

From The Pulpit Of



Jars of Clay

No. 11
Series: 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians 4:7-12

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Text

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Introduction

Yesterday I was at the funeral for the long-time pastor of one of our fellow Chicagoland Baptist churches. He was 98 years old. He became the pastor of this small church plant in 1972 and it grew to over 2,000 members at one point. He wrote a personal narrative of how it happened entitled *The Hand of the Lord Was Upon Me*. I heard him preach in person once. I could tell that there was something powerful about it, but I only caught about 75% of what he said. He had a speech impediment that made it hard to make out everything he was saying.

Now, that's odd, isn't it? A preacher who couldn't talk quite right. It obviously wasn't this man that built that church. The hand of the Lord was upon him.

Think back to the people that have had a profound impact on your life, spiritually. Maybe it was an imperfect parent. Maybe a Sunday School teacher that you have no idea what she's doing these days, she never wrote a book or got famous. Maybe you were influenced by a big name, that has since had a big fall and shown himself to be... not Jesus. Was there a peer in your life that said some things to you or did some things for you who was not the cool kid?

My pastor growing up who spent a lot of time with me was morbidly obese with a high-pitched whiny voice (and he's now divorced), but God used him mightily in my life. I remember hearing someone talking about an experience of being in a church setting where someone was speaking and this person thought the message was super simplistic, no sophistication, just basic, and yet her friends sitting next to her were weeping and their lives were changed. Isn't that just how it works?

In short, what we're going to see today from 2 Corinthians 4:7-12 is very simple. It's just this: **the power in Christian ministry comes from God alone.**

Let's pray...

This passage of Scripture can be broken up into three sections. Verse 7 – pots with a purpose. Verses 8-9 – under pressure but preserved. Verses 10-12 – put to death but producing life. So first, let's look at v. 7 – pots with a purpose.

Pots with a Purpose (v. 7)

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” The first word – “But” – prompts us to recall what Paul had just been saying before. Paul has been talking about the wonderful New Covenant, the era of the Holy Spirit. And he's been explaining that he, by God's mercy, is a genuine minister of this New Covenant, a spokesman for the gospel, tasked with telling it like it is. He doesn't have to help the message but simply proclaim it and in doing so God shines light into darkened hearts, opens up blind eyes to see all-of-a-sudden the absolute beauty of Jesus and the salvation he provides. He said in v. 6 – “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

So when Paul says in v. 7, “*But* we have this treasure...,” what's the treasure he's talking about? It's the treasure of knowing Christ for who he is and having the privilege of making him known. It's that inner apprehension and appreciation of Jesus that produces an ambition to share him with others. The sparkling treasure in v. 7 is this divine and supernatural light that has been shone into our hearts and that reflects out to others.

What a treasure! What an inestimable gift! It's of more value than all the gold of all the kingdoms through all time. It's worth more than owning all the shares of all the companies on the New York Stock Exchange. To have spiritual sight of Christ that allows us to accurately articulate to others who he is and what he's done... that is to possess the greatest treasure imaginable.

In fact, it's infinite! So you don't have to hoard it and keep it to yourself. You can give it away to everyone and never be depleted one penny. Imagine someone gave you a gift of \$100,000. That would be awesome. But \$100,000 can go away pretty quickly – a new roof for your house, a new car, you want to give some away to some charities and then poof, it's all gone. But the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is inexhaustible. It's like a luminous blue variable – a type of star that shines a million times brighter than our sun – but brighter and it can never burn out!

And “we have this treasure in jars of clay,” Paul says. The object being referred to here is a terracotta container. These kinds of clay pots are ubiquitous at archaeological digs. Ancient societies produced them in mass. They were common, multi-purpose tools for storing all manner of things. They weren't anything special themselves. They were cheap and expendable. Breakable. We usually find them as potsherds.

Paul says that the priceless treasure of the light of the gospel is not carried in gilded boxes. God puts it in fragile, lowly jars of clay. It's like an invaluable diamond shipped in a plywood crate. Or maybe rubies kept in Tupperware, or better yet – those flimsy plastic take-out boxes you get at restaurants. Got the image?

Now in this metaphor, what is the jar of clay? Or rather, who? It's humans, like Paul, Timothy, and anyone else who has the Holy Spirit, has their hearts enlightened. It's us who are Christians. We are not the treasure. We are just vessels for the treasure. And

we are weak vessels. Chipped, cracking clay pots. “God delivers his glorious gospel treasure in pots made of dirt.”¹ He knows that we are but dust (Ps. 103:14; cf. Gen. 2:7). He is the potter and we are the clay (e.g. Is. 64:8).

