

+ 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 + It's Not About You! + 2nd Sunday After Pentecost + 18 June 2006 +

The phone rings. "Pastor, have you heard about that church to the north? They've got some great things going on. They've got to be doing something right since they went from 0-800 in three years! They've got so many programs to offer. Oh, and nothing personal, but we'd like to request a release from membership." The pastor is left with the phone in his hand wondering, "What did I do wrong? Were my sermons not eloquent enough, my classes not interesting enough? What could I have done to make it better?" Servant of Christ, it's not about you.

You're standing at a stranger's door. You're helping canvass the neighborhood. A man opens the door with an angry look on his face. "Hi! I'm from Cross of Christ..." SLAM! The noise echoes down the quiet street. You're left standing there, wondering, "What could I have done differently? What did I do wrong?" Servant of Christ, it's not about you.

The opportunity has finally come. Your friend who avoids religious talk like the plague is having some tough times in her family. Her son has been diagnosed with a form of cancer. She's wondering what she can do, where she can go. You wonder if you should go and talk to her about the only One who can truly help her and her son in this situation, but decide you better not because you might mess up. Servant of Christ, it's not about you!

When it comes to sharing the gospel, too often we have to admit we're scared to do it. We worry about our eloquence or our wisdom. We worry if it goes wrong we'll be crushed. It's a painful admission because you realize the truth. You are weak. You are sinful. You are breakable. You are all those things and will fail unless you realize the one truth you can rely on. Servant of Christ, **IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU!**

Have you ever taken a close look at a cheap clay pot? They're not much to look at. They have a boring burnt orange color about them. They're hard. They're brittle. If they have a weak spot, they break. If you drop them, they shatter.

In Paul's day, people used clay jars for other reasons than planting flowers. They were as common in ancient homes as Tupperware is today. People used them to store food or valuables, but they were no less breakable. The jars were hard and brittle and shattered on contact.

Paul was a jar of clay of sorts. You see, there were men in the city of Corinth who claimed to be "super-apostles"—better than Paul in every way. They preached eloquently and displayed boldness. They seemed to have greater concern for the welfare of the people. People began to doubt Paul's message. He had not come to them with eloquent words. He had not come to them with an awe-inspiring appearance. Instead Paul was **"hard pressed on every side... perplexed... persecuted...and struck down..."** The "super-apostles" drew crowds and preached a message that people wanted to hear, a message that used deception and the distortion of God's Word to attract people away from the Christian church.

Compared to the "super-apostles" Paul was a jar of clay, but unlike them Paul's message and ministry weren't about Paul. **"For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."** You can almost hear the echo of John the Baptist's words about Jesus, **"He must increase, I must diminish."** Servant of Christ, it's not about you either because you, too, are a jar of clay just like Paul.

For you to truly understand that, you need to realize what you were. Have you ever toured a cave like Mammoth Cave in Kentucky? As you follow your guide deep into the earth, you get to a spot where the guide turns off the electric lights to show you how absolutely, pitch-black dark it is in the cave. You can't see your hand in front of your face. If you stay there long enough you can lose track of time and your location because of the absolute darkness.

That's what you and I were like in here—our hearts filled with sin's empty, black darkness. From the moment of your conception, sin so filled your heart with empty darkness you didn't know which way

was spiritually up. You were blind to the Lord's love for you. There was absolutely nothing here, except sin's empty hatred for God's holy ways. Not one glimmer of light shone within your heart, nor could it because your heart was like the formless and empty darkness before creation.

That is what you were—filled with sin's empty darkness—but realize what you have become—filled with God's golden light. Paul takes you back to day 1 of creation to help you realize what you have become. On that day, God said, ***“Let light shine out of darkness.”*** It was not there before, but when God commanded it to appear, it appeared. That same almighty and gracious God ***“made his light shine in your heart to give you the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”***

How did God make that light appear in our hearts? He did it through his glory, which appeared in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. When we see Christ display his condescending love for sinners like you and me on the pages of Scripture, when we see Christ leave his heavenly home to take on our human flesh—to become a jar of clay like you and me, when we see him suffer and die to rescue dark souls like yours and mine, when we see him rejoice when he brings light to just one of those dark souls, when we see Christ do all that, we see God's glory and that glory fills our lives.

