

II Corinthians 4:7-15 "Priceless Treasures in Clay Pots"
March 24, 2019

Let's open our Bibles this morning to II Corinthians Chapter 4 verse 7 as we continue our study through this letter of Paul.

Paul was in Ephesus five years after he had finished planting the church in Corinth when the news came of false teachers invading the place. He loved these saints. He had prayed with them and led them to the Lord and taught them God's word, and now he was being accosted by these false teachers who wanted to bring in a legalistic understanding of God, and a kind of a cultic one at that. But in order to sell it to the church they had to get rid of Paul, their greatest influence, and so they went after Paul with great fury. They assaulted his apostolic authority; they questioned his spiritual credibility. They wanted to sell their ideas to the church, but they had to get him out of the way. And everything that Paul was seemed to be fair game. All-out attack. Paul will write in this letter, Chapter 10 verse 10, that they said of him that his letters are weighty and powerful, but his body is weak, his speech is contemptible, whatever they could get a hold of to try to discourage him, they did.

Now, Paul wasn't a very imposing guy from everything we can learn in the scriptures. Apparently, he wasn't a very good-looking guy. He didn't have charm, that's for sure. He'll tell you like he thought you should be told. His oratorical skills I think were good, but they went after those as well. He had a bad eye condition it seems like. A repulsive kind of look. He mentions it more than once. And so they painted Paul as kind of an unimpressive, common, run-of-the-mill kind of out-of-his-league guy, just so that they could get in and get to the flock, get to the sheep.

If you are in Paul's position, you are now put by them between a rock and a hard place. If you defend yourself, you could come across as kind of being proud and more interested in you than everyone else. On the other hand, if he says nothing, then the truth that he had taught might be washed away with all of the criticism against him. So he's in trouble.

Now, everything that you might think about doing he probably didn't do. In fact, here's what Paul did to kind of walk that thin line: He agreed with their complaints about him. That's pretty interesting. There was probably no one more aware than Paul in the New Testament of their sinfulness. He seems to mention his shortcomings everywhere he turns. I am the chief sinner. I am the least of the apostles. I'm a former persecutor, blasphemer. He knew who he was, but he was also amazed at what God had done in his life. So instead of arguing with these men accusing him, he agrees with them. In fact, he lets them make the case what a weak and kind of useless vessel he is, and Paul says, that's right. And then he says this: And look what God is doing with me anyway. It's a great approach, and it's one that I don't think we normally take. We usually run very quick to our own defenses. But Paul took their weakness arguments, their imperfection arguments, and he embraced them. And he said that's right. Clay pot, God's goodness. And it blew there minds.

So last time we looked at verse 1 and verse 16 where Paul said in this chapter, Here's the reason I don't lose heart, and we looked at some reasons why you and I should be encouraged, even though ministry's not easy and reaching a world like we face can be very challenging. And Paul will give us some more things to think about in verses 7 through 15, but here's the focus: His focus is on we being clay pots and the treasure that God puts in us, priceless, so that the distinction between the two is the lesson.

The old adage that you can't judge the value of something by its packaging is certainly true of us. Just look around here. No, go ahead and look. It's frightening. We're kind of like treasure buried in the dirt. Or like, I don't know, a precious pearl hidden in an ugly oyster. The human container does not at all reflect the value of the treasure that God has placed inside of it by His saving grace.

And what Paul writes in this letter, maybe more than any other, is not didactic. Didactic just means to teach. He's not teaching as a guy communicating truth to somebody else. He's writing as a gentleman who's having to face these things, and from a personal or autobiographical sense, this is what I'm going through, this is what I'm having to respond, and you can do the same thing. You really get a kind of a look into Paul's life, where he calls us to emulate his walk with God.

So Paul looks at his imperfections and all, and he acknowledges them because God is the one that uses imperfect people. If God's intention to get the word of His Son out to the world is to use us, look around again. If this is the hope of the church, then God must be glorious. He must be amazing, because we're not going to help Him very much. And yet everyone that God used in the Bible, whether it's Moses or Abraham or David or, Elijah, Peter, Paul, you, me, we're just a long line of clay pots that God has successfully used.

