

Treasures in Clay Jars

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[0 : 00] I wonder how attracted you are to packaging and presentation. Most people are, maybe that's why.

They tend to think that the packaging of a product, the outside, indicates something of the quality inside. That's why companies spend so much on marketing, on the design of packaging.

That's why there's a show called Gruen Transfer, and also why people study marketing at uni. The same goes for food. Beautiful decoration of a wedding cake tempts us to eat it.

Or you go to a fine dining restaurant, much care goes into plating up. And let's face it, we all judge others by outward appearances, don't we?

But, newsflash, in our passage today, Paul tells us that's not how God works. Instead, as we saw last week, God's glory in us isn't visible.

[1 : 08] It's not superficial, it's not radiating from our faces. Rather, Paul compares us to treasures in clay jars. We'll come to that in a moment, but first, at the start of chapter 4, Paul does a recap of sorts from last week.

And so he continues. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renowned 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 everyone'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 that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

What Paul says here is that the light of the gospel is all people need to be attracted to Christ. We don't need to embellish or distort the gospel to win them to Christ.

[2 : 12] The good news of what Jesus has done and how God's promises are fulfilled in them are more than enough. This is where the true glory of God lies, in the gospel itself.

And when its message meets the conscience of the human heart, that's how the Spirit does his transforming work. Sadly, as Paul notes, not all believe.

Because as we saw last week with the Israelites, there's still a veil over their eyes. Now this time, however, it's because of the God of this age that has blinded them.

If you've shared the gospel with others, then I think you will know something of Paul's grief, don't you? That because even though you're persuaded, you're so persuaded by the gospel yourselves, you can't understand why it doesn't convince others.

Jesus, as the answer to all the problems in life, just makes so much sense. So why can't people see it? Well, because the God of this age blinds us to it.

[3 : 24] We're seduced by the fake idols in the world. It's a bit like looking into the night sky. And if you go out to the outback, you realize just how many millions of stars there are in the sky.

And yet, in the city, you hardly see any of them. Because we're blinded by the lights of the city.

Likewise, the God of this age seduces us with pleasure, ambition, material comfort in this life.

And that blinds us, many of us, to the surpassing glory of Christ. I mean, who hasn't been tempted before? When our senses are constantly bombarded by what we see around us, we miss the true glory that is Jesus.

But Paul urges us, right in verse 1, Don't lose heart. See past all that to the wonderful treasure that we have. And even as many are blinded, Paul says that God can transform anyone simply by the power of His Word.

As such is the power of God's Word, Paul compares it back to creation in verses 5 and 6. And he says, That incurs right here in our hearts with Christ.

[5 : 13] Now, when you see the glory of God's creation at sunrise or sunset, or you see images of the universe through the telescope, we remember, don't we, a bit of Genesis 1 today, that all this came into being simply by the Word of God.

God merely said, Let there be light. And there was light. Glorious, abundant light. When once, there was only darkness.

And brothers and sisters, that's the same glory that bursts forth into our lives when God speaks His Gospel into our lives.

At the very first moment that you believe, a new creation occurs in us. A new creation occurs in you. There's an explosion, not of physical light, but the illumination of the mind that we read about last week.

Suddenly, it all makes sense. God's plan for you, God's plan for this world, how you are being saved, what all this means to you in life, and much more, makes sense.

[6 : 30] And on top of that, there is not just light, but life. Eternal life. So what God did on a cosmic scale in Genesis 1, He does in each of us on an individual scale when we become Christians.

But it's no less miraculous, it's no less glorious than on that first day in time. But this is an inner miracle, right?

Nothing happens to our bodies on the outside. We've still got all our physical deficiencies. We don't suddenly run faster, look more attractive, have a higher IQ.

If only, right? On the contrary, our bodies continue to decay. And that's why Paul says, God's glory is like treasure in clay jars.

These were the plastic containers of the ancient world, clay jars. You know those storage bins we buy to store stuff? I've got a picture of one of those. We've got tons of those at home, right?

