

“GOD HAS A MARKET FOR CRACKED POTS”

(II Corinthians 4:7)

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”

A Christian is a person in whom there is an inherent paradox. “We have this *treasure in earthen vessels*” — that’s the puzzling paradox. Because it is a paradox, we have adjusted it into many “sensible” variations.

For example, some conceive of Christianity as all treasure, and no earthen vessel. “Give me God, give me Jesus, give me the Gospel,” they say, “but not the Church, and not the Christian.” “Christ, yes; Christianity, no” is their motto. “I want the treasure, but I can’t tolerate the earthen vessel,” they are saying. But God’s strategy is *both* “treasure” *and* “earthen vessel”; indeed, the treasure is *in* the earthen vessel.

Some, on the other hand, are so conscious of earthen vessels that they see no treasure at all. They see Christianity, the Bible, the Gospel as a purely *human* affair. They say, “Don’t ask me to believe it, when you have only these people as evidence.” They are preoccupied with the earthiness of the vessel.

Others make endless proposals to reduce the disproportion between treasure and vessel. Their motivation and persistence are commendable, but their efforts are largely fruitless simply because the “vessel” remains “earthen.” These folks say, “Let’s create a better church, one so efficient that it will infallibly present Christ, one so strong that His power can freely flow through it.” I say again, the motivation is fine, but this view suffers from a deficiency. *This* view is that the *church* is to be *sufficient for God* rather than that *God* is to be *sufficient for and through the church* (the New Testament view).

Happily, some have read the New Testament carefully enough to rightly conclude that there is a Divine purpose in the disparity between the treasure and the vessel. The “*inconsistency*” is *intentional!* So it is certainly not a hopeless case if earthen vessels are in evidence in the celebration and presentation of the Gospel!

There is a great example of this paradox in the twelfth chapter of the books of the Acts of the Apostles. Herod had imprisoned Simon Peter, and apparently was intending to kill him as he had already killed James (12:1-3). “But prayer was made without ceasing by the church unto God for him” (12:5). The night before he was to be killed, an angel came to his prison cell and set him free (12:6-11). We are probably safe in assuming that his release resulted from the always-strange combination of human freedom and responsibility (the church’s prayers) and Divine sovereignty. But when Peter then went to the very house where the church was gathered praying for his release (12:12), their faith broke down terribly. First, they said the person reporting his presence was “mad,” then they tried to explain his presence by saying, “It is his

angel” (12:15). Do you see the frailty of the “vessels”? There was faith there, true faith, such faith as could secure an answer from God; but the weakness of man was still very evident. You see, God’s power is manifest in human weakness. Christianity is not the removal of weakness, nor is it merely the manifestation of Divine power; it is the manifestation of Divine power in human weakness. And this weakness does not limit God’s power.

Let’s examine this marvelous text under four divisions: first, the Gospel treasure that is identified; second, the gracious trust that is imparted; third, the glorious transaction that is indicated; and finally, the great truths that are implied.

I. THE GOSPEL TREASURE

“We have *this treasure*.” What is this treasure? Many attempts have been made to define the treasure, and most of them are reasonably on target. Some have said that the treasure is the Presence of Jesus Christ, others that it is the power of the Holy Spirit, and still others that it is the precious Word of God. And, without question, these are fabulous treasures! But there is always a Divine genius exposed when we let the Scriptures speak for themselves.

The one great descriptive term that is used in defining the treasure is the phrase, “The glorious Gospel of Christ” (II Cor. 4:4). So the treasure is the “Gospel.” However, we can identify three distinct aspects of the Gospel in this passage, and each is a vital part of the “treasure.”

First, the *Lord* of the Gospel may be regarded as the treasure. Remove Jesus and all Gospel value is gone! In Ephesians 3:8, Paul spoke of “the unsearchable (untrackable) riches of Christ.” Colossians 3:2 says, “In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Colossians 2:9 says, “In Christ dwells all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” — so even This Treasure (all the fulness of God) was in an earthen vessel, the physical body of Jesus! The treasure is Jesus, the *Lord* of the Gospel.

