

2 Corinthians: Paul Bares His Heart to a Skeptical Church

“Jars of Clay”

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

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If you know me well, you may know one of my pet peeves is the goofy sayings often found on church signs. My friend Ken Landis, after hearing me repeatedly complain about the messages churches have on their signs, said that sometime when I go on vacation he’s going to have a new sign erected in front of our church with some crazy message on it. Then he’s going to hide and video my reaction when I come to work and see the sign.

Some churches use their signs to share information about events or to promote the title for Sunday’s sermon. I’m not annoyed by those. But others signs I see just make me scratch my head and wonder, “What were they thinking?” Take this one for example...Are they trying to show people what a loving Heavenly Father God is?



Some churches use their sign in the hope of recovering lost property and demonstrating their heart of compassion for people...



Some signs are clever...



Some signs seem to be evangelistic. At least I think that's what they're going for...



Some signs are designed to perform a public service by causing people to consider their eternal destiny...



And,



And some churches (or at least the people responsible for putting up the messages on the signs) seem to be confused and don't really have a clue what they're trying to accomplish...



And...



But in spite of the fact that there are many, shall I say questionable signs out there, occasionally I'll see a message on a sign that communicates a powerful truth. Here's a message that was, until the end of last week, on the sign of the Grace United Methodist Church in Mechanicsburg... ***"The perfect church for people who aren't."*** I love that message! Jesus' Church is for people who aren't perfect. Someone has said the Church wasn't designed to be a museum for saints; it's a hospital for sinners. Jesus echoed that sentiment when He said, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

I'm sharing this with you this morning, not just so that I could have a forum to vent about my annoyance with church signs, but because the message of the Grace UM sign is one the Apostle Paul is attempting to communicate to 1st Century Corinthian Christians in his 2nd letter to them. The Corinthian culture valued success, prosperity, wealth and gifted leadership

and when the followers of Jesus at Corinth evaluated the Apostle Paul by those standards they thought he came up short. Their skepticism of Paul and his leadership led them to also question the message that he preached. And so Paul wrote this letter to remind them that it's God's power, wisdom and grace, not human strength, intelligence and abilities that are most important in God's Kingdom. Paul says it's in his weakness that God shows Himself to be strong.

Over the first two weeks of our series we've studied chapters 1-3, and today we're focusing on chapter 4. Verse 1 begins with the word, *therefore*. I've been taught when I see the word *therefore*, it's good to ask the question, "What's that there for?" *Therefore* is a connector word that links what came before to the idea the writer is moving into. The last verse of chapter 3 is essentially a summary of Paul's argument that as great as it was that God gave his people the law and the 10 Commandments in the Old Testament, what we now have in Jesus is so much better. Paul concluded chapter 3 with the words, "*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*" 2 Corinthians 3:18 As followers of Jesus, you and I are being transformed into his image. That's the path every one of us is on. And that leads us to chapter 4...

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 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 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. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 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 God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Seeing lives transformed through Christ was the purpose of Paul's ministry. Paul contrasts his ministry with the teaching or speaking of the ones the Corinthians were comparing him to. Look at what Paul says about the nature of the Gospel or the Good News of Jesus that he preaches:

- His ministry has been given to him through God's mercy. It's not something he chose to do on his own.

- Paul and his ministry partners have renounced secret and shameful ways and they do not use deception to distort the word of God.
- He sets forth the truth plainly to people, but the god of this age—our enemy, Satan—hides the truth from people’s minds.
- And finally, Paul says the message he preaches is Jesus, not himself.

As I read and studied chapter 4 this week in the New International Version—the translation I most often use—I decided to also take a look at Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, *The Message*. I like the way Peterson captures the main ideas of this chapter and I’d like to read verses 1-6 to you...

Since God has so generously let us in on what he is doing, we’re not about to throw up our hands and walk off the job just because we run into occasional hard times. We refuse to wear masks and play games. We don’t maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don’t twist God’s Word to suit ourselves. Rather, we keep everything we do and say out in the open, the whole truth on display, so that those who want to can see and judge for themselves in the presence of God.

If our Message is obscure to anyone, it’s not because we’re holding back in any way. No, it’s because these other people are looking or going the wrong way and refuse to give it serious attention. All they have eyes for is the fashionable god of darkness. They think he can give them what they want, and that they won’t have to bother believing a Truth they can’t see. They’re stone-blind to the dayspring brightness of the Message that shines with Christ, who gives us the best picture of God we’ll ever get. Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we’re proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, “Light up the darkness!” and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.

