

Treasures In Jars Of Clay

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 God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant and this is glorious, more glorious than any other task done on earth. In today's passage Paul shares how he carried out this glorious ministry. He testifies that he lived a victorious life despite hardships. Let's learn the secret of spiritual victory through Paul's example.

I. The ministry of light (1-6)

Verses 1-6 tell us how Paul conducted himself as a minister of the new covenant. We discover Paul's attitude (1-4) and Paul's message (5-6).

First, Paul's attitude (1-4). Look at verse 1. "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart." We have the glorious ministry of the new covenant only by God's mercy, not our own achievement or merit. For example, Paul had been a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man. But the grace of Jesus was poured out on him, and he became a minister of the new covenant. Then Paul went through many hardships to carry out this glorious mission. On one occasion, more than 40 men took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul (Ac 23:13-15). In the midst of such constant threats and persecution, he could lose heart. However, he did not lose heart. Instead, he lived a life filled with the Spirit. Sometimes when we serve God with much sacrifice and do not see visible fruits, we are tempted to lose heart and despair. Yet when we come to God for mercy, he renews our hearts. Galatians 6:9 says, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Instead of losing heart, what did Paul do? 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." Some people sought their own benefit through gospel ministry. They claimed to do God's work, but did their own business. Paul was different. Paul worked for God's glory with a pure motive. He did not distort the word of God to please people. Rather, he taught the truth plainly as it is. Paul lived by the truth and spoke the truth without compromise. 2

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Corinthians 13:8 says, "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth." People know that it is good to live by the truth. However, many do not do so for fear that they will lose some benefit. Those who live by and speak the truth will suffer and be persecuted. But God will use them to advance the gospel and God will give them victory. Truth always wins in the end.

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. The late Bertrand Russell¹ wrote a book explaining his unbelief, titled, "Why I Am Not A Christian." However, the problem is not with the gospel. Some who hear the gospel decide to reject it. Ministers can blame themselves when this happens, but they should not if they spoke the truth plainly. Some people reject the gospel out of pride, or because they love evil more than truth (Jn 3:19-21). This is a great mistake. Look at verse 4. The god of this age, Satan, blinds them to the light of the gospel. They cannot see the precious value of the gospel; spiritual things seem foolish to them. So they say to believers, "Why do you spend your weekend serving God instead of having fun?" The gospel is light. But only those who believe can receive this light.

Second, Paul's message (5-6). What did Paul preach? Look at verse 5. "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Here Paul contrasts his preaching with that of the "super apostles." They preached themselves. Paul preached Jesus Christ as Lord. Why is it important to accept Jesus Christ as Lord? It is because Jesus Christ gives us salvation. Romans 10:9 says, "That if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." To accept Jesus as Lord is to receive him as our Savior who saves us from sin and death. It is to receive him as our King who rules with love and peace. It is to receive him as our Lord who leads us to the eternal kingdom of God. This was the message of the apostles in the book of Acts (Ac 2:36; 17:3; 18:5). They proclaimed Jesus Christ as the true Messiah promised by God through the Old Testament prophets. People long for the Messiah to save them. But they do not know who he is. So they wander around here and there searching. Jesus Christ is the only true Messiah. St. Augustine said, "Thou has made us for Thyself O God, and the heart of man is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." No one enjoys true rest for their soul until they receive Jesus as Lord. Those who accept Jesus as Lord experience a miracle. The Almighty Creator God, who said, "Let there be light," works a new act of creation and shines spiritual light into their hearts (6). This light drives out all darkness so that we see the glory of God in the face of Christ.

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Our message should be that Jesus Christ is Lord. When we preach this message, God shines his light into people's hearts. This fall semester we must proclaim: Jesus Christ is Lord. Many students are walking in darkness. They suffer from meaninglessness, fatalism, sorrow, despair, and so on. But when they accept Jesus Christ as Lord, God shines his light into their hearts. They can know that God is living, and God loves them, and they have true salvation in Christ. Other religions such as Buddhism and Islam teach people to follow doctrines to be saved. But mere doctrines cannot save men from sin and death. Only the person of Jesus Christ can save men from sin and death. That is why we must proclaim "Jesus Christ is Lord" on our campuses.

II. Treasure in jars of clay (7-18)

This section is Paul's personal testimony. In verses 7-12 Paul testifies that he lived a victorious life in the midst of hardships. In verses 13-15, Paul proclaims that his victory came from faith in the Risen Christ. In verses 16-18 Paul concludes that he did not lose heart and tells us why.

First, we are not crushed (7-12). 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." Here Paul uses the metaphor of treasure in jars of clay. What is the treasure? The treasure is the gospel, Jesus himself. Why did Paul call the gospel a treasure? A treasure is very valuable because it is rare and unchanging. People treat gold, diamonds and gems as treasures. When the economy fluctuates many people want to buy gold because it is stable; it retains its value. On the contrary, jars of clay are common, fragile and of little value. So people usually do not put treasures in jars of clay. They put treasures in beautiful and expensive chests in a secret place. They use jars of clay as flower pots. However, God put treasure in jars of clay.

