

Treasure in Jars of Clay

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[0 : 0 0] Corinthians chapter 4 and verses 7 through 10. One of the wonderful things about having Phil Stogner here is that as a very senior minister, Phil is able to mentor me in my preaching. And so over the next few months, I'd like to think you'll see a few changes in my presentation and also in the way I think about preaching. So I'm very grateful already, Phil, for some of the hints. So I hope you notice the difference in the next little while. But it'll take time. 2 Corinthians chapter 4 from verse 7. But we have this treasure in jars of clay. There is a great gulf between the Christianity that wrestles with whether to worship at the cost of imprisonment and death and the Christianity that wrestles with whether the kids should play soccer on a Sunday morning.

If the American preacher John Piper is correct in what he says, what is it really costing us to be Christians? What is the price we pay for serving and following Jesus Christ? What is that cost? And most importantly, why must we be willing to pay it? Let me slightly alter Piper's challenge. There is a great gulf between the Christianity which wrestles with whether to serve Christ at all. 2 Corinthians 4 is the Apostle Paul's manifesto of ministry, his story of service.

Bracketed as it is by his determination not to lose heart or to become discouraged, he explores the excitement and the challenge of gospel ministry. Having declared the power of God in the gospel in verse 6 and how the work of saving transformation and change in a person's life is entirely the sovereign work of God, he now moves on in verses 7 through 10 to discuss the cost of serving Christ in gospel ministry.

This section contains what is perhaps the best known verse in this chapter, but we have this treasure in jars of clay.

In these verses, the Holy Spirit is gently probing us, challenging us. Are you willing to bear the cost of serving Christ?

[2 : 5 5] Are you willing to pay the price? There is a great gulf between the Christianity that wrestles with whether to serve Christ at the cost of imprisonment and death, and the Christianity which wrestles with whether to serve Christ at all.

Now, these verses form a cleverly constructed argument. The beginning of verse 7 and the beginning of verse 10 belong together.

Together they talk of the cost that carries. Verses 8 and 9 work together to describe the cost that crushes.

And then the end of verse 7 and the end of verse 10 belong together again. Together they talk of the cost that conquers. So in this discussion of gospel ministry, this ministry to which all of us in general are called, we must take three things into account.

The cost that carries. The cost that crushes. The cost that conquers. And again, the Holy Spirit is gently probing each one of us.

[4 : 1 2] Are you willing to bear this cost? Are you willing to pay this price? First of all then, it's a cost that carries.

It's a cost that carries. At the beginning of verse 7 we read, but we have this treasure in jars of clay. And that phrase is further explained by the words at the beginning of verse 10, always carrying around in our body the death of Christ.

Every word and every phrase in these sentences bear the weight of a thousand studies. We can merely scratch the surface of all that can be known about gospel ministry here.

For example, the gospel ministry is described as being this treasure. This treasure. In this context of verse 7, the treasure is not so much the gospel itself, but the ministry of the gospel.

God's call to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ. The Christ through whose life and death and resurrection sin is forgiven, hope bestowed, and eternal life promised.

[5 : 31] I want to share with you the comments of the North American theologian Charles Hodge on this gospel ministry. He writes, This is a ministry of life, of power, of glory.

It reveals the grandest truths. It produces the most astonishing effects. It frees men from the condemnation and power of sin.

It transforms them into the image of Christ. It delivers them from the power of the God of this world and makes them partakers of eternal life. When I was a child, I truly believed that if only I could get to the end of the rainbow, I would find a pot of gold.

I wonder if whether we realize as Christians that the ministry of the gospel, God's call to proclaim salvation to all men and women, is the greatest treasure the earth has ever known.

There may be times when we as servants of Christ become so discouraged that we think of giving up. The minister thinks of leaving his calling behind as a proclaimer of the riches of Christ.

[6 : 53] But if we have been given a treasure of inestimable worth, how foolish it would be to give it up for a brass farthing. No sensible person would give a pound so he could gain a penny.

So why then would a minister of the gospel ever be so foolish as to give up the treasure of gospel ministry to which he has been called for the brass farthing of anything else?

Likewise, if I told you that a man must walk from Glasgow to Edinburgh with a 50 kilogram weight on his back composed entirely of rock, that man would bitterly complain.

But if you told him that he must walk from Glasgow to Edinburgh with a 50 kilogram weight on his back composed entirely of gold that you will give him and will be his, if he will gladly bear that burden, he'll say, it's a deal.

In the same way, the minister of the gospel may part with possessions and property and sanity and health, but the last thing he may part with is the gospel ministry to which he has been called because it is, above all things, treasure.

