

EARTHEN VESSELS

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

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A Trashman's Library

Near the end of 1997, Jose Gutierrez began his job as a garbage truck driver for the waste management system in Bogota, the capital of Columbia. While working his nightly route, he was struck by the potential of what he saw daily in the dump. Out of a sense of curiosity, he fished out an unwanted copy of Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*.

Over the next several years, he made a habit of fishing out books. Slowly but surely, he collected an impressive library that he made available to his modest neighborhood. With help from his wife, Gutiérrez decided to build a community library in his own home. Before long, to enter Gutiérrez's house was to go through a labyrinth of thousands of stacked books. The house was filled with classics of all kinds, all rescued from the garbage.

Ten years later, it became the Fundación La Fuerza de las Palabras (Strength of Words Foundation), a free library now used by families wanting to help their children with their homework. There is nothing special about his simple home on a hilltop in his meager neighborhood, but local kids crowd into the house during weekend "library hours." They have come to know the humble home as more than Señor Jose's house—it's a priceless treasury.

He became known in the neighborhood with a nickname, "Lord of the Books." Since then, the lord of the books has rescued and distributed more than 50,000 books to hundreds of community centers and rural schools around the country.ⁱ

How does an uneducated, garbage collector become the "lord of books?" He discovered that a treasure was held in the trash. All of this, because one man learned that sometimes things of value are contained in the oddest of places. Something of great worth can be found in what the world would toss aside.

This is something like the argument that Paul is making in 2 Corinthians 4. God has chosen to put treasure in earthen vessels, in clay pots. **"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:7).**

The metaphor is overflowing with meaning and can serve us well today. I'm not sure how Paul was led to choose it, but I do know why. In many ways, this image is brought to us in his letter to the Corinthians as a necessary defense of his ministry.

On more than one occasion we get a glimpse of the problems in Corinth. It was a place wrought with flashy, pretentious rivals whose appearance and delivery were a stark contrast to Paul's. The Corinthians were accustomed to refined speech and appearance. They expected the glory of the proclaimer to match the glory of the proclamation. Paul offers for them, and for us, several warnings.

1. Don't confuse the container for the contents.

In his first letter, Paul had well documented the woes of Corinth. There are **"quarrels among you."** He wrote. **"What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas' ..."**

In the competition for followers, some were likely asking, "How can he speak of such a power so unimpressively?" Even more, "How can one whose life is so marked with dishonor bring a message of salvation? Where is the glory in the strange amount of hardship and suffering he seems to endure?" He says this verbatim: **For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." (2 Cor. 10:10)**

They are, in essence, asking "How can such a wonderful treasure can be properly displayed in such a lowly clay pot?" (Garland, 219) They've confused the container for the contents. David Garland writes that, "Paul must next explain how this glorious ministry can be incarnated in weakness and suffering because some in Corinth see no glory about him at all."ⁱⁱ

Rather than defend his appearance or his speech or his struggles, Paul defends the power of God at work within him. In fact, Paul is arguing that it is in his frailty that he can better convey the true comfort and glory of the gospel. He is living proof that this is only the extraordinary power of God in his ministry and not the work of such an ordinary vessel. Rather than discredit him, Paul says this points to the power of the gospel.

2 Corinthians 4 has just declared:

⁵ For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake.⁶ 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.

Paul knew that he was limited, but he knew the limitless power of God. We know our weaknesses, but the infinite God has none. The truth Paul knows is that God has taken His most valuable possession and placed it inside of you.

Oliver Franks was one of the most distinguished and respected men in Great Britain when he was made ambassador to the United States in 1948. In a post-war world, and on the brink of a cold war, he was in consistent communication with the President on one side of the world and the Prime Minister on the other. Because of his role, it was often important to communicate

vital and confidential messages to one or the other, between Washington and London. Telephone calls were too easily intercepted.

There was a diplomatic bag that went back and forth every day, intended to transport confidential documents by air across the Atlantic. For most of the top-secret content, this was his method. But on occasion, when something was desperately urgent, he wouldn't trust it to a bag that everybody knew was important. He would put it into an ordinary envelope and send it through the regular mail.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Corinthians were distracted, looking for a better envelope, confused by Paul's unremarkable appearance. Paul says you shouldn't mistake the container for the contents. Second, he also says:

2. Don't lose sight of what kind of container you are.

A few years ago, roommates at the State University of New York needed a sofa for their apartment, so they went to a Salvation Army. They needed one of those outdated plaid or floral couches that left a cloud of dust if you slap the cushion. That's what they could afford, and they found it for \$20.

