

“Treasure in Clay Jars”

2 Corinthians 4:1-12

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“We have this treasure in clay jars.”

2 Corinthians 4:7

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, strengthen us with the power of your Son’s resurrection that we may continue to walk with you in the presence of your Spirit. Amen.

Sermon Message

*“Mama said there’ll be days like this,
There’ll be days like this, mama said.
Mama said there’ll be days like this
There’ll be days like this, my mama said.”*

When the Shirelles were singing this song, I believe they were referring to that lovesick feeling many of us get when we break up with our first crush. The butterflies, the nervous giggles, the inability to focus on anything else – Mama said there’ll be days like this.

Yet, I also think these same lyrics reverberate as we wander through days when we just get tired of it all. Yes, *Mama said there’ll be days like this* ... but how many days? How many more days when we just want to say, “I can’t take it anymore?”

But then I think to myself, and maybe you do too, “Who am I to complain?” What is the old saying, “Suck it up buttercup”? What did the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche say, “Whatever doesn’t kill you, will make you stronger?” We all face challenges, right? When I listen to the challenges Joseph and the church face in

Africa, as a pastor I ask, who am I to whine? I am not serving in a war zone. Yet, Mama said that there would be days when we would want to chuck it. And what's the old saying, Mama is always right?

Challenges to the Christian Life

When the apostle Paul was writing his second letter to the Corinthians, he was having one of those days that Mama said. We know, from other parts of the letter, that the Corinthians were a difficult bunch. There were rival preachers and evangelists who were criticizing Paul for not being a good speaker; he just wasn't charismatic enough. There were also members who were causing trouble and making life difficult.

Paul was going through tough spell. Indeed, by the time Paul writes the Corinthians, he must have looked the sight – all those beatings, the times in jail, the stoning at Lystra, the broken bones, the bruised back (Acts 14:19). He was having one of those days, if not years. In fact, don't let anyone tell you that the Bible presents a rose-tinted picture of the life of faith. It doesn't. Here, in Paul's case, he lists the hardships of a pastor and a preacher in such terms that he seems to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.¹

It is why this passage of scripture is so fascinating, for Paul begins it by saying, "We do not lose heart" (4:1). Even after facing such hardship! We do not lose heart, and the reason why we don't lose heart is because we have this treasure, this treasure in clay jars. This treasure, Paul says, is the gospel. More specifically, this treasure is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (v. 6). It is a mouthful, but it is this treasure that keeps us from throwing in the towel.

The clay jars part of the equation is Paul's way of reminding us that we are creatures of God, made from the dust of the earth, fashioned from the hands of the potter. We are human, all too human; i.e., we are breakable, weak, disposable, but we carry what is eternal, everlasting, and life giving; and it is this treasure, the gospel, that matters most.

¹ Samuel Wells, "Treasure in Clay Jars" at St. Martin in the Fields, London, England. Thanks to Samuel Wells for aspects of this sermon.

To be sure, what Paul is talking about is preaching the gospel; after all, he is writing as a missionary, but what he is describing pretty much goes for anything we start-off doing in life with great enthusiasm and then find out that it isn't turning out the way we planned – one of those days.

Paul speaks about this in the opening verses, where he notes the challenges we all face as Christians, giving counsel as to how we are to handle such challenges, when we feel overwhelmed and to remind us that folks who think they have it all together are not the ones who carry the keys of the kingdom.

Remember that Paul is going up against those in Corinth who think that they have it all together, these super-apostles, or super-Christians who look down on Paul as weak and ineffective. Paul addresses them, but he does so by pointing out what happens to such “super-leaders” when the going gets rough, and the first thing that happens, Paul notes, when something bad takes place, is that these super-preachers have ways of changing the gospel; that is, rather than confront reality, they want to “falsify God’s word.” They want to tell people what they think the people want to hear, and Paul’s point is that when a preacher tries to please people, the truth of the gospel is diminished. And it usually doesn’t happen overnight.

Some people might know of the 1937 novel by A.J. Cronin called *The Citadel*, about a young doctor, named Andrew Manson. Early in his practice, he arrives in a Welsh mining town and marries a local teacher, Christine. Having struggled with every breath to improve the lives of the miners, and once his research is published, he moves and takes up a new practice in London, where he quickly makes easy money from idle patients to lazy surgeons. His wife, Christine, no longer recognizes who he is.