[8 : 23] But then Paul says something very curious. He says, we have this treasure in jars of clay. The gold of gospel ministry is not carried in a golden chest, but in the most common and utilitarian container, a jar made of clay.

You buy these jars for ten a penny at the local market in Corinth. You can use them, you can break them, you can throw them away. They are, after all, so very common.

Again, to quote Charles Hodge, by jars of clay is meant weak, suffering, dying men.

Weak, suffering, dying men. That's it. The jar of clay which carries the treasure of gospel ministry is so very common.

You know, the two clay tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written were carried inside a golden box called the Ark of the Covenant.

[9 : 34] The golden treasure, which is the ministry of the gospel, is carried in a jar of clay called the body. Weak, suffering, dying men.

Moving to verse 10, we discover the same general themes just set in slightly different words. Always carrying around in our bodies the death of Jesus.

This is, according to the apostle, the definition of gospel ministry. Always carrying around in our bodies the death of Jesus. Once again, we have the imagery of the jar of clay.

Always carrying about in our bodies. The body here, I want to suggest to you, is more than merely our physical frame. It is the entirety of who we are.

It is our physical, mental, and emotional personalities. The jar in which the gospel ministry is contained, this common earthen vessel, as our older translations rendered it, is the physical, mental, and emotional entirety of a person.

[10 : 50] He's got the same physical limitations as the next man. He's got the same emotional fragility as other people.

She's got the same mental reservations as anyone else. The gospel minister is no superhero from the Avengers or from the Justice League.

He is the same as everybody else. But what is that treasure he carries? What is that gospel ministry he bears in his body which costs him so greatly?

It is that he's carrying in his body the death of Jesus or perhaps more literally, the dying of Jesus. That treasure which is worth more than all this world's gold is the death of Christ.

It is the privilege of sharing in the sufferings of our Lord even as he proclaims the gospel of the cross. I'm sure none of us here have ever been unfortunate enough to have contracted the flesh-eating virus, necrotizing fasciitis.

[12 : 13] I hope we haven't. Medics call those tissues which have been destroyed by that virus necrotic. They are dying.

They are dead. That's the exact word Paul uses here. We are always carrying around in our bodies the necrosis of Jesus, his dying, his death.

The treasure of gospel ministry is necrotic. It is the dying. It is the death of our Lord Jesus. Many years ago, Phil Collins and Genesis wrote a song called Jesus He Loves Me.

And that song was a satirical criticism of big-time revival preachers. These preachers with their gleaming suits and their chauffeur-driven limousines, paid for by the dollars of hard-working lemmings who are taken in by their charisma.

In Phil Collins' mind, treasure for these revival men meant just that, gold and silver. To the shame of the church, Collins' analysis can sometimes prove only too true.

[13 : 29] But certainly not for the apostle Paul. For this common man, the treasure of gospel ministry was the necrosis of Jesus Christ.

Not a chauffeur-driven limousine, but the pain of the whip. Not a gleaming suit, but suffering, betrayal, and crucifixion. Servants of Christ, as those who have been called to proclaim the gospel of Christ's grace, have we reckoned with the treasure God has called us to carry?

We do not carry gold on our backs. We carry the dying of Jesus. Not silver, but the necrosis of our Lord.

This is gospel ministry. Not with the pessimism of the depressive, but the optimism of the servant deeply committed to the sovereign glory of the gospel of God.

The cost that carries. Secondly, we have the cost that crushes. The cost that crushes from verses 8 and 9. The question for us is this.

[14 : 47] In what does the dying of our Lord Jesus consist? What does it look like to be a jar of clay? An earthen vessel?

Someone who is always carrying around in their body the dying of Christ. Well, in verses 8 and 9, Paul describes from his own experience what it means to carry in his body the necrosis of Jesus.

And what I want us to understand as a matter of priority, all of us, is that the experiences Paul lists in verses 8 and 9 are only his because they were first Christ's.

Let's go back to the beginning again. Let's, that quote from John Piper, which again I want to slightly change. There is a great gulf between the Christianity that wrestles with whether to be like Christ in his being hard-pressed, perplexed, struck down, and persecuted, and the Christianity that wrestles with whether to let our children play soccer on a Sunday morning.

I often hear the prayer, Lord, make me more like Jesus. Let me tell you, that's a great prayer to make.

[16 : 11] And yet I wonder whether when we pray this, we realize what we're letting ourselves in for. Being hard-pressed, being perplexed, being persecuted, being struck down.

Paul begins verse 8 by saying, in all things, it's translated here, we're hard-pressed on every side, but literally, in all things we are hard-pressed.

The all things govern the rest of the sentence. In all things hard-pressed. In all things perplexed. In all things persecuted. In all things struck down. The all things here mean from every direction, in every way, at all times.