[7 : 37] Well, that's what they were. And that's what God's decided to do. Put His most precious treasure in a container like this.

And here in verse 7, Paul explains the reason why. He says, but we have this treasure in jars of clay. Why? 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. You see, this way, there's no confusion, where the glory truly lies.

Not in us, not in the clay jars, but in God who put the treasure in us. And so Paul, as a clay jar, is constantly hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, but never to the point of despair or destruction because God wouldn't allow it.

Because God's all-surpassing power in Him is sustaining Him and us. But it's in our weakness that God's power is made most clear.

[8 : 48] For you see, whatever Paul achieves for God and whatever we achieve for God, when we are at our weakest, it's clear, isn't it, that only then, that can only occur because of God's power.

And that's the ironic thing, isn't it? Often as we struggle in life and we don't think we can keep going, we wonder, don't we, how is God going to ever use someone like me?

What can we even do for God given the state we're in? Who are we kidding? Yes, and that's true, we may feel powerless, but Paul's assurance is that even at this point, your faith and endurance bear witness to God's all-surpassing power in you.

Even when you feel you've got nothing to give, that is the point when God's surpassing power is made clear in you. And when people hear and see you and hear your story, provided, you know, the veil is lifted from their eyes, what they will see is not you, but God's all-surpassing power.

And that's what you want them to see at the end of the day, isn't it? Not you. And, you know, that ought to be not just when we are down and out, but that ought to be all of us all of the time, isn't it?

[10 : 13] For what we aim to do is not to impose ourselves and distract others from seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ. I know some of you, just with the most recent wedding as well, you love photo bombing, right?

It's fun to get into other people's photos. But can I say, when it comes to Jesus, let's not photo bomb the gospel, all right? When we share the gospel, the only thing people should see is the glory of Jesus, not us imposing ourselves and getting ahead or in front of the camera.

Now, so we don't try and impress them when we try and preach with our eloquent speaking or our talents. I'm not saying that we, you know, then we're sloppy and thoughtless and we don't prepare.

But I'm saying let's not allow our pride to get in the way of Christ. He's the treasure that needs to shine in the darkness. He's the one, not us, that people need and need to see.

So if Christ is honored, even while we are made to look like a fool, then praise God for that. Paul says in verse 5, we're not preaching ourselves but Christ.

[11 : 27] And now in verse 10, Paul says that his aim is not to tend to his own needs but the needs of others. 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 also be revealed in our mortal body. So death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

So not only is Paul's message about Jesus' death, but so is the manner of his ministry. This is not about neglecting our bodies like, you know, don't eat any food or whatever, you know, just don't take care of yourself.

Rather, Paul is saying what he does in ministry is to lay down his life for others and that's costly ministry just like his Lord and Savior Jesus so that as he does, others can see the life-giving glory of Jesus and belief.

And as they do, the life of Christ is also at work in them. Paul has no choice in this, he says, because he too has been saved in the same way.

[12 : 36] So he continues, it is written, I believe, therefore I have spoken. Since we have the same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak. 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 to himself.

all this is for your benefit so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to the overflow to the glory of God. Paul is compelled to speak by his own faith in Jesus but as he does, he's also assured that the message will apply to him.

He's not just preaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus, he knows that that same resurrection will also be his even as he's giving up his life for the gospel.

One day, God will raise him up just as he did the Lord Jesus. And so he's encouraged by that and he's encouraging the Corinthians and us to do the same.

That, yes, we may be clay jars in our weakness, serving Christ is, you know, crushing and, you know, takes a lot out of us, laying down our lives.

[13 : 46] But just as it was for Jesus and he was raised to glory, so it will be for us. We too will be raised even as we lay down our life for Jesus.

And so again, we see this week the tension, isn't it, between God's power in human weakness and as Christians, we are torn in a sense because there is a sense in which we have great hope of a glorious future, isn't it?