In what ways is this an apt metaphor? How are we humans like jars of clay? There are many ways, but what strikes me about this metaphor is that it means we are not strong. We humans are very fragile. We have limits. We have physical limitations – our bodies need sleep daily and are winding down with each passing year. How many of you feel physically fragile? We have mental limitations. Even the smartest among us cannot know and understand everything. We forget words and concepts. Our intellectual capabilities are limited. We have emotional limitations, we cannot care about everyone and everything. We get worn out easily. Our feelings don’t match up with our best intentions all the time. We are extremely limited creatures.

What this means is that none of us are capable of 100% grasping the glories of the gospel 100% of the time, much less able to share the gospel with everyone, everywhere, all the time with impeccable logic and mental acuity and irresistible powers of persuasion with infinite empathy from a heart that cares perfectly. I’m not omniscient. I’m not omnipresent. I’m not omnipotent. I’m... human. And none of this is to mention my remaining indwelling sin. I’m just a very finite and fallen vessel. Nothing flashy. Just pots.

But pots with a purpose. “[W]e have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” God uses flawed, frail vessels like us to communicate his message. And the fact that we are so plain only makes the message pop more. It’s not about us. It’s all about him – who he is and what he’s done. He uses weak jars of clay so that we don’t get in the way. “The problem with gilded boxes is that their shine can distract from the glory of the treasure they contain.... The fragility of the human minister thus serves to keep the focus on the God of the gospel, not his messenger,” as one person has put it.²

I can’t produce anything of lasting spiritual value in and of myself. I can’t make people see the value of Christ. But that’s the point. When it happens (and it happens all the time), it’s all him! And God alone gets the glory! If something significant happens through someone insignificant; if something impressive happens through someone unimpressive, then something else is going on. It’s clearly not owing to the superlative smarts or skills or sweat of the person. It “show[s] that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” Being jars of clay ensures that God gets the credit. “So Paul’s ministry is profoundly God-centered, not self-aggrandizing, like the message of his opponents.”³ God uses weakness, not strength. Christian ministry should never focus on how amazing the minister is, but just keep people’s gaze on God.

When I was a kid I once seriously sprained my ankle because I thought I could be He-Man and jump down into a basement at my friend’s house that was being built. He was taking too long to go down the ladder, so I said, “I have the power.” And jumped down and got hurt. He-Man was my hero. It was a cartoon in the 80s, but was recently made into a live action movie that I watched with my kids last week. Prince Adam is an unassuming, bumbling guy. But with the Sword of Power he can say, “By the power of Grayskull... I have the power!” And then he is able to do all this amazing stuff.

That’s kind of like us, wielding the sword of the Spirit. **The power in Christian ministry comes from God alone.** We are just clay pots, but with a purpose – that the

power of God would be made manifest and *he* would be glorified. Pots with a purpose, that's v. 7.

Under Pressure but Preserved (vv. 8-9)

Now vv. 8-9 talk about being under pressure, but protected. We may be fragile pots. And we may be put in situations where our weakness and vulnerability is put on full display. But God doesn't just let us be broken and discarded. He holds these jars of clay together.

Here we come to the first of several tribulation lists in the book of 2 Corinthians, places where Paul catalogues how hard life has been for him, how he himself is nothing special, no superhuman impervious to suffering. He's very delicate and susceptible to the same kinds of vicissitudes that we are. Here we get four statements of how stretched to the limit Paul was, but by God's grace how he was not broken. It's "one of the more powerful rhetorical moments in" Paul's writings.⁴

Paul says, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed." Those Greek words translated as "afflicted in every way" are the exact same words he uses again in 7:5 when he says, "When we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn [afflicted in every way] – fighting without and fear within." It's a way of saying that you're getting it from every side, all angles. The word "afflicted" carries the sense of being hard pressed, like you're in a vise and life is just bearing down on you from every angle. We might call this "stress."

Put that together with the image of a jar and it's even more vivid. Think of a pottery jug with clamps on it, tightening, tightening, tightening. And you can hear it start to crack.

But then Paul says he felt pressure from every side, but yet he was not crushed. God didn't allow him to be broken to pieces. He held him together. He felt his weakness, he felt stretched to the limit, but somehow preserved.