Second, we may view the *luxuries* of the Gospel as the treasure. The Gospel is replete with incredible riches and luxuries. The book of Ephesians is an itemized account of many of these riches. It speaks of “the riches of God’s grace” (1:7), “the riches of the glory of God’s inheritance in the saints” (1:18), the riches of His mercy (2:4), “the *exceeding* riches of His grace” (2:7), etc. There are in the Gospel the riches of pardon, forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, redemption, regeneration, conversion, adoption, sanctification, expectation, glorification, etc. All of the communicable attributes of God — love, joy, peace, etc. — are items in the list of Gospel luxuries, and these comprise a great part of the treasure of our text.

Finally, our text directs us to think of the *light* of the Gospel as the treasure. Verse four speaks of “the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ.” And verse six draws a Gospel parallel from creation itself in these words: “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” We must not miss the sequence of verses here, the connection between this verse and our text (the next verse): “But we have this treasure (the light of verse 6) in earthen vessels.”

There is no question in my mind that Paul refers here to the great story of Gideon's battle with the Midianites in these verses (see Judges 7:16-22). The Gospel light, like Gideon's lamps, is carried in earthen vessels (our lives). Just as a small, plain box may carry a costly jewel, or a plain and battered ship may carry a precious cargo, a weak lamp of clay may carry a brilliant light. Note that in the case of Gideon, the strategy of victory included both the breaking of the lamps and the blowing of trumpets. So our strategy for victory includes the release of the light of the Gospel (even if it means the breaking of the earthen vessels) and the sounding of the trumpet-notes of personal testimony. Our regular prayer should be, "O Lord, send out Thy light and Thy truth" by means of us (Psalm 43:3). Our text affirms again that Gospel victories are gained, not by an array of human might and effort, but by the treasure of Divine light in earthen vessels, and by the shout of faith that makes appeal to Heaven first, and then to the hearts of men.

So the great treasure may be viewed as the *Lord* of the Gospel, the *luxuries* of the Gospel, and the *light* of the Gospel. Having seen the Gospel *inventory*, we will now look at the dizzying truth of the Gospel's *investment*.

II. THE GRACIOUS TRUST

"We have this treasure *in earthen vessels*." Just as Eastern kings and men of wealth often stored their fortunes of gold, silver, and jewels in earthenware jars, so God has deposited His greatest wealth in human lives. This deposit is made for two purposes: 1. For *safety*. Paul told his disciple Timothy to "guard the Gospel which has been deposited in your care." 2. For *service*. Paul also told Timothy to deposit this Gospel and all of its implications into the lives of others for the sake of multiplying the original investment.

There is a great example of this truth in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah (32:6-14). A cousin of Jeremiah had mortgaged his land. According to the law, the nearest of kin (the kinsman-redeemer of the Old Testament, a type of Christ) had the right to redeem the land and use it until the year of release, when it would revert to its original heirs. So Jeremiah bought the land for his cousin, and a bill of sale was received (and apparently copied). Jeremiah 32:14 says, "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Take these evidences, this evidence of the purchase (the receipt and its copy), one of which is sealed and one of which is open, and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue many days.'" Sometimes the "earthen vessel" was the nearest thing to a safety deposit box that existed in their society, so the documents were placed in an earthen vessel for permanent *security* and for *service*, if necessary. The story illustrates our text in a vivid way.

I have had the privilege of visiting the Bible lands on two occasions. Twice I have been in Egypt, one of the cradles of the Bible. To visit the Egyptian museums is an education in itself. In the British Museum in Cairo, there is a huge foyer. The foyer contains hundreds of stone busts and some golden goblets which had been used by the Pharaohs of Egypt. At one end of the hall is a large alabaster bowl about twelve feet in diameter. The bowl rests on a marble pillar. The guide may tell part of his tour group to walk to the other end of the hall where there is another bowl exactly like the first one. He tells them to lean over the bowl, but not to touch it.

