

Treasure in Jars of Clay

In the name of him who is both our Lord and our true Sabbath rest, dear friends in Christ: Parents of multiple children learn sooner or later what every teacher and school bus driver already know, and that is that some children simply require more attention and supervision than others. And when you've got a larger group of children, there will invariably be one who stands head and shoulders above the rest in this respect. This is the child that is seemingly never where he's supposed to be, doing what he's supposed to be doing; but who can be found instead channeling apparently endless energy and often remarkable creativity into testing the limits of each and every rule and challenging all sources of authority. If there's a conflict or there's trouble of some kind, this is the kid who's most likely to be at the epicenter of it. Such a child requires a firm hand and constant correction in order to develop properly. He or she takes extra effort on the part of those responsible for their upbringing – and is probably responsible for a lot of their gray hairs (if indeed they haven't first pulled them all out in frustration). Though it is probably not politically correct, anyone who is in charge of a group of children might sometimes refer to such a one as their "problem child". And I think that God sends them to us so that we will have some inkling about how he feels, since he has a whole world full of them – and that would include every one of us.

In any case, I'm sure that the great Evangelist and Apostle Paul would say that his "problem child" was the church he helped plant in the city of Corinth. You may recall that on his first three mission journeys, St. Paul spread the Gospel throughout Asia Minor and Greece. In so doing, he became the spiritual father of upwards of a twenty different churches in cities such as Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Troas, Ephesus, Philippi, and Thessalonica, to name but a few. Paul's last whistle stop, the farthest he got away from his starting point on both his second and third trips was the city of Corinth. And I don't know, maybe it was because it was the last stop – Paul's youngest child, as it were; but the congregation there suffered from more problems and experienced more internal disputes and theological controversies than all the other churches he planted combined. His two longest corrective letters (letters he wrote to churches to address their internal conflicts and false doctrines) were for the Corinthians. We have them in our Bible and call them 1st and 2nd Corinthians; but we know that he wrote at least two other letters to them that we don't have any more. We know too that on one occasion he'd planned to visit them, but then called it off because he was so frustrated with them that he was afraid of the damage he might do if he went in there breathing hellfire and brimstone like wanted to.

So, what was behind all these problems at Corinth? Well, the short answer is Satan, of course; he's the one who always seeks to interfere with the work of the Gospel in any church. And, as always, he had many avenues of attack. But one of the big ones plaguing the church at Corinth was the arrival of the so-called "super apostles". What happened was that some time after Paul left, the congregation was infiltrated by a number of self-proclaimed experts in the Christian faith. In truth, they were the kind of people who prove the statement "a little learning is a dangerous thing". Now, they probably did know something about the Scripture; but they didn't seem to know much about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To be specific, they tended to dismiss the value of Christ's death for sinners on the cross in favor of promoting the value of human wisdom and works. Beyond that, it's pretty clear that they were products of a specific school of Greek philosophy called Sophistry.

Sophistry was very popular in that day and age. And the core concept behind it was this: It's not *what* you say; but *how* you say it. It's all about presentation. The idea was to persuade people and get them to see things your way not on the basis of logic or truth or the strength of the facts that support your argument, but rather by your dazzling display of rhetoric. If you *sound* good when you say something, if you *look* good when you say it; then by golly you *are* good and whatever it is you're saying must be right. Now, that probably sounds pretty absurd to us; but if you think about it, it's really the philosophy that underlies most modern marketing. The goal is to sell your product. And when you do that, the quality of your product is not as important as how you package and sell it to the consumers. If you have the most attractive wrapper, the best commercials, and the prettiest and most popular spokespersons, then you will outsell the competition even if they have a better product. This is also the theory behind most modern political campaigns. Looking and

sounding good is more important than being good. It's certainly more important than the truth. Defense lawyers are another case in point. You see, Sophistry is very much alive and well today.

