

Humble Servants
II Corinthians 4:1-7

A few headlines. On Thursday, the Pope held a meeting in Rome which is still going on today. He called bishops and heads of religious orders from all over the world to try to deal with a decades-long scandal of priests abusing primarily young boys.

Starting yesterday, and meeting through Tuesday, the United Methodist Church is gathering delegates in a specially-called General Conference that aims to settle the same sorts of questions about ordination standards that caused so many traditionally-minded congregations to leave the PCUSA over the last several years.

And just last week, a Texas newspaper reported that 380 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have been accused of abusing more than 700 children since 1998. And it seems, even after their crimes had been discovered, some of these leaders were able to keep working at other Baptist churches over the years. Given all of this, it sure looks like the worldwide Church is in a sorry state.

But given what Paul mentions in verse 2 – where he condemns the hidden things of dishonesty or shame, walking in craftiness and deceit, and abusing the Word of God in one way or another – these problems are nothing new. Some who call themselves pastors have always abused their office to take advantage of others, proclaiming their love for Jesus while really only being concerned about themselves.

Okay, the problem of selfishness in the church today is clear enough. We know what church leaders shouldn't do. But what should we do? What positive model of church leadership should we embrace? Indeed, how can all of us live in such a way that we attract people to Christ instead of driving them away from Him?

Well, we Presbyterians naturally turn to the next thing Paul mentions in verse 2 – the manifestation of the truth. We spend a lot of time and effort making sure that our teaching and ruling elders know the truth about Christ. We have established schools and colleges all over the country to teach the truth. We insist that our teaching elders go to seminary, and we examine all of our elders to insure that they understand the Scriptures and believe our confessional standards. And with all of this necessary focus on the truth, it's easy for us to be a bit smug, to assume that if only those other denominations would get their theological ducks in a row, they wouldn't have the sorts of problems that they do.

But if that's what we conservative EPC types think, we might need to take a closer look in the mirror. After all, in our Presbytery alone, we've had two pastors whose ministries were brought to an end by moral failings – at that's just in the last few years. No, just embracing the right confessional standards, just holding a correct doctrine of Scripture isn't enough to keep anyone from falling prey to fleshly temptations.

No, there's another important part of manifesting, of revealing the sort of truth that Paul mentions in verse 2: integrity. It turns out that it's just not enough to believe the right things – we also have to live according to those beliefs.

And it turns out that such integrity is one of the most important keys to effective evangelism, especially where our younger generation is concerned. After all, many of them prize authenticity, or what they call “being real,” above all other character traits. And let’s be honest – in our age of omnipresent cell-phone video recordings and instant publication of them on social media, this kind of transparency, this kind of integrity, this kind of consistent Christian living is really the only option for any of us.

Take Trevor Lawrence for example. He’s the quarterback of the Clemson football team that most of you saw play in the national championship game. He’s an amazing athlete who has also publicly professed his faith in Christ. But he’s still a 19-year old freshman. Just this week, he was playing in an intramural basketball game, and was caught on camera shoving someone who tried to set a pick on him. Now, we don’t know what was said between the two young men, or what else may have happened during the game which prompted the exchange. But the video was picked up by national media. And even though none of us knows the whole story, some will, no doubt unfairly, be tempted to call Trevor’s faith into question. Like it or not, all of us Christians are on Candid Camera all the time, and the watching world is always looking for an opportunity to call us a bunch of hypocrites.

But however necessary living a life of transparency may be for us, such integrity has always been essential for Church leaders – we shouldn’t expect anyone to listen to what we say if we’re not living it out at the same time. That’s a big part of why Paul commends himself to everyone’s conscience in verse 2. He’s appealing to what they know about him, which had to be a lot, as he was the organizing pastor of the church in Corinth. And given how often they must have heard him preach and teach, they had to know the depth and breadth of his knowledge of the Scriptures.

They also had to know, as is quite obvious from his writings, that Paul was a straight-shooter, calling it like he saw it. But in verse 2 Paul also wants them to remember the example he was trying to set for them, an example that was the opposite of the dishonesty and craftiness and deceit and selfishness that was all too common among church leaders of the time, the sort of hypocrisy that remains the shame of the Church today.

So, what is the remedy for such defective leadership? Indeed, how can all of us who have been called into the Church of Jesus Christ more clearly manifest His Word not only with our lips but with our lives, being as transparent as we are truthful?

Well, here’s an example I often used with my cadets: “I don’t want you to think about pizza. I don’t want you to think about pepperoni, or cheese, or deep-dish or crispy crust What are you thinking about? About pizza! You can’t not think about something. Instead you have to think about something else. You have to shift your focus.”