Andrew Mason has done exactly what the apostle Paul is describing: he has started to give patients what they want, not what they need. And anyone who has been a pharmacist, or a teacher, or a parent, or a pastor knows what that means: You can gain the whole world, but you lose your soul. There is more to the Christian life than appearances.

But there is another problem that can take place when the bad days come, and Paul notes how we all can manipulate the truth to avoid the truth; Paul tries to show the Corinthians that when it comes to things that really matter, like faith, health, love, the line between charm and manipulation can be a fine one. Don't be

fooled by the easy talk. For example, manipulation typically starts with flattery, and then it progresses to a show of neediness, which then flips to a tone of great authority, and slips into constant requests. And the cycle is just getting started.

Paul wants the church to see that leaders who manipulate are like hypnotists: they are dangerous. Maybe he is drawing on Jesus' teaching about people being like sheep, easily persuadable, but for Paul, the gospel must stand on its own merits, and not on the charms of personality. After all, the gospel is what saves us.

But there is third kind of challenge we face in the Christian life, and it is about how we need to come to terms with our own failure and not blame others for it. If you are a stand-up comedian, for instance, and no one laughs at your jokes, and you come off stage and say, "Those people are so stuck up; they don't have a sense of humor" – you might need to look in the mirror. Or, if you are selling hot dogs on the street and no one is buying, and you say, "They don't know what is good for them" – you might want to look at what you have become. Blame is toxic.

The journey of a Christian is toward humility; that is, it is a journey that draws us in and helps us to realize that maybe it is not everyone else's fault. The fingers we point at others are always pointing back at us. In other words, don't blame others just because it is not going well for you.

But there is a fourth problem when those mama days come, and that is when we try to turn other people into versions of ourselves, thinking it is all about us. Perhaps you might know of the Greek myth that tells of a hunter by the name of Narcissus who was led by the goddess Nemesis to a pool, where he saw his own reflection and fell in love with it. He was so absorbed with his own image that he lost the will to live, and he stared at his own self-image until he died.

It is possible, Paul says, to do the same, when leading an organization, or playing on a sports team, or relating to others: we can get to the point and say, "This is all about me. I am the center of it all." But what our scripture is saying the opposite: "No, it is not about you. There are billions of people on this earth, and they all think it is about them too. Stop being so fascinated by yourself."

But Not!

Four challenges we all tend to have when we go through adversity and don't want to face the truth; and where we go wrong is to think that what God wants of us is to be stylish or successful, or always on top, which totally misses the point.

For the point is *not* to show others how robust we are; the point is to show others the treasure we are carrying! The point is to remember that we are the clay jars, the fragile pots. And we are breakable, fragile.

But what is the treasure we carry? Again, the treasure is “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” That's what changes everything. That's what gives light in our darkness, and hope to our ignorance – the glory of God's presence, the very face of Jesus Christ. No matter who you are, no matter how weak or strong – you have that treasure in you; it is the power of God within you.

But wait, there is one more treasure, and it is possibly more amazing. Notice the two contradictory words Paul uses near the end: *but not*. Two little words that pack the power of God, and that remind us that there is nothing that can separate us from God, for once we cut out the excuses, the shortcuts, and the denials to the life of faith, we find ourselves in the position to fully accept and realize the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For then the truth can shine, and then we can confess the gospel: Yes, we are afflicted, *but not* crushed. We are perplexed, *but not* driven to despair; persecuted, *but not* forsaken, struck down, *but not* destroyed.

The power of the gospel is contained in those two little words, which take then shape in our lives, in our fragile, cracked pot lives. And it is the truth.

So, I invite you to open your eyes and see the light. Open your mind and receive the knowledge. Open your heart and feel the glory of God; and open your soul and behold Christ's face. Recognize this everlasting treasure in you. Recognize those days in your life when you were afflicted, *but not* crushed; perplexed, *but not* driven to despair; persecuted, *but not* forsaken; struck down, *but not* destroyed. And then let Jesus' death and resurrection take place in you and see what the glory of God can do. Amen.