

The Purpose of Gospel Ministry, Part 1

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 1, Paul says, "Therefore having this ministry by the mercy of God we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our Gospel is veiled it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.

"For what we proclaim is not ourselves but Jesus Christ is Lord, with ourselves as your servants," or the word is *doulos*, slaves, "for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the

surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us but life in you."

In the section we're going to cover today, verses 7-12, we see that Gospel ministers, those who especially who are in leadership in the church, they are sufferers for the Gospel's sake. They are those who speak so boldly and so clearly and so straight forwardly that the world cannot miss their message and it incurs suffering. It brings persecution their way. They are not paraded and champions in the world. They are not sought after celebrities with millions of fans and followers. They're actually despised, rejected, and persecuted.

This text explains Christ's purpose, for all the sufferings that his ministers endure in the ministry of the Gospel. And so, you know, as we think about this text obviously it pertains to those in leadership: Pastors, elders, shepherds in the church.

But as the pastors, elders and shepherds are to set an example for the flock and to equip them to do the work of the ministry, doesn't it make sense that it applies to every Christian? Indeed it is. And I think more and more these days we're going to have to think about how it is that we as Christians are to suffer well, to suffer righteously.

The hostile world is not getting any better. It's not getting any kinder to the cause of Christ. And that started when Jesus was put to death on the cross. It continued throughout the lives of the apostles, and it's no different today. What is the purpose then of suffering for the sake of Christ? What's the purpose of being persecuted for the sake of the Gospel? We know how it comes, but what is the purpose of God in it? Simply put, this is what the text teaches: Suffering, persecution, and even death, the purpose of all of that is to manifest, to make known, to put on display, the life of Jesus Christ. The word manifest, *phaneroo*, it's used once in verse 11, there again in verse 12, and the word means to become visible. Something that is to be revealed.

So it seems maybe that it's a bit of a paradox that the life of Jesus Christ becomes visible in us when we are most subdued. When we are afflicted, persecuted, even put to death for Christ's sake. We see this paradoxical principal in the lives of the apostles who are the, the foundation stones of the church. Their lives were simply following the same pattern of the life of Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. The full manifestation, the greatest visibility, the highest revelation of that life in Jesus Christ, it came in the death of Jesus Christ. In the death of his apostles.

So, fellow Christian, if the head of our movement, if the founding fathers of our church, if that's what God ordained for them, we know what to expect for ourselves as well. If we profess Christ and we experience no suffering, no hostility for the sake of Christ, no, no suffering for the sake of sharing his Gospel, then we should see that as a potential problem in our lives. Many today are preaching an innocuous, inoffensive, Christ. Many people are giving people a, a friendly non-confrontational Gospel, one that leaves people at ease with sin, unconcerned with repentance. Making no demands for change in their life. And I'd say that's not a Gospel at all, and shouldn't be so among any of us because we know our bibles and

we know who Christ is. We know what his Gospel demands.

But perhaps even those of us who know, those of us who learn and rejoice in good theology and in biblical preaching, perhaps it might be the case that we too can struggle a bit because we're just not getting out much. We're seldom in the company of the unbelieving. We're rarely telling them about Christ. We're rarely maybe putting the demands of his Gospel before the world. And speaking straight forwardly to them, or worse, maybe when we are we say very little. Maybe we say nothing at all about Christ and his Gospel. We try to skate out of the situation quietly. Perhaps we shrink back from making things awkward, because we don't like to make things awkward. Maybe we fear them rather than loving them.

Maybe we fear them instead of God. I think there's probably not a person among us that can't admit that at some times, and in some places we do shrink back. That we aren't as faithful as we should be. Maybe we make excuses, maybe we busy ourselves with so many things that we just never get in the company of unbelievers and maybe when we're in the company of unbelievers we, we just find ourselves fearful.

My prayer for all of us is that we embrace the challenge laid before us in this text. My prayer for us is that we engage the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That we lovingly confront their sins. That we press the demands of the law and the Gospel to their consciences and let them deal with the Lord of the universe, who makes the demand, "Bow before me." May we speak boldly as ambassadors for Jesus Christ. And when we do that, we'll draw fire. When we represent the true Christ, when we preach his Gospel, it is going to bring hostility. It's going to bring rejection, suffering, perhaps even some persecution. But let us never, by God's grace, by the Spirit's power, by the encouragement from the word, let us never shrink back, let us lean in to it.

