

Treasurers in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4.1-18

May 6

During twenty years of serving as an interim pastor, I discovered that congregations need to understand biblical teachings about the role of the pastor. In the context of Paul's problematic relationship with the church at Corinth, Paul detailed the role of a spiritual leader. While not every reader of this lesson will not be a pastor, every believer needs to understand the unique responsibility of the spiritual leader. Therefore, while the principles of this passage apply to all believers, I will focus on Paul's direct teaching regarding the biblical nature of ministry. I am convinced that a large percentage of church conflict arises from a misunderstanding of the biblical roles of the minister and congregation.

What did Paul teach about the role of the minister?

First, Paul lifted up the sole motive for ministry (2 Cor. 4.1). No one enters the ministry with a sense of personal adequacy. "Who is adequate for these things?" (2 Cor. 2.16 CSB). "It is not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God (2 Cor. 3.5). The motive for ministry is the undeserved mercy of God (2 Cor. 4.1). Ministry derives from a calling of God. Every minister (and layperson) is saved by grace, gifted by grace, and serves by grace. There is nothing more pathetic than a preacher of the gospel that has given up (CBS) or loses heart (ESV). The merciful call of God in the life of the man of God provides preserving grace.

Second, Paul set forth the method of ministry (2 Cor. 4.2-5). While ministers by calling and necessity are involved in various types of ministry service such as counseling or leadership, the primary method of ministry is the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4.5). The Lordship of Christ in the life of the proclaimer requires integrity of life and faithfulness in communicating the Word of God. Ministry flows out of integrity; therefore, a minister renounces behaviors contrary to the proclamation of Jesus as Lord. Moreover, a minister can preach the Word employing deceit or distortion of the message. A minister can distort the Word of God by adding to God's Word (Judaizers) or distorting God's Word (easy believe-ism).

Third, Paul described the proper role of ministry (2 Cor. 4.5). A ministerial leader is neither a CEO or a hireling passively driven by others. A minister is a bondservant or slave on behalf of the Lord Jesus for the sake of others. A bondservant serves at someone else's house; serves at someone else's convenience, and serves without an expectation of thanks.

Fourth, Paul highlighted two aspects of the preaching of a minister (2 Cor. 4.5-7). First, the minister must not seek to preach, build up, or exalt himself. The doctrine of a biblical minister centers on the preaching of Jesus Christ as Lord. The glory of the ministry is seen in the nature of the minister as a jar of clay. The treasure is the light of the gospel. The container for the gospel is a jar of clay. Most likely a "jar of clay" has reference to common, cheap, easily broken, earthenware vessels. Judges 7 may illustrate Paul's message. The lesson shared by Paul in 2 Corinthians and Gideon is the inadequacy of humans in kingdom work. Gideon surrounded the much larger Midianite army with 300 men equipped with trumpets and jars containing small lights. The Israelite soldiers broke the jars, revealing the lights within the jars, and blinding the enemy. Ministers are common, cheap, expendable servants. When broken, the light of the light of the gospel shines out brightly into the darkness of sin and lostness. Remember God alone has the role of breaking the servant of God for the gospel to shine brightly.