Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Clay Pots and the Secret to Serving God
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:5-7
Code: 80-236

If I may, this morning, I would like to speak to you from the text of 2 Corinthians chapter 4 which I read earlier and we will set aside our normal study of the gospel of Luke because I want to bring our Shepherds Conference to a culmination. And I believe this is a message that the Lord has impressed upon my heart to bring to you as a fitting end to our conference.

We've learned a lot. Seminars and general sessions and super-seminars and question and answer times and probably done some reading along the way and a wonderful session with Ian Murray on Saturday. Our minds are full. We've gotten our arms around some truth and I think we need to balance it off with the sense of our own unworthiness, lest we become self-appointed experts.

I remember years ago there was a magazine that came out here in the states in its first edition, it's called "New West Magazine." And in the first edition there as an article about Christians on television. I'll never forget a line in that article. The journalist said this at the end of his article, "Personally, I assume Jesus has more class than most of His agents." That was intended as a criticism. But you know something? He's right. Jesus definitely has more class, in fact than all of His agents.

I guess it's an old adage that you can't tell the value of something by the package it comes in. And that is certainly true in terms of preachers and in terms of the rest of us who are witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Like the treasure of salvation buried in the dirt in the parable that Jesus told, the treasure was so precious that the man sold everything to buy it and like the pearl without price hidden in the ugly oyster shell for which a man gave up everything. The container doesn't always reflect the value of its contents. That contrast is the heart of the passage before us in 2 Corinthians 4, the whole chapter is worthy of our study and maybe we'll do that next year.

Very often when I sign a Bible this week or when I sign a book I put under my name "2 Corinthians 4:5-7" because this is a passage in which I really find my life defined and my ministry defined. Verse 5 says, "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For God who said light shall shine out of darkness is the one who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ, but we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves." It is that really startling and extreme contrast that is the heart of this passage, the amazing contrast between the shining glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and the feeble imperfect fragile ugly containers by which this glorious gospel is carried and delivered to people.

A little background. I don't think that Paul when he found the Corinthian church had any idea how much they would break his heart. They did. First of all, they broke his heart by dragging into their life as Christians all the sins that they had been forgiven for in their justification. And so he wrote the first letter to them pointing out iniquity after iniquity after iniquity that were characteristics of their pre-Christian life and telling them to shed those things. And it wasn't long after he had unburdened his grieving heart over their sin when false teachers came into the church and brought heresy, doctrines of demons, in came...as Paul called them...hypocritical liars espousing demon doctrine. And they came into Corinth and the first thing they had to do was achieve status. They had to gain the ascendancy. They had to become believable. They had to rise to the place where they were recognized as teachers. And in order to do that they had to destroy the people's confidence in their pastor, Paul. And so they came and they assaulted Paul. Relentlessly, mercilessly and consistently for months and months they attacked Paul and they undermined his integrity and his credibility and his apostleship and his message. He was so devastated by this on one occasion that he went for a visit and when he got there in an effort to straighten things out and to call them back to himself not for his own sake but for the sake of the truth, a man in the congregation apparently stood up and blasted Paul to the face and nobody defended Paul and he left with an absolutely shattered heart.

He then sent Titus there with another letter, a letter not included in the New Testament. And through Titus he sent them a message, "Don't abandon me because if you abandon me you'll abandon the truth." And he waited for Titus to come back and Titus came back and gave him a good report. The people had responded but he knew the false teachers were still there and he feared for the future because they were fickle and so he wrote 2 Corinthians. And 2 Corinthians is the hardest thing for a man of God to do because it's a letter he has to write to defend himself and the fact is he knows he's nothing. He has to defend himself as the teacher of the truth. He has to defend himself as the Apostle of Jesus Christ. He has to defend himself as the messenger of God. And yet he knows himself to be nothing and this is a masterpiece of a man walking that fine line. We'll get a glimpse of how he does it in this little passage I just read to you.

The false apostles were so relentless in their assault, trying to discredit Paul, that they approach it every way they could. If you go back to verse 1 he says, "Since we have this ministry," and he's referring back to chapter 3, the New Covenant, "Since we have this ministry as we receive mercy, it is mercy that I even have it, it is mercy that I'm saved, it is mercy that I'm called." It's like, "I am what I am by the grace of God," in 1 Corinthians 15. And he says, "We don't lose heart." We have a lot of reason to lose heart but we don't lose heart. "This ministry is too glorious and in spite of what they're saying to you, we have renounced the things hidden because of shame."

