

# **Treasures in Jars of Clay**

**Scripture: II Corinthians 4:1-7**

**By Pastor John H. Noordhof  
Williamsburg Christian Reformed Church**

**July 18, 2010  
Morning Service**

---

People of God, this morning we have ordained these men into their respective office of elder and deacon. It is a call to ministry. It is a call to serve the Lord. Elders serve by governing the church in Christ's name and are responsible for the spiritual well being of God's people. Deacons serve by showing mercy in the name of Christ to people within and outside this community of believers. Together, with me, minister of the Word and Sacrament, we are called to lead and direct this local congregation in its ministry.

Perhaps you who have been ordained today feel inadequate to this task. As you heard the form read and the expectations laid out before you, perhaps you said to yourself: who am I that I can fulfill these obligations? Am I really up to serving in this office? Will I have the time and energy to carry out my tasks? You are not alone in such thoughts. Your fellow office-bearers also have the same sentiments.

But such feelings of inadequacy aren't limited to those ordained to the offices of minister, elder or deacon. Because I remind you, the ministry of the church is the responsibility of all her members, not just those in office. We are all called to be prophets, priests, and kings. As prophets we are all called to bear witness to the name of Jesus. As priests we are all called to present our whole lives as a living sacrifice of praise to God. As kings, we are all called to reign with Christ over the entire creation.

That's an awesome responsibility each one of us has. Having elders, deacons and a pastor doesn't let the rest of the church off the hook for doing the work of the church. As a result, every member can ask: Who am I to do the work of the church? How can I fulfill my tasks so that the ministry of the church can move forward?

The apostle Paul answers some these questions in our scripture reading. In these verses he describes the ministry to which the church has been called. It is a ministry which has been given to those who are like jars of clay, jars which are fragile vessels and are easily broken; jars which have little beauty or value in themselves; yet jars which contain a great treasure. And so, we who are fragile creatures, we who are weak in ourselves, we who feel inadequate to the task at hand, we have been entrusted with this great ministry.

These verses come in the midst of a number of chapters in which Paul describes the glories of the ministry. He does so in the context of having to defend himself against criticism and attacks from individuals and groups within the church of Corinth. Corinth was a very difficult church for Paul to work in. Even though he comes with apostolic authority, having received his commission directly from Christ, nevertheless, there were members in the church who rejected his teachings and went their own way. But Paul does not give up in his ministry to them. In this letter, Paul defends his actions. More than that, he also bursts out in speaking about the glories of the ministry to which he and the church has been called.

What is this ministry? In the previous chapter, in chapter three, verse six, he says God has made us ministers of the new covenant. A covenant Paul describes as bringing righteousness and glory to God's people through Jesus Christ. In the immediate verses preceding our text, Paul compares the glory of Moses with our glory. If under the old covenant Moses' face shone because he reflected the glory of God, how much more will we in the new covenant reflect the glory of God, since by the power of the Spirit we are being recast into the image of Christ.

Then in the chapter after our text, Paul talks about the ministry of reconciliation. God and man have been reconciled through Jesus Christ. This message of reconciliation has now been entrusted to us so that we are God's ambassadors, bringing the message "Be reconciled to God."

This is the ministry we have. To be the community of believers in which the glory of Christ is revealed. To be ambassadors for God, speaking a message of reconciliation. It is a ministry in which the gospel has been entrusted to us: to defend, to proclaim, and to live out in our lives.

It is a ministry in which we reject certain ways of doing things and hold firm to certain standards. Paul says in verse 2:

*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.*

The church does not use any means necessary in order to accomplish her goals. Instead, the practices of the church must fit the pattern of the gospel message. Paul says *we have renounced secret and shameful ways*. What he means by that is explained by what he continues to say.

*We do not use deception*. Unfortunately, when I think of deception I think of politics. I know it's not fair to the many good men and women who serve us in public office, but there is something about the political system that seems to thrive with deception. Whether it is the attack ads that are unfair, or the use of manipulated statistics to prove a point, or the distortion of the opponent's platform, deception seems to be part of the political process. As a result, voters are cynical and are cautious in trusting what politicians say.

That's not the way it ought to be with the ministry of the church. Power politics, personality cults, or deceptive means have no place within the church. The church of Corinth suffered from these things. There were divisions based on personalities. There were attacks on Paul's character. There were distortions of the Word of God, as some denied the resurrection of the body.

