



Calling All Clay Pots

A Celebration of Ministry

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2 Corinthians 4

I would like to try to persuade you of two things this morning: first, that every Christian has received a gift from God which he is responsible to use for the good of the church and for the glory of God; second, there are compelling reasons why we should really want to use the gifts God has given us. Then when I have done my best to persuade you of these two things from Scripture, we will take a few minutes for you to consider prayerfully the specific opportunities of ministry that exist here at Bethlehem.

First then, *every Christian has received a gift from God and is responsible to use it for the good of the church and the glory of God.* This is evident, I think, both from experience and from God's word. Experience teaches us that we are all different. And if we believe that there is a God who creates and sustains the world and everything in it, then our differences must be owing in large measure to him. And if our existence and diversity is owing to God's mercy in creation and providence, then we certainly have the responsibility to thank and honor God in the way we use our distinctive personalities and abilities. And not only for God's honor but also for each other's good, because it would be utterly inconsistent to be dependent on mercy ourselves and yet treat others cruelly or with indifference. So, it seems to me that experience alone teaches us that each has a gift and that we are responsible to use them for God's glory and the good of other people.

But our *interpretations of experience* should always be confirmed by our interpretation of the Bible. There are at least two passages that make the point very clear. The first is 1 Peter 4:10,11, "*As each has received a gift, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace ... whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies, in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.*" These two verses are a theology of ministry in miniature. All four parts of our first point are here: each Christian has received a gift, that is, some special work of God's grace in your life; you are responsible to employ it; for whom?—for the benefit of others and the glory of God. Don't miss the very personal and practical implication of this text for you. If you are a Christian, there is some special manifestation of God's grace in you which can help other people in their life of faith and can honor God.

This is also clear in 1 Corinthians 12:7, "*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*" Notice again that it says explicitly, "*to each is given a manifestation of the Spirit.*" This is what I want to emphasize this morning. It is not just pastors, it is all the members of the body of Christ in view here. There are no exceptions. You have a gift from

God and you are not to squander his grace through negligence. You are responsible to use your gift for the good of the church and the glory of God.

Now perhaps you know that in your head, but you simply don't feel any incentive to obey this command in 1 Peter 4:10, "*Employ it* for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace." So the second thing I want to do is try to awaken a desire for ministry in your heart by giving several compelling reasons why we should really want to use God's gifts rather than doing nothing with them. There are at least five of these reasons in 2 Corinthians 3 and 4 which I will mention briefly.

First, Christians who use their gifts are ministers of a new covenant, which means that ministry is not merely the keeping of regulations, but rather the experience of spiritual power. Look at 2 Corinthians 3:4-6.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills but the Spirit gives life.

The *old* covenant was the agreement God made with his people at Mount Sinai that if they would trust him, obey him, avail themselves humbly of his forgiveness when they sinned, he would give them life and prosperity. The *new* covenant is the agreement God has made with his people that if they trust Jesus and obey him and avail themselves of the forgiveness he purchased, he would give them eternal life. The terms of the covenant are not essentially different. What is different is that the spiritual power to overcome the hardness of men's hearts was by and large not given in the old covenant (Deut. 29:4; 5:29; Heb. 4:2). But in the new covenant, after Christ has made atonement for sins once for all, God has seen fit to pour out his Spirit in large measure for the empowering of obedience.

This means that under the old covenant the word of God (which is holy, just and good) was by and large pursued without a reliance on the Spirit; and when that happens the word becomes a mere "written code," a dead "letter" which kills. This is why Paul calls the law in verse 7 a "dispensation of death." But in the new covenant the Spirit writes the law on our hearts through faith so that it is no longer a deadly external constraint but becomes the cheerful expression of our own will and purpose. And so the Spirit leads to life and not death.

Now what does this mean for your ministry, the use of your gift? It means that we are not involved at Bethlehem in taking dead Biblical sentences and piling them on other people like weights. Ministry under the new covenant (where we live) is neither the explanation nor the application nor the implementation of barren Biblical sentences by human strength. Rather, it is the explosion of spiritual power by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The first great incentive to use your gift is that thereby you are caught up into the great redemptive work of the Spirit in this age. You have your gift from the Spirit; you use it in the power of the Spirit; and therefore, the fruit you produce is the life of the Spirit. You are not left to yourself and your own sufficiency. The first thrilling incentive to find your gift and use it is that in using it you find yourself borne along by the Spirit. You feel great that you are at the center of God's will; you know his wind is at your back; you know his angel is running before you; you finally know what you are made for, and you exult in the grace of God to include you as a minister of the new covenant.