What the false teachers apparently were saying was, if you really knew Paul you would know he's a hypocrite, he's a phony, he's a fake, he's a deceiver. On the surface, on the outside he looks religious, he looks holy, he looks sanctified and pious. The fact of the matter is he has a secret life of

shame. He is a hypocrite, underneath he's a wicked man.

Furthermore, Paul says, "We are not walking in craftiness," in a great and direct answer to the fact that they were saying he is a manipulator, he is a con-man, he is a charlatan, he is a kapelos, the word used in 2:17 for a huckster. He is saying I am not. And they said he had adulterated the Word of God. He says, "I have not adulterated the Word of God but by manifestation of truth commended ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." And so he's answering directly the kinds of things they were saying about him.

They even went further then to attack his character. They went further then to attack his theology. They even attacked him personally. They used that old ad hominem argument, they tried to destroy the man himself. And in chapter 10 verse 10 they said, "His personal presence is unimpressive and his speech is downright contemptible."

Who were they talking about? They said he was ugly and he couldn't communicate. That's bad. If you're handsome, even if you can't communicate, people can at least enjoy looking. And if you're ugly but can communicate, they'll enjoy listening. But if you're ugly and can't communicate, you've got nothing. I mean, they put it all together. They said he was unskilled in speech, chapter 11 verse 6. And he alluded in the first epistle to the fact that they...they said that he gave this simple message over and over again about the cross and he never used the wisdom of man and he didn't weave together the great themes of philosophy and he wasn't apparently intellectual or erudite and he didn't use any of the charm or charisma or the persona that makes communication effective. It was really an unkind thing, it was attacking his personal blemishes, his physical defects.

Some commentators have suggested that he was a small hunchback with some physical deformities. We know he was aging and scarred. Well whatever his shortcomings and looks were and he was obviously aware of those, whatever his physical shortcomings were he was aware of those, whatever his lack might be in personal charm and attractiveness, whatever his limitations might be in oratorical skills, whatever he might not have had in terms of charm, he was aware of. He didn't have the personal power it takes, they said, didn't have the persona. He didn't have the philosophical relevancy to step into this culture and meet it where it was and communicate with it.

You know what his response was? What do you want out of a clay pot? This isn't news. I love this. He turned their arguments on their heads. He said, "You're right, you're right, I agree about my weaknesses. I agree about them. I agree about my inabilities. I agree about it. I'm not going to pick a fight on that. I'm not here to defend myself." And like all noble ministers, he was put in a very embarrassing position. He was being criticized by people much more sinful and weak than he and yet he found it very hard and very painful to defend himself because he knew he was nothing.

But at the same time he knew he was nothing, he knew the New Covenant was everything. And the starkness of the contrast is very apparent. Verses 5 and 6 just blaze out at you as if you stepped into the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle the day the glory arrived...or stepped into the Holy of Holies in the temple the day the glory arrived...or as if you were standing alongside Moses in Exodus when he stood on Mount Sinai and the glory of God was shown to him...or as if you were Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus pulled back the veil of His flesh and the Shekinah blazed forth and put them into a temporary coma...or as if he were Isaiah in the temple in chapter 6 who had a vision of God that crushed him to the ground and made him confess only his sin and unworthiness...or as if he were Ezekiel who saw a vision of God and fainted...or as if he were John who saw the vision of the glorified Son in Revelation chapter 1 and fell on his face like a dead man. He sees the blazing, shining reality that God in Christ in the New Covenant is saving sinners. He sees the blazing glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, this glorious New Covenant revelation.

And then he says in verse 7, "That we have this treasure in earthen vessels." Frail, imperfect, common that he was, he agreed, he agreed. It never ceases to be a wonder to Paul, I think, till he died that God would have put such a priceless treasure in such a clay pot. He was dirt baked hard, that's what a clay pot is. And he knew it. He says in writing Timothy in 1 Timothy 1, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who strengthened me because He considered me faithful enough, putting me into service." He was in shock, he's at the end of his life here. He's a man in his sixties. "I was a blasphemer," he says, "I was a persecutor, I was a violent aggressor and yet I was shown mercy and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant and I will tell you, it's a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am chief," not I was, I am. He never got over that, never. He's near the end of his life and he writes that, never got over that.

