

Next year is Pastor Richard's 20-year service anniversary at this church. As you may know, pastors have to deal with a lot more than just preparing sermons. The hardest part is often dealing with people. So how do we persevere without getting burned out? Just like professors, many pastors can take a sabbatical, which is like an extended vacation or rest period. Does vacation help? Many of you know that even on vacation the problems from work don't go away. How many of you can really ignore all work related emails on vacation? What about getting a raise or promotion? Usually that only motivates people for a little while, before the stress sets in again. In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul talks about how to prevent burnout in ministry.

In vv. 1 and 16 the phrase "we do not lose heart" forms an inclusio, which brackets the rest of the chapter. Paul is talking about burnout here, and he says we prevent it by focusing on the mercy of God in this ministry. By the mercy of God we can share the message of the mercy of God, and by His mercy we endure. Recall that Paul is dealing with people in the Corinthian church who attacked him, calling him fickle and questioning his motives for not visiting them. Paul explained that it was for their benefit that he didn't visit them. Then in chapter 3 Paul said that he doesn't need a letter of reference because he is driven by the gospel, and they are the proof of this dedication to the gospel. Now, he says that it is through God's mercy that he has this ministry of the gospel, so he doesn't lose heart.

Living a gospel-driven life is something that can cause you to be discouraged because it's difficult. Paul experienced many obstacles outside the church, such as resistance to the gospel and persecution. That is to be expected when you preach in a place that is closed to the gospel. If we went to a country that persecuted Christians, we would expect persecution, and it does wear people down. But what sometimes hurts even more are obstacles within the church. These are not necessarily expected. When members of the church oppose and attack Paul, it feels like betrayal. We too have obstacles within the church, disputes that arise from small issues that threaten to tear us apart. In the face of such obstacles it is tempting to give up. This is why Paul says in some of his letters that he has run the race and stayed the course so that he may receive the prize. The race is not an easy one, and certainly there were many times where he thought

about quitting, because it is hard. But in the end, he could say that he remained faithful to his calling.

So how did Paul endure? He tells us here that it is through God's mercy. Participating in ministry of the gospel is a privilege granted to us by God's mercy, and the gospel is a message about God's mercy. We must realize how lucky we are to share God's mercy with others. At Jacob's preschool I lead a time of weekly singing, and I always sing the song, "Oh, How I Love Jesus," because I want to show them how much I love Him and I want them to learn to love Him too. Paul tells us we can prevent burnout by being obsessed with Jesus and with sharing about His mercy. In the pursuit of a Christian life many of us read Christian books to learn from the practical wisdom of other Christians, try to manage our finances in a godly way, maintain a rigid spiritually disciplined schedule, seek cleanliness which is "next to godliness," or strive to live busy industrious lives according to the Protestant work ethic. But none of these things directly have to do with Jesus. If we focus on these things we will get burned out. When Paul talks about the freedom we have in Christ (3:17) this includes freedom from all these things. Christian life is not about doing, but about being. Rigid rules exhausted Israel. In Christ we have freedom from this exhaustion. We don't need to focus on how much we do or how hard we work in order to please God. All we need to do is live with a focus on Jesus and His mercy towards us. We live by the power of Christ and draw our strength from Him. Pastor Richard has many problems to deal with in this church, but I think he doesn't get burned out because for two months of the year he goes overseas and is allowed to focus primarily on preaching Jesus Christ. Not having to deal with the logistical and scheduling issues and being able to focus on the gospel must be rejuvenating. We have many obstacles in this church and also when we try to witness for Jesus in our daily lives. But in the midst of these obstacles we can endure if we remain focused on our Savior. It's difficult to do, but let us be obsessed with telling people how wonderful Jesus is, and it will help us find endurance.