As a believer can you testify to this? You're trying to care for so many people. You're discipling three people in the church. You're involved in a couple different social groups because you're trying to evangelize them. And you're raising four kids. And then this person has a crisis, this person turns on you and blames you for her problems, the friend you've been sharing the gospel with gets mad at you won't return your texts, and your kids are acting out. So many times in ministry I've quoted Harry and Lloyd from *Dumb and Dumber* – "Our pets' heads are falling off!" And yet, I'm still here. Still standing. Stressed, but not totally stressed out. It's God's way of keeping me from feeling self-sufficient.

Next, Paul says he is often "perplexed, but not driven to despair." This one is a word play in Greek – *aporoumenoi* but not *exaporoumenoi*. That word "perplexed" is the same one Luke used to describe the women at the empty tomb on the morning of the Resurrection, scratching their heads. They were completely confused. How could this be? Have you ever felt like this? Like someone opened up your cranium and stirred the pot a bit and closed it back? Your categories are blown. Your expectations are shattered. You feel like you can't make heads or tails. Your assumptions about God are being challenged. This perplexity is often connected to depression or anxiety. The bottom has fallen out. You're spinning, grasping.

This happens when a church you were part of falls apart. When someone you trusted betrays you. When you feel like you're doing everything right, but everything is going wrong. When suffering makes you question God's goodness. These experiences make you feel your weakness, your tenuousness. Like you're just hanging by a thread from falling into insanity.

But, Paul, says, "perplexed, but not driven to despair." At a loss, but not totally giving up. Humbled, but not debilitated. You can't hold yourself together, but he holds you together. If you haven't felt at the end of your rope, maybe you're playing it safe and trying to put on a show where you are the hero who has it all together and nice, easy, sanitized life. Ministry is messy and it will show you how unstable you are in yourself so you will cling to God.

The third paradoxical pair Paul lists is – "persecuted, but not forsaken." Paul had many enemies. Not everyone liked him. He wasn't always popular. Have you ever felt like that? If everybody likes you and thinks you're great, you're not doing something right. Paul escaped by the skin of teeth on so many occasions from plots to kill him. Even supposed believers abandoned him. At the end of his life he wrote to Timothy – "Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me" (2 Tim. 4:10-11).

Well, it wasn't just Luke. Jesus was with him. Paul says, "persecuted, but not forsaken." Born again believers are never truly forsaken. Jesus was, on the cross, on our behalf (cf. Mk. 15:34), so that we never would be. Jesus was raised and then promised that he would be with us always, to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20). "He has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me'" (Heb. 13:5-6; cf. Dt. 31:6, 8; Josh. 1:5)?

The last one says, "struck down, but not destroyed." This quite literally happened to Paul when he was at Lystra. "Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:19-22). He was literally struck down, but got back up. And this was a metaphor for so much of his life.

Paul was not a triumphalistic super-apostle. He was just a man, frail flesh like you and me. He's not saying, "He look at me! Look at how great my life is. If you could just be like me you'd be healthy and wealthy and successful." No, he's saying, "I'm a pathetic guy. My life is not smooth and easy. And sometimes it get so down, so discouraged and full of doubts. Sometimes I'm so burdened beyond my strength that I despair of life itself (cf. 1:8). But God always comes through. I'm constantly under pressure, but preserved, protected. To God alone be the glory. He alone is my strength and shield."

Merrill Tenney rephrases these four couplets like this:

squeezed but not squashed;

*bewildered but not befuddled;
pursued but not abandoned;
knocked down but not knocked out.*⁵

Do you resonate? Do you sometimes feel like a nervous wreck and wonder how God could possibly use you? Do you know your own weakness and utter dependency on him? And have you experienced his sustaining power? Richard Bauckham writes – “anyone who throws himself into the work of Christian ministry of any kind with half the dedication of Paul will experience the weakness of which Paul speaks: the times when problems seem insoluble, the times of weariness from sheer overwork, the times of depression when there seem to be no results.”⁶

Put to Death but Producing Life (vv. 10-12)

Paul was weak and impotent on his own, but when we step back and evaluate his life from God’s perspective it wasn’t as if his life accomplished nothing. He was, by God’s grace, immensely fruitful. But it was precisely through his suffering and weaknesses. Let’s turn now to vv. 10-12 – put to death but producing life.

