

Jars of Clay

SCOTT HOEZEE

According to a now well-known saying coined by the writer, Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message. McLuhan meant by this that whenever we use some tool, especially tools to communicate something, the nature of the tool can have a shaping effect on the message presented. Well, in Paul's time there was a new communication method: Preaching; particularly preaching the Gospel; and for Paul, there was no better medium to present this message than just his plain old authentic self. There were critics in Paul's day who thought that was too weak, too ineffective. Preaching needed to be jazzed up. The preacher himself needed to be a larger-than-life celebrity figure. Paul disagreed; and today on Groundwork, as we dig into II Corinthians 4, we will see why. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are digging into, in a six-part series, the second letter to the Corinthians that Paul had in the New Testament. We have already looked at a little bit of the background of the Corinthian correspondence. We know that there are several letters, both from Corinth and possibly from Paul, too, that have been lost to us in history, but we have the two; and one of the things that we have been saying is that one of the things that makes II Corinthians very unique is that Paul is being very defensive because he has to be because he has come under critical fire by some people called the super apostles, who had infiltrated the church at Corinth after Paul had moved on.

DAVE BAST

Really what we get here is reactive on Paul's part. In fact, this is true of both Corinthian letters. We learn things that we never would have learned otherwise if they hadn't been challenged by those contentious Christians in Corinth. So, the only place where Paul really explains the meaning of the Lord's Supper is in I Corinthians because there were problems with that there. The place where he most fully explains the resurrection of the body – the ground of our hope – is I Corinthians 15 because there were problems with the resurrection; and here, throughout II Corinthians we have these marvelous passages, one after another after another, where he explains the nature of Christian ministry and Christian witness. It seems like he is talking primarily to preachers – to people like you and me; but really they apply to every Christian because every Christian is called in one way or another to live the Gospel out as a witness to the Lord Jesus. So, lots of relevance for our role there as those who point to Christ and His Gospel message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so let's listen to these words from II Corinthians 4. We have to read between the lines a little bit to get exactly what Paul is up against and what he is defending himself from; but this goes, as you said, to preachers, but it goes to all of us who witness. So Paul writes:

¹Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways. We do not use deception nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God; ³and even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.

DAVE BAST

⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, if we read between the lines here a little bit, Dave, it is clear that Paul is reacting against some things that were being suggested for how best to preach and communicate the Gospel back then; and again, this applies to all of us even yet today, both in terms of what we do when we witness, but also maybe a little bit in terms of how we interact with preachers and what kind of preaching we like today that is going to have some relevance for us very much in the Church today; but Paul is reacting against a couple things here. One is that Paul is saying that they have renounced secret and shameful ways of communicating, which may be a reference to maybe what the super apostles are doing, who maybe sound like they are emotionally manipulative, a little razzle-dazzle, something going on with their rhetoric that is turning Paul off and says isn't true to the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes, he starts out negatively by saying: This is what we don't do; this is how we don't witness. We don't use deception or underhanded methods; and a little bit earlier we actually saw this verse in the last program in this series; he says: We are not like so many peddlers of God's word; and that in itself suggests an image of some kind of shady salesman-type person who is willing to do anything to get the sale: Let the buyer beware; that is an ancient proverb. So somebody who is going to do a bait and switch maybe. He will promise you one thing and deliver another; and there are people who try to market the Gospel that way. There were in Paul's day, and frankly, they are still around today.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; sort of religious hucksters... a kind of salesman in the worst sense of the word. There are plenty of wonderful salesmen in the world, but you are not supposed to be selling the Gospel, and you are not supposed to be just full of rhetorical bells and whistles, and you are not supposed to be up there manipulating peoples' emotions, pulling at their heartstrings; and we have all seen this. I mean, frankly there are plenty of wonderful people who have preached on TV over the years, but there are a lot of people who have preached on TV over the years who are very good at manipulating images; and so, you have seen it before, especially when they are asking for donations, but sometimes even when they are trying to get people to believe in Jesus, there are four or five people up on the stage at the same time. They have all got microphones. Women are weeping and the men are sighing heavily and holding their faces in their hands; and it is all very emotive and it is clearly meant to kind of make you emotionally vulnerable so they can get across to you whatever they want to do. Paul is saying: You know, that is kind of a show. That is kind of all theater and drama, and it distorts the word of God instead of preaches it; and I don't do that, Paul says. He doesn't say directly that the super apostles do, but it sure sounds like he has heard a little bit. He has read the sermon reviews and they are coming in like Hollywood, you know.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

Scott Hoezee: These are show business people.