Preachers, ministers are men, that's all. And men are not perfect so there is no hope of perfection in the ministry. If God could not use poor instruments and feeble voices, He couldn't make music. Abraham, guilty of duplicity, and yet he became the man of faith and the friend of God. Moses, stuttering speech, quick temper, yet he was the man chosen to make a nation and commune with God and receive His law. David, guilty of adultery, conspiracy, murder, unfaithfulness as a husband, father...repented, became a man after God's own heart and the number one song writer of all history and we still sing his songs, the sweet singer of Israel. Elijah, running from Jezebel, asking for euthanasia, Elijah who had stood on Mount Carmel, defied Ahab and all the prophets of Baal and heard the still small voice of God at Horeb. Then Isaiah, in the presence of the heavenly vision says, "I'm a man with a dirty mouth, I live among people with dirty mouths, I'm certainly useless to You, O God." But when he had been cleansed he said, "Here am I, send me," and God said go.

And Peter, another clay pot, the leader, the spokesman of the twelve Apostles who denied his Lord with oaths and curses, who even had the audacity to correct the Lord and was restored by the compassion of Jesus in the midst of his disobedience and was enabled by the power of the Holy

Spirit to speak with such force on the Day of Pentecost as to be the agency by which God brought to birth the great Pentecostal introduction to the church. There was John the Apostle who expected to be praised by Jesus for refusing to allow a man not of their company to cast out demons in the name of Jesus and who with James wanted to call down fire from heaven, burn up a Samaritan village and who with James again wanted the chief places in the Kingdom and sent their mother to ask for them and John became the beloved disciple, John became the Apostle of love, John became the eagle who soared to great heights, John became, I think, the Apostle of all apostles who pierced the deepest into the mystery of the incarnation.

Are you getting the picture here? So it is with Paul. He's under assault unjustly. He's falsely accused. He's battered and hammered and it's serious. It's really serious. It's physical as in Ephesus when he started a riot and had to escape. It's physical as he records it in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 where he lists all the of the beatings...five times beaten by the Jews, 39 stripes, three times beaten with rods by the Gentiles, shipwrecked and on and on and on. It was physical. Beyond that it was the concern for the churches. Beyond that it was the criticism of the false teachers. It was the Judaizers who dogged his steps. It was relentless, the plotting of the Jews, who were trying at every turn to find a way to get rid of him. He suffered to greatly that he literally says in the same passage, "I die daily." That wasn't some mystical, spiritual experience, what he meant was I get up every morning realizing that this could be the day I die. So many people were trying to kill him. HE suffered so much and then he suffered at the hands of the people he loved the most. He even says to the Corinthians, "How is it that the more I love you the less you love me?" I don't get it.

And yet assaulted as he was he knew that this was commensurate with what he deserved. He says, in fact, when I'm weak, in chapter 12, then I'm...what?...I'm strong. What this does is just take me out of it.

His...his defense is so interesting in 2 Corinthians because his defense all the way through is...You're right, you're right, you're right, you're right, I'm weak, I know, I know, I know. So what he does is not argue against their accusations of weakness, he affirms them. And they are not defects, they are credentials of his authentic apostleship.

Now this little section here then unfolds for us a magnificent tribute to a humble man. It's the...that's the word, humble...humble. He defends himself not on the basis of natural talent, not on the basis of human skill or achievement, he just agrees and he makes a comparison that is magnificent. Let's look at verse 7. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels in order that...purpose clause in the Greek...the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves."

That's why God puts the priceless treasure in clay pots, so nobody ever has to ask where the power comes from. In comparison to the glory of the eternal God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, in comparison to the magnificence of the New Covenant expressed all through chapter 3, in comparison

to Christ's shining glory, the preacher is nothing...nothing.

Chapter 10 he says, "I don't get into that stuff where you compare yourself with other preachers, measuring yourselves by yourselves. I don't get into that. I just start here. We have this treasure, this ministry..." Treasure goes back to ministry in verse 1, same thing. The treasure is the ministry. What is the ministry? The ministry is the gospel, verse 4, of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. The gospel is the treasure, it is the story of God incarnate in Christ redeeming sinners, that great shining gospel. And that is what is described in the wondrous third chapter where he unfolds the New Covenant. He says the treasure is the truth. It's the truth that God is in Christ, bringing good news of salvation. This is the treasure. And he put it in ostrakinos...ostrakinos, clay pots.

Let me tell you about them. It is baked dirt, baked clay, cheap, really cheap, common, breakable, replaceable, essentially valueless. You have them around you house, don't you? You go down to the gardening place and you get clay pots. Drop one, no big deal. A clay pot is a clay pot. Now, you know, your wife will put a ribbon on it, that's why preachers wear ties...it's the ribbon on the clay pot, you understand? But it's a clay pot. It doesn't have any value, cheap, common, breakable, disposable, replaceable, valueless. But useful. It's amazing what beautiful thing you could put in it, like a flower.

