**WE HAVE TREASURE IN JARS OF CLAY**

November 23, 2014

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

Key Verse 4:7 “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

In the last passage we learned that we mirror the glory of the Lord. We steadfastly look into the face of Jesus and reflect the glory of his face like a mirror reflecting light, and at the same time are continuously being transformed into the same image of Christ. However, it is not easy to do so in this world because people do not recognize it. On January 9th, 2007, Joshua Bell sold out Boston’s Symphony Hall. Seats were nearly $100 each. Bell plays a violin worth more than $3 million and is one of the best musicians in the world. Three days later he entered a metro station in Washington, D.C. wearing casual clothing and a baseball cap. He opened his case and played his violin for 45 minutes. Only six people stopped, 20 gave money (a total of $32), but no one recognized him. Likewise, when it comes to the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ, many are blind. They do not see his beauty and majesty, and therefore do not give him the honor and glory he deserves because Jesus is the suffering servant. Furthermore, God has entrusted us, who are like jars of clay, with the task of revealing Jesus to the world. We are easily breakable, and have many cracks. So we become discouraged. St. Paul encourages us all through this passage, “We do not lose heart”; “We do not get discouraged”; “we do not feel like quitting”; “we are confident.” Again and again you will find that note dominant throughout the passage. Let’s think about why God put his treasure in jars of clay.

Look at verse 2. “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.” In verse 2 Paul refers to the methods of other teachers and philosophers of his day who used any means necessary to gather a following (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:20–25). This of course meant altering their message and merely tickling the ears of their hearers. Paul and his companions renounced these deceitful and shameful ways. They did not edit God’s Word. They announced it. “By setting forth the truth plainly” (v.2), the message remained the same for everyone who heard it. Every Christian is tempted, at times, to adjust the gospel and make it more applicable to the culture. Francis Chen, one of the most prominent preachers in California, said, “If Jesus were here today and started a church, mine would be bigger.” What he meant was that Jesus taught the truth which people did not like. For example, Jesus claimed to be the only way to heaven. Such exclusivity is frowned upon by the lost world, but that did not matter to Paul and it should not matter to us because that is the truth that sets people free.

Even though Paul lived by and spoke the truth plainly, not everyone accepted his gospel message. To some people it was veiled; they could not understand it. They claimed to have many reasons. Some said the message was too simple, and others complained about the minister. However, the problem is not with the gospel. Some who hear the gospel decide to reject it. We must keep this in mind. When someone fails to respond to the gospel despite our best efforts to convince them, we tend to question our methods, our character, and perhaps even the message itself. The gospel is light. But only those who believe can receive this light. The sun is always shining. But we do not always see it. The reason is that something has come between the sun and us. So it is with the gospel. The light of the gospel is always shining. God is always seeking to shine into the hearts of men. But Satan puts various barriers between God and unbelievers. It may be the cloud of pride, or of rebellion, or of self-righteousness. All of these serve to hinder the light of the gospel from shining in. But when we believe in Jesus Christ, something amazing happens. God removes the veil and his light shine in our hearts.

Look at verse 6. “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.” Without the light, our mind is full of darkness which is ignorance, sin and wretchedness. Even getting a Ph.D. in theology will not help us to overcome this ignorance. There is a placard outside a united church, “If you love this planet, demand action on climate change.” Many theologians and pastors spend a lot of time and energy to use politics to pass a law on global warming, instead of engaging in preaching the gospel. This shows that only Jesus the light can solve our ignorance. To Paul, Christianity is not about sets of rules, nor knowing all the rules, but about looking in the face of Christ.

In the first creation, God commanded the light to shine. But in the new creation, God himself shines into our hearts. How much more personal this is! When God shines his light, we can see things clearly more than Ph.D.s in theology. We can see the beauty in the Bible, and in the doctrines of the Bible, which we did not see before, and which unbelievers do not see. Unbelievers say, “Why do you spend so much time and money in serving God and others?” “Why do you go to church early on Sunday instead of sleeping in and go shopping?” Spiritual things seem foolish to them. But for us, because of the light, we can see things clearly from eternal perspective.

Look at verse 7. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” God put his treasure, his light, in jars of clay. We can see God’s wisdom in putting his light in jars of clay. Jars of clay are weak; easily breakable. Likewise, we have frail human body. There are so much sufferings which may break jars. But these sufferings are designed to break jars of clay. A cracked jar allows more light to be seen. Someone said: “In order for a light to shine out of a jar, it has to be broken. One may know all about the way of life and yet never communicate light to others, because that one has never been broken in the presence of God.”

Perhaps Paul was thinking of Gideon and his 300 men in their fight against the Midianites. Each soldier was given an empty clay jar, a torch, and a trumpet. They placed the torch inside the clay jar. At a given signal, all the soldiers blew their trumpets and smashed their jars and shouted, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” The Midianites awoke in a panic at the sound of the trumpets, breaking jars, and shouting. They were so confused that they started fighting one another. Those who weren’t killed fled into the night. Notice that the light of the torches were not revealed until the clay jars were broken.