Paul describes himself as “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” What would it look like to always carry in your body the death of Jesus? It means to have your life be characterized by the kind of ignominy, weakness, and shame that characterized Jesus as he was carrying that cross and being beaten and bloodied and spit on and utterly exhausted. It means you don’t project an aura of being all slick and put together, as if that is what will advance the gospel. No, the gospel advances through death.

Paul goes on – “For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake.” To be a Christian is to be joined to Jesus. As Philip Hughes puts it, “Paul is speaking of something more than [merely following Christ’s] example. Between Master and follower there is a certain unity of experience and destiny.... Martyrdom, for Paul, was not confined to the hour of his death in Rome; it was expressed daily and constantly in his dying-living existence.”⁷ Someone else has said it this way – “[T]he proclaimer must reflect the proclaimed. He who proclaims a crucified Messiah must himself live cruciform.”⁸ And someone else has articulated it this way – “If Paul were a superman, faster than a speeding bullet and able to leap over tall buildings with a single bound, he could hardly proclaim the message of the cross.”⁹

The Christian life is death. But in that daily dying, there is a supernatural, otherworldly power of life at work! “For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.” Paul was gladly suffering at great cost to himself in order to see spiritual life at work in the Corinthians. As has been said, “To see repentant sinners entering into newness of life in Christ makes every affliction borne for Jesus’ sake and in His service a thousand times worth-while. And this is the joy of all Christian witness.”¹⁰

I can think of no better analogy than parenting, especially mothering. As a parent, you sacrifice yourself for your kids. Sleepless nights. I had to have back surgery for a bulging disc as a result of carrying kids. Parenting is not a cakewalk. There’s no easy formula of put this in and get this out. And when your kids are struggling it *kills* you

inside. To be a mom is literally to give your body over to your child. It's to change your body shape. It's to bleed. It's to have the calcium leached from your very bones. This is why so many women these days are hesitant to have babies. It messes with your flat-belly, strong, successful woman vibe. It's not pretty, but it's actually the most beautiful thing: death at work in you for the sake of life in others.

I think of Lottie Moon, the missionary to China that we remember every Christmas. She never married and had children, but she went to the mission field in 1873 and gave her life to see the gospel reach the unreached. She lived through wars and famines and poverty. She gave away her finances and food to those around her and wasted away physically and mentally, until she died at age 72, weighing only 50 pounds. But God used her to reach untold numbers of people with the light of the gospel.

Conclusion

The gospel is the message of a dying Savior, who didn't come to show us how to live our best life now. He came to die, to give his life as a sacrifice of atonement, to pay for our sins, so that we could be reconciled to God and have eternal life with him. If you've not put your trust in that gospel message, do so right now. Stop trying to save yourself. Admit your utter impotence and throw yourself on Jesus' mercy.

And that message goes out through weak, frail, flawed men and women whose lives don't look glamorous, but who are just clay pots with one purpose – showcasing the all-surpassing power of God, who preserves them under pressure, and who through their dying, brings about the resurrection life of Jesus. We have nothing to offer in ourselves.

The power in Christian ministry comes from God alone.

So don't be fixated on the big and successful and smooth and seemingly powerful. Don't be shocked when your life reveals your weakness and inability on your own to effect spiritual results. Come to the end of yourself and see what God can do. Don't rely on the methods the world relies on – big shows, slick marketing, dynamic speakers, well-oiled machines, because then your faith rests would rest in the wisdom of men instead of the power of God (cf. 1Cor. 2:5).

Maybe the best way to end this is to quote those lines from the most basic children's song. It's so simple, but so true:

*Jesus love me, this I know,
for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong;
they are weak, but he is strong.*

The Lord's Table

As we come to the Lord's Table we don't come to something humanly remarkable. It's not like a meal from a restaurant with three Michelin stars. It's just crackers and cheap wine. And it signifies to us how Christ was crucified in weakness. It was nothing appealing to look at in the world's way of viewing things. And yet, it is the most glorious reality in the universe that has the power to save sinners like us and give us a right relationship with the holy God who made all that is that will last even through death...

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, August 16, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 251.

² Ibid., 254.

³ Ibid., 254-55.

⁴ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 233.

⁵ Merrill Tenney, as qtd. in R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 94.

⁶ Richard Bauckham, “Weakness – Paul’s and Ours,” *Themelios* 4 (1982), 5-6.

⁷ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 142.

⁸ Barnett, 232.

⁹ David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC (Brentwood: B&H, 1999), 230.

¹⁰ Philip Hughes, 145.