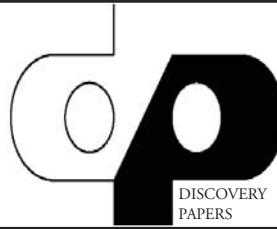


A JAR

**SERIES: IDENTITY CHECK:
LESSONS IN AUTHENTIC FAITH**



Catalog No. 4945
2 Corinthians 4:1-15
4th Message
Steve Zeisler
November 20, 2005

In each Scripture text we've studied in this series, we've discovered a different metaphor. The one in the text at hand is probably the most familiar and self-evident of them all. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves ..." (2 Corinthians 4:7). Earthen vessels, or clay jars, were the most ordinary things in the world in the first century A.D. They were in common usage everywhere. They weren't like stone vessels, hard and strong, or like gold vessels, beautiful and valuable. Somebody said that maybe a good modern analogy would be a milk carton, the most ordinary of containers. God inhabits ordinary containers and brings honor to Himself by doing so.

As we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4944), the end of chapter 3 is about worship. Whenever a person turns to the Lord, a veil is taken away. The veil has acted as a blindfold, but when it is taken away, the believer is allowed to see God in new ways and is transformed. "Beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, [we] are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory ..." (2 Corinthians 3:18). Authentic Christianity, which we are claiming for ourselves as our identity, will make us worshipers of God who adore Him and rest in His presence. We will often turn to and delight in the presence of God.

Now we turn from worship to ministry. We are also called to represent our God in the world. We are called upon to have a faith that makes a difference in our communities, in the workplace, and in our families. Earlier in chapter 3 Paul used the phrase "servants [or ministers] of a new covenant." Now he returns to the idea of ministry in 4:1. The issue before us is whether our lives have changed enough that we have something to offer our neighbors, friends, and families.

Leslie and I recently spent some wonderful days vacationing in Mexico. When we made our return trip, every stage of it was packed with people. The roads to the airport were packed. The airport was unbelievably jammed with people in long lines, with craziness on all sides. The airplane was absolutely filled. There were crying children, honeymooners who spent the whole flight entwined, and a woman sitting to my right who drank continuously. Some

people were short-tempered and tired, some festive and happy. There were old and young, speaking a variety of languages. It was a sea of humanity. I was put in mind of Jesus' compassion when he looked at the crowds around him and saw them as sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34).

Do we have something to say that will make a difference to real people in the real world, with real struggles, fears, and anxieties?

Those through whom God speaks

2 Corinthians 4:1-4:

¹Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, ²but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, ⁴in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Paul asserts in verse 1 that we have received mercy and we are to minister God's mercy. But he recognizes a temptation: to lose heart. Having been given this ministry, we might grow discouraged in carrying it out. The reason discouragement occurs to Paul is that apparently a challenge has been raised that his gospel is veiled: "Your ministry isn't going anywhere. You're not persuading anybody." Some opponents of apostolic Christianity had come to the church in Corinth. They were trying to win away the Corinthian church to their perspective. They were ridiculing Paul and claiming he had nothing to say.

Such attacks have been repeated throughout history. The ancient and eternal message of Christ crucified is frequently rejected by the world around us. So the ques-

tions persist, “If we make great claims for our calling and our message, why aren’t we doing any better? Why aren’t we on the ascendancy instead of on the sidelines?”

Paul has an answer to these questions. He doesn’t say we need to change our approach to become more impressive, make a bigger splash, create more buzz. He says we should refuse to compromise in any way and instead let God speak.

2 Corinthians 4:5-6:

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

Two assertions are made in these verses. The first is that the ministry we’ve been called to, the persuasion we are to engage in, concerns the most important thing in the world. It’s about life and death. He has already observed that the god of this world, that is, the devil, has darkened the minds of people. He has placed heavy veils over human hearts and we’re no match for him. What slogan will I think of that will undo the lies of the evil one? What dramatic presentation can I create to penetrate deception maintained by the master deceiver himself? What cool website can I put up that will break through this kind of darkness and free people from the grip of the enemy? So our gospel is veiled, perhaps because of the importance of our message and the virulence of the one opposing it.

