

Sunday, February 23, 2020 Brad Barrett

## 2 Corinthians 4:7-5:7 Treasure in Jars of Clay

Since my first couple of years as a Christian, about 40 years ago, I have wanted to teach God's Word. Why? Not because I like *being in front of people*, that I like being seen and noticed and applauded. Actually, I'm shy by nature and prefer to be in the background.

I like doing it for several reasons:

- I believe the Bible is God's message to mankind sent from heaven. In this God reveals himself to us. And he reveals US to US.
- I like taking deep or hard to understand things, figuring them out, and explaining them to others. Basically I like teaching. I would have enjoyed being a teacher in other settings, too.

But sermon preparation, like this one today, is one of the harder tasks I encounter. Why?

- Many passages in the Bible are simply hard to understand. And it takes much prayer and reading and studying and conversing. And more prayer and reading and studying and conversing.
- But also, quite commonly...virtually in every sermon...I find myself confronted with truth that is challenging. That feels beyond me. That I wonder how much I am believing and obeying myself.

One of my great fears is that I would be a hypocrite, *faking it* by telling you all to do something that I simply refuse to do.

About a week ago, I find myself thinking about today's passage, "How much do I really believe all this? I feel inadequate to teach about such glorious things." And I even wondered once, "Maybe someone else should teach."

From a chapter we looked at a couple weeks ago, one of the Apostle Paul's statements summarizes my internal struggle. 2 Corinthians 2:16 "*Who is sufficient for these things?*" Who is capable? Who is able? Who has enough? The only answer Paul gave and that I can give you is that I in myself am not enough. I don't have what it takes. But God does. And he dwells in me and in the hearts of every person who acknowledge his Son, Jesus. God is enough. He is our adequacy.

We are in Week 5 of a sermon series going through a section of a letter written by one of God's most significant spokesmen, a man named Paul. This morning, we are going to read some hard things. Some challenging things. Some beautiful things. Some inspiring things.

### 2 Corinthians 4-5

Before we begin reading, let me give a very brief background. Paul is speaking about his role of serving Jesus as an apostle. And in this role, he is suffering through persecution and false accusations.

And the Corinthians view this negatively. This is weakness to them. This isn't the kind of apostle they feel they should have. They want someone more impressive.

Yet Paul is actually walking in Jesus' footsteps. And so Paul serves as an example of someone with great confidence in Christ. Of a firm belief that Jesus died and rose from the dead to bring life. Of conviction that eternity is real.

What we find is that we should emulate Paul. He tells the Corinthians in his first letter, written a year or so before this one,

*1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*

So let's read this and consider how the Lord would want us to imitate Paul.

2 Corinthians 4:7

**Vs. 7**

*7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*

Paul sets the stage for a crucial conversation.

**Three words/expressions** I want to emphasize.

**First, TREASURE.**

He carries a treasure. A treasure is something of great value. Usually this word makes us think of financial riches: piles and piles of gold and jewels. But that is not Paul's concern *at all*. The treasure he speaks of is the treasure of the gospel of Jesus

Christ, the glory of God to the world. That God through his Son desires to bring these sinful creatures, called *men* and *women*, into a restored relationship with him forever and ever and ever.

And with that is Paul's assigned task, the ministry of this treasure of Jesus, to proclaim Jesus everywhere he goes. To cast the spiritual gold and jewels around wherever he goes, sharing the riches of Christ.

### **Second, JARS OF CLAY.**

And he carries this treasure in a jar of clay. He is talking about his own body and life. Our bodies are made from earthen materials. Our minds and our bodies are frail, fragile, easily broken and cracked.

Though Paul walks in God's triumphal procession (2:14), and though he is sufficient in Christ (3:5-6), he pictures himself as a frail jar of clay.

We can think of Paul as extraordinary. Some spiritual Super Hero who has abilities that are unattainable by any other human. And we can be intimidated. We might think, "Well, Paul is unique. I could never do what he does. I'm just not that passionate about Jesus. I'm not that courageous and bold. I'm not that wise."

But Paul doesn't see it that way at all. He sees himself quite ordinary like us. Just a jar of clay.

If anything is extraordinary about Paul is that he is extraordinarily convinced how ordinary he is. How fragile he is...but how glorious God is. A treasure in a jar of clay.

But then we should wonder, "Why would God do that? With the glory of the gospel of Jesus so brilliant and bright and eternal, wouldn't God display this treasure in a more beautiful treasure chest?"

Instead, God puts it in a very plain, fragile, temporary container, i.e., us.