One night they were watching a movie together and one of the roommates felt something strange in the armrest and decided to investigate. He's braver than most. What they found there left the three of them in shock. Inside the armrest was an envelope containing \$700. They didn't stop there.

After a frantic search, the three friends uncovered several more envelopes. Before the night was over, they had discovered \$41,000 in their \$20 couch. But along with all the cash, the roommates also found a name, the rightful owner of the money. Soon they were knocking on her door.

It turned out that the woman and her husband had saved up the money over the course of 30 years and hidden it inside the couch. After the woman's husband passed away, the bed seemed empty, and she started sleeping on that couch. She had completely forgot about the money hidden in the sofa. Her daughter didn't know about it either, and one day, she decided to buy her mother a new bed, so they donated the couch to Salvation Army. The family found out that all those years their mother and deceased father had been keeping treasure in what they thought was trash.^{iv}

Why would God put a treasure in earthen vessels? Why use clay pots? Jars of mud? He does not have in mind some beautiful work of mosaic art or colorful décor. He doesn't choose the image of Solomon's gold drinking glasses, or timeless bronze urn, or the exquisite inlaid pottery of ancient Greece.

In the ancient world, all kinds of things were kept in these earthenware vessels. Their only significance was in what they contained. You might use pottery to hold flowers or beautify an outdoor space. They have some value. We might be better off putting this into modern day language. Paul is saying, “We have this treasure in Tupperware.” No, those still have too much value to some of you. It’s like he’s saying we have a treasure in Tupperware made from grandma’s reused Cool Whip containers. We have this treasure in repurposed turkey lunch meat containers. We have this treasure in Ziploc bags that you’ve rinsed and reused.

Earthenware vessels were common to every household in biblical times. Paul is likening himself to an unattractive, everyday utensil. They were frail, fragile, and expendable. Wood was more secure; metal was more durable; gold was more valuable. Even glass could be melted down and reused if broken. You’ve heard of the iron age, bronze age, and stone age. The reason there is no “pottery age” is because it doesn’t last!

No one competes for the clay medal. You been told to buy gold, but no one tries to convince you to protect your equity by buying mud. It is unattractive and common. It is basically worthless.

Paul had said this much in 2 Timothy 2:

²⁰ Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. ²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these *things*, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

Paul knows that the vessels into which God has chosen to put His treasure are made from the dust of the earth. Some men boast of their strength or stamina, some of their self-sufficiency or resilience. Paul makes it abundantly clear that he can take no credit for what God is doing in him and the gospel does not depend on human strength. In fact, Paul’s weakness is the precondition for divine power. His frailty serves as the grounds for Christ’s power.^y

When he is least reliant on his own resources and power is when, by Christ’s strength, he is the most powerful. This is the story of man from the very beginning, when **“God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”** (Genesis 2:7). God, in His infinite wisdom, named him Adam, literally meaning “red” and deriving from *adamah*, meaning earth. It was within this clay that God had spoken forth “Let Us make man in Our image.”

See, Paul knew he was a jug made of mud. But he also knew what he was created to contain.

3. Don’t forget what you were created to contain.

Paul is clear that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels *so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.*” The Scriptures are abounding with men and women who discover these truths themselves. Abraham and Sarah, at the age 99 and 90

years old, thought it impossible to conceive God's promised child. When Isaac comes, they laugh. No one thought they had figured out a new trick to marriage. Instead, all were forced to say, "Behold, the power of God."

Moses had nothing to offer but slow speech and a simple staff when God had him throw it down before Pharaoh to show God's power and hold it up in the air to make the seas part in two. No one thought Moses had learned sorcery. They said, "Behold, the power of our God." Joshua took his misfit band of slaves around the walls of Canaanite cities blowing trumpets until the walls fall. No one took up trumpets as weapons. They cried out "Behold, the power of the God of Israel." When Gideon led 300 men with torches, trumpets, and clay pots against the Midianites and prevailed, no one thought that clay pots are the next advancement in weaponry. They could say nothing except, "Behold the power of God!"