And clay pots in ancient times were used for a number of things. Sometimes something important was in a clay pot, like the Dead Sea Scrolls was in a clay pot. A little shepherd boy was down there in Qumran throwing rocks into a cave, I've been there to that cave. Something broke and he went in and...Dead Sea Scrolls. Sometimes they were used to put somewhat valuable things in and buried them in the ground, but you didn't leave them there very long. Have you ever seen what happens to the clay pot after a while, just with the plant that's in it it begins to deteriorate at the bottom. So you can't leave anything very valuable in the clay pot buried in the ground. That's what they used to do with their valuable things, they would put them in the ground, remember where they were and go get them. And that's what saved them from being robbed since they didn't have locks on everything and windows and bars. And that, of course, is illustrated by Jesus in the parable I mentioned earlier in Matthew 13 about the treasure hidden in the field. It probably wouldn't have been in a clay pot, that wouldn't last too long. But...and this is what I want you to know...in the home they essentially were used for garbage and waste, to carry out what was unmentionable.

Turn to 2 Timothy 2:20 and I think this verse, uses the same word, makes it clear what we have here. This is a...this use of the clay pot is an analogy or metaphor that goes in other directions so I don't want to get in to the metaphor itself, I just want you to see how it's used here. In a large house they have a lot of...they have a lot of containers and there are gold ones and silver ones and there are wood ones and there's that same word, ostrakinos, clay pots. And the gold and silver ones are to honor and the wood and earthenware are not less honor but to dishonor, they are the unmentionables. And he says in verse 21, "If you're ever going to use any of these things for honor,

you've got to...do what to it?...cleanse it cause it's defiled."

We're talking about dishonorable things, the containers that nobody would see. Certainly no guest would ever see it. The only value they had was the service they performed, that was it. Did you get that? The only value they had was the service they performed. They were unmentionables, nobody ever would see those.

Go back then to 2 Corinthians and Paul says, "We have this treasure in a garbage can, a waste bucket." Common containers for the most humble and most dirty uses never ever fit in themselves to be brought into public. That's how it is in the ministry. Our only value is as containers. It's the treasure that we bring that has the value. That's why the Lord didn't choose many mighty or noble, right? 1 Corinthians 1...not many noble, not many mighty. He's chosen the humble, the base, the common.

This is the essence of spiritual service, folks. They accused Paul..."you're weak, you're unimpressive, you're not a good communicator, you're plain, you're common, you're not clever, you're not philosophical, you're not culturally sensitive." He said, "I know, I know, I'm just a pot but do I have a treasure."

The New Testament was not written by the elite of Egypt. It was not written by the elite of Greece, or Rome, or even Israel. The greatest scholars in the world at that time were down in Egypt. They were in the greatest Library of Antiquity at Alexandria. And the most distinguished philosophers were at Athens and the most powerful leaders and movers of men were in Rome and the religious geniuses were in Israel's Temple. And God never used any of them, none of them. He just used clay pots. He passed by Herodotus, the historian. He passed by Socrates, the philosopher. He passed by Hippocrates, the father of medicine; Plato, the philosopher; Aristotle. He passed by Euclid, the mathematician; Archimedes, the father of mechanics; Hipparchus the astronomer; Cicero, the orator; Virgil the poet. He passed them all. Why? Well He was looking for clay pots.

In their minds and from a human viewpoint, those people were magnificent vessels and frankly they were so impressed with their own value they saw no value in the gospel. He had peasants and fishermen, smelly guys and tax collectors, clay pots who were chosen to hold and to proclaim and to write the priceless treasure of gospel truth.

And God is still doing it, folks. I am telling you, He is still passing by the elite, isn't He? He's still passing by the hard-hearted, non-listening, proud intellectuals. They may be sitting in their ivory towers in universities, and sitting in their ivory towers in the seminaries, and sitting in their bishoprics and in their positions of authority in the church and God is finding the humble who will carry the treasure of saving truth.

You say, "How can that work?" Verse 5, because, folks, "We do not preach...what?...ourselves." We're not the message. I know some of you come to Grace Church and you say, "How did this church get to be like this?" Well let me tell you how it got to be like this. God did this because He blessed His truth. That's it...that's it.

