

Clay Jars, but Filled with Christ

2nd Sun. after Pent. – 06/02/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 Pastor Keith Besel

v.5, [Paul says,] **“For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.”**

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

Introduction

✘ You may not know it by its name, but most of us have either heard it proclaimed or in some way have even bought into its deceptive and dangerous views. I'm talking about what's called “the prosperity Gospel”.

→ It is the attractive but entirely false idea that if you are a child of God, everything will be great. Life will be easy. You will be prosperous, healthy, wealthy, and happy. So, as this insidious lie goes, if things aren't going great for you, then something must be wrong with you. You must not be faithful enough; believing hard enough. So get to work; try harder; believe deeper or you will never be able to “earn” all of God's blessings and riches.

✘ Even those of us who know that this “theology of glory” is wrong, can still so easily get sucked into it. When times are tough, what are we so tempted to ask? “Why me?” “Where is God?” “He must be punishing me.”

→ Yet we aren't consistent in all of this, because when things are going well; when we are especially blessed, we don't ask, “Why me?” Instead our instinct is to say, “Look at me! Look at what I did!” “I finally got what I really deserved!” So either way – in tough times and times of prosperity, this manmade gospel of prosperity leads us in the wrong direction because it makes our lives exclusively about us; about our own desires while completely ignoring God and His teaching.

✘ The Bible teaches that the Christian life often is not so easy. Jesus tells us that those who follow Him will (not “might”) face challenges in this world; that we are to take up our cross daily and follow Him (Mk. 8:34).

→ But He doesn't just leave us alone in this life of expected difficulty and trouble. No, Jesus promises to be with us in the troubles; to strengthen us with His gifts of grace so that we will not only be able to endure, but we will be blessed in this Christian life that He gives to us.

→ In our Epistle Reading here today Paul calls this earthly life as believers – with all of its crosses and suffering – “jars of clay.” But he knows that even as we are “jars of clay” we are still Christ's vessels, which means we have the promise that God will fill us with His glory in Christ.

I. We live under the cross as jars of clay.

✘ Too often though, we have a problem. We let our pride; we let our selfish desires get the best of us and we fight against our roles as God's “jars of clay”. We act and we talk like we are the potter instead. We say, “I'm the one that gets to determine what's right for my life.” But Isaiah 29:16 says, “You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, ‘He did not make me’?”

→ That's the kind of thinking that our world promotes. But it is not true according to God's Word. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Paul says, “...You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.” And Isaiah 64:8 is clear, “O Yahweh, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are our potter; we are all the work of Your hand.”

→ In Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome (9:20-21) he also addresses the way that we often live this life as if we are in an argument with God. He confronts our sinful attitude and he says, "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" In other words, if God wants you to be a beautiful vase and me to be a chamber pot, well He's the one molding us as clay and placing us in His kingdom work. You and I are not the ones in charge!

✘ Today's Old Testament and Gospel Reading both use the Third Commandment as an important example of this. In Deuteronomy 5:12-14 God gives His command, "Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as Yahweh your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. On it you shall not do any work..."

→ So, how do so many people respond? "Yes, that's my day off for me to do what I want to do." Incorrect! It is the LORD'S day; the day that Jesus said in our Gospel Reading (Mk. 2:27) that God "made for man" and not the other way around. As the maker of the Sabbath, He then determines its purpose, not us. He made it for our benefit; for all of mankind, yes to rest from the things of this world but to do so with a very intentional, weekly focus of our attention on worshipping and centering our lives upon our Creator; on His love for us; His care, provision and protection; His unmeasured generosity toward us in His Son, Jesus!

✘ Still, as Paul shows us, the early Christian Church struggled with this idea of suffering as Christians. Just look at Paul:

→ He endured hardship – having been arrested, beaten, imprisoned and run out of town. He physically suffered because of his faith. But he endured.

→ Some people though tried to use Paul's sufferings to bash his ministry, saying that if he were really an apostle, these things wouldn't have happened; that these must be God's judgment against Paul.

✘ And on the surface, we might actually understand that thinking, but it's wrong.

→ Paul points to these difficulties in verses 8-10; that he and the other apostles were afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and even given over to death. But what this is, is an honest assessment of the extent of Paul's role as a "jar of clay".

