

THE GLORY OF THE MINISTRY

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-15

Being a pastor is a tough job. In America, 250 pastors leave the ministry each month. In 2015 Life Way Research surveyed 1500 pastors about their ministries:

84% of pastors say they're *on call* 24 hours a day...

80% expect conflict in their church...

54% find being a pastor frequently overwhelming...

53% are concerned about their family's finances...

55% say it's easy to get discouraged...

48% often feel the demands of ministry are more than they can handle... 21% say their church has unrealistic expectations of them... Only 44% of pastors are serving today at the same church they were ten years ago...

Scott McConnell, a spokesman for Life Way, sums up the findings, "It's a brutal job. Pastors have a challenging work environment. Churches ought to be concerned..."

But here's what we learn from Paul's letters to the Corinthians... **Pastoring has always been a tough job!**

If Paul had been part of the Life Way survey his answers would've added to the troubling results.

Yet rather than moan... or join the pastors who quit... Paul understood the rigors of Christian ministry.

He accepted the challenges... *As do most pastors...*

The survey revealed one more interesting tidbit. Despite the demands, the strain, the obstacles, **98% of pastors still consider their calling an honor and privilege.**

This is how Paul speaks of Christian ministry in Chapter 4, "Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart." Yes ministry is tough, but we *take heart, not lose heart.*

Imagine, being a pastor today in Syria or Iraq. Rather than worry about a late night phone call from a distraught church member, your concern is Isis thugs.

You don't want to be captured, and burned in the street - or have your tongue cut out for preaching the Gospel. Our ministry is not so tough that our lives are threatened, *not yet.* Yet Paul faced these very dangers!

How in the world did he not lose heart?

Two truths encouraged Paul in his ministry...

First, was the glory of the **message**. In the preceding verses Paul compared the glory of the New Covenant with the glory of the Law... *there was no comparison!*

The Law was written on stone. The New Covenant is written in our hearts... The Law brought condemnation. The Gospel brings salvation... The Law was passing away. God's grace abides forever... The letter of the Law kills our incentive. The power of the Holy Spirit sets us free to know God, to behold His glory, and to be transformed into His image, from glory to glory...

Paul had been entrusted with this message. On the tip of his lips was the truth every human needs to be free. This kept him encouraged. For Paul, *the majesty of the Gospel impacted his ministry of the Gospel.*

And if the message he carried wasn't enough to excite him, Paul also received **mercy**. He says in verse 1, "*we have this ministry, as we have received mercy!*"

At one time, Paul opposed this glorious message.

It's ironic, it was while Paul's eyes were open, that his mind was blinded. It took a bright light from heaven that blinded his eyes, for God to finally open his mind.

Paul realized he was the chief of sinners, yet God loved Him, chose Him, even wanted to use Him. Paul never got over the utter mercy he'd received. It caused him to *take heart* even in the face of a difficult ministry.

Paul writes of the scruples he applied to his ministry in verse 2, "**But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness...**" When I was in college we played a lot of cards in the dorm. And when you play cards you like to see everybody's hands.

You like to make sure nothing is going on **under the table** - *no passing cards, or signaling a partner*. You want to make sure nothing underhanded is going on.

And this is how Paul played his cards in ministry. When he ministered he wanted everything to be above board. He was willing to put all his cards on the table.

He had no hidden agendas, or shameful motivations. Nor did he use crafty manipulations. He was honest.

Earlier in our married life, when the kids were little, I bought Kathy a mini-van. *And this was a labor of love*, for buying cars is definitely not an experience I enjoy.

You just expect to be pressured, and lied to, and

manipulated, and strong-armed - and in the end you'll probably get suckered... *I don't like any of the above...*

After visiting several traditional dealerships we finally went to a *discount car lot* where they claimed they didn't dicker. I didn't believe them, until I tried to dicker.

When I threatened to walk off, the salesman told me, *"That's okay, this is a good car, at a good price. And if you don't buy it somebody else will."* *I couldn't believe he really wouldn't dicker.* I had to humble myself, slouch back over, and buy Kath the car she would drive for the next fifteen years. *It was a really good car.*

And this was Paul's approach to ministry. He wasn't like a used car salesman, slapping the hood of the latest gospel - making deceitful claims and inflated boasts. Rather than lie, Paul had confidence in the car!