Then he whispers in one bowl, and despite noise all around, the group at the other bowl can hear clearly every word. One pastor, after observing this acoustical phenomenon, said, “What an illustration! God can speak to us in that still, small voice even when there is noise and thunder around us, and we can hear Him distinctly, provided our hearts are in perfect tune with His, even as these alabaster bowls are in tune with each other.”

In one of the other rooms of the museum, a row of cracked earthen vessels stand on the most prominent display shelves. The guide explains the “inconsistency” of making these equal to the brass, gold, or silver vessels. The tourist’s attention is directed to the jars themselves. Careful observation reveals that the bottoms of the jars have been sawed off and new clay bottoms have been substituted. These earthen jars were among the goblets, pitchers, and golden bowls in the tomb, and all of the excavators wondered why they occupied such a conspicuous position. Then one day an administrator of the museum stopped near them for a minute when the afternoon sun shone directly on the clay jars. Something glinted through a crack near the bottom of one jar. His curiosity was aroused. The jar was taken to his office, examined, and finally broken to pieces. You can imagine their surprise when they found that the clay bottom was three inches thick and that embedded in it were some of the crown jewels of a Pharaoh. They quickly collected the other earthen vessels and sawed off their bases. When they broke them up, they found the balance of the priceless jewels. Here is a practical illustration of the profound truth presented in our text. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.”

The New International Version of the New Testament identifies the earthen vessel as “a clay pot.” Here is the *strange strategy* of our God! The fabulous treasure is contained in “a clay pot.” What insights and explanations arise from this truth. Each Christian is one of the earthen vessels. We are “earthen,” so we see *our need of God*. We are so easily scarred, marred, shattered, and broken.

And we are “vessels,” so we see (do we dare to say it?) *God’s need of us!* The plain and simple fact is that God must have *carriers, containers, conveyors* for His treasure. The treasure is spiritual, and must have some kind of material conveyance. So this principle presents itself: *Having shown Himself once in Jesus in a perfect way, God now shows Himself (in a modified, reduced, but real way) through our ordinary humanity.* A great trust, indeed!

Until John Keats wrote his immortal poem, “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” few would have seen anything exquisite enough for poetry in a Grecian urn! And until we realize that our ordinary humanity is to be a display case for God’s eternal treasure, we will see little that is truly exquisite about human life.

Let me mention three properties that are evident in “earthen vessels.” First, earthen vessels are *fragile*. Even the finest one is very sensitive and highly breakable. God did not insert His treasure in a crush-proof box, or a solid lead vault, or wrap it in styrofoam padding. He put it in earthen vessels, and this strategy often makes for pain and injury. Over the years, if you had explored in my home, you might have found an assortment of broken coffee cups. These cups might have been used at breakfast any morning. Among ourselves, we are quite at home drinking our coffee out of chipped or slightly cracked cups! Christians must remember: if I

agree to carry God’s treasure in my earthen vessel — and in the company of *other* earthen vessels — I am likely to become a cracked pot before I am finished!

In the famous Aesop’s Fables, there is an interesting story of two pots, one of brass and one of clay, which found themselves in a raging flood, hurled along by the racing waves. The brass pot cried out to the earthen pot to come close to it so that it would be protected. But the earthen vessel replied, “No, no, to get too close to you is to run the risk of shattering.” It survived only as it remembered that it was an *earthen* vessel. And so, our usefulness depends upon our understanding that we are feeble witnesses, and “it is not by power, nor by might, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”

Second, earthen vessels are *fallible*. There is never a guarantee that an earthen vessel will succeed at the job for which you want it. Someone has called this “God’s calculated risk.” You understand the grave limitation of such language, but you should also understand the meaning of it. There is a line in Francis Thompson’s fabulous poem, “Hound of Heaven,” that echoes what we are and how we sometimes feel about ourselves. He describes how he had desperately run away from God until God finally caught him. Then God said to him, “Of all earth’s clotted clay, (you are) the dingiest clot.” Have you ever felt that way, that you are the dingiest clot of all earth’s clotted clay? You feel that way *all the time*, you say? Then remind yourself that God does not believe that you are *too* dingy, *too* dirty, *too* delicate, *too* common, to contain and convey His treasure.

