



A PRICELESS TREASURE IN A JAR OF CLAY

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2 Corinthians 4:7-15
Sixth Message
Gary Vanderet
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Every passing year confirms my belief that life is difficult and demanding. It's naive to think otherwise. Life is hard. Where can we find the power to cope with the difficulties, demands and uncertainties we face daily? How can we gain the strength to rise above difficult circumstances? The text that we come to in our studies in the new covenant this morning, from the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, is the clearest passage in Scripture that declares the process by which the power of God is released among men and women.

We pick up the apostle's word, in 2 Cor 4:7:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; (2 Cor 4:7, NASB)

The word that is translated "surpassing" (in some versions, "transcendent") means, "above and beyond." This kind of power cannot be explained in terms of one's personal, human abilities. The apostle is referring to a transcendent power.

He begins by making an interesting statement which connects certain elements we wouldn't ordinarily connect. He says, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (or "jars of clay," NIV). If Paul were writing today, he might say, "We have this treasure in a common peanut butter jar or a coke bottle." He has in mind a very practical, ordinary container. We have this treasure in a common clay pot. What a strange combination! Ordinarily we put our treasure in a safety deposit box or at least in a safe at home. Placing treasure in an earthen vessel seems unusual. Let us think this through and see if we can discover what Paul is getting at here.

What the apostle is referring to is our bodies, our essential humanity. That is what he means by the term, "earthen vessels." This is not a very complimentary term, but it accurately describes us. In a sense, that is what we are—clay pots.

My friend Dave Roper in commenting on this verse notes two things about this vessel that Paul refers to. First, it has *very little extrinsic strength*. It is fragile and easily broken. And second, it has *very little inherent value*. If you had one of those ancient jars today it would be valuable, but only because of its age. When it was first made it was an inexpensive item. Thus when Paul compares our essential humanity to a clay jar, he is saying it has very little extrinsic strength and very little in-

herent value.

That is rather humbling, isn't it, to be told that we are not strong, durable and worthwhile in ourselves? It is humbling, because all of our lives we are told we have to be tough. We have been taught that if we are going to get ahead in this world we have to hustle, we have to make our own way, to make things happen. The early bird gets the worm, we hear. No pain, no gain. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Demand your rights. That is why we go through life thinking we have to put on a strong exterior. We can't appear to be weak and fragile. We can't admit that we don't feel very worthwhile. This has deep spiritual implications. We grow up thinking we can do things by ourselves, imagining that we don't really need God. As someone said to me last week, he didn't want to "bother" God. But deep down we know that we are not adequate. We don't feel worthwhile. We have much hurt and pain. That tough, angry exterior that many display is simply a reflection of the measure of hurt they have experienced in life.

What we are looking for is something to give us a sense of worth, something to make us feel better about ourselves. Teenagers think they have achieved this when they get their driver's license, their first car, their first boyfriend or girlfriend. As we get older, we are no different. We keep looking for that one thing that will make us happy: a husband, a wife, children, academic or athletic success. We think that money or fame will meet that deep need we have inside to feel worthwhile. We learn that money talks, but mostly it lies. It deceives us into believing that fortune will bring us satisfaction and security. But having enough is never satisfying. Having more becomes the goad that drives us on. Some of you high school students will travel to Mexico soon to minister in poverty-stricken villages. And as you play with and love those Mexican children, you will realize how happy they are with so little and how unhappy you are with so much.

This verse holds the secret to what gives life worth and meaning. Paul tells us what that enriching element is: There is a treasure that enriches life! And that treasure is God himself, resident within us. We have no inherent value in ourselves. Paul is saying that it is deity residing in our humanity that gives us a sense of wealth and worth. A pot or vessel is made to hold something. That is a beautiful metaphor, because basic to our humanity is the truth that we were not designed to oper-

ate on our own. We were made to hold Someone: God himself!

Therefore, it is accurate to describe a life without God as “empty.” Such a life lacks what it was meant to contain. That is why Paul says his ministry is to get people to look at Jesus and to see in his face the character of God. As people do that and see Jesus for who he is, they begin to trust him and fellowship with him. Then, as they walk with him and depend on him, their lives start to change. They feel richer and more worthwhile. They begin to express and reflect his character. That is the “treasure” that Paul is referring to—the good news that our Lord has come to indwell our humanity and make us what we long to be.

How is that transcendent power manifested in such frail vessels? And what does the power of God enable us to do? In other words, what does a God-like being look like? Paul tells us in vv. 8-9:

we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; (4:8-9)

William Barclay translates these verses this way: “*We are sore pressed at every point, but not hemmed in; we are at our wit’s end, but never at our hope’s end; we are persecuted by men, but never abandoned by God; we are knocked down, but not knocked out.*”

Again we see the two elements, the weakness of the pot and the surpassing greatness of the power. The power of God is extraordinary. It is different from any kind of power we are familiar with. It isn’t like human power. It isn’t dramatically visible. It is a quiet power that is released in quiet ways, and yet what it accomplishes is astonishing.