Let us look at Paul, his apos, the apostles, look at his associates and those who minister with him and in, his, the name of Christ. Let us follow their faith and life. Let us see their faith and follow their example. That we might know the honor of being counted among them. To have that Christ like courage, to live a life of Pauline faithfulness and boldness. It all starts with understanding the principal of glory through suffering. The principal of life that is manifest in death. That is what makes

this text so foundational. Not just to the Gospel ministry, a formal office of ministry, but this is foundational to Christianity itself. Because it teaches us the purposes of God in suffering for the sake of his Christ. Suffering for the sake of his truth.

God has good purposes in our suffering for Christ and his Gospel. And when we understand his purposes for our suffering, we're not only willing to get out there and join in suffering for the sake of Christ; we become eager to do so. We become excited about the prospect of receiving rejection and persecution and suffering for the sake of Christ. It's our call to arms, it's the trumpet that blows and, and brings us to the line. It's the command of our Savior to join him, to join his apostles, and to join the Christian church, in suffering for the sake of Christ.

Here's the first point, number one, God uses common Christians as vessels of divine power. This point just looks at verse 7, that "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." Jars of clay. For archeologists jars of clay or earthen vessels, in the

form of pottery, bowls, pitchers, dishes, all of them made from hard baked clay, archeologists find these things all the time in their digs. Very common. Some of the most common forms of evidence that they can find of ancient civilizations are in these broken pieces of pottery uncovered at every archeological dig.

These are commonplace vessels, receptacles that held all kinds of things that were useful in a home. Dry goods like grains or liquid goods like oil or wine or water. These could be made from any various materials like, like metal, glass, even an ornamental stone, you know like alabaster flasks that held perfume and things like that. But Paul is specific about the kind of vessel he's talking about, he has this word *ostrakinos*; *ostraka*, referring to that common every day vessel. It's not something precious, it's not metal, it's not gold, it's not alabaster, it's clay. Dirt from the ground. Clay that's hard baked, baked in the kiln, and that's what he wants us to picture here.

He wants us to think of a common vessel, not an ornamental one. He wants us to think of a cheap container, not one that



costs a lot. Not something that's brought out to impress other people. Not something that's used to serve the important guests who come over for dinner. And though they're not ornamental or expensive, vessels that were made out of clay were extremely useful. It's what dominated all the, the life of the home is passing around these vessels made of clay. Very helpful. So the value is not in the material itself that makes up the vessel. Because these vessels, used in daily household life is, they're inexpensive. There's not a lot of bother when one of them breaks. A chipped or cracked vessel, still useful, even to a point. But when a bowl or a jar would break altogether there's no big fuss, it's expected, it's a normal part of life in the home. It's like one of your common cereal bowls when one of your kids drops it on the floor, you sweep up the mess and you go to the next one in the drawer.

If an earthen vessel that they would use, if it became too cracked for daily use, that one's discarded, another one takes its place, just throw it away and replace. Paul's saying this about himself and his fellow ministers. This is what we are, common, not very expensive, certainly not ornamental. You think Paul thought highly of himself? Not at all. This is in contrast to what the false teachers who infiltrated Corinth tried to say

about Paul. He thinks a lot of himself. Not at all. You think he considered his apostolic commission is that which elevated him above others; demanded deference, and respect, and regard, not at all. Here he says, I'm just a clay pot. I'm just an earthen vessel. I'm meant to be used every day and even in uncared hands, at times abused. Those who are clumsy with me, they'll break me. And when my time is done, I'm discarded, as I should be, and replaced by the new model.

The real value though of these vessels, these clay pots, again it's not the material of which they're composed, it's the value in what they contain. Paul says in verse 7, "Our vessels contain this treasure." What treasure? It's what he said in verse 6, the treasure is God himself shining in our hearts who gives us "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." He's speaking of himself as an apostle, with a, with a prophetic gift where God, by the spirit, reveals things to him about the Gospel and he preaches forth that Gospel. It's God shining in his heart, giving him the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He brings that Gospel truth, and by the way, all that is written contained right here in Scripture, that treasure. That's what he

brings. That's what his body contains. That's what his vessel holds.

The treasure itself, obviously as Christians, we know the infinite value; treasure is priceless, it's beyond the worth of the universe and all it contains, after all Jesus said, "What would it profit a man if he gained the whole world and forfeited himself." It's a treasure of eternal durability, one that will never break, one that will never grow old. It's a treasure of omnipotent power. It's able to call the universe into existence and also to regenerate and transform a sinner. It's a treasure of infinite glory. It's a treasure that outweighs the universe and all it contains. It's an unending, unfading, glorious treasure, because the light of the knowledge of the glory of God is in it, in the face of Jesus Christ.