That is what God wants to do—to let his light shine through us. And God delights to use broken, flawed, cracked jars, so that he and he alone will receive the glory. The Message translation of this verse says it well; “If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That’s to prevent anyone from confusing God’s incomparable power with us.” So if you are a cracked jar, don’t despair. God delights to use cracked jars. God can shine through the cracks and flaws of your life if you’ll just surrender yourself to him.

Once upon a time there was an elderly Chinese woman who owned two large jars of clay. She would hang each jar on the ends of a pole which she carried across her neck. Each day she would walk from her house to the nearby stream to fetch water. She would fill up both jars, pick up the pole and walk back to her house. One of the jars had a crack in it while the other jar was perfect and always delivered a full pot of water. At the end of the long walk back to her house, the cracked jar always arrived only half full. Because of the crack, half the water had leaked out. For two full years, this happened daily. The Chinese woman arrived home with only one and a half jars of water. Of course, the perfect jar was proud that it had never lost a drop of precious water. But the poor cracked jar was ashamed of its imperfection, and was miserable. The cracked jar thought of itself as a complete failure. One day, the cracked jar was so tired of failing that it spoke to the woman: “I am ashamed of myself because this crack in my side causes water to leak out all the way back to your house. I have failed you, and I’m sorry. Maybe you need to replace me with another jar that isn’t cracked.” The old woman smiled and said gently, “Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path, but not on the other jar’s side? I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side. And every day as I’ve walked back you’ve been watering those seeds. For the past two years I’ve been able to pick the flowers to decorate my table. Without you being just the way you are, there would have been no beautiful flowers to grace my home.” It’s okay if you’re a cracked jar. Like the clay jars that Gideon and his soldiers broke, there is a tremendous value in being broken. We throw away things when they’re broken, but God cherishes broken people. God uses broken things. And when you are broken, the fragrance of Christ can be detected in your life, and the light of Jesus can shine. Jesus even said, “This is my body which is BROKEN for you.” So, broken down, cracked jars, take heart because God uses cracked jars so that he and he alone will get the glory!

Look at verses 8-9. “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” When we consider Paul's sufferings, they were enough to crush anyone. Simply to bear these sufferings without giving up was a great victory. Yet Paul went beyond this. In the midst of much suffering, out of his resurrection faith, he opened his mouth and began to speak the word of God. Verse 13 says, “It is written: ‘I believed, therefore I have spoken.’” Paul had spoken the word of God boldly in the midst of hardships. Then the gospel spread through him to many people and many cities. Paul literally overcame the world with his faith in the Risen Christ. Here we learn that even though we are hard pressed on every side and confront harsh difficulties every day, we must believe in the Risen Christ. Then we can find power to preach the gospel boldly, and to raise disciples of Jesus in any situation.

What was Paul’s faith? Look at verse 14. “…because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence.” Paul had resurrection faith. He believed that God who raised Jesus from the dead would also raise him with Jesus. He believed that God is living and God is Almighty God; God raises the dead, and nothing is impossible with God. Through Paul’s sufferings and victory, the Corinthians could witness the power of Risen Christ and understand the blessing given to them. Then they could give thanks to God and give glory to God (15).

Look at verse 16. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Paul’s conclusion was that because Jesus was in his heart he did not lose heart. Outwardly his body was wasting away, as is true for all of us. As we get older we cannot move as fast as we once did. Gray hair begins to appear on our scalps. Our eyesight becomes dim. We lose strength in our bodies. As time goes by we suffer from all kinds of maladies that come from aging such as arthritis, back pain, memory loss, and eventually we die. We are wasting away gradually. It is very natural and no one can stop it. But those who live by faith are being renewed inwardly day by day. How is it possible? Jesus living in our hearts heals us and restores the image of God in us day by day. Instead of getting older, we get newer and newer every day until the full image of Christ is restored in our inner beings. When we meditate on the word of God, the word of God controls our mind and heart and enables us to live powerful lives. When we hold on to Jesus and look into his face, inwardly we can be renewed day by day. As time goes by, we become more and more spiritual. But many people will waste away as time goes by, not only outwardly but inwardly. They lose their first love. They lose their vision. They lose pioneering spirit and become powerless like old wineskins. We should be renewed inwardly even though we are wasting away outwardly. Let’s pray that we may be renewed inwardly by meditating on the words of God and looking into the face of Jesus.

Look at verses 17-18. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Paul realized that his troubles were light and momentary. However, they help us to achieve eternal glory. We can receive eternal glory through sufferings. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. Fixing our eyes on the visible things would make us lose heart. We fix our eyes not on the things of the world but on the kingdom of God. When we do so we can live a victorious life in this world.

How marvelous it is that God put his treasure in jars of clay! We are fragile and vulnerable to Satan’s temptations. But we are being broken so that the light of Jesus may shine through us. Even though we are being broken outwardly, yet inwardly we are being renewed to be like him. Finally, when Jesus comes again, our broken jars of clay will be transformed into glorious resurrection bodies.