Finally, earthen vessels are *functional*. Clay jars are normally *made for some practical use*. Museums the world over are full of earthen vessels, but they were not originally designed to be ornaments. They were made to carry water, or wine, or for multiple other purposes. When I was in Israel the first time, I made a choice picture of a modern-day “woman at the well” beside Jacob’s well in Sychar of Samaria. She is dressed as if she was trying out for a Hollywood role — in blue and white robes. She has a tall earthen jar balanced on the top of her head. It made a beautiful and stately picture, but that jar wasn’t made to form a fragment of an American tourist’s photo album — it was made for a practical purpose. A vessel is often used to *carry* and to *pour*. So is God’s earthen vessel. But note: the vessel must be *fillable* to be *functional*. It may be fragile and fallible, but it is functional if fillable. This is God’s strategy, and *He makes no apologies for it!* He has always operated this way. It is not as if He wanted something better, but has to put up with the likes of us. Oh, no! If you believe God is marking time with you until an angel shows up, you have misread the contract. Earthen vessels are God’s first (and only) choice.

But we have a problem with this strategy — we simply can’t believe it! This is revealed in our hero-worship and in our idolatry of size and success. Indeed, guess what the earliest heresy was in Christian history. It obviously would concern the Person of Christ, and you might guess that it would attempt to deny His Deity. But no! Instead, it was an attempt to deny His humanity. And Christians have been guilty of modified versions of this heresy — in their own lives and in the church — ever since that early date. But it is God’s design to deposit and display His Fortune in common, ordinary “clay jars.”

III. THE GLORIOUS TRANSACTION

Note the stated reason for this strange strategy. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, *that (in order that) the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.*” Why does God do it this way? Why does He not employ bionic women and six million dollar men? Why does He use timid, uncertain, stumbling, fumbling Clark Kents instead of sensational, supernal Supermen?

The answer is both simple and profound. The grand reason why frail men are employed to preach the Gospel and do God’s work is that the glorious salvation that results may conspicuously appear as the work of God, and not of man. Both God and the Gospel gain glory from the weakness of the vessels in which they are contained. This is God’s way of keeping us alive to what is really going on. Thus, He keeps us ready for *His* performance, *His* working, *His* surprises. He wants to make it *perfectly clear* that it is *His power alone* that does the necessary job. We are left weak in order to make clear that it is God and God alone who is strong.

To illustrate this “excellency of the Divine power,” Paul introduces his own experience. In him, we can clearly see the “earthen vessel.” In this context, he tells us that he was “troubled on every side, perplexed, persecuted, cast down, and always bearing about in the body (the earthen vessel) the dying of the Lord Jesus.” But in Paul we can also clearly see “the abundance of the Divine power.” Though he experienced all the above trials, he was not distressed, not in despair, not forsaken, not destroyed, and *the life of Jesus was made manifest in his mortal body* (see verses eight through eleven).

“That the excellency of the power may be of God and not of ourselves.” Consider this principle, first, with reference to *God*. When this is the working strategy of Gospel advance, something that exemplifies God is produced. Something that displays God, something that exhibits God, something that demonstrates God, is produced. *Only in this way is something worthy of God produced.*

Then, consider this principle with reference to *ourselves* as Christians. The excellency of the power “is not of us.” This understanding will keep us humble and will keep us near to Him who is our strength. It also will prevent our discouragement. II Corinthians 4:1 says, “Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not.” The awareness of this ministry and our reception of mercy for this ministry provides encouragement to us.

Finally, consider this ministry with reference to our *hearers*. If they understand this matter, their expectancy will be turned toward God and not toward us. Furthermore, other Christians who receive the ministry of the treasure through us will be inclined to pray for us, knowing how helpless we are without the anointing of the Holy Spirit. What a transaction occurs when we understand our status as earthen vessels and fully depend upon the “abundance of the power which is from God!”