Sometimes you hear preachers hyping the gospel and spreading on the cheese... *Come to Jesus and He'll take away all your problems... You'll never be sick again... Riches are at your doorstep... Why be lonely ever?... Say so long to heartbreaks and headaches?*

You'd think Jesus was a magic elixir, and He was being hawked by a con-man trying to sell you a scam.

I got news for you, come to Jesus and you'll add to your life a few problems you didn't even know existed!

The Bible promises, *"all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus, will suffer persecution..."* Jesus told His disciples, *"in the world you will have tribulation."* *How's that for a few verses you'll want to tape to the fridge...*

Of course, the verse in John 16 that begins, *“In the world you will have tribulation,”* ends, *“but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* The Lord doesn’t promise to shelter us from hardships and persecution, but He does promises to be with us through them!

Come to Jesus and you’ll know God’s peace, love, pardon, and power - and it’s free. Jesus paid the price. All He asks of us is to believe... *That I can guarantee.*

I could just as well say, *“This is a good salvation, at a good price. And if you don’t buy it somebody else will.”*

But Jesus may or may not alter your circumstances, or make you rich, or heal your illness. On the inside you’ll be brand new, but life may get more bumpy not less. *That’s giving it to you straight, without the hype...*

A godly pastor understands he’s not on commission.

He’ll be rewarded whether anybody buys what he’s selling or not - *as long as he’s faithful to make the offer.*

This is why you don’t *preach* the Gospel like you *pitch* used cars. You don’t have to stretch or twist the appeal. This is why at CC we don’t sing *“Just As I Am”* a hundred times, and beg people to come forward.

If you have to bully people into getting saved, they’re probably not really getting saved. The Gospel is such a good deal it’ll sell itself, if it’s presented plainly, clearly.

Paul continues to describe his ministry in verse 2. He adds, *“nor handling the word of God deceitfully...”*

A pastor or preacher isn’t like a painter.

Recently, I had the eaves of my house painted. And before the painters started I scratched my head. I wondered how they could finish the job with the little bit of paint they bought... *That's when I saw their secret.*

They cut the paint with water. They diluted it down.

Suddenly, one gallon of pure paint became three gallons of watered-down paint. Slushy paint is easier to spread and it goes a lot farther than thick, gooey paint.

But it doesn't *last as long* or *look as good* over time.

And the same is true of the Word of God. Paul never watered down the Scripture. He didn't thin the message just to make it *spread easier* or *cover further*.

A pastor who dilutes the truth to make it easier to swallow, can attract a crowd, but he's doing folks a disservice. He's creating a false sense of security.

That's dangerous - it can stunt a person spiritually.

On the night before Jesus was crucified, He said to His men, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word..."

That expression, "keep My word," has taken on new meaning to me since I've had grandkids. On occasion, my son or daughter will ask Kathy and I, "Can you guys keep the kids?" But keeping grandkids is a very different kind of child-experience than raising your own.

A parent feels the pressure to fashion and shape their kids, whereas a grandparent loves them "as is." *Let their parents rein them in - I get to turn them loose!*

When my grandkids are with me they run, and play, and eat angel-food cake - stuff God created kids to do!

Where the spirit of Grandpa is, there is liberty!

I love my grandkids like they're my own, *but they're not*. At the end of the day, I have to give those kids back to their parents. They were sired by someone else, to whom I am accountable. A grandparent's job is to *assist* the parents - not *insist* on their own agenda.

And I believe keeping the Word is like good grandparenting. I keep God's Word, like I keep grandkids.

I cherish spending time with God's Word... I love the Word. I'll protect it from evil... And I turn it loose each Sunday - to do exactly what God birthed it to do - *heal, convict, save, cleanse, change, transform, encourage*.

I love God's Word **"as is."** I don't restrict what His Word allows, and I don't allow what His Word restricts.

I'm not *adding to* or *taking away*. *It's His Word, not mine*. My only agenda is to keep it faithfully. I've been entrusted with His Word, and when I'm done preaching it, I need to return it to God, just as He gave it to me.

Paul kept the Word and handled it faithfully. Then he says, **"but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."** Paul was all about *the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth*. When he preached he revealed the truth. He put it on display. It was his only concern...

Your feelings, your traditions, your sensitivities, your political correctness, the odds of you returning - faithful preachers

care, but not enough to tweak God's truth!

I love the words of CH Spurgeon, the prince of preachers... "Many say that we ought to keep *"abreast of the times,"* whatever that may mean; and that there is a certain *"spirit of the age,"* to which we should be subject. This to me is treason against sovereign truth.