It almost seems like there is no respite from the intensity of Christ-like dying. This is the cost which crushes.

The all things pressure and consequences of gospel ministry. And yet we dare not forget that just as in all things we are hard-pressed, so in all things we are not crushed.

[17 : 21] That just as in all things we are perplexed, in all things we are not in despair. That just as in all things we are persecuted, in all things we are not abandoned.

And that just as in all things we are struck down, in all things we are not destroyed. If a person wishes to pursue gospel ministry, he may be sure of the inevitability of the cost which crushes, but he must be even more convinced of the inevitability of the Christ who comforts.

That as the gospel hymn so well says, he giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater. To added affliction he addeth his mercy.

When Paul speaks about being hard-pressed, the image is that of a boxer who is being pummeled by his opponent.

He is against the ropes. He is being mercilessly punched. It would seem as if there is nowhere to go, but then just as the referee moves in to stop the fight, the boxer moves his position and gets out of punching range and survives to fight another round.

[18 : 38] We only have to read the gospels to learn how many times Jesus was on the ropes, being mercilessly pummeled by his opponents.

When Paul speaks of being perplexed, the image is that of a public speaker in a debate who, having been challenged, is at a loss as to what to do or say next.

We might say of him that he is completely lost for words. He is asked a question by his opponent and the listening audience think to themselves, there is no way he can answer that.

He seems to be lost for words. But then at the very last moment, he finds the words and he responds in devastating fashion.

Now for a time he may be lost for words, but he is not in despair because eventually he finds quite the right words to say. Again, we only have to read the gospels to learn how many times Jesus was challenged by his opponent's accusations.

[19 : 46] When Paul speaks of being persecuted, the language has moved from the boxing ring and the public arena to the language of the chase. Like a pack of hounds, the minister of the gospel has been mercilessly pursued, chased from pillar to post, like the fox running at breakneck speed to get away from the dogs.

But just as it would seem as if there's nowhere else to turn, the fox is rescued. The environmental campaigner sees the fox being pursued, captures it, puts it in the back of his flower power van and drives it to safety.

Again, we only have to read the gospels to learn how often Jesus was mercilessly pursued by his opponents and yet at the last moment eluded them.

Lastly, when Paul speaks of being struck down, the language has moved from the boxing ring, the public arena and the chase to the battlefield. The gospel minister here is likened to a soldier in combat and his opponents strike him down.

He is battered by the assaults of his enemies and there he is. He's lying in weakness before them and surely they must deliver the killing blow. But then just at the last moment, he moves and escapes.

[21 : 10] They may be struck down, but they are not destroyed. Read the gospels. Learn how many times Jesus was struck down by his enemies, but until the hour of his death, they were never able to touch him.

Boxing ring, public arena, chase, battlefield, in all things, from all directions, at all times, the gospel minister is like his Lord and this he is, carrying in his body the dying of Christ.

This has been Paul's experience of ministry, just as it was of Jesus himself. This is the necrosis of Jesus. This is what it looks like.

As we go through 2 Corinthians 4 and indeed the rest of 2 Corinthians, we learn that these were experiences the apostle endured in his physical, mental, and emotional entirety.

It's that cost which crushes mind and body and spirit. The great German Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, knew far more than any of us the cost of discipleship.

[22 : 27] Far from having an impressive bearing, on account of his bold proclamation of Christ, Bonhoeffer was often hard-pressed and perplexed and persecuted and struck down.

His opponents were tall, impressive, charismatic, powerful men driven by a superiority complex and megalomania.

Ranged against the millions gathered at the Nuremberg rally, slavishly crying out, Heil Hitler! was the lone voice of this deeply unimpressive man crying out, Jesus Christ is Lord.

And what do we see there in Bonhoeffer? But a pathetic jar of clay carrying in his body the dying of Jesus. Aye, it's a cost that crushes, the cost which puts us in the shoes of Paul the Apostle and Jesus our Lord.

But here's the question. In the light of the excellency and weight of the gospel, would you not rather stand with Bonhoeffer though you know and fear the consequences than with the brainwashed crowd?

[23 : 47] After all, when you're standing with Bonhoeffer and Paul, you're standing with Christ. The cost that crushes. And then lastly, and briefly, the cost that conquers, the cost that conquers.

One of the questions that I've always wrestled with from the very first moment I was called into ministry is this. Why does God send weak and frail men who carry in their bodies the dying of Jesus to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and not the mighty angels?

After all, if a mighty angel appeared before us all here this evening and proclaimed to us the powerful salvation of God, would we not all believe?

They are never hard-pressed or perplexed, persecuted or struck down. So why does God use us and not them? Or to ask the question in another way, why do gospel ministers carry in their bodies the necrosis of Jesus and be entirely as clay-like and as fragile as everybody else?

