

“Treasures in Jars of Clay”
2 Corinthians 4:7-18
March 23, 2003
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Text Comment

- v.7 Paul has just spoken of the majesty of his message: the glory of God in the face of Christ. Now he contrasts that with the fragile and much troubled nature of the messenger. The earthenware pots or jars that were everywhere in use for all sorts of purposes were inexpensive and easily broken. Only their contents gave them worth. [Barnett] That is the irony here: that God should use such unimpressive messengers to deliver such a glorious message.
- v.9 In each of the four contrasts by which Paul describes his life and work as a minister of the gospel, the first item in the pair describes the *earthiness or weakness* of the messenger, the second item describes the effects of the divine power that stands behind the messenger. Left to himself, the messenger is simply inadequate. But, on account of the message he has been given to deliver, he is furnished with divine help.
- v.11 In other places Paul makes this same point. The same hostility of unbelieving man and the demonic realm that sent the Lord Jesus to the cross is now directed against those who speak on his behalf. Paul’s devotion to Jesus is a magnet that draws the world’s opposition to himself. But just as Jesus conquered death, so his power to give life and preserve it is demonstrated in the life of Paul. The opposition cannot stop him anymore than it stopped Jesus, because his life and his power is in him.
- v.12 All this suffering that Paul endures as a minister of the gospel has been fruitful to bring life to the Corinthians. In the real world of Satanic and worldly opposition to the message, the only way to get the word of life out is for gospel messengers to be willing to take the hits.
- v.14 Paul had the same faith as David expressed in Psalm 116, and in the same confidence of future salvation Paul continues to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let the world do its worst, as it did to the Lord Jesus. The victory will be ours at the end.
- v.15 The more people who come to faith in Christ, the more thanksgiving and praise will be offered to God. We want more people to believe in Jesus not because we want our club to become larger, but because we want more people to love and worship the God we love and worship; we want him to receive the glory that is his due.
- v.18 Paul could easily find himself concentrating on the troubles, the opposition, the danger that he had to face because of his ministry on behalf of Christ. But, seeing the glory that is to come, knowing that he will share in the triumph of the Lord Jesus, he is free to concentrate on happier things. Calvin writes: “Note well what it is that will make all the miseries of this world easy to endure; it is that we should transfer our thoughts to the

eternity of the kingdom of heaven. If we look around us, a moment can seem a long time, but when we lift up our hearts heavenwards, a thousand years begin to be like a moment.”

There is no doubt that as Paul writes here he still has the false teachers in Corinth in the periphery of his vision. They are given to self-congratulation, to boasting about their qualifications and their impressive resumes. They were impressed with their influence. Though they wouldn't have said it quite this way, the Corinthians, they thought, were oh so fortunate to have had *them* come among them. They were an ancient version of the television evangelist who is sure that the Lord has no more effective or valuable spokesman. No, says Paul, we are not about ourselves but the Lord Jesus, it is *his* glory not ours that mesmerizes us and it is for *his* sake and not ours that we seek to bring others to trust in him. Indeed, without his power, *we* could never overcome the blindness of the natural human heart. Left to ourselves we would accomplish nothing, we would win no one to salvation. In ourselves we are weak, but Christ's power in us can accomplish great things in the hearts of even the most unlikely people. And when he says that he is weak, he is not posing. He's not as some do making a public virtue of his "brokenness." He is stating the facts. He's not that great a speaker, he's been pushed around a lot, and he's paid a steep price for his concern that others hear about Jesus Christ. He has said much of this already in 1 Corinthians and will say more about it, though it is embarrassing for him to do so, later in this same letter.

The authentic way of Christian ministry must be the way of suffering for the sake of Christ and others, not the way of self-promotion and self-aggrandizement. The sophist orator, the teacher who went about seeking a reputation among others and seeking to gain a following for himself is no minister of Christ. The true Christian minister must be willing to take his lumps because the world is no more friendly to his message than it was to Christ himself; he must be willing to be dismissed and patronized by those who will not believe and must be willing even to put his life at risk. That is what it takes to bring the gospel to such a hostile world. If one wants a high place in this world, if one wants the life of ease, becoming known as a champion of Jesus Christ is no way to proceed. The world needs the message about Jesus Christ desperately, but it does not know it, is not willing to admit it, and does not appreciate anyone who says so.