I know of only one spirit to whom I desire to be subject, and that is the Spirit of all the ages, who never changes... Let the times and the spirits go where they like, we shall keep to the Holy Spirit and to His eternal teachings... Whatever novelty comes up, keep to the word of Jesus! Whatever discovery may be made by the wise men of the age, let Christ be wisdom to you... Here is your anchorage. The Book is our ultimatum."

And Paul would agree. As he told the Corinthians, he handled the Word of God - *not deceitfully, but faithfully.*

God's Word is so wise, so powerful, so engaging, when taught plainly and clearly it surely sells itself. So the question arises, *why do people resist and reject it?*

And in verse 3 Paul explains, "But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them." The Gospel is such a good idea, the ultimate reason it's ever rejected is that folks have been spiritually blinded. Chalk it up to "the god of this age."

This is a provocative title for Satan. *The age, the culture, the world around us...* has a god, and it's not our God. Realize it

or not, the world bows to Satan.

People live and never wonder why... they worship and never look to whom... They'd tell you they have no god. But **"the god of this age"** has them in his spell. They're twisted around his little finger. And his greatest accomplishment is that very few people know it's him.

Sadly, Satan blinds men to the truth of their need and the gospel. Mention Jesus to some people, and it doesn't matter how nice you approach them - a callous attitude reveals they're a victim of a spiritual deception.

It's like the waitress who was in a foul mood. Her customer was just trying to be polite. She handed him his coffee, when he said, **"Looks like rain today, doesn't it?"** She snapped back at him, **"I can't help what it looks like, we sell it as coffee, so just drink it and shut-up!"**

The point is, despite how nice you are there's still a resistance - a veil over the eyes. It's caused by Satan.

This is why, before you preach you need to pray!

It's been said, **"There's a lot you can do after you've prayed, but there's nothing you can do effectively until you've prayed!"** Prayer is the heavy artillery. Through prayer we can open the eyes that Satan has shut.

I hope you'll invite some friends to the upcoming Harvest Crusade, but surely pray for them beforehand.

Paul says, Satan blinds those **"who do not believe."**

It's unbelief that gives Satan the foothold - *the opportunity to weave his deception.* Yet when a person does believe, it

opens the blinds just enough to let in the light. The light of the glory of Christ shines in them.

Never give up on a friend. If you came to faith there's hope for them. It takes just a little faith to crack open the window, and the light of Jesus comes streaming in.

Verse 5 is so important... **"For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake."** Christian ministry should avoid self-promotion and self-advertisement.

Terminology such as *"promotional tours," "image consultants," "fan clubs"* have no place in the Christian vocabulary. We're ***"bondservants for Jesus' sake."***

Can you imagine a slave with a fan club?

For some pastors *"it's all about me."* Their bio is a brag. They pad their stats to promote themselves.

It was once said of a self-absorbed Teddy Roosevelt, ***"He wanted to be the corpse at every funeral and the bride at every wedding."*** I know ministers like that...

Hey, you can't *promote yourself* and *magnify Jesus* simultaneously. A spotlight only shines on one person at a time - and if that's you, it puts Jesus in the dark!

Paul says, ***"we do not preach ourselves."*** That means when Paul used an illustration he didn't always make himself the hero... He didn't always have to tell you *where he'd been*, or *what he'd done*, or *who he'd seen*... To preach yourself is to toot your horn...

Whereas, the man who preaches ***"Christ Jesus the Lord,"***

bows when he takes a stand... he hides when he steps up... he still listens even when he speaks...

There's a humility about him. No curtain calls for him. He'll boldly take the stage, but he doesn't need to.

When the power of the Holy Spirit came upon Samson he worked many mighty miracles. But what we're told in Judges 14:6 impresses me most... "Now to his surprise, a young lion came roaring against him. And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion apart as one would have torn apart a young goat, though he had nothing in his hand. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done."

Did you hear that? He ripped apart a lion with his bare hands, but "*didn't tell anybody what he'd done.*"

Are you kidding... most pastors would've taken a selfie with the lion and tweeted it to their followers. Their next fundraising email would highlight the pic...

The greatest miracle wasn't that Samson killed a lion, but that he did so without bragging about it...

Paul continues, "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." At the time of creation we're told that darkness was upon the face of the deep, but God ended the darkness with His Word.

He said, "*let there be light, and there was light.*"

This is what ends the darkness in our hearts. Not me talking about me - but God's Word - *it's the knowledge of the glory of*

Jesus that drives out the darkness.

