

SERIES: Power through Weakness

SERMON: Treasure in Clay Pots

SCRIPTURE: 2 Cor. 4:1-12

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There's a program on PBS I like to watch once in a while called "Antique Roadshow." In virtually every program someone discovers that a piece of furniture picked up at an estate sale for \$18 turns out to be worth \$50,000 (or \$100,000 if he hadn't scraped the old paint off). Someone else finds a photograph in the attic of her deceased aunt that is an original signed by Ansel Adams and they make off like a bandit. Or someone is given a vase by their grandmother and it turns out not to be a vase after all but a "vazzz" from the Ming dynasty, and they are able to retire wealthy.

I don't ever expect to be on that program. I'm a lot more likely to be the poor bloke who sold the priceless heirloom in the first place, not realizing its value. But the fact is, it's not that unusual for treasure to be found in strange places, even in clay pots. In 1947 a little Bedouin boy was throwing rocks into a cave up on a rugged cliff within sight of the Dead Sea when he heard the sounds of breaking pottery. That led to the discovery of the greatest literary treasure ever—the Dead Sea Scrolls, which eventually were found to include copies of every OT book except Esther—all dated more than a thousand years earlier than any copy previously available.

The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of treasure in clay pots in our Scripture text today. He says, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." What is the treasure, and what are the jars of clay he is talking about? Well, we'll get to that, but let's start at the beginning of the chapter and work our way there. Read with me, if you will, from 2 Corinthians 4:1-12:

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed 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, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

The overall theme of this passage seems to be the lifestyle of servant leaders. Servant leaders seem to be a rapidly vanishing breed today. Churches, by and large, are looking for dynamic visionaries, world-class communicators, C.E.O. types, rather than shepherds or servants.¹ Even in

the early church servant leaders weren't always held in high esteem. The church at Corinth is a case in point. They were on Paul's case big-time because he wasn't a very impressive leader for someone who claimed to be an Apostle. Though he had founded the church and personally led many of them to Christ, now that he had been gone for a while and they had become accustomed to a new style of leadership, they were becoming quite critical of Paul because, among other things, he wasn't very good looking, he wasn't sufficiently eloquent, he didn't have the sterling credentials they were looking for, he didn't charge for his services (inferring they weren't worth much), and he was constantly facing persecution and suffering (which didn't fit their health-wealth theology).

In this passage Paul again defends himself and his ministry, but in the process he uses the first person plural pronoun, "we," rather than "I." I think he wants to encourage all of us to become servant leaders like he is.

The character of the servant leader (1, 2a)

He is spiritually courageous. Paul says in verse 1, "We do not lose heart." Ministry is tough and it's so easy to give up. I suppose every one of us has at some point been prepared to throw in the towel. Perhaps we have said, "Who needs this? I'm only a volunteer; I'm not getting paid; and no one seems to appreciate my effort. I'm outta here!" But Paul says there is something that should stop us in our tracks: "since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart."

He's talking about the ministry of the New Covenant. Maybe if we were under the performance standards of the Old Covenant he could understand giving up, because failure was so common and the results so discouraging. But the New Covenant offers so much more hope; it provides forgiveness, power, and victory. It results in transformed lives! Therefore, he says, "we do not lose heart." We hang in there. We remain faithful.

But Paul doesn't take any credit for the ministry he has. It wasn't his idea; he didn't earn the right through hard work or exceptional brilliance; rather it was his through the mercy of God. The fact that any of us are able to serve the living God is a privilege beyond description.

He is morally sound. Verse 2: "We have renounced secret and shameful ways." Sadly, some people use religion for shameful purposes. We have been inundated with scores of accounts of priests who have used their positions to prey on children. And we are all aware of TV preachers who have gotten filthy rich through self-promotion. They almost always hide their financial dealings and many refuse to join the Evangelical Council on Financial Accountability, because they don't want to be accountable.

But it's not just professional clergy who are guilty of secret and shameful behavior. What about the AWANA leader who feeds on Internet pornography in the privacy of his home? What about the Sunday School teacher who spends hours reading romance novels or watching trashy soap operas? The servant leader is a person of integrity, open and transparent; he or she is the same in

public as in private.