So, the minister who puts himself forward instead of Christ may avoid trouble for himself, but he prevents people from seeing the greatness of Christ. No one can be taken up with how clever and how well-spoken and how powerful an orator the minister is *and, at the same time*, think great thoughts about Jesus Christ.

Later on in this same letter, Paul will generalize this point and say that Christians should even rejoice in their weaknesses, in all the things that seem to make them small and insignificant, or powerless, or unimpressive, they should even boast about these things, because it is their weakness that clears the way both for them to experience Christ's power in their lives – the self-reliant never do – *and* to reveal that divine power to others.

You remember how startled the crowd was on the Day of Pentecost because the men who were preaching the good news of Christ's death for sin and resurrection to eternal life, and who were preaching it in all of the languages represented in that crowd of pilgrims who had come from all

over the world to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, those preachers were *unlettered* men. They were not intellectuals, they were not trained orators, they had no experience speaking to a great crowd on an auspicious occasion, yet they were captivating everyone by their message. They were tradesmen and fishermen for goodness sake. These fellows are supposed to be *the mouthpieces of Almighty God*? It was the disjunction between these very ordinary men and the divine authority of their message that arrested everyone's attention. It was obvious to everyone that they were wielding someone else's power. It was not long before Jesus Christ, not these men, was the focus of everyone's thought and attention. These men were not substantial enough to block anyone's view! You could look right through them to the one standing behind them. Think about that and then consider that the Lord *chose* such men to be the founders of the international church.

Some time before, you remember, during the public ministry of the Lord Jesus, he had sent out his twelve disciples to preach and heal the sick. And those ordinary men had done that. They had held crowds of people spellbound with their preaching, but they weren't great speakers. They had driven demons out of the possessed and miraculously healed the sick, though they were in every way perfectly ordinary fellows. So, though they had done those spectacular things, no one became enamored of *them*. No one tried to make *them* kings, no one became *their* followers. It was perfectly obvious that they were wielding someone else's power not their own, they were doing things not in their own name but in the name of another. That other person, the person standing behind them, was the one everyone thought about when the disciples preached and healed.

Now, that is quite extraordinary, when you think about it. We might well have supposed that, granted such powers and wielding such powers, a cult of personality would have grown up around the disciples. You remember how that almost *did* happen several times during Paul's ministry. He would work miracles and people would believe that he was a god and Paul would have to clarify matters, would have to explain that it was not his power but Christ's that they had seen at work. But, generally, that was never a real problem in apostolic Christianity. God had seen to that. Once the people got to know Paul, they weren't tempted any more to think of him as a god. In fact, the same one's who thought at first he was a god, later ran him out of town and once even stoned him. The Lord chose his servants among the lowly more often than not and even if they were not lowly, soon they had suffered and struggled enough so that no one thought that *they* were kings or saviors. They were altogether too ordinary for that and they lived altogether too hard a life.

If you remember, that is why so many did not believe in Jesus either. His was a way of suffering and not triumph, of lowliness not majesty, of ignominy not glory. They could not imagine that this carpenter, this itinerant amateur rabbi, could be the Savior of the world. But he was. He came in lowliness because that was the price of the redemption of his people.

And now his people follow him in the lowly way so that nothing will distract from Christ's own glory, so that human beings will not look to men but to the Son of God. That is Paul's point: we hold the treasure of Christ in jars of clay *so that* it may be clear that the transforming power that is evident in so many lives comes not from the messenger but from God himself.

Now, to be sure, Paul does not mean that God does not provide his church with gifted men or use the talents and the learning of his people. He certainly does both. Paul after all was a man of great learning and of terrific intellectual ability. Though he was, as we saw in 1 Corinthians, apparently not a great public speaker, he was mighty with the written word. No thinker, no writer, no philosopher of the first century or, for that matter, of the entire classical world, compares to Paul in the impact that his thinking and writing had upon the world. And in the centuries since the church has not lacked for great thinkers, great writers, or great preachers and teachers. Nor, among the Christian laity has there been a dearth of clever, able, persuasive men and women. But, these folk too, like Paul before them, were conscious of their being “jars of clay,” unimpressive vessels in which was conveyed to the world the glorious message of Christ and eternal life.

Few of these men were men of worldly power or stature. Many of them lived lives of great difficulty and deprivation. And, no matter their great gifts and accomplishments, they were sufficiently weak and unimpressive in the ways that matter most to human beings, that Christ always shown through as the sum and substance of their lives and their message. It certainly was so with Paul. History judges him a titan of the intellectual, social, and religious life of mankind. But even the Corinthian Christians, who knew that he was the Lord’s apostle, who knew of his power to work miracles, who knew the story of his conversion by the direct appearance of the Son of God to him, who had learned the truth from him, found it rather easy to dismiss him, not to take him seriously, when more impressive examples of intellectual and oratorical leadership came among them.

