

Jars of Clay (2 Corinthians 4)

Christ in us, the hope of glory (Colin Hughes)

Sunday Evening 29 June 2008

Saint Peter wrote,

“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

(1 Peter 4:10-11)

Three things are clearly stated in this passage.

- (i) Every one of us has received a gift from God: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others...”. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he wrote, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:7).
- (ii) We are required to use the gift. Not only because Peter wrote, “Each one should use whatever gift”, but because it also says, “... so that in all things God may be praised”. If we truly love God and have grasped what it means to be children of God then we will desire to do whatever it takes to bring praise to God. And in this passage we are instructed that using the gift will result in God being praised.
- (iii) It is to be used to share the gospel: “... so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ”. In other words, it is through sharing with others the message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that people might come to know and praise God. And ultimately this brings the glory of God: “To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

If we are honest, I don’t think any of us would deny the truth that we have each received a gift from God. In fact, it would be impossible in light of the numerous passages in scripture that support it. It is simply not possible to be a Christian and yet not have received a gift from the Holy Spirit to equip us for God’s work; recall what Paul wrote, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

However, having this idea clearly planted in our head is for most of us an entirely different thing to having it firmly planted in our hearts. We might intellectually know that we have each received a gift from God, but somehow we often fail to recognise it or even properly use it. And even further from our hearts and minds can be, “for the glory of God”. How can my ordinary life bring glory to God?

That is the question we aim to answer. Let us turn to God’s word spoken through the Apostle Paul in his second letter to the Church in Corinth, chapter four.

2 Corinthians 4

Treasures in Jars of Clay

1 Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 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. 3 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. 5 For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 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.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

13 It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, 14 because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence. 15 All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

This passage begins with an important word that we often encounter when reading scripture: therefore. The meaning of this opening verse hinges on what was said just before it. In the previous chapter Paul teaches that we are all ministers of the new covenant and our ability to perform this ministry comes from God. Verses 5 and 6 in chapter three read, "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant..."

The verses immediately preceding this passage describe the result of this ministry, "But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

So the result of the ministry is having the veil removed, in turn we reflect God's glory as we are transformed into His likeness, and it is that which ultimately draws people to God.

Now the opening verse has a context: "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry..."

It is an amazing thing - in fact, amazing Grace - that God has prepared a way for any of us to come to Him, and even more remarkable is that He has chosen to use each of us to be ministers of this amazing grace. But there is a curious conclusion to the "therefore" in this

verse: "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart." With this wonderful message what could cause us to lose heart?

We need to remind ourselves of the context in which Paul has written this letter. Paul has been deeply grieved by the actions and words of a number of Corinthians who claimed to be Christians, but preached a very different gospel message to that of Paul. In confronting them it seems that they have attacked him and asked the question, if his message is the true message then why does he have such few converts? Their message, on the other hand, attracted many. By Paul's own admission he was not a very good speaker. In the first letter to the Corinthians he had already written,

"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power."

(1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Paul defends the true message by claiming (verse 2), "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the Word of God." The Greek word used for deception means "cunning" or "slyness", and the word we translate "distort" was carefully chosen as a word used in commerce when a trader adulterates or cheapens a product for profit. Paul then goes on to say, "On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." In other words, I stand before God and accept his judgement if anything I have spoken is contrary to His word. Now that is bold!

Preaching the truth takes courage and is rarely popular. Paul goes on to attack these false teachers: (verse 3) "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing." To Paul it was very simple: the fault was not in the message he preached, but in the hearts and minds of the unbelievers. For, (verse 4) "The god of this age (Satan) 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." And Paul is careful to qualify that those for whom the veil has been removed cannot take any credit for themselves, because God has (verse 6) "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."

In chapter three we heard that unlike the glory of God that shone in the face of Moses which did fade, the glory of God in the face of Christ is eternal, because He is the image and the glory of God. Therefore to know Christ is to know God and His glory. Isn't that marvellous?

Then we are treated to this wonderful encouragement, (verse 7) "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." The treasure is the glorious truth of the gospel message and yet God has chosen to place it in us, who are nothing more than ordinary, fragile clay pots. Why would God entrust such a treasure to us? It is so that people are left in no doubt where the true power comes from, and to whom the glory should be given.

However, the metaphor of being clay pots which are easily broken is not unintentional. Paul has experienced first hand the frustrations, difficulties, and even persecutions for preaching the true gospel. Hence in the next few verses (8-9) he talks about "being hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." And then (verse 10), "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus..." But the Greek word used here for "death" is better translated as "dying"; that is, "the dying of Jesus". In other words, Paul was making the distinction that Jesus did not just suffer in His death on the cross, but in His life long ministry; he suffered loneliness, disappointment, harassment, mocking, betrayal, and then ultimately an agonising death. That is also why Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:31, "I die every day..." .