Why? That brings us to the **third term: SURPASSING POWER.**

Paul, this fragile, weak jar of clay, actually walks in power. In courage and strength.

God leads him in triumphal procession in Christ.

So we have a contrast between the glorious treasure of the gospel of God and this fragile, inglorious Jar of Clay. And the contrast between the two makes it even more evident that God is real, for God displays his power in weak things.

If you have followed Jesus for very long, you have already experienced some of God's power.

And it makes you hungry for more of God. Power to forgive those who don't deserve it. Power to love the unlovely. Power for boldness in the face of fear. Power to persevere in extreme hardship.

And you, too, can testify like Paul: "*This surpassing power comes from God, not from me.*"

### **Vs. 8-12**

Now he describes in more detail the suffering he has endured for Christ.

The theme of these 5 verses is Death and Resurrection.

*8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;*

*9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;*

*10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*

*11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.*

*12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.*

Paul has suffered extensively for Jesus' sake. Actually, horrifically.

Yet he has not lost hope. He does not despair. He hasn't lost heart. Why? Because Jesus through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit gives Paul life and power and hope right when it feels like he could die.

Paul is not suffering for suffering's sake. There is no inherent glory to suffering. He is not a masochist that likes suffering. He doesn't suffer as penance, as if he could pay for his own sins.

He simply walks by faith, looking unto Jesus, imitating Jesus, speaking the message of Jesus.

Such a lifestyle brings levels of suffering. And when it does, the Lord strengthens Paul.

When we live all out for Jesus—when we love others like Jesus loved—when we spread the news of God's Son—we will inevitably suffer...at various times and in various ways. Suffer sleeplessness. Suffer discomfort. Suffer financially. Suffer reputation. Suffer unjust accusations. Suffer rejection.

This intimidates me, in one way. I hesitate. Do I really want to follow Jesus? Wouldn't an easy, comfortable life be better? We need to count the cost of following Jesus wholeheartedly. We need to recognize it will cost us.

But we cannot stop there with the cost. We also look to the reward.

Paul is telling us that there is life after death. There is power in weakness. There is glory after the suffering. Our death brings about resurrection in us and in others. Vs. 12: *“Death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”* All of this is a constant theme in the NT.

Some of Jesus' own words on this matter:

*John 12:24 ESV Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Multiple times he says something like this.

If we want resurrection power and fruit in us and in others, we die to ourselves first.

### **Vs. 13-15**

So Paul knew he would suffer. But he was so convinced of eternity and the treasure of life in Christ that he was compelled to speak about Jesus and teach about Jesus.

*13 Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak,*

*14 knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.*

*15 For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*

Paul has a spirit of faith that is just like the psalmist, whom he quotes here from Psalm 116. Paul is utterly convinced of all these eternal, heavenly truths. This treasure. And so it compels him to speak. In a way, Paul can't keep quiet. The news is so good that he is compelled to speak. Even if he suffers for speaking up, he cannot stop.

I don't speak up nearly enough, so I've been praying, “Lord, increase my convictions. My confidence in all that I have in Christ. My understanding of this treasure.” I need my awareness to increase that others need the Lord. They desperately need him.

And in vs. 15, the end result is that more and more people will hear about Jesus, and believe in him. All this results in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Paul is convinced of such things.

### **Vs. 16-18**

Now Paul begins a lengthy set of contrasts. From 4:16 thru 5:10.

All of these contrasts relate to this life vs. the next life.

- Seen vs. unseen
- Temporary vs. eternal
- Earthly body vs. resurrected body
- Walking by sight vs. by faith

This is a remarkable section. Some of it we'll cover next week.

Speaking of his trials and the challenges he faces in his life of following Jesus, Paul says this:

*16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.*

*17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,*

*18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

These are astonishing words from Paul.

Though our bodies and our lives on earth are like jars of clay—frail and broken and wasting away—our spirits can be revived.

How? By believing that even the worst suffering in this life—even unto severe persecution and martyrdom—is small and short and momentary and light...COMPARED TO something much greater. Compared to an eternal glory that awaits us on the other side of life.

This is so crucial. Paul is the most eternally minded person you will ever meet. I can whine and complain about the smallest of things sometimes. But Paul has a heavenly perspective on his suffering, even though his suffering is great.

I think it would be safe to say that to be a Christian is to be eternally minded.

You can't be a Christian and not have some at least basic belief that eternity is real. That there is another world--- an eternal world. That God exists in that other world. That Jesus Christ descended from heaven, took on humanity, died, rose from the dead into immortality.