But that was alright with Paul. Like John the Baptist, Paul was always saying of the Lord Jesus: “he must increase and I must decrease.” I don’t want you to see Paul, I want you to see Jesus. And it was precisely the lack of the natural qualities of an impressive man that made it more likely that people would look right past Paul to Jesus Christ. As one scholar puts it:

“Not in an ugly little Jew, without presence, without eloquence, without the means to bribe or to compel, could the source of such courage, the cause of such transformations be found; it must be sought not in Him – but in God.” [James Denney]

Being a Jew in itself was a terrific disadvantage in the Greco-Roman world. Being a Jew who wasn’t a great public speaker was a double whammy.

Now, you notice that Paul applies this lesson to his readers. “But *we* have this treasure in jars of clay...” What was true of Paul is true of every Christian. The message far exceeds our capacity to do it justice either by the example of our lives or the words of our mouths. And most Christians know this absolutely. They know that when they speak about the Lord they never do him justice; their presentation is never as good, as persuasive, as winsome, as effective as it ought to be. They almost always cringe after talking to someone about Christ because they know that they could have done a better job. What is more, they know full well that their lives are hardly the recommendation for the gospel that they ought to be. They think, “who is ever going to believe *me* when I speak about these supernatural, these divine things?”

People should look at us and our lives and fall down on their knees and say, “What must I do to be like that?” Look at those Christians. They have the life I want. How did they come by it? How can they be so kind to one another, so happy, so content, so generous, so self-disciplined, so fruitful in all their relations: such faithful and loving spouses, such affectionate and effective parents, such firm friends, such hard workers, so cheerful in the face of adversity, so full to the brim with the life that is worthy to be called life. How do they get to be so? And we cringe because we know that while our lives *should be* the unassailable witness to the reality of the God of love and light and power dwelling in us, in fact we often live in ways so indistinguishable from the world that it never occurs to people who observe our lives to explain them as the effulgence, the overflow of our faith in Christ. And then what can be said about us as individuals is far too often true of Christianity as a whole in its institutions and common life. The public face of Christianity in this world is so frequently nothing to be proud of at all. The many public failures to be faithful to Christ and the Bible, the internal divisions, the heresies, the worldliness. And, on top of that, we get sick just like the world does, we lose our jobs just like the people of the world do, we die in the same ways and in the same number that the worldly die. If we are the bearers of Christ’s glory in this world, then no wonder that no one sees that glory. It is rather a wonder that anyone ever takes us seriously when we talk about Christ.

Oh, we are jars of clay alright. But, then, that is how it must be. For if we were glorious and impressive in ourselves, given the hardness of the human heart and the difficulty of faith, people would never get past the messengers to find the One who sent them. For you can’t see God and Christ, but you can see other human beings. If the human beings are impressive enough they will soak up all the attention people have to give. And they do. There are a great host of stars and celebrities who are taking up all the attention of multitudes of people in our day; attention that should go to God is going to rock stars and athletes and movie actors. Sometimes it is even going to preachers. The cult of personality is alive and well in 21st century America, as it was in the first century. But Paul didn’t qualify and he was glad he didn’t. He wanted people to look to Christ and not to him.

Paul understood that it was Christ himself, not his human messengers, whether ministers or private Christians, who alone could draw the indifferent and the worldly and the rebellious to God. As Charles Wesley put it in the verse of one of his hymns:

No man can truly say
 That Jesus is the Lord,
 Unless Thou take the veil away
 And breathe the living Word;
 Then, only then, we feel
 Our interest in his blood
 And cry with joy unspeakable:
 “Thou art my Lord, my God!”

I love to hear stories of how people have come to faith in Christ. I hope you do too. There is nothing more interesting in all this world than the story of a man or woman finding eternal life in Christ. And, over and over again, these accounts remind us that the human beings who have the responsibility to bring this good news to the world are utterly unworthy of the message that they

have been entrusted with. This treasure – the knowledge of God in the face of Christ, the way to heaven through faith in the Son of God – is being carried about in little, cracked, clay pots.