A second incentive for stirring up our gift and using it for others is that this is what Jesus meant by servanthood; and servanthood is the path of greatness. Notice 2 Corinthians 4:5, "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as *your servants for Jesus' sake*." When Paul uses his gift in ministry to the church he says he becomes their *servant* for Jesus' sake. They get the service, Jesus gets the glory. What does Paul get? Paul gets the joyful fulfillment of knowing he is becoming a great man of faith. For Jesus said, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:43). True greatness in the Kingdom of God is servanthood. Using your gift for others is the way God intends for you to serve. Therefore, if you have any aspirations at all toward true greatness, you have a good incentive to find and use your gift for Jesus' sake.

The third reason you should use your gift for the good of others and the glory of God is that your ordinariness is no reason not to. Too many people say, "I'm so ordinary, so average and undistinguished. I can't do anything significant." 2 Corinthians 4:7 shows that this argument is wrong and why. It says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels (or clay pots!) to show us that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." God's concept of ministry is so different from the world's concept. The world stresses the classy container, not the glory of God in human weakness. If there is one thing that we are coming to learn together in this church it is that *God's purpose to get the glory in all things determines how we do all things*. Here God's purpose is to make sure that we see that the surpassing power belongs to him and not to us. How does he do it? He puts the treasure of his gifts and his gospel in clay pots like you and me. Your ordinariness is not a liability; it is an asset, if you really want God to get the glory. No one is too common, too weak, too shy, too inarticulate, too disabled to do what God wants you to do with your gift. Take Jim Lindholm, for example. Not many of us are more confined and limited physically than Jim. But who do you suppose it was that surprised Carol Levy with 27 red and white carnations after her surgery to say we missed her? Jim Lindholm. And that's not the only gift you have, Jim. I praise God you are using them among us. No matter what your condition, you have a gift and the humble use of it in reliance on the Spirit will bring glory to God. It is no liability to be a clay pot in the Kingdom of God.

A fourth incentive to use your gift is that *it makes people thankful to God*. In 2 Corinthians 4:15 Paul says that the use of his gift of apostleship "is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may *increase thanksgiving to the glory of God*. Peter said (in 1 Peter 4:10) that the use of our gift is a stewarding of God's varied grace. Paul adds here that the spread of grace through the use of our gift causes thanksgiving to increase to God's glory. The true reward of a Christian who uses his gift to help others is not that they thank him but that they thank God. What joy can be greater than to rely on the Spirit, use our gift to serve another person and to have that person strengthened in faith and filled with thanksgiving to God? If we ever hope to win unbelievers to faith and gratitude and to transform grouchy saints into grateful ones, we will have to find our gift and use it for their good and to God's glory.

Finally, one more incentive: whatever inconvenience, or suffering or affliction you endure in the use of your gift, it is more than worth it. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." Paul's point is not merely, hang on, it will be better by and by. He goes deeper. The affliction we endure makes our experience of the by and by better. Our affliction sustained in faith is *preparing for us an eternal weight of glory*. This is a tremendous incentive for Paul to press on in the use of his gift even when he tended to get discouraged. The hope that all his afflictions will only serve to increase his joy in the glory of God keeps Paul from losing

heart. That's what he says in verse 16, "So we do not lose heart." We press on, in spite of everything, to use our gifts for the good of the church and the glory of God.

So now let me sum up what we've seen. First, we saw from 1 Peter 4:10,11 and 1 Cor. 12:7 that every Christian has received a gift from God which he is responsible to use for the good of the church and the glory of God. Then we looked at five reasons why we should all have a strong desire to be good trustees of God's gifts. *First*, by using your gift you become a minister of the new covenant, not in the application of a mere written code which kills but in the power of the Spirit which gives life. You are swept by the Spirit into the great river of redemption and are not left to your own sufficiency. *Second*, the use of our gift for others is what Jesus meant by servanthood; servanthood is true greatness; therefore, if you have any aspirations to godly greatness, find your gift and use it. *Third*, being ordinary or disabled is not a liability in the Kingdom, but may be an asset if your aim is to glorify God and not yourself in the use of your gift. Therefore, no one is excluded from the call to all clay pots. *Fourth*, using your gift will change people and make them more thankful to God. And what better way to invest your life than to spend it increasing thanksgiving to God? Finally, whatever affliction you may encounter in the use of your gift, if you accept it in faith, it will only serve to enlarge your joy in the glory of God in the age to come.