It is precisely when our resources are insufficient and our might incapable that God can make known His all-sufficient, almighty power. If you believe you are ill-equipped or incapable, you underestimate the treasure inside. What a joy to know that all I need to display the sufficiency of Christ to others is the humility to acknowledge how insufficient I am.

So, Paul can say, **"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body." (2 Cor. 4:8-10)**

Not only is it a temptation to confuse the container with the contents, not only is it easy to lose sight of what kind of container you are, but you can also forget what you were created to contain. God is saying to us that if we will say, "We are merely clay pots," He will say, "I can make my power made known through you." But if we insist to God that we are a treasure, He will say, "You have amounted to nothing more than clay pots."

To those who hear the call of God this morning and find in it too tall a task or too great a burden, Paul says you have not fully understood what is contained in you. To those who would prop themselves up and polish the outside, concerned only with themselves, Paul says you have mistaken the vessel for the treasure.

Dead Sea Scrolls

Around the same time Oliver Franks began sending top secret news through ordinary mail, Bedouin teenagers were tending their goats and sheep near the ancient settlement of Qumran, located on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea in what is now known as the West Bank.

Some of the most dramatic biblical stories are set in the rocky caves of this region, between the Judean hills and the Dead Sea. For hundreds of years the Judean Desert held secrets of days that have long since left its sands, until one day they were revealed by a young Bedouin shepherd in 1947.

As the story goes, a shepherd of the Ta'amireh tribe left his flock of sheep and goats to search for a stray. Amid the crumbling limestone cliffs that line the northwestern rim of the Dead Sea, around the site of Qumran, he found a cave in the crevice of a steep rocky hillside. Intrigued and in search of his stray, he threw a stone into the dark cave, only to be startled by the sound of breaking pots. When that curiosity led him to enter the cave, the young Bedouin found a mysterious group of large clay jars. Some were empty, but looking closer, he discovered they were full of old papyrus scrolls. He had stumbled on the greatest find of the century, what became known as the "Dead Sea Scrolls" In these were ancient texts, some of the oldest manuscripts of books like Isaiah. It was a landmark discovery of some of the most valuable scrolls ever found.^{vi}

If you have never known what it is to let the Word of God take root in your life, hear it announced today from the lips of Paul and from the powerful movement of God that burst forth from the empty tomb: You were created to be filled with this treasure, the light of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This is a message about you and about the power of God.

To all who hold this powerful Word of God in your clay pot, come out from whatever cave you've been stuck in. Leave behind the trap that says your life is about the vessel. Let go of the lie that your pot must be polished or preserved. The one who made you used the dust of the earth for a reason.

He knows how easily a fragile vessel cracks, and if you're not ready to be broken, you will sit in darkness. The Word of Life hidden in you will remain just that. If you've been portraying yourself as the treasure, here is the good news for you today:

He knows you are an earthen vessel.

He knows that you are a cracked container.

He knows that we are jars of clay.

He knows that you're a jug of mud.

But he fills us up so that as we live our lives in this world the glory of the light shining from the face of Jesus Christ bursts out, and those who would have never known the truth about God will see Him because God put a treasure inside of us.

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- ⁱ Sean Coughlin, “Dustbin man builds free library of thrown away books,” June 6, 2017: <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-40173423>; Julian Banguera, “‘Lord of the books’ creates a valuable library from rubbish,” June 16, 2018: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/lord-of-the-books-creates-a-valuable-library-from-rubbish-1.3529219>
- ⁱⁱ David Garland, *2 Corinthians (New American Commentary)*, 218-220.
- ⁱⁱⁱ NT Wright, *2 Corinthians (Paul For Everyone)*, 43.
- ^{iv} Associated Press, “New York roommates find \$40,000 in sofa and return cash to owner,” *The Guardian*, May 15, 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/16/new-york-roommates-find-cash-in-sofa-return-owner>; Newsner, “Students buy a sofa at a thrift store – and discover a widow’s secret treasure inside,” Nov 8, 2016: <https://en.newsner.com/news/students-buy-a-sofa-at-a-thrift-store-and-discover-a-widow-s-secret-treasure-inside/>
- ^v T.B. Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul’s Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*. SNTSMS 86 (Cambridge: University Press, 1996) 166.
- ^{vi} The Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, accessed 7/21/2021: https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/learn-about-the-scrolls/discovery-and-publication?locale=en_US