I heard not so long ago the story of Frank Pastore. Some of you baseball fans may remember him. He was a pitcher with the Cincinnati Reds. In 1979, when he pitched in a game on opening day, he was the youngest player in Major League Baseball. He was, by the standards of pro sports, a moral man. He was even known as something of a goody-goody. He didn't use drugs, didn't get drunk, didn't cheat on his wife. And, as a result, he tended to hang around the Christians on the team, because they didn't do those things either. But Pastore was bright. He wasn't the typical jock. He thought about things. He wasn't a Christian because he judged Christianity to have been proved untrue. He knew something of the arguments that skeptics used to undermine confidence in the Bible. He had been taught that life arose by accident through the blind processes we call evolution. The Christian fellows witnessed to him from time to time, urged him to believe in Jesus. But, the fact is, they couldn't answer any of his questions and couldn't provide intelligent responses to any of his objections. They were ball players. They didn't read much, they didn't think much about their faith. Frank Pastore knew a whole lot more about *why he wasn't* a Christian than they knew about *why they were*, at least on the intellectual level. And so it continued.

In 1984 he was just coming into his own as a star pitcher, when he was struck by a batted ball on the elbow of his pitching arm. Though he didn't know it at the time, his career was finished. But the Christian men on the team came to him in the locker room after the game and offered to pray for him. He was happy to have them pray; it couldn't hurt. And then they invited him to a Bible study. He went because, unbeknownst to him, the Lord was drawing him to himself. But at that Bible study he was his usual smug self and showed off the sophistication of his unbelief. These were jocks, for goodness sake. Frank Pastore was too smart to revolutionize his world view for some jocks! Well, they were smart enough not to try to argue with him. They just asked him to read some books and tell them what he thought about them. C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* was one of them. Every year we distribute many copies of that book here at the church. Another book was Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, a book that was instrumental in the conversion of one of our elders, Mike Pfefferle. If you don't have the capacity to make a good argument, you can always give someone a book and dare him to read it!

Well he had been challenged to read the books so he read them. A few days later, Cincinnati was playing Pittsburgh and he was sitting in the visitor's clubhouse at Three Rivers Stadium. It was during the game; he was still injured and wouldn't pitch in any case, so he was reading one of those books. And in a moment of transcendent discovery he found himself face to face with Jesus Christ himself. "Jesus, you're alive!" he said.

He loves those Christian fellows who witnessed to him and loved him when he was a smug unbeliever. But as he tells his story it becomes clear that not only did they have this treasure in jars of clay, but that it was good that they did. Frank Pastore never got distracted by the fellows who brought Christ to him. They were so unimpressive in their account of the Christian faith that he paid little attention to them and found himself face to face with the Lord Christ himself. *That* is a more unnerving experience altogether. Had he found that he had met his match in one or more of those Christian ball players he might be still arguing with them today. As it is, he is

now an adjunct professor at Biola University with an apologetics and evangelism ministry, an articulate spokesman for the gospel of Christ. But, then, he is also a has-been as a baseball player. Never made it to stardom, just to eternal life. Another clay pot himself! In fact, I'll wager that few, even among the baseball fans here, recognized his name when I first mentioned it.

Brothers and sisters, you sit here completely aware of how timid you so often are in encounters with unbelievers. You know you're a clay pot, you know how little you have to offer. But, take Paul to heart. It isn't the jar, it is what is in the jar that matters. And in your chipped, cracked, and scratched jar is the greatest treasure in the world: the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the way to eternal life.

The Lord doesn't require you to save people. He doesn't even require you to impress them. But he is in you and he does require you to get next to those people so that they will find themselves next to him. You don't get the credit if they believe; you don't get the blame if they don't. Just keep your eye on the ball: Christ the King and Savior. No one can stand up to him if only he chooses to reveal himself. And, from time to time he will. He will!

John Bunyan came to Christ in part because he overheard some Christian women talking about the Lord Jesus. Just chatting among themselves. I met a fellow this week who came to Christ as a teenager in South Florida through some kids in a Youth for Christ club on his high school campus. Listen, if an American highschooler can bring Christ to the unsaved, *any Christian* can bring Christ to the unsaved!

So, you're a jar of clay. That turns out to be an advantage, a way of making sure that Christ has an unimpeded, unobstructed path to the unbeliever's soul. So, let's not let our fears and insecurities keep us silent around unbelievers. Speak up and speak out. We have a great treasure in these jars of clay. The more unimpressive the jar, the more striking the fact that it contains the treasure!