

Transfiguration of our Lord
February 22, 2009

SERMON

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2 Corinthians 4:1-7

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord. At first this may seem to be an obscure “holiday” in the Christian church. I think we all understand the meaning and importance of Christmas and Easter. We get Ascension. Pentecost... the birth of the Christian church with 3,000 coming to believe in one day. But why was Jesus’ transfiguration important? And what significance does his transfiguration have for us today?

First let’s briefly recall what happened at Christ’s transfiguration. The time of Jesus’ suffering and death was drawing closer. In fact, just six days before our Lord Jesus went up the mountain on the day of his transfiguration, he had directly foretold his suffering and death. Now he walked up the mountain with only three of his disciples – Peter, James and John. As they walked, I imagine the three disciples were still contemplating Jesus’ words. Why would their master suffer and die? Wasn’t he the Messiah? *If he knew he would suffer and die, didn’t that mean his power was limited since he apparently couldn’t stop these terrible events?* But their doubts and concerns came to an abrupt end as the Lord Jesus was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. The prophets Moses and Elijah, who had died hundreds of years earlier, stood with Jesus. The Father announced: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” Suddenly their doubts and fears vanished. Those 3 disciples saw the Lord Jesus in all his heavenly, divine glory. All became clear – Christ is almighty God. His Word is truth. His deeds are righteous. His forgiveness is real. His salvation is genuine.

Just as the Lord made Peter, James and John witnesses and heralds of his glory, so also he has made us witnesses and heralds of his glory. Our privilege as Christians is to proclaim the glory of Christ in this dark world. In today’s sermon text, the Apostle Paul encourages us to do this important work. He teaches us (1) what we should preach, (2) in what manner we should preach and (3) he also tells us what kind of result we can expect when we preach. Listen now to God’s Word as it is recorded in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4, beginning at the 1st verse. (2 Corinthians 4:1-7)

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. 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 the glory of God in the face of Christ.” But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

First, Paul answers the question: “About what do we preach?” When I was in college studying to be a pastor, my biggest concern about becoming a pastor was that I would have to write and preach sermons. I thought, “What will I say? How can I preach for 20 minutes every Sunday? I’m not an eloquent speaker. I definitely don’t like to be the center of attention. I don’t like to talk in front of a crowd. Some people thrive on that, but definitely not me. I get nervous and I’m at a loss for words! How will I be able to preach?” Perhaps you’ve had similar concerns when you think about witnessing your faith to family and friends. “What will I say? How will I find the words to explain my religion?” The answer to these questions is contained in today’s text. “*For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.*” What do we preach? Not about ourselves! We are weak, fragile jars of clay. The beauty is never in us. The beauty is in the message.

The attitude: “It’s all about me,” comes straight from Satan. Satan tempts every Christian to draw attention from Christ to self. We all struggle with this one. If God blesses us with *spiritual knowledge*, Satan tempts us to show off our knowledge so others are impressed. If God blesses us with *strong faith*, Satan tempts us to brag about our faith as if it were something we created. If God blesses us with *wealth*, Satan tempts us to congratulate ourselves for our skill in earning it. If God blesses us with *health and safety*, Satan tempts us to think we deserved it by our fervent prayers. Take a close look at your own life. Where has Satan successfully tempted you to trust yourself instead of God? In what ways do you take pride in yourself instead of giving glory to God? Confess these sins to God, for they are an offense to him. Then turn your thoughts again to the Transfiguration of our Lord. We are quickly reminded of where true glory lies. Not in us, but in Christ. And in the glory of Christ is evidence that we are truly forgiven. The one who lived for us and died on the cross for us is true God! He has made us fit for heaven.

By his mercy, God has revealed his truth to us. God, by the power of his Word, called light into existence when he created this world. By his same powerful Word, he has made his light shine in our dark hearts. He has revealed in us the knowledge of the glory of God in the person of Christ. In a sense, then, we are also witnesses of Christ’s transfiguration. God has revealed to us Christ’s glory. We know he is God and Savior of all the world.

So what do we preach about? Certainly not ourselves! Rather we preach about the crucified Christ. We preach about the glorious Christ who is our Lord and Savior. God chooses the weak and frail to preach his word. The end of our text says: “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*” We are “clay jars” which carry a beautiful treasure... the good news about Jesus. We are fragile and weak, but that just shows even clearer that the real strength is in God and in his Word. Do you feel insufficient to proclaim that gospel? Good! That’s because you are. So remember it has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with the word.