When you realize what you were and what you have become, then you will realize what you are. If you had a priceless treasure, you would put it away, maybe in a safety deposit box or fireproof safe under your bed. You would not put it in a brittle, old, dirty clay pot, right? You would not want to entrust something so valuable to something so weak and breakable.

...But the Lord does just that! He takes his treasure, which is beyond price, and entrusts it to jars of clay. We're weak. We're corrupt. We're insignificant. We can shatter with one good push, yet the Lord of lords in his unimaginable love entrusts his most precious treasure to you and me. He entrusts to weak jars of clay that message of the glory of God in Christ—that message of the life, death and glorious resurrection that brings forgiveness of all sin to all mankind. He entrusts that priceless treasure and then tells you and me, “Go and share that treasure. Don't hold it back. Share it and watch what I do with it.” Trust me, Servant of Christ, it's not about you!

Now you might say, “Pastor, I may be a weak jar of clay. I may be privileged to bear Christ's priceless treasure to the world, but won't the world break me? What if I mess up?” Servant of Christ, don't worry. It's not about you.

Has this ever happened to you or to someone you love? You get one of those build-it-yourself bookshelves from Wal-Mart. You bring it home, pull out all the parts, barely glance at the instructions and start trying to put it together. The instructions suggest a couple simple tools, but you think you know better and can even improve on their suggestions. Unfortunately in the end it looks nothing like the picture.

When the Lord sent Paul to the city of Corinth, Paul had one tool—the Word of God. Now Paul being the intelligent, well-read, bold man that he was could've decided, “I think I know better than God.” He could've come in with eloquent words of worldly wisdom. He could've knocked their sandals off with his bold candor. He could've oozed with concern for the physical welfare of every person. That's not why Paul was there. To do so would attract people to himself, not the Savior he was sent to share. Paul was there for one reason—to use God's Word to share the priceless treasure of Christ. Paul did not rely on himself, but on what was given to him.

Servant of Christ, the Lord has given you the same tool to share the priceless treasure of Christ, but don't rely on what you think you should have. When given the opportunity to share that priceless treasure of Christ, what do you expect of yourself? Do you expect to be a perfect proclaimer with all the right words, all the right expressions, all the right illustrations, all the right answers all the time? If that's the case, then none of us should be proclaimers. If that's the case, then we might as well give up or not even bother to share the treasure of Christ because only super titanium containers can do that, not weak jars of clay. If we have expectations like that, of course it's easy to give up. It's easy to wonder,

“Why would the Lord use a weak jar of clay like me to bear his priceless treasure when he could have somebody else do it better?” Servant of Christ, the Lord didn’t want someone better to share his treasure, he wanted you!

So rely on what you have received! The Lord uses you to proclaim his Gospel **“to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”** Rely on the power of the Word to transform the hearts of others as it has transformed yours. Rely on the promises in that Word. Yes, you are a clay jar, but you have a Lord who will never fail you. You may be hard pressed on every side, but the Lord will never let you be crushed. You may be perplexed, but the Lord will never leave you to despair. You may be persecuted, but the Lord will never abandon you. You may be struck down, but the Lord will never let you be destroyed. For it is true for you in your weakness what the Savior promised Paul in his weakness, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”**

Rely on the forgiveness that comes to you through the death of Jesus for those times when you have failed or for pride when you’ve taken credit for the Spirit’s success. Then the life of Jesus will also be revealed. Rely on what you have—as a congregation. Yes, we have a weak clay jar of a small congregation in a tiny old building, but we have a treasure beyond price to share with our community and region. Let’s share it. Let’s find ways to share it. Let’s not hold it back, but proclaim it to the world. Rely on what you have because you have been made a servant of Christ. Yes, you are a weak clay jar of a person, but you have a treasure you can share with that relative who questions Christ, that friend who’s life is upside down, that co-worker who seems hopeless, or that classmate who’s worried. Servant of Christ, it’s not about you.

Even though you are a sinful clay jar, you are filled with the light of the glory of God. Even though you are an insignificant clay jar, you are filled with the priceless treasure of Christ. Even though you are a weak clay jar, you have the promises of an almighty & gracious God. Even though you are a mortal clay jar, you have the one tool that never fails—the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Don’t worry, servant of Christ. It’s not about you. It’s all about him and you can rely on that! Amen.