And that’s the first point Paul makes in verse 5 – if we want to bear a truthful, transparent witness for Christ, we have to stop thinking about ourselves and our needs and start thinking about Jesus instead. We must preach not ourselves but Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord. Pastor Rick Warren put it this way in the opening sentences of his bestselling book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*:

“It’s not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your

wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born *by* his purpose and *for* his purpose.”

And that’s exactly what Paul is getting at in verse 5: Jesus is the Christ – that means He’s the promised Messiah who rules and reigns over all of us. But not only that, Jesus is the Lord – that means He’s the Son of God, the One through whom everything came into being, the One Who holds the universe together. And so given Who Jesus is, it just makes sense that all our speaking and all our living must not be for ourselves – everything we say and do must be for Jesus. And any Christian, leader or layman alike, who misses this point, anyone who still clings to the notion that life is all about us and our happiness will eventually end up living the same sort of selfish lie that has caused so many of the scandals all over the Church throughout history and around the world today.

So, how can understanding that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord, transform the way we see ourselves? Instead of the sort of selfish pride that has led so many church leaders to take advantage of other people, a focus on the authority and divinity of Christ should create in each one of us a profound sense of humility. Now, this sort of thing didn’t come any easier to Paul than it does for us. After all, he was one of the most learned rabbis of his day, and because he understood how Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Scriptures, the depth of his insight outclassed them all.

But as Paul explains in verse 6, the only reason he knew anything about Jesus was because of that experience he had on the road to Damascus – when Jesus appeared to him in a blinding light, impressing upon him the truth of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, as well as the reality of Jesus’ oneness with all who trust in Him. Everything Paul knew about the Scriptures and about Jesus thus flowed out of an experience that Paul had nothing to do with. So, instead of being proud of his immense learning, Paul humbly gave all the glory to God for everything he knew about Christ.

And that humility before God led to an equally sincere humility before the people he was called to serve. Again, such humility didn’t come naturally to Paul – after all, he was an apostle. He had done miracles of healing. And he had been the organizing pastor of the Corinthian church. But in verse 5, he doesn’t insist on any of those titles, however much he deserved all of them. Instead, he simply calls himself their servant. Indeed, in the Greek, this word is even more astounding, because it means bond-slave. Isn’t that astounding? Instead of lording his knowledge and wisdom and authority over the Corinthians, Paul considered himself nothing more than a slave to them.

True humility toward God and toward the other members of the Church. Wouldn’t an attitude like that among church leaders make the kinds of abuses that we hear so much about today simply unthinkable? For let’s face it – no one ever heard of a slave abusing his master, right? So, if all of us, leaders and laymen alike, really considered our brothers and sisters in Christ to be more important than we are, and if we were constantly seeking to better our brothers and sisters’ condition regardless of the cost to ourselves, well, the idea of taking advantage of them to satisfy our own desires would never enter our minds.

But there’s another reason that humility is critical for all church leaders: it’s the best way to reveal the glory of God to the world. Now, I know we usually give the pastor all the credit for a growing, vibrant, church, don’t we? In fact, it is this sort of tendency to put pastors up on pedestals that has encouraged so much of the abuse we see in the Church today.

But Paul will have none of this sort of adulation. Instead, in verse 7, he insists that, in spite of his great learning and insight, and in spite of the miracles of healing he had accomplished, he was nothing more than an earthen vessel, not any more valuable than a clay pot. The real treasure, Paul says, is what's inside the pot – the glory of God in the face of Christ. It is the wisdom and power of God, and not some slick, polished presentation, that made all of Paul's ministry possible.

And come to think of it, could there really be any other way to follow Jesus? For He didn't reveal the glory of God in the showy way that would have impressed the religious leaders of the time, did He? No, those leaders who in their pride looked down on everyday people, those who thought they were so much better than everyone else didn't think much of Jesus either.

And, according to the world's priorities, why would they? He was born into a working-class family. He hung out with tax collectors and sinners. He was even willing to touch an unclean leper. And He chose to lay down His life on a cruel cross, dying a criminal's death. According to every worldly measure, He was nothing more than a loser.

But it was because He humbled Himself before God and in the sight of sinners like us, it was because He refused to take advantage of His divine might and majesty to please Himself, that all who trust in Him have received such tremendous blessings – forgiveness of our sins and righteousness in the sight of God. As Paul says in our responsive reading, It was because Jesus humbled Himself and became a Servant to all of us that we have the hope of the resurrection and eternal life with God forever.

So, how could we follow such a Savior in a selfish way? How could we reflect the glory of such a humble King by taking advantage of others? No, the only way to follow Jesus is to do what He did, in true humility putting aside our wants and even our needs in order that others might be blessed. For only then can we truly put our focus on Him, giving Him all the glory and honor that He deserves.