



2 Corinthians 4:1-7, 'We hold this treasure in clay pots'.

Clay pots come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and styles. They can be very useful and appreciated. But their main point is their contents – whatever they contain or carry, and especially so if those are valuable treasure! But then the 'useful' clay pot may even hide or hinder access to the contained treasure!

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul describes us as 'clay pots', bearing treasure from God, the news of the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. He expands on this in verses 1-7 of 2 Corinthians 4 and on our privilege in receiving and being able to share this good news.

In 2 Corinthians Paul describes a range of his struggles and challenges in serving Jesus, acknowledging the reality of pressures and problems in his ministry. But he is encouraged! He is realistic about the challenges he faces, expanded on from verse 8 onwards, but his primary focus is on encouragement and 'not losing heart' – as mentioned repeatedly in chapter 4 verses 1 & 10, and ch.5 verses 6 & 8!

Chapters 4 and 5 on this theme begin with his affirmation in 4:1 – “Because of God’s mercy, we are given this ministry”! The task is “to set forth the truth plainly” v 2; and to “preach Jesus Christ as Lord” v 5. Here is the vital task for each believer in Jesus, for every person who has been accepted by God as his child, forgiven and blessed through Jesus, and called to follow him, acknowledging him as our merciful Saviour and Lord with authority over our life.

In verse 7 of chapter 4 there are three things for us to note:

1. TREASURE

Treasure stories are exciting. And here is a truly exciting treasure story. The good news of the treasure of knowing God and becoming his child and friend. J I Packer’s excellent book Knowing God highlights the wonder and glory of the privilege we have of actually being able to know God, becoming his child and friend, being saved by him from the consequences of our sin and allowed to serve him. No wonder Paul says in verse 1 that it is by God’s mercy and goodness that we have the privilege of this ministry of sharing the good news of salvation through Jesus.

In chapters 2 and 3, Paul has been writing about showing and sharing God’s glory and salvation to others and now he realises afresh how good God is to allow him to bear this treasure to others, and he is encouraged “not to lose heart”. He wants to present the truth rightly and righteously. So in verse 5 he clarifies ‘We preach not

ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord', in an amazing message of reconciliation with God, because it is in Jesus that we have and share "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" – as in chapter 5:20...

²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

So this message is important for others and they need to hear it, and see it working out in our lives and relationships and expression. And here we are called and commissioned to present the message faithfully, in integrity, constantly and consistently. In ch 4:2 Paul highlights that he does not and we must not use deceptive, underhand methods, or shallow manipulation or cheap persuasion, diluting the message to achieve easy acceptance. We may be simple clay pots, but we must be clean pots!

In Sibü, Sarawak some years ago, in the front courtyard of a church of another grouping, I remember seeing a large shrine to Mary. In the presentation of its architecture and style and red and gold colouring, it was very similar to the structures and style used for shrines of Buddha. And sure enough, in front of it I saw a woman bowing in worship with waving joss sticks just as she would in honouring and worshipping and praying to Buddha. To what degree did this presentation of Christianity merge in people's minds with Buddhist beliefs and practices, making the Christian message easier for people of another religious background to accept but dangerously diluting and confusing the message in a false syncretism? So Paul asserts, we must be careless or deceptive or lazy or neglectful and not cheapen the treasure as we share the gospel, but present Jesus as Son of God, Saviour, and Lord. As Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:15 "correctly handling the Word of Truth" – with its associated challenge to each of us to keep growing in our relationship with Jesus and our knowledge of his Word and its application in our daily life. This takes serious commitment and effort, whatever our age or stage in life as Christians. So Paul can affirm that he is living on public display as a faithful servant of God's Word and under the authority and direction of God's Word.

This treasure is so important to share BECAUSE it is God's truth. How zealous are we for others to know Jesus as Saviour? Our friend Alan Ang, a former Bible Society representative in Singapore, was a zealous witness and salesman of the Scriptures. Sometimes he met with very open responsiveness but on other occasions he was rejected and discouraged. But he commented that if he was down, he would go down Lovers' Lane selling his Bible portions, because he could always make good sales there since people would buy fast to get rid of him!! In his witness, he talked of the four thicknesses: Thick Skin to cope with embarrassment or rejection; Thick Stomach Lining to cope with erratic meals and too much junk food; Thick Soles of His Feet to cope with walking to reach people; & Thick Skin on His Knees for much prayer for the people he would meet and talk with! How do we measure on our thicknesses as we carry and share the treasure of Christ's salvation??

And how is our sensitivity to God's timing as we have opportunities to share the treasure? I always remember Mary's anointing of Christ's feet with her alabaster container of fragrant oil. She faced pointed criticism for her sacrificial love – but if she had delayed even one week, it would have been too late and Jesus would already have been crucified! Paul actively used his opportunities to share the treasure and urges us to do the same.

