

The Heart of Fruitful Ministry

2 Cor. 4:1-18

BI: Faithful, fruitful servants of Jesus see themselves as clay pots who carry a great message on behalf of a glorious God.

This past week I, and a couple ministry partners, had the privilege of traveling to Uganda to speak to approx. 200 African pastors about preaching and pastoral ministry. We were amazed at how hungry they were to hear the word preached and taught. These were men who had truly been transformed by the gospel. One of the highlights of our week was hearing all of these African men sing in one accord that great song from the former slave trader to preacher, John Newton, Amazing Grace. It was stunning and breath-taking.

One of my primary goals in teaching that week was NOT to teach them something new, but rather just to encourage them to be faithful to the ministry to which they have been called. The vast majority of these men were untrained preachers. Hardly any of them had access to commentaries or Bible Study software, or any of the basic tools that western preachers are so dependent upon. None of these men felt like they had much to contribute to the cause of Christ, but there they stood, week after week, proclaiming to all who would hear the little truth they knew.

I wanted to encourage them. I wanted them to know that you don't need to have a degree in theology to be fruitful in ministry because the power of God to produce fruit is not of the flesh, but of the Spirit and the Word.

In 2 Timothy, when Paul was coming to the end of His life and ministry, it was in reality a triumphant end. He had run his race well and was about to finish his course. But there are not crowds to celebrate His achievements. To the contrary, we find Paul saying things like

- “All who are in Asia have turned away from me.”
- He is concerned that Timothy (his replacement) is beginning to bend under the hardships of the ministry and is in danger of quitting.

His final words as he closes that letter include statements like (2 Tim. 4:10),

- “Demas, having loved this world, has forsaken me.”
- “Only Luke is with me.”
- “Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm.”
- “At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me.” “But the Lord stood with me and supported me.”

This doesn't strike us as the kind of victorious end we would expect from one so gifted and Spirit-filled as the great Apostle Paul. The success of His ministry wasn't based on

the support of His faithful friends. It didn't come from flashy ministry events where thousands of people might gather in stadiums to hear his teaching and be awed by his power. He didn't have great crowds of loyal followers. His life was hard. His ministry was offensive. His enemies were many.

You might be thinking, "I thought Paul was a powerful Preacher! I thought God used him to change the world!" And that is true. Paul was a powerful preacher. And his ministry had a massive impact upon the world! But the power of his ministry was not the kind of power the world uses to change people's minds and bend their wills.

- The world's power is in clever philosophies of men.
- The world's power is in its ability to deceive and manipulate people.
- The world's power is based on false promises and empty hopes. But this was not Paul's power. In fact, Paul makes this point explicitly in 1 Cor. 2:1-5. (Read)

Did God use Paul's preaching to turn the world up-side-down? Yes. But the power of His preaching was not in his clever ideas. It was not in his great ability to communicate with words. It wasn't in making people laugh or helping them feel good about themselves. So where did the power come from? The answer to that question is found in 2 Corinthians 4.

Read 2 Cor. 4:1-7

In this passage Paul reveals five foundation stones of fruitful ministry, and they are not what you might think. If you desire to have a spiritually fruitful life while you wait for the Lord's return, then...

I. Never Compromise on Personal Purity: (1-2)

1. Read 1-2

2. Paul didn't think for a minute that he was the source of his own success. He says the only reason he was in the ministry at all is because God had mercy on him. And he understood that representing Holy God in a sinful world demanded a holy life and a clean conscience. This is where fruitful ministry begins. It doesn't start with giftedness. Godliness and giftedness are not the same thing. Many gifted people are on their way to Hell. Some of those who will be cast into everlasting fire will protest that the miracles they performed in Jesus name proved they were true disciples. But Jesus will say, "Depart from me."

3. Some of the leaders in the church of Corinth had attacked Paul with all kinds of accusations of immorality and impurity, but it wasn't true. He said (2) "We have renounced the things hidden because of shame."