And reading about Paul's life over these last many months in the book of Acts, and studying II Corinthians, which is so personal and which writes so much about his sufferings, I have come to the conclusion that the church today is a bunch of wimps. Don't take it personal, unless you're part of the church. But look, our biggest concern is oftentimes "Are you going to get done in time for us to make brunch over there at the restaurant?" Or, "The game's on. I don't know if I can stay. It's too hot. It's too cold. You're going to long or too short. You're not very funny." There are 100 things that we're concerned about it. None of them have to do with the gospel. Or with people getting saved that are lost and for whom Jesus died. And I look at Paul and I said, man, there's a clay pot that was beaten to death for the one thing that mattered to him, the salvation of others. It's a pretty convicting bunch of verses. But what I want to look at with you this morning from verses 7 through 15 is some characteristics that make you a useful pot, the cracked pot as you are, that God would use us.

Beginning with this truth: Humility will render us useful to God. Look at verse 7. Paul begins by saying, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the excellency of that power might be of God and not of us." Now, the word "but" is one of those contrast words, and in here it makes a comparison between you and verse 6. Verse 6 Paul talked about that the light of the knowledge of God can be found, the glory of God, shining in the face of Jesus. And we spent some time with that last week. But suffice it to say, if you want to see what God is like, you just look at Jesus, because shining in His life is the pure representation of who God is; His heart, His love, His power. And then he goes, but look at us. That's the comparison. Look at us cracked pots. The glory of God and the face of Jesus, and then us. But God has chosen to work in this way so that He might be honored and glorified. You and I should know that this priceless and divine treasure of God's love and salvation found in His Son, God has planned and purposed to place in very lowly containers

to have it be broadcast abroad. That's the way that God has chosen to work.

In fact, the word "treasure" in this verse 7 is the exact same word as the word "ministry" in verse 1. It is a reference to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a reference to the fact that God sent His Son, His only Son, to die at Calvary, to rise from the dead, to provide forgiveness of sins, to give eternal life to those who will believe and follow Him. And when you do that -- as you have, most of you -- when you do that, you become a place where God comes to dwell. Your life becomes His home, and you now have this priceless treasure in very clay pots.

In fact, the word "earthen" here, it is a word that literally means baked clay. It is a reference to the most inexpensive, use the word cheap, abundant, easily breakable, quickly replaceable, virtually worthless vessel that was used in Jesus' day. You could get them for a buck for 1,000. They were everywhere. Sometimes treasures were hidden in them, almost to put it in plain view. If you were recently with us in Israel, we took you to Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. They were found in clay pots, just kind of sitting in a cave. Luckily a kid threw a rock and broke one, and wanted to go see what he broke.

Sometimes those same clay pots were used in homes to carry the refuse and the waste away from the house. When Paul wrote his letter to Timothy, his last letter to Timothy, he said, "In a great house there are vessels of gold and they're of silver, they're of wood, some of them are of clay, some are for honor, some are for dishonor." But then he said, "If you can cleanse yourself from the latter," the list of sin that he had made, he said you could be a vessel for honor that had been set apart for the Lord and prepared for every good work. Paul saw himself as a vessel of clay; a cheap, if you will, nonessential, except God has chosen to put into you the instructions for eternal life. You have the secret of how you get to Heaven. You know in your heart what the world needs to hear to make it from here to there. You have it, and it's in your life, cracks and all. That's where God has decided to put it. The bottom line for clay pots are, they have no intrinsic value of themselves. They are worth only as much as the valuables that you place inside them or the service they offer.

So far from disputing the disparaging assessments of these false teachers about himself, Paul agrees. He embraces the

truth. I know I'm not worth much, I know I have got very little to offer, but God is working in my life. That's the issue, that the glory. God's intention is to use weak vessels to bear this awesome eternal life-giving truth about His Son and send it out. And that's in you this morning. That's on you, that's with you, and God's intention is that it gets out from you.