IV. THE GREAT TRUTHS

There are several great truths implied by the statement in our text. First, we note the importance of the proper *control* of the vessel. If *you* control the vessel, you will invariably put the wrong things into it and will use it for wrong or inferior purposes. However, if *God* controls it, He will fill it with Himself and all the attending benefits of His Presence, and will use it only for eternal purposes. Good news! When we belong to Him, these earthen vessels are held in His hand. Revelation 1:16 speaks of the “candlesticks” (churches) and the “stars” (servants of the churches). It says, “He (Jesus Christ) has in His right hand the seven stars.” We are in the Divine hand to be protected, to be filled, to be poured out — and to be *broken*, when necessary.

Second, we see the importance of the *content* of the vessel. We are to bring our *emptiness* to Christ in order that He might fill us with “all the *fulness* of God” (Eph. 3:19). Dear friends, let us not remain empty vessels. A vessel of gold or silver may be of considerable value though it be empty. But an “earthen vessel” is good for little if it is not available to its master. Its master *puts in* what He wishes, and *pours out* when and where He wishes. Christians are here to be filled and poured out — both at the Master’s discretion. If people are wise, they will not want the vessel as much as they want the contents of it. It is far more important to be rightly related to the Treasure than to the earthen vessel!

Third, we see the importance of the *context* in which the vessel is used. A clay jar filled with water in a house filled with water faucets will be of very little consequence. A Christian whose “ministry” is sitting in church analyzing and rejoicing in the treasure will be of little use. He is just one vessel among many. But that same vessel of water in a blistering desert could mean the difference between life and death. When we circulate “in the desert,” we are in a world of people dying of thirst, and from within us should flow rivers of living water (John 7:37-39).

Finally, we note the importance of the *condition* of the vessel. Every Christian is to be a “vessel unto honor,” not a dishonorable vessel. A vessel can be rendered useless by being dirty or cracked.

This entire symbol may seem frightfully inconsistent, that so great a treasure should be placed in an earthen vessel, like a priceless jewel enclosed in a clay box, or a lovely picture in a tawdry frame, or a king’s crown in a cracked and dingy case in a dusty museum, yet *this is precisely the strategy of our God*. This is His very best strategy, for it was His strategy in the coming of Jesus. The treasure of everything God is was wrapped in the human flesh of the body of Jesus. In the old Negro spiritual, “Sweet Little Jesus Boy,” there is a poignant line which says, “Please forgive us, Lord, we didn’t know who you wuz.” It was not the simplest thing in the world to recognize, for “this treasure” came in an “earthen vessel.”

Then, this is God’s strategy for the living of the Christian life and for Gospel advance. A vessel of clay is well-suited to represent the human body and the Christian life. The body is highly subject to damage, danger, disease, decay, and death. A vessel of clay is bound to break sooner or later. Yet, through this unworthy kind of lamp the light of God may shine. God’s best strategy for Gospel advance is still to place His treasure in an earthen vessel and charge that poor vessel to carry the treasure to someone who hasn’t yet come to share in its wealth.

Dr. A. T. Robertson, in his book, The Glory of the Ministry, tells of the Jewish Rabbi Joshua who was once taunted by an emperor's daughter on his ugly appearance. He pointed to the earthen jars which contained her father's wine. He noticed the next day that she had placed the wine in silver vessels; but it promptly turned sour. The rabbi then ventured to remind her that the humblest vessels sometimes contain the greatest treasure. Even so, God has placed His immortal tidings in our mortal hands! We are vessels of *clay*, but we *are vessels*. God *can use us, and will, if we give proper attention to the **control**, and the **content**, and the **context**, and the **condition** of the vessel.*

Are you available and expendable to God? If not, you will live a poor and meaningless life. If so, He will fill you with "the light of the knowledge of His glory" and let it shine out through the earthen vessel of your mortal life. We must remind ourselves that our *opportunity* for living this life and sharing this treasure lasts only as long as our *occupancy* in this "earthen vessel." Be sure that the treasure is within you, surrender to the Master's control, seek the place of maximum usefulness, keep the vessel clean and usable, and let the Master pour His Treasure through you.

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