The weakness of the pot is described in these terms, “We are afflicted; we are perplexed, we are persecuted, we are struck down.” On the other hand, the surpassing greatness of the power is described in the words, “We are not crushed, we are not despairing, we are not forsaken and we are not destroyed.” Paul uses an image from boxing. I think of those blow-up bags with weighted bottoms I loved to play with as a child. If you knock them down they pop right back up. There is something irrepressible about us, says Paul. We may take a beating, we may take some hard shots, we may get pummeled all over the ring, but we are not flat on our backs on the canvas. We may be down, we may hurt, but we’re not out.

The remarkable thing is this (and this is where we struggle): it takes both of those things working together to produce the power. We must be weak in order to be strong. We don’t like this, though. We want to see the power of God in our lives, but it has to come from untroubled, peaceful circumstances. We want to go through life protected from all danger and difficulty.

We want life to be like a “Pirates of the Caribbean” ride at Disneyland. We would like to glide in our little boats through all the difficulties. It may appear that bad things are going to get us, but they never get close. We come safely out the other end, our hair unruffled. We are still looking for that cottage with the white picket, rose-covered fence, that life of ease and rest and peace. But it never comes.

We don’t want to admit that life is hard. Christians have financial reversals. Christians have marriage problems and mental problems. Christians contract cancer and Multiple Sclerosis and Alzheimer’s Disease. At times we are confused, but we don’t despair. We don’t give up. We don’t give in to our fear and anxiety. We are not left to our own resources. We are knocked down, but we are not out. We get right back up.

How do we do this? Paul tells us how, in v. 10:

always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. (4:10-12)

Notice the two elements that produce this resurrection power. First, the outward circumstances into which we are placed; and second, the inner attitude to which we must consent.

Paul describes these outward circumstances as *constantly being delivered over to death*. Bad things happen to us all the time. It’s as if we are being handed over to death every day. The circumstances of life come to put us to death, to depress us and defeat us.

And the corresponding reaction we must have is this attitude: *We carry about in our body the dying of Jesus*. Later this morning we will partake of the Lord’s Supper, reminding ourselves again of the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross. Jesus was not powerful and impressive and noteworthy. He was not being applauded by the multitudes who listened to his every word. No. The cross was a place of physical weakness, a place of rejection by the proud and arrogant world around him. It was a place of obscurity, where he was willing to lose everything he had built and trust his Father to bring it back and make it significant.

Dave Roper writes, “That cross was the culmination of a lifetime of dying to his own dreams, his reputation, his career, his friends, his comfort, and eventually his life. Jesus was always ready to die! Always! Every day he gave up what he could not have. His whole life was a life of service to others.” Jesus said, “I did not come to be served, but to give my life as a ransom for many.” That was his attitude throughout his life. He was always willing to die for others. And the consummation of that attitude was the cross itself, in which he gave up

his life for the world.

That is the attitude we are to maintain. Paul says as much in Philippians 2, a passage that elaborates on what it means to carry about in our body the dying of Jesus:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil 2:5-8, NIV)

If we want to manifest the glory of God, we must be willing to carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus. We will have to put to death our ambitions and dreams. All of us have those, don't we? But people are always getting in our way, talking away our rights, our reputations and our toys. We want to fight and demand our own way. We want everyone to think well of us. But Jesus says we have to give up our right to have the things we think will make life happier and richer. We have to take up our cross and follow him. We go through life with an attitude of self denial that enables us to receive the life of God. *"...always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body."*

It's when we are crushed and broken and disappointed, our dreams shattered, that we begin to rely on the Lord Jesus. So in some sense we are always cracked pots. We are always being crushed. We are always being broken. We are always being given over to the circumstances that hinder and frustrate us. We shouldn't be surprised. It is then that we begin to rely on the Lord Jesus. The result is that people see the treasure: the life of God resident within us.

That is what Paul says. Verse 12:

So death works in us, but life in you. But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed, therefore I spoke," we also believe, therefore also we speak; knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. For all things {are} for your sakes, that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. (4:12-15)

When we die, people see more of Christ in us and they are drawn to him. Paul says this is what brings glory to God. People will give honor to God because of the change that he has made in our lives. It's all for the sake of others! It's not just about us. We can't live the way

we used to, thinking of life only as it relates to us. We need to be willing to take whatever life hands us and see it as the instrument which God wants to use to produce his character in us so that others will be drawn to him.

Many of you know the deep sadness that comes from the loss of things you hold dear: health, reputation, a loved one. The deep pain of that sorrow is wanting something you no longer can have. Without trying to be uncaring, I want to say that the only way to deal with this is to let go of what you want and die to your right to enjoy those things: marital intimacy, a trouble-free work environment, a warm father-son relationship. Dying is the only way to live again. The apostle's answer is to "carry around in our body the dying of Jesus," i.e., to adopt the attitude that Jesus brought to every loss: a willingness to give up what he wanted and submit to his Father's will: "Not my will but yours be done."

Dying is hard. It was hard for Jesus and it is hard for us. Yet it is the means by which we can know joy again—a greater joy than ever before. He alone is the source of eternal consolation and joy. In him we can know an enjoyment that isn't based on having what we want, but having him. This is the enjoyment of which the prophet Habakkuk spoke:

"Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Hab 3:17-18, NIV).

May that be the prayer of our lips today!

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