The second assertion is that the only one who can penetrate such darkness is God Himself saying, “Let light shine out of darkness” (v. 6). Only He can break chains that have bound people. Only He can strike the scales from their eyes and remove the veil from their heart. So Paul is willing to say, “Yes, our persuasion may not seem to accomplish much, but we are going to align ourselves so that God Himself may speak and it is He who will dispel the darkness.”

What kind of servants, then, allow God to speak? What choices can we make that will allow us to become the ones through whom God’s voice is heard?

Verse 2:

We have renounced the things hidden be-

cause of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.

When results are slow in coming, the temptation is to trick the thing up a bit: put on a bigger show, choose prettier spokespersons, stage the dramas, fake some miracles, cry on cue, or wring emotions. But the verse is clear. We must refuse to manipulate, settle for style in place of integrity, or twist the truth to satisfy an audience.

Leslie and I went to a timeshare presentation when we were in Mexico, and I learned something. They don’t really want your money. Did you know that? They’re not really interested in selling you anything. The key to the whole timeshare arrangement is love. The salesman was very clear on that subject. “Our mission is to make life better for guests, and the joy on the faces of our vacation partners is reward enough.”

I’ve known religious organizations that market “love” the way timeshare salesmen do. But Paul insists, “We will not do that. If God will speak, it will be through people who tell the truth. We will live in God’s sight and be judged by Him.”

Verse 5:

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

How many churches depend on a single dynamic chief with members as acolytes of the man or woman at the top of the pyramid? The preacher cannot be more important than the message. A cult of personality (to preach oneself) will not serve God. “We preach Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for His sake.” One of the truest tests of the authenticity of a Christian organization is to ask whether the leadership, the folks who could promote themselves, choose not to do so, but instead serve people for Christ’s sake.

We move on from the ideas of integrity and a refusal to compromise or be discouraged, to consider suffering. This too is a critical test of whether a ministry represents authentic Christ-centered, apostolic Christianity or not.

The treasure of God’s presence within

2 Corinthians 4:7-11:

⁷But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; ⁸we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ¹¹For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

In a great number of philosophical and religious settings, people deal with the issue of suffering by promising to alleviate it, transcend it, or define it out of existence. They offer you a “get out of jail free” card of some kind, a chance to avoid the terrible things that other people have to go through. If God loves us, He must act to remove the horrible difficulties that afflict people in the world.

But Paul is asserting the opposite here. The Lord Jesus takes up residence in ordinary human beings like you and me to bring honor to Himself. He is going to display His power and glory as we face life's sufferings in His strength. He doesn't remove difficulties, but He joins us in the midst of them. The promise to Christians is not that we avoid suffering. We will inevitably suffer, and sometimes suffer more for faithfulness to Christ than we ever would have otherwise. The promise is that our suffering won't be meaningless, and that it won't be the final word. God is glorified when we believe His promises, live by the Spirit, and offer hope to our companions.

There are four terms used in this section that cover the range of human suffering: afflictions, perplexities, persecutions, and being struck down. Afflictions are pretty ordinary things. You're already late for an appointment and then you get a flat tire. Or you had a wonderful weekend planned and the kids get sick, so it's spoiled. Afflictions are not death blows, but they're hard to deal with and you wish they weren't there.

Being struck down is probably the most severe suffering of all. It might include things like horrible depression, a terrible illness, or financial reversals that seem impossible to get out of. These are the kind of blows that it seems you can barely recover from.

Perplexities might accompany suffering. Most of the time when we're suffering, we want some explanation.

But there's no promise in God's Word that we're going to get answers, so we're confused. But in all these things the end will not be destruction.