You say, "Isn't it you?" It's not me. When Paul says, "When I'm weak I'm strong," let me tell you what it means. He doesn't mean a man with no convictions. He doesn't mean an undisciplined man. He doesn't mean a lazy man. He doesn't mean an irresponsible man. He doesn't mean a man who can't work and work hard. What he means by weakness is "I got myself out of it, I got myself out of it." And that's when the strength became the parent. I got myself out of it.

If you want to be used mightily by God, get yourself out of it. Get yourself out of it. Just see yourself as a garbage pail, or in the words of Peter, "Clothe yourself with humility." It's not you. It's not your personality. It's the Word of God.

And you see, back to verse 7, the reason. You say, "Why would the Lord do that? Doesn't He need the intellectuals? Doesn't He need the great people, the fancy people, the famous people?" No. Because the people aren't the power, right? What's the power? The message. And the reason, verse 7, "That the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves."

If you're looking for a human explanation to Paul's success, there isn't any. There isn't any. I mean, I've heard people say, "We're studying the Bible to see why Paul was successful." I'll tell you why he was successful, he preached the truth. The truth is powerful. "Oh, we've come to your church to find out what makes things tick here." I'll tell you what makes things tick here, truth...the truth of God...the truth of God and the power of God. That's what makes things tick.

The surpassing greatness explains the transcendent might of superlative power from God on the souls of those who hear the truth. We're clay pots. We're back there again, at best, and we have nothing to offer, beauty or power. And Paul knows it and he says in 1 Corinthians 1, "I was with you in weakness, fear and much trembling." We've said "a permanent case of spiritual Parkinson's." And in the end it's okay that we're so weak and we're so afraid. I would be petrified to step into this situation and give you my ideas because in the end I just want to give you God's Word, as Paul said, that your faith would rest in the power of God. That's the point. And in 1 Corinthians 3 he also said, "Neither is the one who plants anything and the one who waters is anything." Right? "But God is everything."

Years ago, Denny wrote, "No one who saw Paul's ministry and looked at a preacher like Paul could dream that the explanation lay in him. Not...he writes...in an ugly little Jew without presence, without eloquence, without the means to bribe or to compel could the source of such courage, the cause of such transformations be found." And then he writes, "It must be sought not in him but in God."

A.T. Robertson wrote this, "There always have been men in the world so clever that God could make no use of them. They could never do His work. They were so lost in admiration of their own." And then he says, "God's work never depended on them and it doesn't depend on them now."

The power is not the product of human genius, or cleverness, or technique, or ingenuity. The power of the gospel is in the gospel. And we're weak and common and plain and fragile and breakable and dishonorable and disposable clay pots who would be taking the garbage out. But instead we're bringing the glory of God.

Now the amazing thing is that such weakness does not prove fatal to the gospel because the gospel is not eke, it's not out of us. The great reality is this is essential to the gospel because it makes crystal clear where the power really lies.

Last week I was down in Florida at a conference and a preacher/pastor came to me and he had tears in his eyes and he was really weeping after I had spoken. And he said to me, "May I please talk with you?" He talked to me two or three times in a day off and on but finally got to what was in his heart, he said, "I'm...I'm a pastor," and he said, "I...I'm trying to give my people the Word of God and I'm studying so hard and I'm reading everything I can read and I want to bring the Word of God to them." And he said, "I've tried to follow the ministry of yours and others who do expository preaching and I spend hours doing it and I come on Sunday and I give them the Word of God and..." with tears in his eyes he said, "but, you know, I'm just not very good. I'm not very good."

And I said, "Well, how are they responding to it?"

"Well," he said, "I don't know, I can't imagine...I just can't imagine that it's very effective because I'm just not very good."

Well, you know, maybe he's the best of all.

I'm not saying that getting yourself out of the means you're not diligent in your study. If you're going to preach the Word you better study it to get it right. But when you open your mouth you want to come out "Thus says the Lord..." Because the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword.

So, maybe we should call this "The Clay Pot Conference." Be grateful, huh? I am an unworthy servant, but God has given me a treasure. What a privilege.

Father, we thank You for our morning together of worship. Help us never ever to commit that frightening sin, replacing our own ingenuity and creativity above the divine revelation. May we ever and always know that we are just a clay pot and what makes us powerful is not in us, it's in our message. May the Word go forth, not just through the preachers, but through all the believers here

who are also clay pots containing the glorious treasure. And may you through the truth of the glorious New Covenant gospel use us humble servants as instruments to bring many to righteousness. And in the end there will be no explanation for our lives and no explanation for our impact except the message we preach. We give You the glory, in Christ's name. Amen.

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