→ That's not negative though. Paul is simply saying he cannot be the focus. He's merely a simple, earthenware vessel; nothing remarkable in itself, but still clearly created for a purpose. What matters, you see, is not Paul but who fills Paul.

✘ Paul's role is never to point to Paul, but to proclaim and point to Jesus!

→ Though he's addressing his own situation, Paul is talking about all of us. He uses the plural "we" throughout. As Christians, we all face being afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and given over to death, because we are all "jars of clay".

→ This is our human condition; the result of living here in this sin-filled world, as sinners ourselves. And no, this is generally not a popular time, even always a safe time to be vessels filled with Christ who proclaim Christ and His unpopular word of truth.

II. But Christ takes on our clay.

✘ So why do we proclaim Jesus? Because He did what no one else ever could or would do for us. He became one of us.

→ The One who was intimately a part of creating us out of the dust of the earth – the clay – took upon Himself the clay of our human bodies.

→ And everywhere that we fall short as “clay jars” Jesus fills in for us to perfection. As we fail to resist temptation, Jesus overcame temptation in our place. As we suffer afflictions, persecution, suffering, and death, Jesus faced these things for us.

✘ In fact, Jesus went far beyond what we suffer to endure the punishment and pain that we could never withstand. Jesus died on a cross and was buried in an earthly tomb. Sure, others experienced that, but Jesus did it 100% in our place. His vessel of clay was utterly crushed for us.

→ And then as no one else could ever do, Jesus rose back to life in victory over death. Death could not contain the Son of God, which changed everything!

→ As verse six says, Jesus’ light of victory now shines into the darkness of our sin to give us life; to give us the knowledge of the glory of God.

III. With that, Christ fills our jars and transforms us.

✘ This is where Paul addresses our purpose now as Christians; as those who are simple “clay jars”. We may be cracked, humble vessels, but Jesus has filled us with His grace and blessing; making us precious beyond words. So now, the Father looks at us and sees His precious, beautiful “jars” inside and out.

→ Not because of us, but because of the “treasure” that verse seven says God has put inside of us. It is the greatest treasure that could or can ever be imagined! We have it inside of us, as a free and undeserved gift – not to hide; not to sell; not to use in some way so that we get rich or gain some advantage from it. No, He fills us with Himself; with His life-saving gifts of forgiveness and salvation so that we will give that Treasure away; so that we will spread it far and wide; so that others can be saved; so that others will have the same joy we have of being filled with Christ!

✘ All along, the treasure itself and its “surpassing power”, as Paul says in verse seven, still “belongs to God and not to us.” Why would God do this? Why put such a glorious and powerful gift into breakable and temporary clay pots like me; like you? So there can never be any mistake about where the power lies; about who and what is truly important and in charge in all of this!

→ This life – it is not about me ... or you! It is about Jesus and Jesus alone. And because I know that He loves me and saves me and wants to spend every moment with me here in this life that I have today; every moment of eternity with me in His heavenly glory, well folks, I am now changed. I am overjoyed that my existence is not about me. I want it to always be all about Jesus!

✘ Sure in this life, we may be afflicted. But by God’s power we will not be crushed. In Jesus we will always overcome!

→ We may be perplexed and struggle to understand why we are suffering as we do at times, but we are never driven to despair, because we have hope in Jesus! We may experience persecution, but we are never forsaken; never alone, because we are filled with Christ! We may be struck down, but we are never destroyed, because we have the power and the glory of God inside of us.

→ Indeed, united with Christ, nothing in this life can overcome us, because our existence does not depend upon us; upon our power. Though we are clay jars the surpassing power belongs to God.

✘ And now because of that, our future as clay jars is glorious!

→ Unless Jesus returns first, the time is coming when these clay jars, these earthly bodies will have served their purpose on earth. Our bodies will die and be returned to the earth. But we Christians know, this is not the end.

- ➔ The same God who called light into being; who took the dust of the earth to mold mankind with His hands and breathe life into us; this God will take your lifeless body and mine and re-create them by His almighty power. We will be raised from death to a glorified life that will never end.
- ➔ When that happens, the Bible assures us, our new bodies will be the same bodies we have now, but there will be huge differences. The consequences of sin will no longer corrupt us. There will be no more affliction or suffering or death.
- ⊗ What is now a humble clay vessel will be re-created by God Himself into a vessel of beauty and honor; perfect; holy and just like now – still filled to overflowing with the presence and the beauty of Jesus! Amen.