He is intellectually honest. He goes on, “We do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God.” There is a whole new specialty that has sprung up in recent years known as “spin doctors,” but they’ve never studied medicine. They are given that name because it is their job to put a positive spin on whatever a certain politician or political party says or does. We almost never hear a leader today say, “I blew it,” or “I’m sorry.” Instead the spin doctors get busy performing surgery on the truth in order to present stupidity or downright criminal activity in a favorable light. Well, the profession of “spin doctor” has also entered the ministry. There are those who can spin almost anything to make it sound spiritual, even if it’s directly opposed to Scripture. How else do we end up with openly gay and lesbian ministers in churches, claiming that the Bible supports their lifestyle?

Of course, the Bible can be distorted in less subtle ways as well. I find evangelicals massaging it all the time to protect their favorite doctrines. But Paul wouldn’t do that. “On the contrary,” he continues, “by setting forth the truth *plainly* we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” This is the opposite of spinning the truth. The church should be the true no-spin zone. We should never be guilty of embellishing the truth or dressing it up in pedantic language in order to make ourselves look more scholarly. Truth is not always easy to grasp, but our goal should always be to make it as plain as possible. How else are people’s consciences going to be challenged? How else is the truth going to penetrate their hearts?

However, friends, no matter how spiritually courageous, morally sound, and intellectually honest a servant leader is, there is no guarantee that his message will be received well.

The limitations of the servant leader (3, 4)

An extremely important truth is shared here, and that is that our success in ministry can never be judged solely by the response of people. Why?

He recognizes there is a Satanic blindness that prevents some people from seeing the truth of the Gospel. Here’s how Paul puts it: “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Did you ever stop and wonder, “Why do some people refuse to believe despite having heard the truth again and again?” They may be moral people and they may have exemplary families, but they live their lives seemingly oblivious to the fact that a judgment is coming and they will be required to stand before God and give an account of their lives. I have known individuals who have sat under the teaching of God’s Word for decades but never give any evidence of assimilating the truth or responding to it. You perhaps have had the experience of sharing your faith with a family member for years and yet nothing seems to get through. How do we explain this phenomenon?

Well, Paul attributes it to spiritual blindness. You will recall from last Sunday that we were

introduced to this concept as he spoke of the veil that covers the hearts of those who are followers of the Old Covenant. But now he takes it beyond the Jewish people and claims that unbelievers in general suffer from a spiritual blindness that actually has Satanic origins. “The god of this world” is clearly a reference to Satan. He is not a real god, but he is treated as such by his own minions; he is actually a defeated enemy, but he is still active and we have to be aware of his strategy.

Satan does a number on the minds and hearts of unbelievers to the extent that . . . “they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” He hides from them the truth of who Jesus really is. He’s fine with them paying lip service to Jesus as a great teacher, a lover of the poor, even a martyr; but he doesn’t want them to see His beauty, His grace, His mercy, His love, and especially His forgiveness.ⁱⁱ

But if they cannot see the light of the gospel because of Satanic blindness, does this mean they are not responsible? The answer is that they are “without excuse” (Romans 1:20) because they see *enough* and know *enough* to make them responsible. In that passage Paul says that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (1:20) Furthermore, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (1:21) The unbeliever is held accountable because he has cooperated with Satan in his own spiritual blindness by exchanging the glory of God for idols and by exchanging the truth of God for a lie. So, in effect, unbelievers have made decisions along the way that give Satan a foothold. They have willingly allowed their minds to be tampered with.

The wise servant leader will recognize this limitation on the success of his ministry and will accept that his ultimate responsibility is faithfulness. He will recognize that he is not just competing in the marketplace of human ideas; he is in a spiritual battle that involves supernatural forces. But I want to offer an important caution:

He refuses to use this as an excuse for not sharing the Gospel. It would be easy to say, “If unbelievers are suffering from supernatural blindness, what’s the point in witnessing to them?” But such an attitude ignores other potential factors that contribute to a lost person’s condition. It could be that some people around us have not believed, not just because of Satanic blindness but also because no one has bothered to explain the Gospel to them. Or perhaps it has been explained but not lived out. We can chalk up the fact that our neighbors are unchurched to Satanic blindness, but if we don’t invite them to an outreach event when we have the opportunity, how can we just blame Satan for their lost condition?