And verse 7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us." Here's a strange idiom - *who puts treasure in clay pots?* It's like serving steak and lobster on a paper plate. You expect to find jewels and gold in a safe or a treasure chest - not in a brown paper sack.

But this is not how God wraps His treasure...

God has taken the most valuable treasure on Earth, the Gospel of Jesus, and placed it in clay pots.

In the ancient world, every household used clay pottery. These were the everyday dishes - the tupperware - the plastic cups in the cabinet. These were the disposable containers; in contrast to the glass vases and the fine china - the valuable heirlooms.

You'd expect God to use the expensive containers to hold the more valuable contents, but that's not what He's does. He wants the attention on the *treasure*, not the *packaging*. That's why God puts His eternal riches in styrofoam cups - or as Paul puts it, in "*clay jars.*"

And that's what we are... *we're made of clay*. Our bodies are *dust to dust*. We're coarse, uncouth, rough-edged pottery. At CSM we're a bunch of *cracked pots*.

Yet God chooses the likes of us to hold His treasure! Imagine, *God places the Spirit's living water in ball jars*.

But why does he do this? Paul explains, "*that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.*"

God uses clay pots to hammer home that the power, the beauty, the wisdom is in the *message* itself, not the *messenger*. The taste should come from the *contents*, not the *container*. A bottle or cup should be tasteless.

I have a cup in my office that's devoted to coffee. On occasion though, I'll pour Coca-Cola into that cup. I end up with coffee-flavored Coca-Cola. The contents is contaminated by the container. My drink is tainted.

This is not what God wants with His vessels. He doesn't want the minister to contaminate the message with *his own prejudices, or pride, or opinions, or personal biases*. He wants the message to flow as purely as possible, so that all the listener tastes is *the sweetness of the gospel*, not *the flavor of the preacher*.

This is why Christian ministry should always be conducted in humility and simplicity. No glitzy fanfare, or ostentatious displays, or verbose introductions.

I'm not saying we shouldn't communicate in an engaging manner - but the difference is in our motive.

There's a difference between trying to *express yourself*, and wanting to *impress others*. The question should always be asked, "*Are we trying to get the message heard, or do we want the messenger seen?*"

DL Moody was the Billy Graham of his day. A man used by God in mighty and marvelous ways. Yet Moody was uneducated. His voice was high-pitched and nasally. He even had an unattractive appearance.

Once, a reporter was sent to analyze Mr. Moody's success. He later wrote, "I can see nothing whatsoever in Moody to account for his marvelous work."

And that is exactly the reason God puts His spiritual treasure in paper sacks - so that every onlooker will rest assured *"that the power is of God and not of us."*

Verse 8 provides us a little taste of Paul's ministry, "We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed..."

Merrill Tenney paraphrases this, "Squeezed but not squashed, bewildered but not befuddled, pursued but not abandoned, knocked down but not knocked out."

There were circumstances that squeezed Paul... unanswered questions that bewildered him... enemies that pursued him... attacks that knocked him down...

Talk about a pastor having a rough job. Nobody had it tougher than Paul, yet he never resented his trials. *God was faithful to show up with what Paul needed!*

Recall, when Gideon defeated the Midianites. It was another example of how God uses cracked pots to showcase the excellence of His power!.. God kept telling Gideon to send people home, until his troops were reduced to 300 men - outnumbered 450 to 1.

God equipped each of Gideon's soldiers with a clay jar, a torch inside the jar, and a trumpet. On cue they were to light the torch, break the jar, and blow the trumpet. When the jars were broken, the light came streaming out, and it created the

illusion that the Midianites were surrounded. It caused them to panic.

You know the rest of the story. We're told *the sword of the Lord and of Gideon* - won a big victory that day.

But focus on those clay jars... For like us they were hard, and ugly, and thick. God needed to break them for the light to shine through... The same is true for us.

As long as we're prideful and self-sufficient God can't use us. It's when He breaks us of our self-sufficiency, and humbles us, then His light comes shining through.

And this was the good thing that happened to Paul. His ministry was hard. Brokenness was his blessing.

Mark Twain once boarded a train for Sioux City. He didn't want to carry his briefcase on board, so he asked a clerk if the case was strong enough to withstand the rigorous treatment doled out by the baggage handlers.

