JARS OF CLAY • JARS OF CLAY • 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-7 • 4/23/2023

# MAIN POINT

We are going through a 3-part series from the book of 2 Corinthians called Jars of Clay: God’s presence in our weakness, strength in our suffering, and hope for our future. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth that the hope of the gospel is like a “treasure we hold in clay jars.” This metaphor reminds us of how fragile life can be. We will take a close look at how God works through our frailty and suffering to accomplish his purpose in our lives. God’s treasure is carried in clay jars, reminding us that God’s beauty and power can show up in our brokenness and god’s hope transcends our physical lives.

Today, Pastor Chuck will be speaking about God’s presence in our suffering. (2 Cor 4:7- 12,14, 16- 18). How we are wasting away – yet being renewed day by day.

The LifeGroup lesson will focus on: Christians can ﬁght discouragement because the treasure we carry is greater than the broken vessel we carry it in.

# INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

**If your home were on ﬁre, what is one thing you would want to make sure you grabbed on the way out? (alive things don't count)**

**Why do you value that thing so much? Where do you keep it right now? Why?**

Most of the time, the place we keep our valuables reﬂects how valuable they are to us. For the Christian, though, we have the great treasure of the gospel inside of the very frail and weak vessel of ourselves. But we should not be discouraged because the treasure we carry is greater than the broken vessel we carry it in.

# UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ 2 CORINTHIANS 4:1-7.

**Paul opens with the word “therefore.” Looking back at chapter 3, what are some of the reasons we do not lose heart? (see commentary)**

**What did Paul mean in verse 2 in commending the gospel as an open display of the truth?**

**As Chruistians do we live our live sin secret or the open? (consider Dan 6).**

**What does it look like for us to “set forth the truth plainly”? Why does this take so much courage?**

Paul was compelled to share the same mercy he had been given, and though he and other Christians were victims of discouraging attacks, he urged his readers to persevere. This perseverance was not because he was strong, but because he was conﬁdent that the gospel would never fail.

**What character traits did Paul emphasize for Christians in these verses?**

**What is Integrity? Why is integrity so important to sharing the Christian message in a dark world?**

**Why is a refusal to compromise the gospel an issue of integrity? Why might we be tempted to compromise the message of the gospel today?**

When we preach the true and full gospel, as Paul did, the message isn’t going to resonate with everyone. But our goal isn’t to please people; it’s to be faithful messengers of the gospel. If our goal is to please people, then we wouldn’t be preaching about Jesus; we would be preaching about ourselves.

**In verse 5, Paul said that we are slaves because of Jesus. What does that mean in your own words?**

**How does proclaiming Jesus lead us to a life of service of others?**

**How do we make sure Christ is honored, instead of ourselves, when we serve?**

Paul insisted that instead of exalting themselves in their preaching, he and other true apostles presented themselves as the Corinthians’ servants for Jesus’ sake. Paul had sacriﬁced much for the Corinthians and the other churches to which he preached. He had not even exercised his right to be paid for his work. He humbled himself in this way for Jesus’ sake, so that Jesus alone would be honored. His, and our, reason for doing this is because of what God has done for us in Christ.

**Why is it important to remember the treasure we carry, according to verse 7? Why is our brokenness as Christians actually a good thing according to verse 7?**

**What are some ways that your weakness and frailty can showcase God’s glory while you still seek to live a life of integrity?**

**Does that mean we should be proud of our sin? If not, what does it mean?**

Paul’s metaphor here is meant to show how the greatness of the treasure outshines the greatness of the messenger. Because we are all broken, weak, and frail people, when someone believes in the gospel, we can know that it’s not because of our greatness as the carrier but because of the greatness of the treasure inside us. In this way, God is gloriﬁed through the weakness of His people.

# APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

We are in a continual state of being transformed by the Spirit of the Lord into the image of the Lord. This transformation is the result of discipleship, and it is a process that will take a lifetime. It requires humility, because it’s not about our own boasting, but about God’s work in us.

