you. All of this was going on in Corinth. This is why Paul had to confront it, and he did and it did not go well. These super-apostles appeared to be much more impressive than Paul (11.6-7). Paul's weaknesses and vulnerabilities were exposed by these guys. So, Paul leaves and writes a severe letter to them, that, by God's grace is used by God to bring about some change. 2 Corinthians is the letter that Paul wrote in response to the news that the church was beginning to listen to him. His encouragement to them is born out of the grief that he experienced by their rejection of him. Instead of running and hiding because his insecurities and weaknesses are exposed, he embraces them and experiences grace in the midst of them and calls the church to do the same.

He does this by taking us back to the gospel because a right understanding of the gospel confronts and corrects our misunderstandings about Christianity, about Ministers, about the Church and about our lives. Paul goes back to the gospel because it provides a course correction for the church, because the gospel goes for the heart.

1. A Right understanding of the gospel (1.3-7)

Paul goes back to the gospel in an effort to show how Christ produces a completely new value system. His point is: The sufferings of Christ produced comfort for us. (1.5) Therefore, God uses adversity in our circumstances as a means for us to not only find comfort in him but to be able to comfort others (big idea) because (follow the logic) our eternal comfort (our salvation) came to us by means of the adversity experienced by Christ. The gospel is counter-intuitive. Christ became sin (5.21) that we might be credited with his righteousness. Christ became poor (8.9), that we through his poverty might become rich. He became weak, that we might become strong. He died that we might live. Now, he calls us to live like that. He calls us to embrace our weakness, acknowledge our failures, stop trusting in our strengths, and skills, stop making much about ourselves and instead, make much about Christ. That is why a right understanding of the gospel exposes and confronts our...

2 Misunderstanding of Christianity (1.8-11)

Our day is no different than those in Corinth. There are plenty of people who think that the gospel exists because God wants to make us the center of the universe. They preach the benefits of the gospel, as if that is the gospel itself. There are, for sure, benefits to the gospel, such as forgiveness, security, eternal life, peace, joy, reunion in glory, reigning with Christ, etc. But, those are the results of the gospel. They are not the gospel. If you only focus on the benefits of the gospel, then you can easily think that God does all of these things for you and that God exists for you. It is really all about you. Therefore, it is easy to assume that God wants you to be happy, as you understand happy. He wants you to have things, to be successful, to have a perfect family, to have smart kids, to be wealthy, to never get sick, to never be weak, to never suffer, to never have a "bad" day. We would love that, we think. Our hearts would love to be validated. So, when someone comes along and teaches us a version of Christianity that promises to give us what we think we are entitled to, we are easily duped. The impression that is given is that these Super-Christians never get sick. Super-Christians never have problems. Super-Christians never get discouraged. Super-Christians never get thrown into prison. Super-Christians never get ALS, and they sure as heck, never die. Super-Christians are not super because they are not real.

Christianity is not the means to advance myself. To become a Christian is to die to our self; to give up, to relinquish your trusting in yourself and to trust completely in Christ. It means to give up your perceived rights for comfort, for respect, for approval, for security, for advancement, and for approval and instead cast your entire hope and security upon Christ.

(1.8-11) Our sufferings are an opportunity to experience God's comfort that we (like Christ) may comfort others. Our sufferings are a means that God has ordained for the benefit of others. Christianity is the call to come and die in order that others might live. It is the call to accept affliction so that others may be comforted. It is the call to embrace and find satisfaction in your affliction, even in your death, in order that others might live. Christ

did that for our sins, we do that for the comfort and encouragement of others. That is not how many understand Christianity. But that is the call. It goes back to John 12-13.

Do you begin to see it now? If you think that you are strong, self-assured, gifted, capable, secure, able to handle anything, you are deluded. You are weak, fragile, needy, vulnerable and mortal. You need Christ. If you are weak and you know you are weak and are tempted to look to other things to compensate, give it up and look to Christ. Next, a right understanding of the gospel exposes and confronts our ...

3. Misunderstanding of a Minister (4.1-18)

A minister of the gospel is a sinner who needs to preach the gospel to himself as much as he needs to minister the gospel to others. The minister does not have it all together and has not arrived. But, if he dares admit that to too many people, he may lose his job because, just as a church has to choose whether or not they are going to be a bag of marbles, or a bag of grapes, a minister has to choose whether or not he is going to be a servant of Christ, or a professional minister. A professional is trained, and lets you know it. A professional is trained and you are proud of it. A professional has an image to create, uphold, polish and promote. If you get too close to him, you will see, like the Wizard of Oz, that he hides behind the curtain of busyness, rhetoric, skill, theological precision and the aura of his position. The professional uses the congregation in order to advance his career and secure a pension, while the congregation uses the professional to make them feel good about their reputation and esteem. Both give up honesty for the elusive attempt of pursuing self-glory. Many are willing to settle for that and call it ministry. God doesn't. Neither did Paul and thankfully, the gospel blows all of that up.

3.18 reminds us that as followers of Christ, we are in the process of being transformed into the same image (of Christ) from one degree of glory to another. This process is called progressive sanctification, in which the follower of Christ is being changed from the inside out into being more and more like Christ. This is what the Word of God does in the hearts of the people of God. This is the ministry of the minister. This is the ministry of the church. This is what is happening to us. Paul, speaking as a minister of the gospel says (4.1) "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God" (that is the ministry of the gospel that changes people from death to life and keeps changing them so that they will be a perfect replica of Jesus) "we do not lose heart." But, here is the irony, as far as the world is concerned. (4.7) "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."

We are dying men, preaching to dying people an undying message about a King who died to save us that we might reign with him forever who rose again from the dead. We do not hide our weaknesses. We do not run from our problems. We acknowledge our difficulties knowing that there is grace greater than every one of our failures and grace greater to meet every one of our needs. One of our own has been revealed before all of us, to have lived in a jar of clay. Do you see it? The gospel is the treasure and the body is the jar. In the end, what drew us to him was not the jar, but the treasure that was inside. It's not the jar; it's the treasure that is inside. You can kill the jar, but you can't steal the treasure.

Do you know what a minister is? He is ajar of clay. Do you know what you are? You are ajar of clay. These jars are temporary. These jars are not forever. The treasure inside is what matters.

So, what kind of a church do you want? Do you want a church that makes much of the jar, or makes much of the treasure? What kind of relationships do you want? What kind of life do you want? Do you want people who think that the jar is everything or people who know the difference between a jar and the treasure?

Misunderstanding of Life.