Paul is not trying to depress us. He is, once again, defending the reality of preaching the truth. Another criticism he faced, and a lie the false teachers in Corinth used, was that his sufferings were hardly proof that he was in "God's favour". Even today we hear false teachers telling us that we should avoid adversity, and unless we live an abundant life filled with blessings then we are under the judgement of God and must be living in sin. For servants faithful to the word of God this could not be any further from the truth. Jesus suffered. Paul suffered. If we are preaching the true message then we can expect to suffer. But there is a purpose in our suffering. In verse 13 we read the strange statement, "It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken'. With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak." This is a quote from Psalm 116. We should note that whenever a reference to scripture is given the writer is not picking out a single verse to capture his point. Rather the entire passage from which it came is relevant to his case.

Psalm 116

- 1 I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;
he heard my cry for mercy.
- 2 Because he turned his ear to me,
I will call on him as long as I live.
- 3 The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
- 4 Then I called on the name of the LORD :
"O LORD, save me!"
- 5 The LORD is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
- 6 The LORD protects the simplehearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me.
- 7 Be at rest once more, O my soul,
for the LORD has been good to you.

8 For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death,
my eyes from tears,
my feet from stumbling,

9 that I may walk before the LORD
in the land of the living.

10 I believed; therefore I said,
"I am greatly afflicted."

11 And in my dismay I said,
"All men are liars."

12 How can I repay the LORD
for all his goodness to me?

13 I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.

14 I will fulfil my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people.

15 Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.

16 O LORD, truly I am your servant;
I am your servant, the son of your maidservant;
you have freed me from my chains.

17 I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the LORD.

18 I will fulfil my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people,

19 in the courts of the house of the LORD—
in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD.

This whole Psalm describes suffering and adversity for God's sake and Paul quotes it to remind us that suffering is not something that began with believers under the new covenant. Verse 10 of Psalm 116, which he refers to in his letter, reads, "I believed, therefore I spoke." In other words, the faith God has invested in us gives courage to speak out even in the midst of adversity. Moreover it makes us even more determined. And even if our suffering for Christ's sake leads to death, Paul explains (verse 14), "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence." How wonderful!

Paul finishes off this splendid passage with some inspiring truths (verses 16-18): "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

He uses a clever contrast (verse 17) between the "momentary light afflictions" and the "eternal weight of glory". We should also note that the word translated "momentary" does not mean sixty seconds, or a few days here and there, it means "in this present time". In other words, during our entire life here on earth. Similarly in this passage Paul is not talking about some future hope when we die, although in that day we will be fully sanctified and our transformation into the likeness of Christ will be complete. Instead he is saying that day by day we are being inwardly renewed. What is seen: wealth, comforts, riches, we acquire in this world are temporary, but what the Spirit of God works within us, the unseen, is eternal. Through these afflictions we face, God is working to make us more like Christ in the here and the now. As Paul said (verse 11), "so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." That is a most excellent message. So despite the fears we all naturally hold in the face of suffering, why would we wish to avoid one moment of adversity if it works to make us more like Christ, a reward of eternal glory, right here and right now? And through that eternal glory working in us we become more effective in our evangelism. Paul says (verse 15), "All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God."

So what does all this mean for us? We are like clay pots. Ordinary people invested with the most wonderful gift of God's grace and equipped for the purpose of evangelising. Every one of us has been given a unique gift from God, which empowers us to work with God to draw people to Him, and ultimately bringing glory to God. However, the natural inclination of man is to receive glory for himself and so our message is impossible to understand to those who are perishing, and for whom the veil still covers. Paul wrote, "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) So by faithfully living according to God's word we begin being transformed into the likeness of Christ and reflect the glory of God. It's so simple. All we need do is pray earnestly that God may remove the veil from the blinded hearts and minds of unbelievers, and speak the plain truth of Christ crucified. No gimmicks, clever words, or eloquent speech is required. Always working in God's strength. God does the rest. But here is the best part. We should never lose heart, because if in our living we are persecuted for God's sake, then He is at work in us providing an eternal reward that will never perish. That is, adversity increases our transformation into the image of Christ, which reflects God's glory all the more and makes our witness even greater. Paul wrote, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10) How glorious! Let us finish where we started by listening to the words Peter wrote.

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."