

## *God's Glory in Clay Pots*

### **2 Corinthians 4:1-18**

John Breon

We're starting in the middle of this section of Scripture. Then we'll move out from there to take in the entire passage.

The apostle Paul is still explaining and defending his ministry as an apostle, a minister of the new covenant, one empowered by God's Holy Spirit. There are people accusing him of being weak and therefore not a true apostle—or at least not one of the same caliber as they claim to be. Paul turns the accusation against his challengers. He owns his weakness and admits it freely. But that's not all there is to the story. There's more to his ministry than his weakness.

Paul writes, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay..." The jar of clay is a clay pot, a piece of pottery, an earthenware vessel. In this sentence it speaks of weakness. It represents Paul and other genuine apostles and everyone who shares the apostolic ministry. That includes us. We're part of the church that carries on the ministry of the apostles as we follow their teaching in the New Testament.

For us today, pottery may be kind of special or unique. We don't see it made every day. But in Paul's day, jars, pots, lamps, dishes, all kinds of ordinary items were made by potters working with clay. So a clay pot is ordinary and common. The image of the jar of clay gives Paul a way to talk about his weakness. He often contrasts his weakness and God's power. He even celebrates his weakness because it's where God's power is displayed.

Lewis Smedes was an author and professor. He had a way with titles. One of his books was entitled *How Can It Be all Right When Everything Is all Wrong?* It includes a chapter based on this verse in 2 Corinthians. It's titled, "You Are Only an Earthen Vessel, but God Has a Market for Cracked Pots: The Gift of Being Ordinary."

In that chapter Smedes says that earthen vessels, clay pots, are *fragile*, *fallible*, and *functional*. Fragile means sensitive, easily chipped, breakable. When these pots get next to each other, they can get jostled, bump into each other and get damaged. If we agree to carry God's treasure, in the

company of other clay pots, we're likely to become cracked pots before we're through (71-72).

Before and after this verse, Paul uses the phrase, "for Jesus' sake" (verses 5, 11). He says, "We don't preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Jesus is the Lord. Paul and other believers are servants, really slaves, of others in the church for the sake of Jesus—to spread his word and advance his cause. A little later, Paul says, "We're always being given over to death for Jesus' sake." Following Jesus, sharing the new covenant, and serving are not easy. Paul faced death on a regular basis as he went around sharing the gospel. But again, it was for the sake of Jesus—not just talking about him, but participating in and demonstrating his death and resurrection in the life of his messengers.

Listen to how Paul describes what it was like, what it can be like, to be a jar of clay, a weak vessel used by God:

We are afflicted on every side, but not crushed;  
perplexed, but not in despair;  
persecuted, but not abandoned;  
struck down, but not destroyed.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus. (vv 7-10a)

That's being a fragile clay pot.

Smedes also says that earthen vessels, clay pots, are *fallible*. There's no guarantee they'll do the job. They won't perform perfectly every time. They may be too shallow for what you want to plant in them or too thin and break too easily. "So God takes a risk with earthen vessels; it's always a gamble when you have a high priority job and only ordinary servants to do it. And we take a risk with God, too; for it is hazardous to venture out as the bearer of God's grace when you know you could fall flat on your face" (73).

Quite a few years ago, a friend of mine who led youth ministry in the Texas Conference (SE Texas) invited me to speak at their winter retreat. He gave me the theme that their leadership team had selected and told me how many times I'd be speaking over the weekend. I was flattered to be

invited and I started preparing. I asked him a little bit about what the youth were like and what they were looking for. But mostly I prepared what I wanted to say.

By the time I arrived at the camp the evening the retreat started, my throat was feeling scratchy and sore. There was a music team there to lead worship and I got acquainted with them. As we left to go to the auditorium, I thought about asking them to pray with me, but then held back.

While we were singing in worship, my throat didn't hurt. And I got through my first message o.k. I kept feeling worse all weekend and finally had to go to the emergency room. But I kept speaking at my appointed times. It didn't go over very well. I don't know if it was my low energy due to being sick or if I just wasn't connecting—maybe some of both. Finally, on Sunday morning, I finished with a pretty good message and got a more enthusiastic response.

Later, as everyone was getting ready to leave, I saw a stack of papers in the cabin where I was staying. They were evaluation forms for the retreat. I looked at a couple. They were pretty critical of the guest speaker from Oklahoma. I decided not to read any more. I was used to being more effective in ministry and getting compliments. So that was tough to take. It was tough to admit my failure. For a long time I thought about that weekend and how I failed and what I could have done better.

I guess that experience illustrates being both fragile and fallible. But I have to trust that God was at work in some way through all that. If nothing else, it taught me humility and greater dependence on God and trying to know better the people I want to reach. Often on Sunday mornings, I'll come in here and think, "God, you're going to have to work through this jar of clay."

It's hard to beat what Smedes says about this:

I dare say that there are a few nettlesome memories of failure that keep rattling in the closet of your mind. Maybe failures at your job, failures as a parent, failures as a moral person, and assorted others. If everyone knew you the way you know you, they might just wonder at God's sanity in gambling with earthen vessels like you. ...If you have

felt the sting of failure as an earthen vessel, hear this: God will never say that you are too dingy for his service, too grubby for his purpose, too common for his uncommon treasure. God puts his treasure in *fallible* earthen vessels, and no other. (73-74)

The treasure. What is it? Paul says, “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” Right before that verse he’s been talking about knowing God in Jesus, “the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Christ.” And before that, he was talking about the gospel. And all through this section of the letter, he talks about the ministry of the new covenant and about God giving the resources to do the ministry, to get done the work God wants done (2:14-6:13).

