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Scripture:

2 Corinthians 4:5-7 (CEV)

We are not preaching about ourselves. Our message is that Jesus Christ is Lord. He also sent us to be your servants. The Scriptures say, "God commanded light to shine in the dark." Now God is shining in our hearts to let you know that his glory is seen in Jesus Christ. We are like clay jars in which this treasure is stored. The real power comes from God and not from us.

BIG IDEA: The world is a big place! And God loves all of it. Since the time of Jesus, people have been sharing the love of God in many places and in many ways. But in the last 150 years, mission has changed dramatically. Instead of missionaries primarily from the US and Europe going to Africa and Asia, missionaries are now FROM everywhere, going TO everywhere, telling others about God! And through mission, we get to be part of it!



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Surprising People, Surprising Faith

Has anyone ever told you not to judge a book by its cover? To expect the unexpected? Not to follow the crowd, because the crowd isn't always heading in the right direction?

If they did, then they were right!

In J.R.R. Tolkien's amazing trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, there are lots of examples of things not being what they seem. In this series of stories, a hobbit named Frodo has a big job to do – one that is dangerous – so he needs help. Frodo has to take a magic ring to be destroyed – which can only happen in the place where it was made: an evil land called Mordor. The ring tempts the people who carry it to use its powers for evil, so Frodo needs good people around who can help him resist the power of the ring. But it is a long and dangerous journey, so he also needs protection from those who would capture the ring and keep it for themselves. One person who offers to help is a man named Strider.

Now, the first time Frodo sees Strider, he does not think much of him. In fact, Strider seems a little scary! We first meet Strider in the first book of



the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Frodo describes his looks to his friends as “foul!” The narrator shows Strider sitting in the shadows — dirty, smelly, worn ... covered in mud. But Strider helps Frodo and his friends, and Frodo is able to learn that Strider is more than he appears to be.



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Strider is, in fact, a friend to Gandalf, the good wizard, who is an old friend of Frodo’s. Gandalf leaves Frodo a letter, telling him to look out for Strider, and in it records lines of a poem about Strider – that show that he is NOT what he seems to be:

*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the darkness shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
And crownless again shall be king.*

These verses are without a doubt about Strider – the book tells us so. But what kind of picture of him is presented?

Frodo needs help – a powerful ally he can trust not to be overcome by the ring, and a mighty warrior who can protect him. But what does he see, and what does the poem describe: a dull, crownless old guy, wandering around in the dark with a broken sword? What kind of help could he be? But Frodo trusts Gandalf’s judgment, and brings Strider along as his helper, in spite of his looks. For Frodo thinks about judging books by their covers – and realizes that an enemy would TRY to look appealing, in order to trick him. An enemy would “look fair, but feel foul.” But Strider “looks foul and seems fair.” So Frodo trusts Gandalf’s letter, and his own feelings about Strider. And it’s a good thing he does! Strider turns out to be a great leader and warrior, who protects Frodo and his friends on their dangerous journey. He resists the temptation of the powerful ring Frodo carries, and defends him from the enemies who want it. As the story goes on, it turns out that Strider is even more than anybody expected! He is the rightful king of the land!

Wait — play that back a minute?

Dull. Crownless. Old. Wandering in the dark with a broken sword. Is that the picture of a king to you? Probably not. But even so, Strider IS king, even though he doesn’t look like it. What an unexpected surprise! Strider’s true identity may be hidden by his outer surface, but it is there and real, nonetheless. It is kind of like keeping a pile of diamonds or jewels in a clay jar. If you saw it from the outside – just a plain clay jar – would you think it was valuable? No! But, if you looked at the inside of the jar to see the treasure, you’d know how very valuable it was. You cannot tell how valuable someone or something is from the outside. It could

be a very nice package – but as Frodo and Strider know, the nice package could contain something very bad. In the same way, even though the outside appearance may not be very impressive, like with Strider, it could hold a very real treasure inside.



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Strider, a muddy stranger, turned out to be a king! But Frodo couldn't tell that by just looking at him, could he? In the same way, God can use people, places, situations, and times that seem completely off-the-wall to us. It doesn't matter what's on the outside – or even if it makes sense to other people. Like the Scripture says, God chooses ordinary people and situations to show his power and love.

People look at the outside appearance.

God looks at the heart.

What can we learn from this?

- First, this lets people know that the power and love come from GOD, not from us. God doesn't care about how we look – only who we are, and how our actions show it.
- Second, God works in unexpected ways, or through unexpected people.
- Third, you never know what effects God might have planned for YOU.

But that just means that we don't have to worry about it! All we have to do is act in obedience to God, and whatever happens, for better or for worse, God will use it powerfully!

What in any of this could make sense to the rest of the world?

But that's how God works – he surprises us, each and every day! Appearances are nothing; the inside is what counts. And WE are called to ACTIVELY OBEY God by not caring about appearances, but being willing to do the unexpected and crazy! We are the clay pots that God puts his treasure in! We can share that treasure by living obediently to share this treasure with the WHOLE WORLD.

(Quotations from Tolkien's text taken from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, by J.R.R.Tolkien.)



Carrie Cypher's passion for global Christianity led her to American Baptist International Ministries, where she worked during 2005 and 2006 as assistant in the Office of Development. In her role, Carrie wrote much of the worship and educational materials used in the World Mission Offering materials for 2006 (Be Surprised by God. Pray. Give. Be Amazed!). A former adjunct professor of intellectual heritage at Temple University in Philadelphia, Carrie is now studying for her doctorate in the School of Divinity at Great Britain's University of Edinburgh.