Most of the ancient Near Eastern empires had leaders who claimed divinity. Pharaohs were gods to Egypt, Caesar was a god to Rome. The promise of the devil when he lied to the first man and woman in the Garden was that they would become like God themselves. The foolish hope in our suffering is that we can dominate, transcend, and become godlike. But the Christian alternative is to remain an ordinary clay jar all your life. You never get to transcend life's difficulties. You never become more than you were on the first day—less, if anything and as you grow old the jar becomes more fragile, cracked, and stained. But the jar contains something extraordinary. The genius of the gospel is not that we are changed into something greater, but God Himself becomes great in us.

Verse 10:

Always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

The point here is companionship. Jesus is with us in whatever perplexity, tragedy, heartbreak, loneliness, or loss we encounter. This jar contains a treasure. He goes where we go. Most believers are most aware of the presence of Christ when life is difficult, when this world's benefits are least apparent. There's the haunting line in Psalm 23:4: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me ...”

When we are at the end of our rope, when we have no resources to call on, His voice will grow clearer, His love more certain.

Remember Thomas when Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room after His resurrection. Jesus said to him, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into my side ...” (John 20:27). Jesus is scarred in His resurrection. For eternity He will bear His scars. He is a high priest who faithfully ministers to the needy and broken.

The second thing we can say about suffering is in verse 11:

We ... are ... being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

This suggests that some suffering is supposed to crucify something in us—perhaps pride, selfishness, or prejudice. Crucifixion and resurrection are the way to newness of life. Therefore, life's struggles become a source of renewal in addition to reminding us of the loving presence of Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:12-15:

¹²So death works in us, but life in you.

¹³But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I BELIEVED THEREFORE I SPOKE," we also believe, therefore we also speak, ¹⁴knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. ¹⁵For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.

Our suffering sometimes contributes life to others. Christ had no sins of His own to die for, had no wickedness to be destroyed, and had no reason for God's rejection of Him; but He suffered entirely for the benefit of others. When we are given the privilege of going through whatever hurt or persecution or rejection is required so that someone else can benefit, we find ourselves once again near to the One whose suffering gives life to those He loves.

Verse 15 reminds us that the grace which is spreading to more and more people is causing thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. We've been taught that though we are under pressure, we must not give in to discouragement, compromise our integrity, lie about who we are, or manipulate the word of God. Instead, we must tell the truth as it is, allow God to speak, face suffering with honesty, and believe that the Lord is in the midst of whatever hard things we have to go through. Finally, at the end of all this, realize that it has enormous effect because God is being praised as He deserves to be and we can delight in the praise given to Him.

The best opportunity ever offered to you is that Christ will take up residence in your heart. Most of us want to become greater than we are. We want to stop being clay and start being gold. We want to rise above other people.

We don't want to be just like everybody else. We wish we could develop into something superhuman. Most folks love action heroes who have secret identities of great power. We wish we were like that. But there is no such offer made to any of us. We are clay jars and we always will be. The offer that is made to us is that God will join us, and He will make Himself great, and we will be the containers in which He does so.

One of the most famous stories in the Bible is the account of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17). The god of the Philistines took credit for making a giant, Goliath, who was nine feet tall, enormously powerful, overwhelmingly terrifying to behold, and undefeated in battle. He stood before the army of the God of Israel, taunting them and ridiculing their God. The Lord God, in contrast, chose a shepherd boy who couldn't even wear warrior's clothes, who had never fought in a military battle, and who had no weapon that impressed anybody. What David had was his belief that the living God had called him to face a frightening enemy and the power of God was displayed in the faith of the shepherd boy.

You and I have the great privilege of being shepherd boys all our lives, nothing more. But we know the One who is great, and He has chosen to be our companion and make Himself glorious by His presence in our life.

Copyright © 2005 Discovery Publishing the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made, in writing, and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306-3695.

Unless otherwise noted, all other Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE ("NASB"). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.