When Paul was sent out there in Acts Chapter 9 after meeting the Lord on the road to Damascus, the Lord said to him through the servant, "Tell him to go his way. He's a chosen vessel for me." Same word. "He's going to bear my name before the kings and Gentiles and the children of Israel." I'm going to use him as a vessel through whom this word would get out. And Paul says the same thing here: I'm a vessel. How does Paul not get discouraged? How come he can stay so positive and not lose heart right between verses 1 and 16? It's because he realized from a humble standpoint, this isn't me. This is God working in me. I haven't got what it takes, but He does. And I get to be a vessel for His Honor. I get to carry the good news of Jesus.

Look, the world is filled with people so enamored with their own cleverness and their importance and ability, they could never be used by God. Sometimes that's true in the church. God tends to choose vessels that the world rejects. Go through the Bible and see the kind of people God chooses. Simple Galilean fishermen, traders like Matthew, kind of obscure lives like Phillip or Nathaniel or Mark, and even the smart guys, guys like Luke and Paul, who were really not very useful to the Lord until they came to the end of themselves. By using clay pots God will assure Himself one thing: He gets all the credit, doesn't He? It's hard for you to brag, "Yeah, the Lord used me and He should be glad to have me." I don't think you could say that without grinning, that the Lord would be glad -- if you say it to us, we'll laugh at you -- I mean with you. Which is why Paul said at the end of Chapter 1 in I Corinthians 1, "If you're going to glory, you got to glory in the world. The fact that God would use the likes of us is mind blowing. But the prerequisite of spiritual usefulness is humility. You see yourself as you truly are; you acknowledge that the glory of one's accomplishments is the work of God in me, and that I contain treasure that belongs to Him. He's come to live in my life.

The danger in being a vessel is that the message after a while can start to taste like you. It's like getting a drink from the hose at 2 o'clock on a hot July afternoon, and you just

want some cold water. You're not getting it. You're getting warm water that tastes like the hose. That can be a problem for us, when the contents begin to be tainted. No, no, no. Jesus wants all the glory, and Paul's point is that the fruit that has shown up in his life, like the Corinthian church that these guys are so after now, was simply a work of God and not of Paul. So whatever you say about me -- you can't speak, you don't look very good, you got no charm, you're not a very imposing figure -- Paul goes, guilty of all of that, but look what God has done. And I like that, because we can all brag about the Lord. We all may not measure up outwardly what we think we should be, but God can certainly use us.

What He won't do is share His glory with you. Pretty hard and fast rule in the Bible. Isaiah Chapter 42 verse 8, "I'm the Lord, that's My name." Don't wear it out. No, that's not what it says. "That's My name, and I won't give My glory to anyone else." Jesus said to the disciples as He was teaching them in parables about being a servant, He said, "When you've done everything that's been required of you, make sure that you say of yourself, I am an unprofitable servant. I've done just everything I've been told to do. This is what's required of me."

You remember in end of Leviticus Chapter 10 when Aaron's boys, Nadab and Abihu, came upon the scene of God lighting the fire for the first-ever sacrifice there after the tabernacle had been built, and it was a miraculous day. Fire came down from the Lord. And these boys, a little drunk it seems, at least a little tipsy, lit some strange fire, ran around the camp, and got everyone's eyes off of the Lord's great work upon them. And the fire jumped out of this place, and it burned them to death. And then the Lord sent Moses to Aaron, and He said to Moses, "Say this to Aaron: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before the people I must be glorified.'" Two things that for me is the most important things in ministry: No. 1, God's holy, I'm not; and No. 2, any fruit that comes from my life is because God's done it, not me. Let Him be honored. He doesn't share His glory with anyone. So it was God's work, and Paul was willing to admit that, and realized that he played a part, but it wasn't him, it was the Lord. He was the cracked pot. He was the clay pot.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Chapter 5 verse 16 of Matthew, to us, that we should do our works before men let our light so shine before men, that they would see our God

work, and seeing our God works they would glorify our Father who's in Heaven. Do things in such a way that God gets honor. Paul was humble, and in that humility, God could use him greatly. Nothing got in the way. God had found a vessel He could fill up and pour out. Jesus would say in that same Sermon on the Mount, be careful that you don't do your alms before men to be seen of them.