DAVE BAST

Well, I mean, just think about it. Paul is saying the Gospel doesn't need to be stage managed. The Gospel doesn't need special effects. The Gospel doesn't need to be tricked out in some way in order to come through more clearly or more powerfully. That is not the way it works. For one thing, it cannot work that way because Paul says people who don't believe the Gospel are darkened in their thinking. They are *veiled*, is the

word that he uses. They are blind, in other words. They cannot see it; so no matter how you trick it out or how you attempt to enhance the power of the message through these various human means, frankly; it is not going to work because they cannot see it anyway unless God takes the veil away – unless God opens the eyes – unless God opens the ears to hear, they are not going to get it. So, it is not only unseemly, it is dumb to try to think that your eloquence or your cleverness or your various whatever you do is going to make the message go through.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; none of which is to say that there isn't a certain art to preaching; none of which is to say that preachers don't take great care to get the words right and the wording right and some illustrations right. Of course, that is all true; we will mention more about that in a bit, too; but it is to say that when you put on a show, if the people have the feeling that the preacher is putting on a false front, how are you going to get them to believe in Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life? You cannot get people to believe in Jesus as the truth if you yourself are putting up a false front. You have to be true to yourself, Paul says, and just jazzing it up and cranking up the technology or whatever, which is something that the Church is still wrestling with today, that is not going to change it if the Spirit of God isn't blowing in the room when the sermon is being preached; and the Spirit is going to work better when you yourself are transparent to Christ.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the God, Paul says, who first created the light in the beginning of Genesis, who said: Let the light shine out of darkness; He will shine the light of Christ into our minds and hearts, and He has done that and He will do that. That is what it takes; it is the power of the Holy Spirit. That is all you need; but there is a second charge, or accusation, that Paul wants to respond to in this section of II Corinthians, and we will go there next.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging today into II Corinthians Chapter 4; and Dave, we want to get right back into that. We just saw that Paul said that preaching is not supposed to be stage craft and drama and bells and whistles and high-tech hoo-hah, but it is supposed to be an authentic witness to the authentic Jesus; and there is some indication that the false teachers in Corinth had accused him of having a weak and ineffectual style of preaching: Well, that is just so boring, Paul; you've got to jazz it up.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But they also apparently had a second charge against Paul's particular form of preaching, and that charge was that it wasn't very effective. Hey, you want us to think Paul's preaching was effective, look at all the people who didn't come to believe...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul responds to that beginning in verse 3.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we read these verses earlier, but I think they bear repeating. So let's hear them again. Paul says: ^{4:3}If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel that displays the glory of Christ, the image of God. ⁵For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servant for Jesus'

sake; and then these words that we just referred to: “For God who said, Let light shine out of darkness,” made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. And this is really important, I think, for anyone who wants to understand why some people accept the Gospel and others reject it. Paul is explaining it right here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It sort of reminds me of the line from the great preacher and teacher of preaching, Fred Craddock, who once said that there are two kinds of preaching that are hard to hear: Good preaching and bad preaching. Good preaching could be hard to hear, too, because Paul is saying: Look, preaching is a unique form of communication. It is proclaiming the Gospel. This is not just a bedtime story form of communication. It is not... today we would say a standup comedian doing a monologue. It is not a politician delivering a persuasive speech. Preaching is its own form of communication through which God has chosen to get His Gospel proclaimed to the world; and it is not going to work like ordinary forms of communication therefore, because what preaching is overcoming is not just people who don’t understand something so you give a lecture to teach them how to bake bread; or it is not just telling a story to entertain children or adults; preaching is overcoming a spiritual power, Paul is saying. People are spiritually dead. They are veiled in their understanding, Paul says. So if somebody preaches a sermon and not everybody is converted, you cannot say: Well, clearly that is because you...