Anyway, these "super apostles" were good. They had been trained in the methods and techniques of sophistry. They were slick, polished speakers who knew how to draw a crowd and keep them mesmerized with their words. So it didn't matter that their theology stank; people liked listening to them. And by listening, they came to believe what they had to say—especially over and against the teachings of the Apostle Paul who possessed none of the qualities that the sophists were famous for. In fact, Paul seemed to have nothing going for him. We know that he was a relatively small, frail man. He had a physical infirmity of some kind that detracted from his appearance, and he was sick a lot. Even worse in a world attracted to the strengths of the sophists, Paul was not a very eloquent speaker. Oh, he had it up here in his head, and he knew how to write; but when it came to oral presentation, he fell far short. Put it this way: in terms of presence and natural ability to inspire, Paul was Barney Fife and the "super apostles" were Sheriff Taylor. And the super apostles made hay of it. They belittled Paul to the congregation at Corinth and said of him that he was a paper lion. Yes, he roars something terrible when he writes his letters; but in person he looks and sounds like a frightened cub. And so the Corinthian congregation was being led astray.

It's in response to this that Paul writes to them that they are confusing the quality of the messenger with the substance and value of the message. He tells them, "This isn't about me. I don't preach *myself* to you. I don't want you to follow *me*. I'm merely a servant. Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord. I want you to trust and follow him."

To highlight his point, Paul takes them back to how they came to faith in Christ in the first place. He reminds them that he didn't come to them looking like "Joe Cool" and astounding them with fantastic speeches. No, he came to them looking weak and pathetic and stammering his words. But, he says, "God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness' made his light shine in your hearts." His point is that the power of God's Word spoken by himself, God's humble and unattractive instrument, accomplished the miracle of conversion in them. When they heard Paul proclaim the Gospel message, the truth that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world, and that he rose on the third day to show that we are righteous before God in him—that's what turned the light on in their sin darkened hearts and minds. It was not the man, or the power and skill of his speaking; but rather the power of God working in the message that brought them to saving faith. "That's what gave you the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ", he says.

Paul takes it a step farther. He tells them, as a matter of fact, the Lord did it that way for a purpose. "God gave you this gift of saving faith in Christ, this priceless treasure, packaged in a plain, unattractive jar of clay" (referring to himself) "precisely to demonstrate that you weren't taken in and deceived by a lot of glitz and glamour. That's the way of the world. But God did something different. He deliberately chose to light in you the fire of faith in Jesus through means that you wouldn't find appealing in order to prove to you that it was God's power that did it, and not that of any man."

Then, referring to his ministry and that of the other evangelists with him, Paul says, "Look at us. What are we? We go from place to place spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and everywhere we go we suffer hardship; but we endure. We are persecuted, but never abandoned by God. We are attacked, crushed, laid low; but never defeated." And it's true. If you read about the journeys of Paul, it's an account of one disaster after another. He's always being bad-mouthed, attacked by crowds, thrown in prison, beaten, and driven out in shame and disgrace. One time he was stoned by an angry mob and left for dead. He was shipwrecked several times. Often he lacked the basic necessities of life. But the mission went forward. His point is that if he were on some crusade with a mere human force behind it, it would have been lost long ago. The very fact that they were able to continue in spite of all the opposition was proof that the power of God was at work in their ministry.

It's proof also that their message was the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. The truth that Jesus died for the sins of the world is an offense to people. Sinners don't like to be confronted with their sins. Even worse, once they come to see their sins, they don't like to hear that they cannot get better on their own and save themselves through their own efforts, either in whole or in part. But that's the message of Jesus. That's the message of his cross. And so wherever that message is proclaimed it's going to be despised by the world and

come under attack. Those who proclaim it are going to be received just like the Lord Jesus who lived, suffered, and died it. That's what Paul means when he says, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body." He's saying that just as the sufferings they endure for the sake of the Gospel show Christ's death, so the fact that they continue on in the face of what seems to be insurmountable opposition proves that the risen Christ lives in them and is empowering them. And through them, mere jars of clay, the risen Christ is reaching out and saving people everywhere – including the believers in the church at Corinth.