In my OT Survey class last Monday night we were looking at Ezekiel 3:16ff, where the Word of the Lord came to the prophet saying,

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in

order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself.”

God doesn't hold Satan accountable for the lost condition of unbelievers, or at least not *just* Satan; he also holds *us* accountable.

The wise servant leader will recognize the limitations that Satanic blindness puts on his ministry, but he will not use that as an excuse for failing to share the Gospel. On the contrary, Paul moves immediately to our responsibility to share the truth with unbelievers, because that is the principal antidote God has established to deal with spiritual blindness.

The responsibilities of the servant leader (5, 6)

The response of some to the phenomenon of Satanic blindness is to focus on new techniques and new methodologies, better marketing, new paradigms of worship, or a new approach to the culture. These things may increase the audience, and that's valuable and worth doing, but since Satanic blindness is supernatural, only a supernatural power can remove it, and that power is in Jesus Christ. That is why Paul says we much preach Christ, not ourselves.

He preaches Christ, not himself. Verse 5: “For we do not preach (proclaim) ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.” What does it mean to preach ourselves? Have you ever heard a pastor who was constantly telling stories about himself and his family? His kids always say the cutest things; he and his wife have the perfect marriage and their relationship seems to be the perfect illustration of almost any spiritual truth. Or have you known people who are so self-focused that they just constantly talk about themselves. There is no room for Jesus in a conversation because they are so full of themselves. Paul refuses to be like that. The words most on his lips are, “Jesus is Lord.” In 1 Corinthians 2:2 he said, “For I resolved to know *nothing* while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” He doesn't mean that literally; as a matter of fact, he taught them much more than just truth about Jesus. But what he means is that the Cross was central and every other topic eventually led there.

And if Jesus is Lord, then Paul is His servant. He's not into impressing others but rather serving them.

He trusts God to shine light into the darkness. Paul goes right back to Genesis 1 and claims that the same God who at the dawn of creation dispelled the primeval darkness is the One who causes spiritual light to drive back the darkness of sin and unbelief from the hearts of men. It took a miracle or creation to separate light from darkness, and it takes a miracle to bring an individual out of spiritual darkness into the light.

Will you notice something with me here? There are three forces at work whenever anyone comes to faith in Christ. They are not equal forces by any means, but they are all active:

Satan blinds.

We proclaim.

God turns on the light.

We are not responsible for turning on the light, only for sharing the truth.

So far we are probably saying to Paul, “right on.” We appreciate his selfless attitude and we agree with his philosophy of ministry. But then he comes to a topic that we don’t relate to nearly as well:

The humility of the servant leader (7-9)

Paul stresses the humble position of the true servant leader, as opposed to the strong, dynamic, CEO model of leadership the Corinthians were looking for.

He is just a clay pot, ensuring that God gets all the credit. Verse 7: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay.” What treasure? The nearest antecedent is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” That’s a treasure alright! And God hasn’t deposited that knowledge in the brilliant and noble and powerful minds of our culture. Instead He has placed it in jars of clay, ordinary earthen vessels symbolic of ordinary, weak, foolish, and inadequate human beings.

Why has God put something so important into such fragile, easily broken vessels? Well, he tells us specifically why—“to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” I like Ray Stedman’s observation here regarding the power that is released when God turns on the light in a human heart:

So often, in our time, power is used to tear things apart, to blast, or explode, or crush. But this transcendent power unites, gathers, harmonizes. It breaks down walls of partition and removes barriers. It does not make superficial, external adjustments, but works from within, producing permanent transformations. Do you know any other power like that? It’s absolutely unrivaled.ⁱⁱⁱ

And this power is mediated, amazingly, through ordinary clay pots. This is the very same point Paul makes in 1 Cor. 1:27-29: “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” Paul’s detractors at Corinth thought, “How can you hope to make an impression with the Gospel unless the spokesman himself is impressive?” But Paul saw God’s clay pot plan as far superior, for it would guard against the danger that credit due to God would go to one of His human instruments. Whenever we start thinking we’re pretty important, particularly gifted, eminently successful, it would be wise to come back to this verse. We’re all really just jars of clay.