So using the frail and the weak and the fallible is possible, because salvation and the power to save is not from the human messenger. It comes from the divine message and from the person that we preach.

So first and foremost, you want God to use you greatly in this life, be humble. Realize you're just a container. You're just a container. And that should be important enough. Somebody opens a bottle of perfume, they usually don't go, "Great bottle." They usually go, "Nice smell."

Secondly, if you're going to be a vessel that God uses, it's going to hurt. There is pain in the process of being a clay pot. It's not going to be an easy road. Paul writes in verse 8 these words: "We are hard-pressed on every side, but we haven't been crushed; we are perplexed, but we're not in despair; we are persecuted, but we're not forsaken; we've been struck down, but we are not destroyed." Now, I want you to get it clearly, that is Paul's humility in his weaknesses. It did not cripple or destroy, but actually strengthened Paul in ministry. It had been a hard road to follow, but he found tremendous encouragement in his frailty, because anything that he didn't have power for, he realized God could show His power, and frailty left him unhindered in terms of self.

I don't know anyone in the New Testament more beaten up than Paul. He died, it would seem, in his 60s. I'll bet he looked 150. You just know he had scars, he spent one too many rounds in the ring. And mercilessly beaten by everyone near him. He has suffered and been battered -- you read this -- this book, just read this book, and you go, my goodness, what kind of life is this? Let me read you what he writes toward the end of Chapter 11. He said, "I am more: in labors abundantly, I'm in stripes above measure, I'm in prison more frequently, I'm in death often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I've been beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times shipwrecked; spent a day and night in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of water, in perils of robbers, of my own countrymen, in peril of the Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, in the sea,

perils of false brethren. I'm weary and we're in toil, sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings, in cold and nakedness." And then he puts, oh, yeah, and then I got to take care of the church every day.

I mean I don't want to have to write that about my life. We are usually interested in how life can be as easy as possible, because "I want to know the Lord. He blesses me all the time." But there's a price to pay if you're going to, it's one thing to have the Lord living in you; it's another thing to have the Lord working through you. And that's where Paul lived his life. No matter the cost. It is painful, but I'm surviving it. It is painful, but I'm invincible in the Lord.

Paul's unimposing persona caused a big dilemma for these false teachers, because they had to answer the question how can a guy that looks that bad have done so much in the lives of many people, impacted so many? And the answer was, God is in me. God is in me. But Paul was willing to pay the price. Notice that here in these two verses there are four contrasting statements that Paul used to demonstrate his own inabilities to face what he was facing, but that his inability was not crippled by them, and so God was able to get him through it. It's painful, but we're through it. But being available can be painful.

I think sometimes we won't share with people, we won't witness to people, I had a lady go "What are you guys going to do when you go out to do fliers?" I go, "We're going to put them on the door." She goes, "I don't want to do that." I go, "Why?" She said, "What if somebody asks what I'm doing?" Ooh, there's persecution like you've never faced. "Just say this, 'I'm putting a flyer on your door hoping you'll join us for Easter.'" "I don't know if I can say that." "Well, what are you going to say, 'I was here to rob the house, but now you're home. I'm going to go next door?'" It's craziness. Not exactly suffering for righteousness.

Paul had certainly been beaten down, but I'll tell you what: He knew God alone could work, and that the message had to be delivered, and the word wouldn't go out void, and so he didn't lose heart. Oh, man, this is going to be hard, but life in this world shouldn't be that easy. Despite the costs, he knew the Lord would give him victory. So look what he writes: "We are hard-pressed on every side, yet we're not crushed." The word hard-pressed in Greek, it means to be squeezed. I am being squeezed into a corner, but we're not popping. We're not crushed. God is most glorified in weak vessels. I

think it was Hudson Taylor the fellow that founded Inland China Missions, who wrote about this verse, "All of God's giants have been weak individuals who've done great things because they were acutely aware that they couldn't do them." It's a great quote. Tough going, but we're going nonetheless.