**What speciﬁc forms of ministry has God called you to do? How does that calling and the promise of the Spirit’s empowerment help you stay faithful to the task even in times of discouragement?**

**How does Satan use discouragement to try to defeat us as ministers of the gospel?**

**Why do you think we so quickly fall back into masking our weaknesses or focusing on ourselves instead of others? How do these things affect our witness?**

# PRAYER

Thank God for your weakness and brokenness because it is a chance for His greatness to shine through. Ask Him to help your group persevere even in the midst of discouragement because of

their conﬁdence in the gospel.

# COMMENTARY

2 Corinthians 3-

3:3-5 You have the living God within you 3:6- we have His promise (covenant)

3:7-11 The New Covenant is more glorious than the old 3:14, 18 Christ has removed our veil

3:17 We have freedom in Christ

# 2 Corinthians 4:1-7

As a minister who was called of God to share the message of Christ and the new covenant, Paul turned his focus to the issue of Christians’ perseverance. God had given him this ministry.

Because Paul had received mercy, he felt compelled to share mercy. We do not give up is an expression of Paul’s bold commitment to stand by the gospel. He was the target of a demoralizing attack by opponents. He felt the sting of the Corinthian church members’ lack of support. However, Paul was committed to persevere in serving God.

Verse 2 highlights further contrasts between Paul and the false teachers. Paul had renounced shameful secret things, but his critics had embraced them. The deceit was that they claimed to be ministers while really striving only for personal gain (see 2 Cor. 2:17). They were guilty of distorting God’s message. Paul sought to be acceptable in God’s sight, not to be popular among people. He stood by the gospel because he knew that the gospel would never fall. He didn’t need to add anything to it. He also didn’t need to puff up his reputation in an effort to make the gospel seem more effective. Paul understood that the important question to be answered by ministers is not “What do people think of me?” but rather “What does God think of me?” If commendation was needed for the Corinthians to again support him, Paul decided that he would depend on God to prick their consciences. He would simply keep on making an open display of the truth.

Paul’s appeal to the conscience is signiﬁcant. A Christian’s conscience is one means by which the Holy Spirit can guide him or her. Impressive oratorical displays appeal to the emotions and

can sway opinions. However, when the Holy Spirit communicates truth to the Christian’s conscience, the believer’s will is addressed, leading to conviction and changed behavior.

Verse 3 alludes to the idea that Paul may have been accused of declaring an obscure or hard to understand message—one that seemed veiled. Another possibility, however, was that Paul’s preaching had not proved as popular as the false teachers’ proclamations. Paul declared that if the message of Christ was hidden or unclear to some, the real problem was the hearers’ spiritual hardness. They were perishing, and the condemning evidence was their lack of openness to the true gospel.

Verse 4 helps us understand why gospel proclamation and Christian ministry may appear “unsuccessful” at times. The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers. Satan was and is a clever, powerful deceiver. He made the false teachers and their distorted message appealing to many in Paul’s day. Sadly, Satan continues to deceive many men and women today, so that they prefer spiritual darkness over the light of the gospel.

In verse 5, Paul clariﬁed his twofold, God-given task. The focus of his proclamation was Jesus Christ as Lord. To borrow a concept from John the Baptist (see John 3:30), Paul the proclaimer decreased so that Jesus the Lord would increase. As a result, Paul and his colleagues viewed themselves as slaves because of Jesus. For them, personal gain wasn’t part of the equation.

In terms of Christian service, perseverance and victory are synonymous terms. What motivates us as believers to stay faithful in our service is the conviction that God has called us to serve. Giving up isn’t an option. Christians serving in any type of ministry face discouragement sooner or later. Discouragement often is one Satan’s most effective weapons against believers. Paul’s example (based on Jesus’ example) reminds us that faithfulness in service demands a steadfast commitment to stand by the gospel and not be derailed even by a ﬂagging Christian relationship as we seek to help people understand the truth of the gospel.

