



Clay Pots

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us (2 Cor 4:7).

I thought of this verse while visiting an art collection in Kunming, China. I saw ancient clay vases decorated with beautiful paintings and worth thousands of dollars. They were beautiful – but these are not the “jars of clay” of which Paul wrote.

Paul is writing a glory-seeking group of believers. The Corinthians look down on Paul because he shows little oratorical brilliance, he does not have an impressive appearance, and he does few miracles. They are not impressed!

Paul writes, “The only treasure I have is the gospel (the knowledge of the glory of God). I carry the treasure in a jar of clay, a clay pot.” Paul is referring not to a beautiful vase, but to the cheap clay containers that people used to carry a candle through the streets at night. These were not decorated in any way; they had little value; they were not impressive at all. In fact, when the candle burned down, the jar was thrown away. Today, Paul might write, “We have this treasure in a plastic cup.”

Recently I visited the grave of Karl Gutzlaff in Hong Kong. Gutzlaff was the first Lutheran missionary to China, an entrepreneurial genius, a prolific writer - and a failure on the mission field. He was deceived by “converts” who took money intended for ministry and spent it on drugs. He supported himself by working as translator for a company that was heavily involved in the opium trade. He died heartbroken by the failure of his dreams for Chinese missions. There is little glorious about Karl Gutzlaff; he was a clay pot.

On the same trip, I visited a Chinese history museum that accuses early missionaries of condoning the opium trade because so many of them traveled to China on ships carrying opium. The treaty allowing British missionaries into inland China also forced China to accept England’s sale of opium. Sadly, it is true that some missionaries did little to oppose the opium trade. Yes, the missionaries were clay pots who made many mistakes.

But remember - it isn’t the pot, but the treasure that matters! And the treasure is the gospel. Karl Gutzlaff wasn’t an impressive pot, but he helped carry the gospel to China. Today, there are nearly 100,000,000 Chinese Christians because of clay pots like Gutzlaff.

Paul says that God wants to show that the surpassing power belongs only to Himself. When God works through clay pots, no one can give the credit to the pot; all the glory goes to God!

If I wait until I am a beautiful Chinese vase to do something for God, I will never do anything! Instead, I must say, “God, I’m not much - just a clay pot. I can’t do much, but I am willing to let you use me. Please show the glory of your gospel through me - and help me to stay out of the way!”

Will you join me as a member of the Society of Clay Pots?