- The word "renounce" means to speak out against, to refuse, or deny.
- Literally, Paul is saying, "we have renounced the things that one hides out of a sense of shame."

3. What's he saying? He's saying, the accusations of our impurity are false. I do not commit immorality. I am not using the gospel as a means of getting rich. Examine my life and you will see. I have a clear conscience. I don't have a secret life of shame.

4. Unfortunately, many who claim to represent Christ in the world today have tremendous gifts and a secret life of immorality. They are one thing in the pulpit and another thing at home. In the pulpit they are loud and strong and seem to speak with the voice of God, but at home they are unholy. They treat their wives and children badly. They are sensual and indulge the flesh often with pornography, and drunkenness. In fact, one recent authority on modern church planting has warned that the most pervasive sin among young church planters today is drunkenness. But followers of Christ are to pursue holiness. They are to be an example in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity.

5. You see, my brothers, "true ministry is not a momentary performance. Its not a one-hour sermon, or a 20 minute family worship, or 10 minute gospel presentation. It is the outflow of a life. E.M Bounds once said, "It takes twenty years to make a sermon, because it takes twenty years to make a man."

6. This is where fruitful begins. Do you want to have a fruitful ministry? It begins with personal purity. That's why Paul told young Timothy (2 Tim. 2:21) "Therefore, if anyone cleanses [purifies] himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work."

7. Never Compromise on Personal Purity.

II. Cultivate a sense of your own Inadequacy: (3-4)

1. Read v. 3-4

2. You see, whether you're a pastor, a missionary, and evangelist, or just a parent concerned for the souls of your children, the problem God has sent us to address is one that's greater than we are. The sinner's problem is not that he's not quite good enough to meet God's standard. His problem is that he's dead in his trespasses and sins. That's a really big problem. Another way to say that is that his spiritual eyes have been blinded by the devil.

3. No matter how well you present the gospel, no matter what approach or technique you prefer, you will always be ministering to those who live in darkness.

- They are in darkness because they are spiritually blind and dead.
- They are in darkness because they are by nature sinners.
- They are in darkness because of their evil deeds.
- They are in darkness because the "god of this world has blinded their minds so they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. That's not something you can fix. God has the fix that.

4. You may remember that in the parable of the soils it was the condition of the soil, NOT the skill of the sower that mattered. Your giftedness will never save anyone. Your natural

abilities to communicate and persuade can never change a heart. The problem is too big to be solved by human means.

5. It's so important that we NOT over estimate our own importance and ability in ministry. Some people think if they can just learn the proper technique or remove all the obstacles that inhibit people from coming to church fruitfulness with NECESSARILY follow. But that just isn't the case. The problem is too big. Weapons of the flesh have little power in spiritual warfare, and that's what ministry is about.

6. Much of Paul's ministry was a failure in man's eyes. Much of Jesus' ministry was a failure from a human perspective. After three years of teaching, and miracles, and irrefutable evidence that He was God in flesh you might think that he would have MILLIONS of followers. But on the day of his death there were only about 120 – that's approx. 1/3 the size of Calvary Bible Church.

7. Beloved, if you are being faithful with the ministry God has entrusted to you, be encouraged - Jesus is building His church. You are not adequate for the task but He is. You are not able to defeat the enemies of God, but He is, and He is using you in some small way to accomplish His great, great work of redemption in the world.

8. So cultivate a sense of your own inadequacy. It will drive you to prayer and dependence on the Spirit in all you do.

III. Saturate your Ministry with Gospel Clarity: (5)

1. Read v. 5

2. People today have all kinds of ideas about what the gospel is. Some teach that the gospel is the message that says God wants to make you happy, or that God wants you to be wealthy. That's exactly what Paul refused to say. Men who say such things are not really preaching Christ but themselves. They are trying to make a name for themselves. They are trying to make themselves rich at the expense of other people. But Paul didn't do this.