The future is really bright for us. It's the real thing. Paul keeps telling us about it. A wonderful new creation, as I've just said, is in us that cannot be taken away.

And yet, on the other hand, we have this sense of weakness, isn't it, that we're just clay jars, frail in the body, being urged to give it over to death by living for others so that the glory can be seen by others.

The packaging, as it were, our packaging, doesn't quite match the product inside, does it? Now, some of you, I know, are young and you probably don't feel physically frail, right?

[14 : 51] You've got really good abs and things like that and you're just getting stronger each day and not like me going the other way. But even so, I think you do experience this sort of wasting away of your body, don't you?

For example, you may struggle with unfulfilled desires in your life and wonder why you can't control it. Lustful passions or perhaps loneliness from being single or not having enough money for life's comfort.

So I think in life, we own whatever stage we are, we feel, don't we, this, the weight and the burden of this earthly life. It's not all that we wish it to be.

And it's tempting in those times, therefore, to be weighed down by it and then to think I'm going to give up. But Paul again repeats what he said in verse 1. Therefore, we do not lose heart.

Verse 16. Instead, he encourages us to respond in two ways, which is our final point on the outline. First, we are to fix our eyes on eternity.

[15 : 58] So he says, though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Yes, our bodies are wasting away as it carries the death of Jesus. But look inwards and

remind yourself of the new creation.

How wonderful that, you know, to think that each day we are being renewed day by day. That's the truth. You may not feel it, but each day as you persist and are faithful in your faith, you are being renewed day by day for eternal glory.

That's God's treasure right there in you. In fact, Paul says that in the next sentence, the more we waste the way outward, the more the treasure actually grows within.

For he says, for our light and momentary troubles, that's the outside bit, are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory. That's the stuff inside. Our troubles in life may seem big, but actually, Paul says, they are featherweight and just mere seconds.

But what's more, God is using it to achieve eternal glory. And actually, the word in Hebrew for glory is weight. It's eternal weight.

[17:15] And so, it's forever and it's heavy. And so, Paul then encourages us to say, fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

Seen is what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. It can be tempting when life gets a bit too much to focus on the here and now, to be discouraged by our weak bodies, our failures, our unmet desires and dreams.

But Paul says, look to eternity instead. See with the eyes of faith. Don't allow what's in front of us physically to blind us to the glory of eternity.

We may not be able to see God's new creation in us with our eyes, like, can't look inwards, but it's no less real. We see it by faith.

And that's the difference between living by sight and by faith. Because when we live by sight, what we do is we give in to those temptations and unmet desires now, doesn't it?

[18:18] We seek to satisfy the demands of our earthly bodies here. By contrast, when we live by faith, we turn all those same unmet desires and groanings and longings, which we will continue to have for the rest of our lives, we turn it all around and use it to focus ourselves on eternity.

We say, it's not met now because it will be met in eternity. And this is the promise in chapter 5, verse 1. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

And again, here's another Old Testament imagery. The flimsy tent that he's talking about is like the tabernacle, temporary, easily dismantled. But the eternal house is like the temple, permanent, impressive, except it's even better than the temple because Paul says it's built by God and not human hands.

But when we look to eternity, we know we will have to keep groaning, don't we, until it comes.

That's the deal. And so Paul says, meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling because when we are clothed we will not be found naked.

For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

[19:46] Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God who has given us the Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. So you see, the deposit of the Spirit in us gives us a taste for what is to come.

The reason why you have groanings and longings for eternity is because of the Spirit in you making you unsatisfied with this life, making you think life has got to be more than this.

And the truth is, there is. And God, Paul says, God has intentionally fashioned us in this way. It's not by accident, Paul is saying.

It's not like He's leaving you frustrated. In fact, it's the opposite. He's creating in you groanings. This hope in us is actually a good thing because it's meant to help us to yearn for eternity.

It's not meant to, God did not leave us in that state to discourage us, but more, it's actually to help us to look to that heavenly mansion or heavenly dwelling.