DAVE BAST

It was a bad sermon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It was a bad sermon. No, it might have been a great sermon, but you know, these people are actively resisting it because of a spiritual power that the Holy Spirit of God has to overcome, and if the Spirit doesn’t then these people are going to remain ignorant; but that is no fault of the preacher. It just highlights the unique form of communication that preaching is.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you speak about communication, and one of things that they will tell you in communication studies or class or whatever... you want to be a more effective speaker, well you have to know your audience; first and foremost, know your audience. Well, that is also true for Christian preachers; and here is the truth about your audience: Christian witness, Christian preacher, Christian friend sharing with someone, your audience is blind – blind to the truth – and oh yes, they are also dead, spiritually dead if they are not a believer; and so how are you going to overcome that? Well the fact is, you are not. Your best bet is to just be faithful and tell the story and point to Jesus and what He did and don’t worry how eloquent you are or how good your arguments are or your brilliant analogies because it is going to be up to the Spirit to take away the veil, open the blind eyes, unstop the deaf ears, and raise the dead.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, the classic vignette of that in scripture is Ezekiel 37, where the Spirit of God takes the prophet Ezekiel to this valley of dry bones. They are skeletons. They are deader than dead. They are bleached in the sun; and then the Spirit of God says to Ezekiel: Preach a sermon.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Ezekiel says: Good one; that’s a good one; that is funny. No; preach to the bones; and so Ezekiel starts to preach a sermon thinking: This is the dumbest thing I have ever done, and then the Spirit begins to blow and all of a sudden bones start rattling and they come together, bone on bone, and you know the story. It is kind of what you are saying, especially when you are preaching to unbelievers; that is the audience that every

preacher, every teacher, every Christian witness, every conversation you have with a non-believer at work in the break room, you are preaching to a spiritual skeleton. You think it is completely futile. There is no chance... and humanly speaking, you are right; there is no chance; and it won't help if you yell louder or have a clever prop or use power point or have a video. If the Spirit is not blowing, they are going to stay dead.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But when the Spirit blows, and the Spirit chooses to do this through authentic witness that we are all capable of doing, all of a sudden the dead come back to life, just like in Ezekiel 37.

DAVE BAST

I ran across a reference to a book on preaching. I never saw the book, I didn't read it, but I thought the title was great and it stuck with me ever since: *Thirty Minutes to Raise the Dead*; today we might say twenty minutes to raise the dead, given our church services, but that is what we are about. I happened to run into a regular listener to Groundwork, who said to me: Hey, you know, you are always asking for topics and subjects, talk to us a little bit about evangelism and practical ways of how we can witness to the Gospel. Well, you know, I think this is the most practical lesson of all: Don't worry about how persuasive you are or how convincing you can be. It is not about that; it is about just talk about Jesus, share what He has done for you, point people to the Bible, tell them what He did, and then pray for the Spirit to use that because that is what is going to be the convicting force.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, one of the most famous sermons in Christian history was the first sermon. It was on Pentecost, and even though we honor Peter as a great apostle and all the rest, at the time of Pentecost Peter wasn't much to brag about. He was an ordinary fisherman known to mess up; known to have most recently denied his own Jesus three times; he had feet of clay; he wasn't an eloquent speaker by any means; and the Spirit empowered him on Pentecost to preach the first sermon. Three thousand people are converted on the spot, and it is like: Did Peter do that? No, Peter did not do that and he would be the first to say it. The Spirit of God did that, but it required Peter to be Peter. He had to be his own self, an authentic witness. We can all do that. The Spirit can work through every single one of us, in conversations, in lesson plans in classrooms, certainly in sermons in church. What God needs to get people to Jesus are simple, humble servants, because guess what? Jesus was a simple, humble servant. He was the Son of God, but He humbled Himself to death – even death on a cross. You want to get people to the humble Jesus? You be humble. You are not going to get people to Jesus by taking on airs or being a puffed up, proud person, or being some celebrity with bright lights flashing on you. You want to get people to Jesus? Be like Jesus.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Humble, a servant.

DAVE BAST

Authentic, we might say. So Paul says what we preach is not ourselves – it is not about me. It is not putting myself and my outsized personality forward, but we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. Let's talk a little bit more about that before we wrap up this program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are going to pick up now, Dave, right at II Corinthians 4, where we left off at verse 7, to hear some words that are very, very familiar to many of us; at least part of this passage is, and that is where Paul writes: We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God, not from us. ⁸We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

DAVE BAST

¹⁰We carry always around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake so that His life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. So, not very triumphalist, is he?