3. He says (5) "For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord (or "Jesus as God") and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." In other words, we have NOT come to trick you or defraud you. We have come to serve you. We have come to tell you the truth about Jesus; that He is God and that you can be reconciled to God through Him.

4. Everywhere he went the apostle Paul's labored to make the gospel clearly understood to those who heard it in hopes that they might be saved. Beloved, this should be our goal as well. You are not called to come up with a clever message. You are called simply to deliver God's message.

5. Paul said 1 Cor. 1:17 "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void."

- 1 Cor. 1:21 "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."

- The gospel is: 2 Cor. 5:21 “God made him who knew no sin to be sin our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

6. Do you want to be fruitful in ministry? Become an expert in making the true gospel clear. This means you must read, and study, and meditate, and memorize, and pray for wisdom and clarity. Attend the evangelism class we offer from time to time. Go downtown with the 4Sg group of Friday evenings just to listen to how they share their faith. Work at it. Be intentional so that you can proclaim God’s message the way God intends it to be heard.

7. Fruitful servants of Jesus Focus on Gospel Clarity.

IV. Rest in the Comfort of Divine Sovereignty: (6)

1. Read v. 6

2. People don’t get saved by persuasive arguments. People’s lives are not transformed by creative ideas and self-help techniques. Every time a sinner turns to Christ it is nothing short of a miracle. It’s like in the book of Ezekiel where God told His prophet to cry out to the dry bones “Come alive!, “Come alive!” You don’t have the power to give anyone spiritual life. God has to do that by the same divine power that said, “Let light shine out of darkness.”

3. Paul affirms this again when in 5:17 he says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ He is a new creation.” That’s explicit creation language. It is something that God does by His own awesome creative power. As I said earlier, you are inadequate for the task, but God is not. He is completely sovereign over the fruitfulness of your ministry.

4. Do you remember that short parable of the farmer in Mark 4:26–27 “And He was saying, ‘The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil;²⁷ and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows—how, he himself does not know.’”

5. Listen, God is more concerned about saving people than you and I will ever be. Jesus is building His church one soul at a time, and He will not fail to complete His mission. He is irresistibly calling people to Himself for salvation and all whom the Father gives to Him will come (Jn. 6:37). Your job it not to make anyone come. You and I are merely “mail men” whose job is simply to deliver God’s message. Your duty is to “preach the word.” And as you do, the Spirit takes that word and accomplishes amazing things that are far beyond us.

6. When asked how he accomplished the Reformation Martin Luther replied:

I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my [friend] Philip [Melancthon]

... the word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.¹

7. As men and women speak forth the truth of Scripture, God, “Who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness!’ shines in people’s hearts to give them the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

8. Now, I don’t know about you, but that encourages me. I don’t have to be worried about results. God is the one who causes the growth. Some plant, others water, but God gives life. My job is simply to be faithful with His word. So beloved, devote yourself to ministry to others. Spend and be spent in your efforts to love, serve, and teach God’s truth. But as you do, rest in the comfort of God’s sovereignty. He is at work. He is building His church. And He will not relent until all is finished.

9. This leads us to a final

V. Approach Your Ministry with True Humility: (7)

1. Read v. 7. Paul says, “We have this power in clay pots. So that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.”
2. The heart of this passage is the really startling contrast between the magnificent light of the glory of the glory God in the face of Christ against the insignificance of the men who preach it.
3. What is the minister? The minister is like a clay pot. God has packaged his powerful gospel in insignificant servants like you and me. The power is not ours but His. What is a clay pot? It is something that is fragile, frail, feeble, flawed, and completely replaceable. But in us has been deposited the most glorious treasure of the universe.
4. The Corinthians attacked Paul on every front. They insulted him, called him weak, and unimpressive. They said his speech was contemptible and that he was ugly. And Paul’s only response was, “I know. You’re right. I don’t deny any of that.” He just agrees (v.7), “We have this treasure in earthen vessels so that [purpose clause] the surpassing greatness of the Power will be of God and not from ourselves.” That’s why God puts the priceless treasure in clay pots - so nobody has to wonder where the power comes from. In comparison to the magnificence of Jesus Christ; in comparison to the glory of the New Covenant (chap. 3); in comparison to Christ’s shining glory, the preacher is NOTHING!
5. In Paul’s opinion he was nothing but baked dirt. He saw himself as common, breakable, replaceable, and essentially without value. If you drop a clay pot and it breaks, no one cares. You just go get another one.