Paul insisted that instead of exalting themselves in their preaching, he and other true apostles presented themselves as the Corinthians’ servants for Jesus’ sake. Paul had sacriﬁced much for the Corinthians and the other churches to which he preached. He had not even exercised his right to be paid for his work. He humbled himself in this way for Jesus’ sake, so that Jesus alone would be honored.

Why did Paul lower himself and honor Christ exclusively? His reason stemmed from God’s incredible act toward him. Paul described this divine act by drawing a connection between the light of creation and the light of re-creation in Christ. As the Genesis account reports, on the ﬁrst day of creation, God said, “Let light shine out of darkness.” Paul did not quote the Genesis record

precisely, but he paraphrased it to draw the connection to Christ. God’s creative act of calling for light broke the darkness of the primordial world.

Paul’s conﬁdence that true preaching focused on the glory of Christ rather than on its ministers rested in the fact that just as God ﬁrst created light, God made His light shine in their hearts.

When God sent Christ, He acted much as He did when He created physical light. Jesus spoke of Himself as the “light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5) and taught that His followers were also the “light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). The New Testament also describes life in Christ as walking in the light (1 John 2:8-10).

The illumination of the hearts of individuals is not just a mental state of enlightenment. From Paul’s perspective, it is an act of re-creation. Christ’s coming into the world, and the illumination of individuals to see His light, is a gracious divine act by which believers receive the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. When Paul came to know Christ personally on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3), this act of God surpassed the original act of creation in its ability to reveal the glory of God.

Paul expressed this conviction to validate his claim that his preaching was about Jesus as Lord and not about himself or some other. He was so captivated by the greatness of the revelation of Christ that he could do nothing else.

On the one hand, there is treasure. The treasure represents the new covenant ministry empowered by “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (4:6). In Paul’s day earthenware containers were used to hold many different items. Paul had in mind precious items such as silver or gold. Paul viewed the gospel and its ministry as precious cargo. On the other hand, this priceless gospel ministry was carried about in jars of clay. Artifacts from Paul’s day indicate that not all items were stored in earthenware containers. Boxes of gold and ivory, decorated with precious stones, were available for the wealthy. Yet, it was common for items of great value to be stored in inexpensive pots of clay.

The counterpart to the jars of clay in Paul’s metaphor is the ministers themselves. Paul had in mind not only the physical body, but also the many trials and troubles that came upon him and those who ministered with him. He introduced the idea that God had placed the treasure of the gospel ministry in frail, ordinary humans. A priceless treasure was contained in common earthenware.

Paul chose this metaphor because it symbolized the reality of his ministry. He had received the incredible light of God in Christ and was commissioned to spread this gospel throughout the

world on Christ’s behalf. Yet, this precious treasure did not raise Paul out of ordinary human life. He still faced the weaknesses of physical trials and persecutions in this world.

What was the purpose of this design? The grand message of Christ was carried through the world by ordinary, weak human beings to show that this all-surpassing power was from God and not from the ministers. The expression “all-surpassing power” alludes to 4:6, which focused on the divine power demonstrated ﬁrst at the command that light appear (Gen. 1:3), and later in the order that the light of Christ shine in the hearts of believers. God spoke and the light of creation shone; He spoke and the light of re-creation shone as well.

This power of God was also evident in the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 15:18-19). The weakness of Paul and other ministers, coupled with their refusal to use deception, could not have produced the powerful, re-creative effects that the gospel produced. God chose weak creatures to minister the gospel so that it would be all the more clear that He had accomplished the work through these ministers (2 Tim. 1:8).

The effectiveness of their ministry might have caused some people to attribute honor to the ministers themselves. But Paul insisted that the weakness of the jars of clay demonstrated that ministers of the gospel deserved no glory for their work. The power came through weak instruments to demonstrate that it was from God and not from the ministers.