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; but very realistic, right? It kind of brings us full circle. We opened this program with a quote from the media expert, Marshall McLuhan, who famously said the medium is the message. Paul here is saying the medium – the vessel by which the Gospel is communicated should match the message itself, which is the humble sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. You need to be a humble sacrifice yourself to get that message across authentically; and that is the way God does it. We are all just jars of clay. We are not golden vessels, we are not silver and copper; we are clay pots – simple clay pots, and not all that attractive at that; and yet, that is the vessel that God pours the Gospel into, and we pour it back out of that same simple clay pot whenever we witness to Jesus; whenever we engage in evangelism; that is the way it goes and that is the way it needs to go, Paul says. We are dealing with a salvation that came through the death of God's Son, so you are going to have to have a little death around inside you and humility and sacrifice yourself to get that across.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the contrast is between the value of the contents and the very humble nature of the package that it is delivered in. So the jar of clay is our frail, fragile, feeble human nature subject to all kinds of pains and troubles and even death. We are carrying death around inside us all the time; but the treasure is the Gospel itself; and so God chooses to deliver this inestimable treasure – this Good News that brings salvation – through very ordinary human beings; and it really suits us in trying to communicate the Gospel or share it with others, to be humble – to be human – to be ourselves. That is all you have to do; just be yourself; be authentic; be honest. Don't put on airs, and let the attention go to the treasure – to the Gospel itself; and that, Paul says, will prove that it is God's power that actually saves. I mean, if you are saved by human eloquence, you can be *unsaved* by human eloquence. If you are persuaded by somebody's great arguments, somebody comes along with better arguments and you say: Oh gosh, I guess I was wrong.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that is right; and you know, it also reminds me of how well this probably fits Paul himself, who again is defending himself against these super apostle critics who were saying that Paul wasn't nearly impressive enough in his presentation, in his preaching style; so he is defending himself against that, saying: No, this is how it should go. There is a description... not in the Bible, it is from an extra-biblical source; but somebody in the ancient world who knew and had met the Apostle Paul described Paul as being kind of short, bald; he had eyebrows that met in the middle; he had a nose that was a little too big for his face; ears that were a little big for his head; he was bow-legged; and he didn't have some preaching voice like Morgan Freeman or

someone; and yet, this is the guy that God tapped to be the Apostle to the gentiles; who planted all these churches. Paul is saying: Yes, that is me. What you see is what you get. I am a jar of clay, but I am God's jar of clay, and He has filled me up to the brim with the Gospel, and that is the way it needs to work for all of us in the Church.

DAVE BAST

Which is not to say we don't try hard to do our best to share the Gospel with authenticity, but with persuasiveness. Paul can say a little bit later... we will see this in the next program: I appeal to you, be reconciled to God. He is passionate about it. It is not kind of a give or take: Hey, whatever. Here, I'll give you this, but I can't convince you, so eh, you know. I mean, Scott, let's be honest. You and I both care a lot about preaching, and we work hard at it. We try to be the best we can be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I teach preaching for a living right now, and so none of this is meant to... if my students are listening... none of this is an excuse for lazy preaching or for not taking care to choose the right words or the right illustrations or stories. No, no, no; there is a craft to preaching, and the Spirit enables those gifts in preachers, and we need to exercise those gifts with due diligence. Of course, of course, of course; but at the end of the day, that is all just in service of the Holy Spirit...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who has for some reason chosen to work through preaching. Once every generation, it seems, somebody somewhere in the Church predicts that preaching is going to die away and some new form of communication is going to take its place: Videos or dramas. It has never happened. The first thing the Holy Spirit did on Pentecost was have Peter preach a sermon...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And He has been inspiring sermons ever since; because this is somehow the method that God uses.

DAVE BAST

Yes, but let's also bring this down to you. You are not a preacher, maybe; you don't worry about preaching; but again, you are concerned, as my friend was, with how to be a better, a more effective witness; and the answer is be aware of your humanity, be aware of the clayness of your jar; and don't let that stop you. Don't say: Well, I am just, you know... I am retired or I don't have...

SCOTT HOEZEE

I get tongue tied. No, that is okay. God will use you. God has been using you... In fact, some of your weaknesses might become God's strengths because that is what Paul says: Where I am weak, I am strong because that is sort of the way the Gospel goes. Out of the great weakness of Christ came the power of salvation.

DAVE BAST

So thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know if we can dig deeper into scripture that you are interested in. So visit groundworkonline.com to give us your feedback.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/jars-of-clay>

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