¹ My All Time Favorite Luther Quote: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bortoreform/2013/05/my-all-time-favorite-martin-luther-quote/>

6. Nevertheless, clay pots are useful. You can put things in it that have some value. You can put a flower in it. You can put oil in it. In O.T. times they put people's bones in it. You can put your money in it. In the ancient world scribes who wanted to keep their scrolls safe put them in large clay pots and that's where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found – in an obscure cave in some clay pots.
7. In the home in Paul's day clay pots were used for garbage and waste to carry out what we usually don't talk about from the pulpit. Turn with me to 2 Tim. 2:20.
8. In a large home there are all kinds of containers. There are gold containers and silver containers. There are containers made of wood and then there are containers made of clay. Some are for honorable use and some for dishonorable use. What are the dishonorable things? They are the things that no guest would ever see or smell. This is what the clay pots were used for. The only value they possessed was in the service they performed.
9. Paul says, "We have this treasure in garbage cans." Our value as servants of Jesus is not in who we are but in what we contain and what we deliver. That's why Paul said in 1 Cor. 1, that God chooses the foolish and the base and the despised. The things that are of no esteem in the world.
10. And God is still passing by the elite of this world. He chooses men like you and me. Why? So that "the surpassing power will be of God and not of men." It's the truth that matters. Get yourself out of the way. Do you want to be an effective, fruitful minister of the word? Then get yourself out of the equation. Stop focusing on techniques and results. Rather, focus on being faithful with the next opportunity to speak God's truth into someone's life.
11. If you are looking for a human explanation for Paul's success – there isn't any. What brings about spiritual success and fruitfulness is the truth. So learn the truth, carry the truth, and deliver the truth and remind yourself as you do that the most important Person in the room is not you. It is the H.S. of God who takes the word of God and transforms the hearts of the People of God for the glory of God.
12. One theologian (A.T. Robertson) wrote, "There have always been men in the world who are so clever that God could make NO use of them. They could never do God's work because they were so lost in admiration of their own."
13. You see, the power is not the result of human genius or cleverness, or creativity. The power of the Gospel is in the gospel. The power of the truth is in the truth.
14. The amazing reality is this, that our weakness and our insignificance does not ruin our ministry of the gospel. Rather, it is the very means that God has chosen to bring the light of the gospel to people who are blind and cannot see the light of Christ.
15. Did God use Paul to accomplish much? Yes! But Paul didn't see himself as anything special. Do you know how Paul spoke of himself in the NT? He referred to himself in three ways...

- Least of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:9).

- Least of all saints (Eph. 3:8)
- Chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15)

16. Do you want to be a fruitful servant of Christ? Get the focus off yourself. Realize how insignificant you are. God doesn't need me to proclaim his truth. He can use Balaam's donkey when He wants to. But He chooses to use insignificant men and women like you and me, NOT because we are so clever. Not because we are so gifted. Not because we are such great communicators. No, He uses us because of how insignificant we are so that there will be no mistake about where the power comes from. He wants to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from men.

17. Do you want to be a faithful, fruitful servant of Christ? Then follow the example of the apostle Paul...

- Never Compromise on Personal Purity
- Cultivate a sense of your own Inadequacy
- Saturate your Ministry with Gospel Clarity
- Rest in the Comfort of Divine Sovereignty
- Approach your Ministry With True Humility

BI: Faithful, fruitful servants of Jesus see themselves as disposable pots carrying a great message in the service of a glorious God.