Paul rejects these means. They are inappropriate for the church. Instead, he desires to speak the truth plainly. He will rest on the testimony of Scripture. He will lay it out plainly. Paul also talks about accountability. He commends himself to their conscience. He knows that people can read the motives and intentions of leaders. A person using deceptive means may be able to fool some of the people some of the time. But you can't fool all the people all the time. Personal integrity can't be bought; it has been to be earned by honest practices. In addition to being evaluated by others, Paul knows he is accountable to God. He is working in the sight of God, who knows his heart and his motives. One day he will be called upon to answer for his actions.

As we carry out the ministry of the church, we are to use the means that are appropriate to the gospel message. We should not deceive people, nor distort the Word of God to suit our own agenda. Instead, we are to use the Word openly and plainly, knowing that we are accountable to each other and ultimately to God.

Paul continues to describe the ministry of the gospel as being hidden. Paul concedes that not everyone will accept the gospel message. Indeed, the majority of the people in Corinth rejected its message. They remained blind to the light that the gospel of Christ brings. Because there is an opposing force to the gospel. Paul calls it the "god of this age". This is a reference to Satan. While Satan has been defeated on the cross, he is still able to work his

deception. He will fail in frustrating the plans of God. But in the meantime, there will be opposition to the ministry of the church.

As a result, we ought not to be surprised by the spiritual blindness that surrounds us. There will be resistance to the gospel. There will be those who will try to undermine the foundations of the church. This is not a pessimistic view. It is a realistic view. We need to know our enemy. We need to defend ourselves against the temptations that would bring us down. We need to acknowledge that it is not we ourselves who can deliver people out of their spiritual blindness; only God can do that.

And that's the positive side of the ministry. Many people do receive the light of the gospel. Just as God created light in the beginning to shine in the darkness, so God makes his light shine in our hearts--revealing the glory of God through Jesus Christ. We have that light. We don't have to doubt it. We don't have to be shy about it. We have the light of the knowledge of God's glory. That gives us the confidence to carry out the ministry of the church.

It is a ministry that has as its focus the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul says in verse five: *For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* The heart of the gospel message is Jesus and what God has done through him; namely, through Christ God has reconciled ourselves to him. That might seem to be a narrow focus, but it is not. Because we preach Jesus as Lord.

That means Jesus lays claim to our whole lives so that we must shape our living according to the principles of Christ's kingdom. Since Jesus is Lord, he lays claim to this entire creation. Christ calls upon all people to worship and serve him. Christ calls upon the realm of government, education, labor, and family, to reflect his lordship. That's a tall order. Therefore to preach Jesus as Lord is not a narrow message but it is as all encompassing as the creation itself.

Since Jesus is Lord, that makes us his servants. We take our marching orders from him. As his servants, we serve one another. We don't become each other's masters. Our master is Christ alone.

But perhaps by this time, these officebearers feel even more inadequate to the task they have been called. Instead of encouraging you, these words have added to your burden. After all, this ministry of being ambassadors for Christ is an awesome responsibility. This charge to speak the truth plainly and not use deceptive ways requires wisdom in handling the word of God. This warning about the "god of this age" means we must put on the spiritual armor of God. This Christ-centered focus asks that we become humble servants. So who am I to handle all of this?

But even if you weren't ordained to your respective office, you would still have this task of ministry. Because it is the shared task of all the members of the church, though officebearers do have a unique function within the whole. As a result, every one of us can ask: Who me? How can God use me? Why would God use me?

That's why it is so crucial to hear verse seven. *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

I want you to imagine two small cases--cases to hold a priceless necklace. One case is black velvet, soft to touch. The metal of the case is made of gold. The embroidery also uses gold. The other case is made up of dull steel, with all kinds of scratches on it. The hinges are loose. Which case would you put the priceless necklace in? The fancy one, right? That's what you would expect.

But that's not the case when it comes to the great treasure God has given. This treasure is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And to whom has it been given? This ministry of reconciliation has been given to us. But who are we? We are like that dull case, not the fancy one. Paul says we are like jars of clay. Nothing fancy, just ordinary pottery. Pottery that can be easily broken. Yet God uses us. We don't deserve to be the container of this treasure. We are not worthy. But this ministry has been given to us--to those in office, as well as to every believer.

Our own admissions of our inadequacies reveal that the gospel is the power of God, not our own. It is God who is at work. God uses our weakness, our frailty, and through that models what the gospel is all about. Because God himself took on our weakness through Jesus, his son, to make all things new.

At times, we despair about our abilities. We get discouraged concerning our effectiveness in the ministry. We are jars of clay. But God uses us. Therefore, we do not have to lose heart. Instead, our very weakness can showcase the glory of God. And in the end, that's what counts. Amen.