A belief in eternal, heavenly things is all part of our Christian faith. My problem is, I don't think about eternity enough. I have my eyes down too often, seeing this life and all its problems. Because of that, my trials often don't seem "*light and momentary.*" They are *heavy and long.*

But Paul, this beautifully eternally minded man, doesn't see it that way. And this comparison of suffering with future glory doesn't take away all trials, but it does bring hope and courage through perspective.

That's why Paul says, "*We don't lose heart.*" Though it's very difficult at times, we won't quit.

### **Vs. 5:1-5**

Now in Chapter 5, Paul continues talking about eternal things. Now he compares our earthly bodies to our heavenly, glorified, resurrected bodies. It can be confusing at first, but let's do a visual exercise. Everyone sitting on the east side of the room: you are the temporary. The earthly. The mortal. Everyone sitting on the west side: you are the eternal. The heavenly. The immortal.

*5:1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*

*2 For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling,*

*3 if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked.*

*4 For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*

*5 He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.*

I love the last phrase in vs. 4: *That what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.* These mortal and perishable and broken jars of clay will be swallowed up and overcome by the glorious, immortal, imperishable bodies just like our risen Lord.

The resurrected body was a familiar topic to the Corinthians, for Paul had written extensively about this in his first letter to them, written about a year before.

*1 Corinthians 15:42–44 ESV*

*So is it with the resurrection of the dead.*

*What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.*

*It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory.*

*It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.*

*It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.*

So far, we have only experienced the left side of each line. But by faith in Jesus Christ, we believe the right side of each line is coming. And verse 5 offers our guarantee: The Holy Spirit who dwells in every believer in Jesus is a guarantee of the glories to come.

Don't you east-siders now wish you were sitting on the west side? Next week we may need more chairs on this side! ☺

And by the way, if you're not sure you know Jesus yet...if you are still seeking the truth... keep seeking. Know that there is a God out there. Know there is an eternity. There is a coming judgment. You want to end up on Jesus' side.

Let's finish up with vs. 6-7.

### **Vs. 6-7**

*6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord,*

*7 for we walk by faith, not by sight.*

Again, Paul's life is not spent thinking only of this life. Of this body, this *jar of clay*. Of the pain and trials of this world. No, Paul sees beyond that. He walks by faith. He is persuaded....convinced....he is trusting...that God is real. Eternity is happening. Jesus rose from the dead. Resurrected bodies are promised. Heaven and hell are actual places. By faith, Paul believes all these things....things he cannot see or touch...yet. And so he always has good courage. He doesn't lose heart when life gets hard.

We'll look again at vs. 6-7 next week.

## Lessons

There are some powerful lessons here for us from this passage.

Paul is such an example for us. Remember what he told the Corinthians in his first letter.

*1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*

He is no Superhero. He is simply convinced of heavenly things.

So how can we grow in imitation of Paul...who really is simply imitating Jesus? How do we live a life that matters for eternity?

Let me give you seven things to consider. You likely can't grasp all of these at the same time. So may the Holy Spirit direct each one of us for one or two things we can apply from this passage.

**First**, we need conviction that God's gospel is a treasure.

Many of us dream of treasure. Of riches. Of financial well-being. Instead of that, we should dream of eternal well-being. And not merely dream: We should study and sing and talk and ponder... the revelation of God that speaks of our riches in Christ. The story of Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead to bring eternal life to all who believe...this is history's greatest treasure.

So the first lesson is, we should ask the Lord to help us to believe this. To have ever-deepening convictions of how rich we are in Jesus.

Do we believe...really believe...this? Are we increasing in our confidence in and passion for this treasure year by year? Are we paying attention to the songs we sing? Are we taking notes from sermons? Are we praying over and worshiping through key Scriptures about the treasure of eternal riches we haven in Jesus?

It's quite easy and natural to grow cold and apathetic. But the Spirit can transform us from the inside out.

*Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

The past few weeks as I have been meditating on all this, I have been wondering, "How convinced am I of the glory of this treasure? Does it give me joy every day, or am I neutral?" I have been praying my heart would grow hotter. I have been meditating more on the truths of our treasure each morning.

Let us ask the Lord to help us to deepen our convictions of what a treasure we have in Jesus.

**Second**, we must take hold of our ministry, a ministry like Paul's.

We must OWN this ministry God has given us. We have a purpose. A calling.