Secondly, he says, "We are perplexed, but we're not in despair." Now, that's a world play in Greek. It literally reads "aporeo," and then "exaporeo." It literally means we're at a loss. We don't know what comes next. We don't know what God is doing, but not knowing doesn't exasperate us, doesn't push us to the wits end, or if you will, here's the way I wrote it for myself: I'm at a loss mentally, but I'm not losing my mind. So often we hear from Christians, "I don't know what God is doing. I don't know why He hasn't answered. Waa." The whining thing that we do. Paul goes, I don't know what God's up to. I don't know why He let this happen, but whatever He's doing, He's doing it. We're going to continue on. We are perplexed. We don't know. We haven't got an answer for this. But we're not despairing.

Thirdly, we are being persecuted, but we haven't been forsaken. We're going through it. We don't feel like God's abandoned us. If you want the definition, write this down: Hunted by men, but not left behind by God. Paul was sure that God was with him, though he was going through it. Man, I know sometimes as Christians, I don't know what the Lord is doing. I don't know where God is in this thing. I wish He would just -- yeah, whatever. There's a whole world that needs to hear about Him. Just go tell them.

And then finally he says, "We're struck down, but we're not destroyed." Struck down is a wrestling term. It literally means body slammed. In modern boxing terms, knocked down, but not out. Those of you that are older remember commercials, took a licking (Congregation: Keeps on ticking). Thank you very much. Great contrast as the vessels pour out life-giving content. It can be a hard road to be a witness for Christ, but a glorious one, because the Lord is going to accomplish His will, and that was Paul was at rest, man. I mean, look at the words that he uses here. Hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. But he follows it up with all of the assurances. I'm not crushed, I'm not in despair, I'm not forsaken, I'm not destroyed, because the Lord's with me. Clay pots. In danger for the sake of the glory of God. That's why I don't lose heart.

I had a friend of mine in college who used to say to me, "Well, the Lord's still on the throne," which to be honest with you I hated, because he usually said it after I was complaining about something, and then this jerk, "Oh, well, at least the Lord's still --" "Oh, shut up. Go sleep on the patio." But he was right. It was the power of God that made Paul fearless and formidable, and verse 16, that's why he didn't lose heart.

Thirdly -- humility, suffering. Thirdly, a clay pot must learn sacrifice because that alone will bring fruitfulness. Suffering or sacrifice brings fruitfulness. Verse 10 says this: "For we who live are always being delivered to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also could be manifest," or made known if you will, "in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you. And when we have that same spirit of faith, according --" I'll stop at verse 12. And "then death is working in us, but life is working in you," now, Paul just summarizes what he said in verse 8 and 9 by indicating that his sufferings were constant. The change of tense in verse 10 is that it is constant. It is a present tense, unrelieved difficulty. No letup. Paul would write to the Corinthians in his first letter, "I'm in jeopardy every hour." He will say in I Corinthians 15:31, "I die daily." I don't think he wasn't an exaggerator. I mean, that's how he lived his life to get the gospel out. Shame on us.

The idea that Paul was carrying about in his body the dying of Jesus is a powerful kind of a rebuke to the allegations of the false prophets which said, well, Paul is suffering because God is mad at him, which wasn't true at all. He was chastening for his hidden sin. Paul says no way. Look at the fruit. And besides, suffering isn't always a sign of God's displeasure. Sometimes it's a badge of honor for just serving Him in a world that doesn't want anything to do with Him. Hated me, they're going to hate you. So suffering for the cause of Christ shouldn't surprise us. Jesus said, "You'll be hated by all men for My name's sake, but endure to the end. You'll be saved."

So you want to be a useful vessel in God's hands, realize that to bear fruit you're going to have to be willing to make sacrifices: Sometimes your friend, sometimes your gain, sometimes your pleasure, sometimes your ease. Let me ask you something, and you ask yourself, when's the last time you prayed with someone to receive the Lord? Where you just -- you were there, and you're the guy, you're the girl. Or when was the last time you shared with someone what God has done

in your life? You see, that's going to bring difficulty, but it also brings fruit. Paul showed the effects of the beatings upon his life, and then he pointed to all the churches he left behind, and the hundreds of thousands of people that were saved. There's probably no more fruitful man in the New Testament than Paul.