The man took Twain's case, and threw it to the pavement, *"That, sir, is what she'll get in Philadelphia."*

Then he slammed it a half-dozen times against the side of the car. *"That's what she'll get in Chicago."*

Finally, he hurled the case against the wall, and stomped on it vigorously until the papers spilled out, *"That's what she'll get if she ever makes Sioux City."*

Twain couldn't believe what he was witnessing. Finally, the clerk handed Mark Twain his mangled briefcase; then said calmly, *"If you're going any farther than Sioux City, I'd suggest you carry it on yourself."*

Paul was like that briefcase. **Everywhere he went to minister he got *beat-up*, but he never *gave-up*.**

He traveled a lot further than Sioux City and he received rougher treatment than Mark Twain's briefcase, yet God was at work in all his difficulties.

Paul says in verse 10, that he's **“always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.**

For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you.” Paul's body was probably more mangled than Mark Twain's briefcase.

He was literally one of the walking wounded.

But the cracks in his vessel became opportunities for the light of Jesus on the inside, to shine to the outside.

Dr. Rachel Remen tells the story of a patient she treated for severe depression. The man had lost a leg to cancer. She had him draw a picture of how he saw himself. He drew an ugly, cracked, worthless vase.

But a transformation occurred in this young man's thinking as he began to deal with his disappointments. He soon discovered he could be an encouragement to other cancer patients. His life took on new meaning.

One day, Dr. Remen showed her patient his previous drawing... of the cracked, ugly vase. The fellow took out a silver-colored crayon and drew vivid, colorful streamers that flowed out of the cracks in the vase.

He explained his addition to the doctor, "Where its broken, this is now where the light comes through."

And Paul is making the same statement. It's where he's been dying - *hurting* - that's where the light shines through. Jesus is revealed through His scars.

And this is God's desire for every Christian. We assume God is praised by the trophies and crowns we accumulate. But it's our weaknesses that showcase His grace. Our wounds let His light shine through.

Paul is no longer discouraged by difficulties, he now sees them as opportunities to reveal the light of Christ.

Chuck Colson climbed the rungs of political power stepping on anybody and everybody on his way up. A brilliant lawyer, a shrewd politician, and a fierce political operative - he became a special assistant to President Nixon. He ended up becoming Nixon's hatchet man.

And it was doing the President's dirty work, during the Watergate Scandal, that put Colson behind bars.

While facing trial, Colson was given a copy of CS Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*. After reading it, Colson gave his life to Jesus. He was instantly transformed. Critics said it was just a ploy to reduce his sentence.

But after his stint in prison, God continued to shine His light through Colson's life. God put it on his heart to start a prison ministry. *Prison Fellowship* became one of the most successful Christian ministries of its type.

Later Chuck Colson made an interesting comment, "The

great paradox (of my life) is that every time I walk into a prison and see the faces of men or women who have been transformed by the power of the living God, I realize that the thing God has chosen to use in my life... is none of the successes, achievements, degrees, awards, honors, or cases I won before the Supreme Court. That's not what God's using in my life.

What God is using in my life to touch the lives of literally thousands of other people is the fact that I was a convict and went to prison. That was my great defeat, the only thing in my life I didn't succeed in."

How ironic, the one defeat on Chuck Colson's resumé was the aspect God used to touch others.

And this is what Paul discovered. It really is through the cracks that the light of Jesus shines the brightest.

Paul summarizes his enduring faith in verse 13, "And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke..."

Paul quotes King David in Psalm 116. There David declared, "I am greatly afflicted" - yet he spoke. Paul was from a long line of faith, *that suffers yet speaks up*.

He says, "We also believe and therefore speak..."

Real faith can't stay silent. Faith is born in the heart, but eventually bubbles up and speaks out the truth.

And here's the truth Paul's faith declares, "knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you."

Paul had given his body to His Lord a living sacrifice. And

ministry had taken its toll. But Paul wasn't worried about his *physical condition* or his *present welfare*.

He knew that despite his current aches and pains, one day his body would be resurrected immortal.

Remember that, when life gets *tough* - when ministry gets *rough*... Here's a promise you can take to the bank, *the Christian has a reward on the other side!*

"For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God." As troublesome as it was, Paul's ministry had spread God's grace to thousands.

That meant many more people had been added to the ranks of the grateful. And that meant *more praise, more thanks, more glory* to God. Paul's ministry had "*caused thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.*"

And that's what helped Paul take the punches.

All his suffering was a small price to pay to bring God more glory. This is the heart of every true minister. **Christian ministry can be hard, but it's always worth it!**