And that brings us to one of the best known images in the Book of 2 Corinthians— *jars of clay*. Verse 7 of chapter 4 says,

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Corinthians 4:7

In that culture inexpensive clay jars were often used to hide valuable treasure. People would hide money or valuable possessions in clay jars in their homes and armies returning from battle would often carry money or jewels they had plundered in clay pots. Paul uses this common image to highlight the contrast between human weakness and God’s treasure. The treasure isn’t the vessel—our bodies. The treasure is what has been given to us by God that we have the privilege of carrying around. **The fact that we carry God’s treasure in our weak,**

human bodies demonstrates that our weakness is no obstacle to God's glory being revealed in and through us. In fact, our weakness accentuates the glory of God.

The best example I know of in the Bible where God's power was clearly noticed in human weakness is found in Acts chapter 4 verse 13. Jesus had been crucified less than two months earlier. The Holy Spirit had been poured out on the believers at Pentecost. And after Pentecost Peter and John and others were preaching the Good News about Jesus with power and God was doing signs and wonders and miracles through them. This enraged the Jewish religious leaders, because Jesus, whom they had crucified and believed was still dead, was now being proclaimed to be alive. They beat Peter and John and imprisoned them and warned them not to speak in Jesus' name, but these guys wouldn't quit. And one day after yet another arrest, Peter told them, "We can't help speaking about what we've seen and heard. Who do you suggest we obey you or God?" And then we read this, *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."* Acts 4:13 The fact that Peter and John were ordinary was evident to all—they were backwoods fisherman, hillbillies from the sticks of Galilee—but the Spirit in them and the message they carried was straight from Jesus and that was evident even to their adversaries.

I'll pick up reading at verse 8...

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 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 then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

This has a very poetic flow to it. Listen to how Eugene Peterson expresses this...

We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best!

Paul is very honest about the difficulties he faced and continues to face, but he is also filled with hope and assured of the coming victory in Christ. No matter what his circumstances

were, Paul walked in faith and hope. Can you identify with the words Paul uses to describe his circumstances? Do you feel squeezed and trapped by your troubles? Are you confused, not knowing what to do or where to turn? Do you feel kicked around and beaten up? In spite of all of that, Christ Jesus is at work in you. And if you allow Him to, He'll take what is happening to you and actually use it for your good to transform you in Him and make you a blessing to others.

In verses 13-15 Paul writes,

It is written: "I believed; therefore have spoken." Since we have that 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 overflow to the glory of God.

The statement that catches my eye in that passage is verse 14, "*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.*" Do you see it? The One who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us. God's power that was used to bring Jesus back to life from death is also at work in you and in me and it is continually transforming us to be like Jesus. I like the way Terry Wardle expresses our ongoing transformation. He says, "I've been transformed. I'm being transformed. And I will one day be transformed."

And Paul concludes chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians with these words,

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 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, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Eugene Peterson puts it this way,

So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.

God's plan has always been for his treasure to be carried in clay jars, to expensive containers. I hope that's encouraging to you.

As the Grace UM sign reminds us, Jesus' church isn't for perfect people; it's for people who are on a journey of being transformed by Jesus. And we're in good company, because God's plan from the beginning of the Bible to the end was to use weak, broken, marginalized, seemingly powerless people to do his work. He repeatedly used barren women to bear children who did great things for Him. In a culture that gave great advantage to the first born, God often chose to bless younger siblings. He chose people like Joseph, Gideon and David to be his rulers, in spite of the fact that they were ignored by their family members and others around them. He gave prominent roles to women, foreigners, slaves, children, prostitutes, when the culture said, "Those people can't do anything significant."

And today God chooses to use people like you and me, with our sketchy pasts, our weaknesses, short comings and sin patterns and our propensity to be distracted and to focus on other things. He chooses clay jars like us to carry his treasure. What He asks of us is to admit our weakness and confess our vulnerability and to rely on his strength and his wisdom and his grace at work in us, rather than to embrace the message of our culture which tells us to rely on our strength, our intelligence and our abilities. **Do you remember the question I posed to you the first two weeks of this series, "When you face difficulties whose resources do you rely on, your resources or God's?"** I warned you that we'd be asking that question throughout this book. Receive these words again as God's truth for us today. *"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us...Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day...So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* 2 Corinthians 4 selected