And, I might add, he continues to do this even in all the "problem child" Corinthian-style congregations that are around today – which is pretty much all of them. The problems the early church suffered are still with us. And the fact that marketing and political campaigns still work proves that we are all affected by the sophistry of the world. And with that in mind, there're a couple of lessons we need to take away from this text.

First, if you figure out a way to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ more appealing, then it's a safe bet that what you've got really isn't the Gospel any more. There is simply no way to take the sting and offense out of telling someone, "No matter how good you think you are, no matter how hard you've tried to do what's right, you're a damned sinner and you're heading for hell." There is no way to make God's Son suffering and dying on a cross look pretty. You can't appeal to people by telling them that it's faith in the work of Christ alone that saves, that there is no other path, and that nothing they think, say, or do can make themselves look one iota better in the eyes of God either before or after their conversion. It's only the perfect righteousness of Christ that counts before God. You can't dress up any of that and make it more palatable without changing the message. For this reason, the message of the true Gospel will never be particularly popular. So if something is going on in the church that's esteemed in the eyes of the world, if it's appealing, attractive, if people are flocking to it in record numbers, then you can be pretty sure that somewhere along the line the message of the Gospel has been compromised.

We don't have to dress it up or tone it down, nor should we try. Sometimes people in the church think, "If only we have a pastor who looked better, who was more eloquent, who was a better entertainer, ah, then we'd really take off and grow." This is the wrong way to think. God's power works through his Word, and it's God who brings people to faith when and where it pleases him. The only way to evaluate a pastor is to ask, "Is he faithful? Is he showing me my sin? Is he proclaiming Christ and him crucified? Is he properly administering the Sacraments?" If the answer to those questions is "yes" then give thanks to God for sending you a faithful shepherd. And I'm not saying this to promote or defend myself; I am saying it on behalf of all the faithful pastors God has called to serve his people, those who have served you in the past and those who will do so in the future. They (we) are mere jars of clay. What counts is what's inside and what gets served to you.

Another attempt to appeal to people is to add more flash and pizzazz to the worship service. But again, the question should not be how exciting and entertaining is it, but rather what message does the service convey? Some people think I'm opposed to contemporary worship services and praise songs on principle, or because I'm a stodgy old traditionalist. Not so. I'm opposed to watering down the message of the Gospel, and I've yet to see any contemporary stuff that proclaims the Gospel more clearly than what we already have. The vast majority of what I've seen falls far short and makes exactly the kind of compromises we should avoid. But talk about treasures in jars of clay: the ancient and today much despised liturgy of the church is one, as are the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But through these humble and seemingly insignificant means God works the miracle of faith by the power of his Word.

And he works this miracle in you – which means that you too are a jar of clay containing a priceless treasure, a treasure that God intends for you to share. And that bothers a lot of us, doesn't it? Most of us would rather be jars that just held the treasure, not that also help distribute it. And many people excuse themselves by saying that they simply aren't gifted in the areas needed to be an effective evangelist. Yeah? Well neither was St. Paul, who is probably the greatest evangelist who ever lived. A recent fad that has swept through many churches is what's called "spiritual gift inventories". Maybe you've heard of them. They are little self-evaluation tests you take to determine which specific gifts you've been given by God for you to use in the church. Then based on results, you are directed to play to your strengths be it in administration, teaching, encouraging others, calling on people, what have you. And I suppose that there may be some value in it as far as it goes; but I fear it misses the truth that Paul is sharing with us in today's

Epistle. It leads people to say when there's a need (especially when it comes to evangelism), "Sorry, that's not my field. God hasn't gifted me for that aspect of ministry. I'd love to help, but I can't do it."

And that's the way it will always be when we just look at the jar rather than the treasure and the power of God that's inside it. Maybe it's time we started playing to our weaknesses and relying on the Lord who bought us with his blood to do the work through the power of his Word. That really is what the Christian message is all about: We are weak. God is strong. We rest. God works. We die on account of sin. God makes alive on account of Christ. We stumble, stagger, and are pushed back. God never lets us fall. We live forever in glory, all thanks to our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to whom be all our praise now and ever through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!