Well, the answer to these questions is given in our passage. First, from the end of verse 7, so that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. And then at the end of verse 10, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body.

[25 : 20] You see, the cost we pay as gospel ministers is a cost which conquers because it is through our weakness that the all-surpassing power of God triumphs and that the eternally glorious life of Jesus is finally revealed.

In other words, God sends weak and frail men who carry in their bodies the dying of Jesus to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is only through them his all-surpassing power may finally flow and it is only through them the eternally glorious life of Christ might ultimately be seen.

That which we translate as all-surpassing power in verse 5 is literally the phrase hyperbolic dynamite. Hyperbolic dynamite.

It's that explosive power of God which alone breaks through the blindness of our minds and open our hearts to the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Even the greatest of angels Gabriel or Michael lack such power. Great men be they the most charismatic speakers lack such power.

[26 : 42] Moses lacked such power. Only the sovereign God of the new covenant has such power and the sovereign God of the new covenant chooses to use weak and frail earthen vessels to proclaim his mercy and grace.

He will share his glory with no one else. No mighty angels no great man shall share his glory or earn his praise.

We might wish that our ministers were more robust more gifted more authoritative but then you see the success of their ministries would be theirs not God's.

Just as Christ was crucified in weakness so Christian salvation is proclaimed by weak jars of clay who carry in their bodies the dying of Christ. Salvation must be all of grace not just in those who receive the gospel but also in those who preach it.

there is nothing so sallow as a preacher who commends the all sufficient grace of Christ but by his bearing and his manner commend his personal all sufficiency.

[28 : 08] The Free Church of Scotland is at least 25 ministers short as I'm saying every week at the moment and has begun a process to try and understand why so few men are offering themselves for ministry.

My fear is that in our denomination we have begun to talk more about the competencies required of ministers than the consecration required of ministers.

That the necessary qualifications are taken from the wrong list entirely leadership skills charismatic personality brilliant auditors rather than from the right list faithful expositors jars of clay committed to the glory of Christ.

Perhaps there are some here who are thinking I can't possibly be called into ministry because I lack I lack so many gifts other men have.

in the light of Paul's teaching here in 2nd Corinthians 4 verses 7 through 10 perhaps it's time to think again. Remember how true it is to say that God is not nearly as interested in your abilities as he is in your availability because in the last analysis the all surpassingness of the power must come from him and not us.

[29 : 37] And then finally the cost it conquers is that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. The result of the all surpassing power of God at work through the proclamation of his gospel our blind minds open and stubborn hearts changed.

The good news of Jesus floods the darkness of our minds with the light of the glory of God in the face of a gracious Christ. Sins are forgiven.

Hope has shone through and eternal life has conquered. If it was a mighty angel or the greatest of men proclaiming this then onlookers could say of a man's conversion well that's because of the power of the angel or the charisma of the preacher not of the mighty sovereignty of God.

they would attribute a minister's success to him and not to God. And if we're being honest which man among us does not wish that acclaim.

But God will share his glory with no man. The glory of Christ's grace is best seen in hard pressed perplexed persecuted struck down earthen vessels.

[31 : 05] it has been a constant storyline in the series of studies in 2nd Corinthians 4 that historically the greatest revivals in Scottish church history were founded not upon the charismatic rhetoric and passionate preaching of great men but on the spirit empowered and rather ordinary preaching of common men.

Why is that? Because God will share his throne with no other. The joy of living out the gospel of free grace the joy of proclaiming the good news that through faith in Jesus Christ a person's sins can be forgiven and he receives eternal life.

Are there any here who want to shout amen when they hear John Piper's quote for one last time? There is a great gulf between the Christianity that wrestles with whether to serve Christ at the cost of imprisonment or death and the Christianity with whether to serve Christ at all.

Yes if it means that ordinary men and women hear the gospel and if it means that God will receive all the glory then we will willingly pay the price of imprisonment and death.

May the all surpassing power of God and the life of Christ be seen in all that we think in all that we say and in all that we do. Let us pray.

[32 : 43] O Lord our loving heavenly Father we thank you for the gospel which from beginning to end is entirely the story of your grace toward us in Christ Jesus.

We thank you that you call jars of clay to be bearers of that treasure that treasure which is the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We ask tonight O Lord we ask from among us in our family here in Glasgow City Free Church. Those who are here this evening and those who are on vacation. Lord we ask and pray that you would draw from our number men who you will prepare who are consecrated holy to your glory and committed to preaching the gospel of your grace to serve you in the mission field here in Scotland and abroad.

In Jesus name we pray these things. Amen. Amen.