2. But these verses also talk of the role of **THE CONTAINER**.

Even if beautiful and useful, the container pales in comparison with the precious treasure, and Paul reminds us that we function as 'jars of clay', common earthenware pots! Far from perfect, not glorious, but important because we bear the good news of Jesus. Paul earlier acknowledged his own weakness and frailty ("I came to you in weakness and fear and trembling" – 1 Cor 2:3), but his commitment here in 2 Cor 4:5 was to "preach Jesus Christ as Lord" and his view of the messengers, the containers, was "ourselves your servants for Jesus sake".

Jeremiah 18 highlights that the potter makes the clay pot for his purpose and has sovereign control over it. The wonder for us is that God deigns to use us, his creations, and gives us the privilege of sharing the treasure of the good news of Jesus with the people around us. And with the privilege comes the responsibility to fulfil that role and not just hide the treasure!

Sadly, our tendency is to preserve the pot, safeguarding our own peace or comfort or security, even at the cost of concealing the treasure. What an inverted scale of values! Hudson Taylor, famous missionary pioneer in China and founder of the China Inland Mission/OMF had an older brother. Hudson urged his brother to join him and go to China as a missionary. His brother's response was to reject the thought with the comment "I'm not going to bury myself in inland China! I am going to develop my business and make a name for myself!" He did develop his business, and enlarged his shop to a double-width frontage, with his name in large signage across the front. And he died and is no longer remembered while his brother Hudson who served God in China had a hugely significant and productive life of service for Jesus.

I like Billy Graham's attitude. He was once asked "How do you cope with all the publicity and acclaim from your ministry?" His response was to ask "Do you remember when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey the week before he was crucified, and all the crowds cheered and waved and put palm branches and coats on the ground where Jesus rode? If the donkey had thought it was all for him, he would have been totally wrong. They were cheering for Jesus." Billy Graham added: "I am just the donkey, bearing Jesus to the people!" God seeks "faithful humble servants". As Paul expressed it in Philippians 2:5-7 "Have the same attitude as Jesus, who made himself of NO reputation" and further in 1 Cor 4:2 "What is required in servants is that they will be FAITHFUL"!

So, as God's 'chosen clay pots', it is important that we are Clean - pure, holy, righteous; Empty - of self-centredness, pride, personal priorities; and Available – willing and responsive to our Lord. This is Paul's thought in 2 Timothy 2:21 – that we would be "a vessel for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work".

Paul was not afraid of any suffering and trial, recognising that God would guard and use the 'clay pot' while Paul was faithfully guarding and bearing the treasure, and that the eternal results from his service far outweighed any temporary or temporal suffering. (2 Cor 4:17).

3. So for Paul we see the importance ultimately of **THE PURPOSES OF GOD.**

In ch. 4:11 Paul expresses his goal as “so that Christ’s life may be revealed in our mortal bodies” and in 4:7 he acknowledges “that the all-surpassing power is from God and not us” and in 4:15 desires that others might be saved and in turn give thanks and glory to God.

Paul recognises the reality of problems and pressures. He is not naïve or simplistic, but he relies on and rejoices in God’s strength and activity in and through him. As he describes it a little later in 2 Corinthians 12:9, God’s promise to him was: “My grace is sufficient for you and my strength is made perfect in [your] weakness”.

A discouraged preacher once wrote to the well-known Scottish preacher and writer, Alexander Whyte, concerning his thoughts of giving up and leaving the ministry. Whyte’s response to him was “Never think of giving up preaching, The angels around the throne of God envy you your great work!” It IS a privilege to serve God and to tell others about him, and to see his purposes worked out, even though we may often not see the full picture at the time as we struggle through the process.

One of our friends in East Malaysia, Max, a leader in the church in Sabah, was arrested by the Security Service some years ago for his clear witness to Muslim people. He was interrogated and detained for some months and underwent some very difficult experiences, but was ultimately released and courageously continued to witness clearly to Muslim communities in Sabah. And not only was his faith and commitment to evangelism strengthened through all his difficult experiences, but the church members in Sabah who had stood with him and prayed earnestly for him, were also strengthened in their trust in God and obedience to Christ’s command to share the gospel with those around them.

How is our view of ourselves and our lives as God’s ‘clay pots’ and of the treasure we bear of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ? What do we see of God’s purposes for us, in us, and through us?

May we be like Paul and see the purposes and calling of God, appreciate the privilege of the treasure of the gospel of Christ, acknowledge our limitations and role as ‘clay pots’ and rejoice in the ministry we have received through God’s mercy, and as in ch. 4:1,16 & 5:6,8, may we not be discouraged or lose heart!