This purpose is not first about a career or family or other even very good activities. This purpose is to know Jesus, to love him, and to display him to the world. The mission is to take our bucket of riches in Jesus...our treasure...and like casting gold coins around, we throw the treasure around wherever we go.

Paul said, "*I believe, therefore I speak.*" He simply spoke of what he truly believed. This was his ministry. Every other purpose we have is subservient to this. Being a spouse. A parent. An employee. A business owner. A student. All these things fall under this purpose.

Have we taken hold of this ministry as our very own?

**Third**, we must humbly acknowledge our frailty. That all this treasure and ministry is done in these frail, broken, limited bodies of ours. "Jars of clay."

It's normal and natural and expected that we are going to feel the limitations of our bodies and our lives in this world. We shouldn't be surprised.

We can wish we didn't have limitations. We can dream of a pain-free, tear-free, death-free life.

But it's not ours.....not yet. That day is coming. For now, our ministry of carrying this treasure around is done in broken jars of clay. And it makes us reliant upon the power of God.

Through this contrast of treasure in such a fragile vessel, God's resurrection power is displayed to the world. What a purpose!! So we acknowledge and seek contentment in the weakness of these earthen containers.

**Fourth**, count the cost of this ministry, for it will bring suffering.

We may not ever suffer quite like Paul, being beaten and shipwrecked and stoned. But we have to accept that we will suffer in some way as we serve others in the name of Jesus. Such a ministry will cost us. It will cost us time. Money. Energy. Reputation. Comfort. Suffering is not our goal. But it is the inevitable outcome.

There are easier, safer, more comfortable lives to live than following Jesus wholeheartedly. Willingness to suffer is not natural. It strikes against our humanity. So it takes conviction about eternal things to choose the life following Christ. I really like comfort and ease. I like peace. So to make choices that may result in discomfort and pain and turmoil and stress... well, that takes the power of God.

The past couple of weeks as I've read and re-read this, I look at Paul's life. And I find myself challenged.... Even intimidated by Paul.

I've realized this passion that Paul had isn't something I can force out of myself. I need to sink my roots deeply into Jesus. Let him transform me from the inside out.

We can pray, "Lord, help me be willing to suffer for your sake as you suffered to give me life."

**Fifth**, we must believe that such suffering brings a glorious resurrection power.

Because suffering is part of our ministry in Christ, we need a promise of something better ahead. Something glorious. That promise is resurrection power. Do I believe vs. 10-12, that my death brings me life? When we die to our own desires by faith and for the sake of others, God's resurrection power is demonstrated through his Spirit in us and in others.

By God's power, we can have joy and peace and love that defies human explanation. People will say, "What is it with you? How can you still love and have peace like this?"

We all want resurrection power, but are we willing to die first?

Death is painful. But we are inspired by the promises—the promises of real life in Christ. Of fruitfulness of reward.

The life of trusting in Christ is a life of death first, followed by the promised fruitful life, a life of resurrection power and reward.

**Sixth**, we lift up our eyes from this world and gaze into eternity.

The next life is real. God is real. His reward is real. And it will be worth it. Gloriously worth it.

So we have to keep our eyes up, gazing into eternity. And we grow in our longing for this glorious, future reality.

How do we do this?

The Scriptures can help us. They are like lenses that correct our limited eyesight and enable us to see clearly.... to see the unseen. Our trials, though they are long and heavy, will be put in perspective. And we won't lose heart.

Are our minds so filled with this world, that we have no brain space left for an eternal perspective? Are we growing in being eternally minded?

**Seventh**, we walk by faith, not by sight.

To walk by sight is natural. It is normal. It is what the rest of the world does. But walking by sight ignores the reality of eternity. The reality of God. The reality of what Christ has done.

How do we do this?

When we wake up every morning, let us talk to this invisible God by faith.

Tell him we want to look into eternity.

Praise him for his great power and mercy, though we can't see him.

Ask him for help to simply believe.

Confess our doubts.

Pray like the man in the gospels who exclaimed to Jesus, "*I do believe, but help me in my unbelief.*"

Open our Bibles to see men and women over the centuries who walked by faith, trusting in this invisible God, believing his goodness and his power.

We want to *grow* in this. We want our convictions on future things to increase. They increase over time as we study God's Word, we obey what we know, we ponder future things, we sing about them, and we talk to our friends about them.

## **Conclusion**

In all of this, if you know Jesus, you have a treasure. You have spiritual riches, and it is being contained in an earthen, clay pot. But that great contrast displays something glorious.... it displays the power of God to the world.

May we walk in a manner that befits what God has done for us and in us.