If I were to give you something of great value, a gold bar that I got as a little token gift from Fort Knox, or something like that. The hope diamond, which weighs 45.55 karats. The Arkenstone for you Lord of the Rings fans. Where would you put a treasure of such great value? If I gave you some treasure, a material treasure like that, you would immediately take that

treasure and lock it in a vault. Under lock and key, monitored by a security system, guarded by a platoon of navy seals, you'd hire them all. You'd lock it away. Why? Because you don't want anybody getting to it.

It's not what God does with his treasure, he deposits a treasure of infinite value in earthen vessels, in human beings, in common breakable jars of clay. Why? Why does he do that? Because in God's economy, God guards his treasure by putting it in weak receptacles that are guaranteed to leak. They're certain to break. Why is that? Because when clay pots break, the treasure is exposed to others. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. The literal translation of that last part from the Greek text it makes the purpose clause just a little bit clearer it says that "we have this treasure in jars of clay in order that the surpassing power may be sourced in God and not derived out of us." Sourced in God.

We want that to be clear to people and especially for shepherds, pastors, preachers. True preachers don't want anybody looking at them. It's not about them. If people get caught up in

the vessel, they've lost it. They've missed the point. It's got to go beyond the vessel, beyond the human receptacle, so the people can see the treasure. If they don't see the treasure there's something wrong with our ministry. This treasure, Paul says, "God shining the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The treasure in our hearts is a Gospel of superlative power, the word there is *hyperbole*. Literally the word *hyperbole*, it means to throw beyond. *Hyper*, beyond, and then *bolo*, the word throw. *Hyperbole*, it's an extraordinary power. It's a power that defies any human explanation as to its cause. It's a power far beyond anything explainable in man, explainable in the world, or the universe for that matter.

The extraordinary power, the superlative power, this treasure, Paul's not talking about God's omnipotence in a general sense, though it's sourced in the divine omnipotence. Paul's talking about something far more specific here in this context. The power of the treasure carried in weak vessels, human beings, common Christians, is the manifestation of divine grace, a grace that saves and sanctifies. This power, this treasure is the power of the Gospel to save and sanctify

sinners. It's an extraordinary power, it's a superlative power, it's a hyperbolic power, one that has no source in mankind.

It's so extraordinary, so amazing, it defies any human explanation. Only God has the kind of power that is sufficient to convert and transform the sinner. Paul here is self-consciously committed to God's good purpose in this. Using fragile, weak, common vessels like himself as the receptacle to carry this treasure. He's conscious about it, self-conscious, and he's committed to making that apparent to everybody. He knows God's good purpose, he's fully on board with God's plan, he sees God's wisdom, and so he's intentional to deemphasizing himself, the human vessel, because he does not want there to be any confusion whatsoever about the power source.

In understanding that God has a good purpose in using common vessels like us God intends to show through us even through weakness, even through fragility, even through bad health, even through an inarticulate manner of speaking, even in our tendency to make mistakes, to get things wrong, even in our nervousness and our stuttering speech, there's such a confidence that God intends to show through us that the surpassing power

belongs to God and not to us. Why, it's so men don't put their faith in a fragile vessel like us, a common clay pot, there's no salvation in us. Rather we want their faith to rest safely, securely, eternally, in the power of God. This helps us, doesn't it, to, not to think too highly of ourselves. As if on the one hand our nature as a clay pot has anything to do with attracting and drawing and converting or sanctifying a sinner.

You can't put enough paint on the clay pot to make it useful and powerful to save and sanctify. It's not about us, but the treasure we carry inside of us, it's what we proclaim, the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." So this has a tendency to curb our pride so that we mortify and kill it. On the other hand, this helps us to remember our nature as clay pots, common vessels, weak, sometimes failing vessels. The power of God in the Gospel to save and sanctify really has nothing to do with repelling the sinner either. Who we are as common vessels, we are not the one repelling the sinner, it's the power of God and the Gospel that repels the sinner. God knows that we're nothing more than clay pots.

He's the one who designed us. He's the one who formed Adam

out of clay and breathed into him, an animating principle of life. His expectations about us are pretty realistic. In fact, this is why he put the treasure in you in the first place. It's to show everyone the surpassing power is so obviously not of us. So thinking about it this way, our nature as clay pots, as common vessels, It's meant to encourage the faint hearted.

For those who shrink back from confrontation. Who don't want to make the room awkward by bringing up Christ and his Gospel. It's to encourage you that, listen, it's not about you it's about him. But learn from Paul's teaching here. Follow Paul's example, tell people about the Gospel. God uses common Christians as vessels of divine power. Knowing and understanding that it gives us confidence and courage, it gives us humility. It gives us boldness.