He uses the word dying here, but he doesn't use the word "thanatos," which is the word, the regular Greek word for dying. He uses the word "necrotos," which means dying, not dead. We're not dead, we just feel like it. We're in that process of, picking up our cross and following Him.

In verse 11 Paul states what he said in verse 10, except this time he changes it from "I" to "we." All of us live in a hostile environment, and it's into this arena that God has sent us. I'll tell you what, when I got saved in the 19 -- early '70s, late '60s, when I started going to church there was a lot of embracing of Christians. That's pretty well gone. Christians are just nutty now; right? They're viewed by the world as problematic. Everyone can have their opinion, but you can't, because you're lunatics. And yet this is the people that we're supposed to reach with the gospel of Jesus. It's going to cost. There's going to have to be sacrifices made, but we're going to have to stand our grounds.

So Paul had marks on his clay pot from ministry. He'd been scarred by stoning and scarred by beating, and marked for preaching the cross, and over and over he came to Him, and every day he faced death while bringing the gospel of life. So Paul suffers. He dies. The people that hear him live. Same thing with you. God has saved you. Now he's put you out there as an offering. And maybe you'll die in the process, at least your reputation and maybe your success in the world, but in the process of that sharing your faith other people can find life, and that's the way it's supposed to be.

Priceless treasure held in clay pots. Finally, verse 13, 14, and 15 says this: Clay pots can be faithful, and they can be hopeful, and they can be worshipful, because in the end this is exactly what you want to be: A vessel God will use. Verse 13 says this: "And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, 'I believed and therefore I spoke.'" We read that this morning in Psalm 116, "We also believe and therefore we speak." Paul's verse 13 claim is he can be faithful because he's preaching a message that first moved his own heart. In other words, I've

believed, that's why I'm speaking. If I didn't believe it, then I couldn't endure it. If I didn't believe it, I probably wouldn't go and risk anything to preach it. If I didn't believe it, I'd probably be shut down fairly easily, but I do believe it. And maybe sometimes that's the problem with the church. We're told we should go share our faith, but we're not sure we believe it; at least not believing it enough to speak up, to speak out, to reach out. If we did, how could we be silenced?

Penn Jillette, you might have heard the story of the magicians Penn and Teller, he claims to be an atheist. About five years ago there was a Christian that got on stage with him and started to give him the gospel, and I mean the guy wouldn't let up. And Penn started kind of insulting him and calling him out and challenging him, and the guy goes, "Well, whatever you're going to say to me, that's fine, but you got to know, without Jesus you're going to go to hell." And he just stood his ground. The next week or so Penn came out with a statement in the news that said, "I don't believe what this guy was telling me. However, if he believes that, he has to treat me this way. If he truly believes that without Jesus people are going to go to hell, then he is obligated to do whatever he can to tell me." That was his observation. Now, he didn't listen, but his analysis is right. If you truly believe what you're preaching and what you're believing, then you got to tell someone, no matter the cost.

And so Paul talked about being faithful. And he says we preach by our faith. We preach what we believe. It's touched our lives; now we want it to touch yours.

Second of all, as far as being hopeful, "We know that He who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you." Look, this life when it is over is not over. The message that we preached is also applied to us. We're going to Heaven. How do you stop a guy like this? You don't. Hey, kill me, but the message doesn't change.

And finally, he says in verse 15, "For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God." Paul was thrilled because his life was all about people getting saved. In the living and the dying, in being the clay pot, the word was shared and souls were saved, and they came one at a time, and then there was 100, and pretty soon there was 1,000.

We have four weeks to go before Easter. We'd love to see you get out there and tell somebody, invite someone. Don't just let the guy in the room behind you, who's so faithful, do it. You should be the clay pot. Well, what if -- I don't care. Maybe they'll yell at you, make fun of you. Ooh. Suffering for Jesus like never before. I'll tell you who's suffering for Jesus: The 20,000 Christians that have been killed in Africa this week. They're suffering for Christ. We don't even know what suffering means. But God has put us here because we're wimps. He doesn't put us there because we couldn't handle it, but we can handle this. So pick up some fliers. You have five in your bulletin. That's the least you can do. If you want to do more, there's some in the back table, okay? Amen?