[20:53] Can you see what He's doing? So many times we think, oh, this is why He's doing it to me now. But actually, He's doing it to you so that you'll look forward to eternity. So yes, you will feel a little naked.

That's Paul's point. because when you feel naked, then you long to be clothed with heavenly clothes. So don't be deceived to think that whatever you're unsatisfied with needs to be met now.

Let me give you an example, for instance. I know something that many of you struggle with, and that's perhaps, for example, feelings of loneliness as a single person. You can easily try and satisfy that by just getting married, right?

That is to live by sight. Now, please hear me clearly. I'm not saying no one should get married, but marriage is not the answer for loneliness. Instead, when that happens, you tell yourself this.

Look to the future, look to eternity, and say, your longing for intimate relationship and community is already met in Christ, number one, because He's given you His Spirit.

[22 : 01] That treasure is already yours. But secondly, it will overflow in abundance one day in heaven. That's what we're meant to do with unmet desires today.

It's not to say, I've got to satisfy it now, but actually say, I will wait by faith because when I get to heaven, I will be clothed with much, much more than what God can give me in my earthly body now.

So that's what I want to encourage us, that we channel that aching in our life to a deep longing for eternity. Don't give in to the temptation now.

Don't do the wrong thing now, but rather live to please the Lord because when you do, glory awaits you at the other end.

Look, I've just picked one example, but there are so many other examples of this, isn't there? Of things that we want now and we feel like God's not giving it to us. Turn that into a longing for eternity.

[23 : 03] God has put that there, fashioned you for that very purpose. We can choose either to live by faith or by sight. Settle for what is passing away now or wait to get what is going to last.

And so Paul finishes by saying this, Therefore, we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight.

We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

So Paul resolves to live by faith. He longs to leave and be at home with the Lord, but yet while he has to wait, he says, I'm going to please the Lord. Essentially what he's saying is, I'm going to live by faith.

That's how you please the Lord. Nothing gives God greater pleasure than to see us so confident in the reward that is in store for us that we would not jeopardize it now by living in sin on this earth.

[24 : 11] And so that's what the last sentence points to. Verse 18, For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each of us may receive what is due for us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Now, Paul is not saying here that on that day when we get to the judgment, we'll have to show by good deeds that we deserve our salvation. This is not Paul saying salvation by works.

Rather, he's saying that if our faith in Jesus is genuine, then what we do in this life will reflect that faith. We will please him by living in faith, not giving in to the fleeting pleasures of this world.

We will store up treasure in heaven and not on earth. We will grow in the fruit of the spirit, self-control, patience, things like that.

Then when we come before the judgment seat of Christ, we can just stand there and it will be abundantly clear that we have lived for eternity. Does that make sense?

[25 : 16] We're not trying to do good deeds so that we can get in, but because we have faith, we will live in such a way that when we get there, it's clear that we've lived for that moment. I remember when you were young and your mom promised that you could have her favorite dessert, the best chocolate pudding in the world, but only if you don't spoil your appetite by eating sugary lollies through the day.

And because you know just how good your mom's dessert is, you forgo those sugary hits, right?

The lolly jar was there in the pantry, but you don't go there so that you can hang out for this amazing dessert that mom has at the end of the day.

Well, it's the same with God. We have an amazing eternity waiting for us. It's so wonderful that everything now pales by comparison. God has given us the faith to do it, the deposit of the Spirit, the Spirit's power to endure.

He's given us a taste and a longing for it. Now what we need to do is fix our eyes on it. Keep remembering mom's dessert is at the end of the day.

Don't lose heart, even when you feel like you're really low on sugar and you need it, but live by faith because we're confident of this coming glory.

[26 : 39] Let's pray. Father, we often feel the burden of our earthly life with its unmet desires and frailty. Yet, Lord, we know that we have your all-surpassing glory at work in us, keeping us for our eternal home where we will be clothed in glory.

Fix our eyes firmly on this in your Son, Jesus. Help us to live by faith and not by sight. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.