

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, July 31, 2011 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

Series: Every Christian a Minister
Jars of Clay - 2 Corinthians 4:7

Introduction: Everybody loves a title. Everybody wants to have the credentials, and be referred to by them. When I took a math class at Floyd College, I discovered that the professor was my high school geometry teacher. After that first class, I went up to her to reintroduce myself, but I made the mistake of calling her Mrs. Davis. She let me know right quick, “*Steve, I am Dr. Davis.*” So I said to her, “*That’s wonderful, I am Rev. Skates.*”

Paul was known by many titles, such as Saul the persecutor, Saul the Pharisee, and later on by Paul the Apostle. But here in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul chooses to not make a name for himself, but rather to humble himself. In vs. 5, he tells his readers, “*For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.*” **2 Corinthians 4:5 (NIV)** Then in vs. 7, he 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 (NIV)**. Paul identified himself to the saints at Corinth as a jar of clay!

Now, why did he choose this title? Perhaps Paul understood what Isaiah said many years earlier when he wrote, “*Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.*” **Isaiah 64:8 (NIV)**. Obviously Paul understood that when his race was over and the dust had settled, all that would be left of his body would be a crumbling jar of clay.

Now Paul wasn’t making light of himself. He didn’t see himself as a worthless piece of junk. Oh no! He added something else to this description of himself. He said that while on the outside he was simply a jar of clay; on the inside God had placed genuine gold. He had a treasure inside him that was fashioned by the very hand of God. And that was what Paul was really thankful for. Paul knew that he had been given a great gift on the inside, and he was constantly thanking God for giving it to him.

This morning, let’s examine what Paul meant when he said that he was a treasure in a jar of clay. But more specifically, I want us to see how this relates to our responsibility as ministers and servants of Christ. First, I want to point out:

1. The Twist

I’ve been fascinated with the use of words for years. I guess that’s why I’ve appreciated the clean humor of the comedian, George Carlin who used to say things like, “*Isn’t it a bit unnerving that Doctors call what they do “practice?”*” And, “*If a lawyer can be disbarred and a clergyman defrocked, can’t an electrician become delighted?*” But one of my fascinations with words is the use of oxymorons like: *Genuine imitation - same difference - almost exactly - pretty ugly - small crowd - definite maybe - exact estimate – government intelligence.*

In Paul’s self-description, he is using twist on words, or an oxymoron in the phrase “*we have this treasure in jars of clay.*” Now his readers knew what he was talking about because back then people kept treasures in clay pots and buried them in the ground for safekeeping. Jesus referred to this in **Matthew 13:44 (NIV)** when He said, “*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*”

But notice also the contrast in the statement. It says that something uncommon is hidden in something common; that something durable is hidden in something breakable; that something very valuable is hidden in something that is cheap; and that something attractive is hidden in something unattractive.

When we look at Paul’s comparison in this way, we can see that God has taken a great risk in us. His new creation – the eternal life that He bestowed on us, which is something that is very unique, very durable, very valuable, and very attractive, He has entrusted to common, frail, and fragile human beings.

It’s a lesson in God’s great risk, but it also shows how much He values us. Just as the treasure of His salvation and spiritual gift is within us, it is He who made us as well. We are not afterthoughts with God. We were carefully and individually crafted by the master potter. And just as the potter makes the container to be used for a purpose, so has God made us. We’re jars of clay, but we’re useful jars of clay. Secondly, notice:

2 The Trust

While waiting in a Doctor's office one day, I saw a magazine ad for Mercedes-Benz that caught my attention because it was a three page ad. On one page was a picture of Earnest Hemmingway with the caption "An Author." On the next page was a picture of Beethoven with the caption "A Composer" under it. On the last page was a picture of a Mercedes with the caption "A Car" under it. And underneath that was the statement, "Sometimes words are not enough." That is the feeling we get when we think of what God has put in every believer. Sometimes words are not enough to describe this treasure.

Jesus called this treasure "the pearl of great price." Peter called it "this precious value." James said it was a "precious gift...from above." Paul called it "...the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men" and said that it was that "the light of the gospel" (2 Cor. 4:4 NIV). This valuable treasure of salvation and eternal life is something that brings light to dark places. When a storm comes up and it knocks the power off, it can be scary thing to suddenly be in the dark. But when the light comes on, and the darkness is chased away, so is the fear.

It's the same with this precious treasure God has entrusted with us. We carry the message of light that can chase away the darkness of uncertainty and fear within people's hearts. That's why Paul told the Romans that he was "not ashamed of the gospel," for it was "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." (Romans 1:16 NIV).

The message of salvation by grace through Jesus Christ is a treasure and a sacred trust that has been given to us. Words cannot describe the meaning and the value of that treasure.

Paul held this trust in high esteem. He did not want to disappoint. He didn't want to be guilty of stashing the treasure away or keeping it to himself because he knew how valuable and important it was. He said this about it in **Romans 11:33 (HCSB)** "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments, and untraceable His ways!" Paul understood that he'd been given a sacred trust, and his responsibility was to tell folks about this greatest treasure that could ever be found. Finally, I want to say a little about:

3. The Trustees

Paul said in **1 Corinthians 4:1 (NIV)** "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God." Paul looked upon himself as both a servant and a steward. And that's describes us! We are servants of Christ in that He is our Master, but He has entrusted us with the very thing that can give people hope and value – His gospel message. And as His servants – His clay pots, we have a divine purpose to fulfill – to carry that gospel with us and share it with whoever will listen. This is how God has chosen to carry out His work – through fragile clay pots like you and me.

Someone has said, "God buries the workmen, but He carries on His work." And that it is exactly the point Paul makes when he compares himself to a jar of clay.

He describes us whom God has trusted with this great treasure as people who are weak, dispensable, temporary, and fragile. And as such fragile and weak vessels, we are often "hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down." (2 Cor. 4:8-11 (NIV)). In other words, we're prone to the stresses and strains of life. We have our times when we are unreliable, vulnerable, easily confused and beaten down.

But despite our vulnerabilities and weaknesses we will not be destroyed and we should not ever lose hope. God will always be with us because we are valuable to Him in that He has entrusted us with the precious treasure of the gospel message. And when we spread the good news of the gospel, we are manifesting the life of Jesus to others. We are showing His strength in our weakness.

Conclusion: I close with another way Paul chose to describe himself. Even though he considered himself a fragile jar of clay, he also called himself "Christ's ambassador" (2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV), and because of that, he was going to "press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14 KJV). So our call as servants and stewards is a high calling. It is an honorable calling and a sacred trust we have been given - to bear the precious treasure in our hearts, and carry it to a lost and dying world. And that is why we cannot keep it on the inside. We are to let it out. It's a sacred trust we have. We are God's trustees so let's not be guilty of keeping it under lock and key. Instead, may we be faithfully proficient! May we be diligently prepared! And may we be generously persistent in giving it away because somebody is waiting in a dark place for us to come along with the light. Somebody is lost and needs you to help them find the way.

You may be a jar of clay, but you as a minister of Christ, hold the life giving power of the gospel in your heart.