So God tells us what to preach: Christ crucified and Christ glorified. But in what manner does God want us to share his Word? When the people of this world have a message to share, deception is often used. A politician makes promises he never intends to keep and says things he doesn’t really believe in so that people will vote for him. A commercial advertises a product and exaggerates its benefits and usefulness so that people will buy it. A company promises an amazing salary to all who sell their products, but in reality, the vast majority earn very little. A person selling his car hides the fact that the car had been in a serious accident and was repaired. These are all examples of how the world spreads its propaganda – through deception, secrecy, and distorting the truth.

The apostle Paul clearly teaches us that the world's methods are not to be our methods. He writes: *"Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."* We are not to use "secret shameful ways" to preach the word. If someone did an in-depth investigation of our church, its teachings and its programs, they should find nothing that brings us shame. We don't hide our actions, but do everything openly. We also are never to use "deception" to accomplish our goals. Nor is it ever permissible to distort God's truth in order to draw more people into our church. Paul's opponents did all of these things as they tried to lead people away from Paul. In our day too, we find cults and churches using such sinful methods to attract people. May God keep us from following the ways of the world as we strive to grow His church. Dear friends, we have nothing to hide... nothing to be ashamed of... no need to deceive. God has revealed his truth in our hearts. Let us set forth this truth plainly just as the apostle Paul did.

We have talked about what we are to preach – the pure Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have talked about the manner in which we are to do it – openly, honestly and truthfully. The apostle Paul also teaches us what kind of result we can expect when we preach the truth. He wrote: *"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."*

We just heard that we should not hide the truth, but proclaim it openly. But does that mean all will accept that truth? Will everyone understand and believe the Gospel? No, they won't. To those who are perishing... to unbelievers, the Gospel is hidden it is veiled. Sometimes when a new painting of an accomplished artist is first displayed, there is a ceremony where that piece of art is first covered with cloth. After some introductory words, the cloth is pulled off and the painting revealed. To some, the gospel is never unveiled. You can proclaim it clearly and truthfully, yet some fail to understand and believe. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians: *"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* (1 Corinthians 1:18.) Just because we clearly and boldly proclaim the truth does not mean that all who hear will believe and be saved. Many reject, and for them the Gospel message is foolishness. Finally, only the holy spirit can pull back the veil. That's not our job!

I'm sure many of you have seen the Mel Gibson movie: "The Passion of the Christ." In this movie, the crucifixion of Christ is depicted clearly and truthfully. Believers who saw this film have said it is the most moving film they have ever seen. Many, when they watched the movie for the first time ended with tears in their eyes in quiet contemplation. Such is the effect of the Gospel on those who believe. One viewer said, "It made me realize that my sins killed Jesus." And on the other hand, it reminds us, "My sins have been punished fully. I am forgiven. I am free." That powerful gospel moves believers. It has a real impact in their hearts and lives.

But unbelieving critics had a very different view of this film. They saw this as an anti-Semitic film which rouses people to hate the Jews. They criticize the film maker for following the Bible account so closely instead of acknowledging that there are (in their opinion) many falsehoods and exaggerations in the Bible text. In short they ridicule this film and feel no one should go see it. To them, this film is foolishness. The apostle Paul predicted this! To those who are perishing, the Gospel is absurd.

We should expect the same as we boldly and truthfully witness the good news about Jesus Christ. Some will not understand what we are saying. Some will ridicule us. Some will say we are simpleminded. Some will hate us. But we are not seeking the favor of men when we preach the Gospel. We are simply God's servants who are witnessing to his truth. May God give us the boldness to say together with the apostle Paul: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."* (Romans 1:16)

Dear brothers and sisters, as we have seen, the transfiguration of our Lord continues to be of great importance to us today. No, transfiguration Sunday doesn't get the attention of Easter or Christmas, but it is a day we will do well to recall every day. Keep that shining image of Jesus etched in your mind... especially as we head toward the dark days of his suffering and death. The one with all power and glory joyfully, intentionally suffered and died for you and for me to remove our guilt forever. Keep that shining image of Jesus etched in your mind... especially as you head through dark days in your life. You are weak and frail. But he is powerful and glorious and will bring you through this world to the glorious inheritance he has prepared for you. Keep that shining image of Jesus etched in your mind... so that others this sin-darkened world groping around blindly will see the light shine forth in your words and actions. Be the one who pulls back the veil and gives someone their first glimpse of God's unimaginable love and forgiveness. *"Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart."* Unimaginable treasure in jars of clay. Glory to God. Amen