The treasure is knowing God, not just by reputation but by experience. By faith, we see the light of God’s glory—God’s splendor and worth and beauty. And we see it in the face of Jesus Christ, who is the image of God. Jesus shows us who God is and what God is like. At the same time, he shows us who we are to be and what we’re to be like as people made in God’s image and being restored to that image by grace.

The treasure is the gospel that shines God’s light everywhere. The god of this age—the evil one who seems to rule in some ways—blinds people. But the living God, the true ruler, gives light and vision to everyone who looks to him. In the new covenant in Jesus, God offers light to everyone. The ministry of the new covenant has life and power from the Spirit of the living God. In that ministry, we share and shine God’s light as the Holy Spirit works through us.

During the Second World War, German paratroopers invaded the island of Crete. When they landed at Maleme they were met by islanders bearing nothing other than kitchen knives and hay scythes. But the consequences of resistance were devastating. The residents of entire villages were lined up and shot.

Overlooking the airstrip today is an institute for peace and understanding founded by a man named Alexander Papaderous. Papaderous had lived through the war and was convinced his people

needed to let go of the legacy of hatred the war had unleashed. So he founded his institute at this place that embodied the horrors and hatreds unleashed by the war.

One day while taking questions at the end of a lecture Papaderous was asked, "What's the meaning of life?" There was nervous laughter in the room. It is such a big question. But Papaderous answered it.

He opened his wallet and took out a small, round mirror and held it up for everyone to see. He told how as a small boy from a very poor family he came across a motorcycle wreck. It was during the war and the motorcycle had belonged to German soldiers. Alexander saw pieces of broken mirrors from the motorcycle lying on the ground. He tried to put them together but couldn't, so he took the largest piece and scratched it against a stone until its edges were smoothed and it was round. He used it as a toy. He was fascinated by the fact that he could reflect light into dark places—deep holes, crevices, dark closets. He made a game of getting light into the most inaccessible places he could find.

He kept that mirror with him as he grew up, and over time it came to symbolize what he might do with his life.

I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the black places in the hearts of men—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.

Then he took his small mirror, held it carefully and reflected the light of the sun onto the face and hands of the person who asked him, "What is the meaning of life?" (Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, 171-75).

Jesus shines with the light of God's glory. We can be filled with that light and reflect it onto others so they can see something of God's glory—the glory that every one of us is meant to share as bearers of God's image.

Smedes says that earthen vessels, clay jars, are *functional*. Most of the ancient pottery we may see in a museum wasn't made to be pieces of art. It was made to be useful, to perform some function. It's made to hold, to carry, to pour whatever someone puts in it. Clay jars of God function as pourers out of what God fills in. What God fills us with is himself. That's the treasure we have in these clay pots. Paul says, "We carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (v. 10b).

We have to be fillable to be functional. God gets into us. God's Spirit lives in us, filling us with life and light, overflowing in us, pouring through us to bring light into darkness, to quench thirsty spirits, to water seeds of God's kingdom.

At the beginning and end of chapter 4, Paul says, "We do not lose heart" (vv 1, 16). Apostles, believers, God's jars of clay don't get discouraged and give up. We don't give up because it's through God's mercy that we have this ministry of the new covenant by the Holy Spirit. We don't lose heart because God's grace is reaching more and more people. And that causes thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. We don't lose heart because, even though outwardly we are wasting away (we're fragile earthen vessels), inwardly we're being renewed day by day by the treasure we contain—the life of God in us. We don't lose heart because even though we have troubles and affliction, they are light and momentary and they're preparing us for the eternal weight of glory that will come in the fullness of God's kingdom.

Smedes says that God makes no apologies for how he shows his face to the human race. Clay pots, earthen vessels, real people—even though we're cracked pots—we're God's first choice. Using earthen vessels is God's way of keeping us aware of what's really going on. When God uses us, it's God's power and not our technique that does the job (75-76).

Have you ever known just what to say at the right time to someone? Have you ever been available to serve and you truly blessed another

person? Have you known what to pray and saw God answer? What a joy to be instruments of the living God to bring life to people.

Smedes concludes:

So, keep in touch with yourself as the fragile, fallible, but functional and fillable piece of ordinary humanity that you are. Keep in touch with yourself because, just as you are, you are qualified to hold and to share the treasure of God. Walk into the unknown possibilities of tomorrow with your human weakness, carry with you the blemishes of your soul and the commonness of your spirit. Just be the earthen vessel that you are. Let God fill you, and then you may be the hand and heart, as well as the face of God, to someone who needs him more than he [or she] needs anything else in the world. When it happens to you, you will know for sure that no matter how wrong everything around you is, there is something most magnificently right with you. (76-77)

I remember a story I read about a pastor who visited a member of the church—a woman who had a beautiful set of crystal glasses. He thought about his own house and his big family. Every so often, someone would empty the peanut butter jar (they were glass back in those days), put it in the dishwasher and then put it on the shelf with the glasses. He said some people are like that crystal—beautiful and graceful. Others are like the peanut butter jar—clunky, thick, maybe with part of the old label attached. Then he said that we're not great because of what we look like, we're great because of what we contain (Bob Benson, *Something's Going on Here*).

Do you want to contain the treasure of knowing God, overflowing with grace and gratitude, shining with the light of his glory? You can know the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ. Look to him. Trust him. Put your faith in him. Receive the fullness of God's Spirit in your life. Be committed to sharing this treasure with the people around you.