He is knocked down but not knocked out. Paul is here concerned to show how the grace of God is magnified when His human instruments are at their weakest. You’re very familiar with the words of verse 8 and 9: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed;

perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” Please note that these are not paradoxes that display Paul’s perseverance and courage; rather they are paradoxes that display God’s power and providence. God allows pressure and trial and persecution in Paul’s life, but He puts limits on them.^{iv} Nothing can touch us that has not passed through the hands of the heavenly Father.

Does God allow His servants to be hard-pressed? You bet! Does He allow them to be crushed? No way. Does He allow them to be perplexed? Yes, often. Despairing? No; despair does not come from Him. Persecuted? Sure! Abandoned? Never! Struck down? Yes. Destroyed. No.

I like J. Philip Arthur’s words here:

Taken together, these four images tell us that Paul was a hard-headed realist with no romantic illusions about his service for God. Far from depicting himself as a spiritual superhero blazing a trail of success like a comet across the first-century sky, Paul portrayed himself as a groggy fighter reeling from a succession of near-lethal blows, surprised to find himself still on his feet and sure that if he was still standing, it was only by the grace of God.

The ultimate impact of the faithful servant leader. (10-12)

That impact is best expressed this way: As he experiences “the death of Jesus” (suffering), he reveals the life of Jesus to unbelievers. Paul expresses the same idea in three consecutive sentences in verses 10-12. Each begins with death and ends with life.

1. Verse 10: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.”
2. Verse 11: “For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.”
3. Verse 12: “So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”

The essential point Paul is making in each of these statements is that the servant leader is destined to undergo decay and death. Not only will we suffer the normal effects of the aging process, but in addition we can expect suffering, persecution, and even death for the sake of the Gospel. These trials, however, can be spiritually productive in the lives of others. As we accept suffering and respond to it in godly ways, those around us see Jesus and are drawn to Him. That makes the hard times worthwhile. We have lost a number of dear friends over the past year here at First Free, but the suffering they have endured well has impacted so many people for Christ.

Conclusion: Let me ask you something: Do you ever complain to God that He hasn’t given you a better clay pot? Are you ever jealous of the style or color or shape of other pots you see walking around? I think God wants us to get our eyes off the jars of clay and onto the treasure we carry in them. He has given us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of

Christ, and He wants us to share that knowledge with others.

i. You'd be amazed at how the position descriptions developed by churches seeking Senior Pastors have changed over the years, even in evangelical churches. Whereas 30 years ago the key assets churches were looking for were a man of integrity, a man of prayer, one who would study and teach well and love people, now the focus is much more on leadership issues—coaching, mentoring, teamwork, motivational skills, articulation of vision, and management ability, etc. Of course, it doesn't have to be either/or; it should be both/and, but there's only so much time in a week, and the time that a pastor spends on administration and management cannot be spent in the Word. In the process of this change, not surprisingly, I believe something has been lost in many of these churches when it comes to biblical literacy and holy living.

ii. This is essentially the same thing taught in 1 Corinthians 2:14, 15: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he *cannot understand* them, because they are spiritually discerned." Does this mean that unbelievers cannot understand the words we use? No, of course not. Does it mean they cannot learn spiritual concepts and even spout them back? No, in fact, unbelievers have tremendous intellectual capacity, even in regard to biblical studies. One of the best technical commentaries ever written on the Book of Galatians was written by Ernest DeWitt Burton of the University of Chicago, yet I doubt seriously that he was born again. He could understand exegesis but not the Gospel.

iii. Ray Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*, 124.

iv. Consider God's ways with His servant Job. Toward the end of his terrible ordeal Job, who has endured the philosophical attempts of his so-called friends to explain his suffering, but who has also engaged in some personal justification, is challenged by God to put up or shut up. Listen to Job 38:1-11:

Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! (Sarcasm) Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, "This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt"?

It is that last sentence I want to draw to your attention. We have seen the enormous power of Hurricane Katrina, and the flooding of a major American city. The water seemed out of control, but it wasn't. God has fixed limits for the waves of the sea, and He says regarding any trial that faces His children. "This far you may come and no farther."