Jesus is the treasure. In what respect is Jesus the treasure? John 1:4 says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Jesus is the Author of life. To thirsty souls, Jesus is the living water which quenches (Jn 4:14). To the hungry, Jesus is the bread of life which satisfies (Jn 6:35). To the blind, Jesus is sight (Jn 9:5). To those who are wandering, Jesus is the way to God (Jn 14:6). To those suffering from the sting of death, Jesus is the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25-26). In Jesus there is no darkness, no sorrow and no death, but only life and light and love and peace and joy (Rev 21:4). In Jesus are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3).

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We human beings are like jars of clay. God made us from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7). If we were to drain the water out of a person, what remains, such as sodium, potassium, calcium--the dust of the ground--would be worth maybe \$3.50. We are nothing. However, God breathed into our nostrils the breath of life, the image of God (Gen 1:27). This gave us great value. Sin robbed us of this treasure. Yet when Jesus comes into our hearts, he restores all that was lost. Jesus is God living in us. He fills us with the Holy Spirit and restores the image of God in us. Jesus changes any kind of wretched sinner into a prince or princess of the heavenly kingdom.

Fanny Crosby was accidentally blinded as a young girl. So she was sorrowful, bitter, and miserable. But Jesus changed her into a woman of love, joy, and peace; she was full of spirit. She wrote over 9,000 hymns, including, "To God Be the Glory," "Near the Cross," "Blessed Assurance," "Rescue the Perishing," and, "I Am Thine, O Lord." She had a treasure in her heart! Mother Barry and Dr. Joseph Chung and Dr. James Kim are always spirited and joyful no matter what. They have a treasure in their hearts. David Hull always smiles and is ready to serve others; he joyfully works hard to serve God. He has a treasure in his heart. The treasure is Jesus. In ourselves we do not have joy or peace or life. We are just clay. We are vulnerable to temptation, we go up and down like a roller coaster, and we break easily. But when we have Jesus in our hearts we are full of strength and joy and spirit. It is not from us, but from Jesus Christ, our treasure.

However, some people ignore the real treasure and are obsessed with their jar of clay. Nicodemus became wealthy and famous. It was like painting a fancy design on his jar of clay. However, his inner man was very miserable--bound and choked by the power of sin and death. He lacked the real treasure that could give him spiritual victory, freedom and peace. We must know that real treasure is to have Jesus Christ inside the jar.

Usually people put treasure in expensive containers. However, God put treasure in jars of clay. Why did God do so? Look at verse 7b. "...to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." God wants to show plainly that the power of the gospel is from him, not his servants. Why do we need to remember this? Sometimes God's servants become confused as though they are the source of power. They become proud and useless. To help us, God reminds us that we are jars of clay, mere containers to carry Jesus. John the Baptist is a good example. He gained popularity through his ministry and people thought that he might be the Christ. He clearly said, "I am not the Christ." John denied himself more and more, saying, "I am not," and "no." (Jn 1:19-28). He knew that Jesus is

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the treasure; he was only a jar of clay. That's why God's all-surpassing power worked through his message. We need this kind of attitude. Then God's power works through us.

In verses 8-15 Paul testified that he won victory over many hardships through Jesus Christ. Paul was, "...hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (8,9). Usually if people are hard pressed on every side they get stressed out, they give up, they become mentally ill, they are crushed, and they even commit suicide. It is because they have no inner power to overcome the hard pressure. But Paul was different; he had Jesus in his heart. He said in verse 10, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." Paul wanted to experience Christ's resurrection power. He said, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings..." (Php 3:10). When Paul shared Jesus' sufferings, he also shared Jesus' resurrection power and became a blessing to the Corinthians (12). It is easy for gospel workers to say that their environment is challenging or unfavorable to the gospel, due to persecution, pressure or perplexing difficulties. However, the real problem is not outward, but inward. If we have Jesus in our hearts we can overcome all hardships and create a new history. Paul's situation was difficult. The book of Acts tells us that Paul was often persecuted and misunderstood. But Paul never despaired, never gave up, and was never crushed. He had a never-giving-up spirit. It was because he always trusted Jesus and overcame hardships by the all-surpassing power of God. In this way he lived a victorious life, and so can we.

Second, "I believed; therefore I have spoken" (13-15). In verses 13-14 we see that 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).

In this part we can find another secret to live a victorious life. 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

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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.

Third, we do not lose heart (16-18). 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 even though we dye every day. 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, 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.

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. 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.

Through today's passage we learn how to live a victorious life. It is by the power of Jesus. Let's remember that we are like jars of clay. We are fragile and vulnerable to Satan's temptations. We have no power to overcome difficulties that confront us.

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But when we have our treasure Jesus in our hearts, we can overcome all kinds of hardships to live a victorious life.