

June 2, 2024

“The Jar Paradox”

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Intro:

Treasures. We all have them in some form or another. Treasures are neat in that their value is mostly given by the ones who value those items the most. The value that we place on our treasures often consists of more than just its re-sale value.

I was just yesterday speaking with a lady who was helping her 86-year-old aunt move, and we ended up talking about the various treasures that a person accumulates over a lifetime. This lady noted that her aunt had a collection of fine china and crystal glasses that she was particularly fond of, but that she was no longer going to be able to keep in her new place. The niece (the person I was speaking with) didn't place as much value on having such items herself, and as a result found herself in the difficult position of trying to figure out what to do with them. She was leaning towards keeping them, not because they were valuable to her, but because she was appreciating the value of the efforts that her aunt had gone to in order to acquire the full set of crystal and china over the years – one piece saved for and purchased at a time.

Or we can take as an example the stuffed rabbit at the center of the story of the Velveteen Rabbit – ratty, dirty, fuzz missing, one eye popped off, stuffing all out of place. Perhaps you are familiar with the story? A little boy received as a present a fancy stuffed rabbit. He literally loved the fanciness out of that rabbit. It so happened that as the boy got older, he came down with a very contagious sickness which resulted in the need to purge his room of all possessions that might possibly be a place where the virus could hide –anything made of cloth, including his clothes and this dearly loved rabbit. To his parents, the rabbit was well past its prime and not worth saving. To the little boy it was the greatest treasure in the world. I don't want to spoil the ending for you so I won't tell you what eventually happened, but if you haven't read the story, [you might enjoy doing so.](#)

The point is, we all have things that we value – our treasures. And we all do everything we can in order to keep those treasures safe. The more valuable the item, the greater the security measures. Some things we keep on the top shelf where less than gentle hands can't reach it. Some things are kept in a cabinet with a door that closes, latches, and possibly locks. Other treasures we keep in a locked box or a safe, hidden away where people are not likely to find them. Some of you will have treasures in a safety deposit box at a bank.

Logic and prudent thought dictates that one not put their treasure into a container or a place that is fragile or easily compromised.

Jars of Clay:

Yet this is the precise paradox that we come across in 2 Corinthians 4. God has a great treasure, and He has chosen to store this treasure not in a double bound and locked treasure chest, but in fragile and easily broken jars of clay. When I try to envision these jars of clay that Paul talks about, I get an image of something that I might make in a pottery class. A clay jar or pot that I made would be flimsy and thin in places. The chances are very high that there would even be holes or cracks in those thin places, making the jar completely useless for keeping whatever went into it, actually inside it.

According to Paul, we Christians are jars like this. There is nothing secure about us that can guarantee the long-term safety of the treasure that God has put into us. This treasure, which is the glory of God, seen in the face of Jesus Christ, is constantly at risk of being lost because we as human beings are at risk of succumbing to the pressures and attacks of the Enemy through the temptations of this world that we live in. By rights, and by expectation of holding onto the treasure we are entrusted with, we should be solid and strong like an oak chest bound with iron, but we aren't. We are weak. We are scared. We are easily tempted. We lack wisdom to make good decisions. We are anything but secure. Since we are such fragile vessels, we should expect that we will crumble under the pressure at some point and lose what we have been given.

I'm not talking here about the light of Christ shining through our holes to the world around us, and I don't think Paul is talking about that when he uses the fragile jar imagery. I think it is a commentary on the power that we lack to withstand all that we will face. When we break, light doesn't spill out to change the world; it is simply lost. It is lost because we lose our faith. We lose our way. We turn our backs on following Jesus because the reality of life – ours and the lives of those around us, is hard and doesn't always make sense when lined up with what we know and have been told about God. That is the fragility. That is the risk that God takes in placing His treasure in us.

God's Power:

But, and this is a big but, this is also the beauty of the paradox of what God is doing. Those very things that threaten the integrity of our lives of faith, the things that we ultimately have little power to withstand, did not break Paul. By extension, they would not break the believers in Corinth he was writing to, and they will not break you and me, who are reading this today.

Listen again to the list of paradoxical comparisons that he gives:

Pressed on every side by troubles, yet not crushed.

Perplexed, but not driven to despair.

Hunted down, but never abandoned by God.

Knocked down, but not destroyed.

These are testimonies of jars that outlive their fragile nature. These are jars that are able to withstand what should otherwise destroy them. What Paul is pointing out for us to hear, to know, and to be able to hold onto deep in our heart and soul of faith, is that *while on our own we lack what it takes to hold it together, we are not left on our own*. Our own strength and power, in fact, has nothing to do with it. It is all about God's power, present in us. Paul can, and we can, claim to have not faltered in our role as treasure holders not because we resisted well, but because of the grace of God working in us, and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, constantly and consistently revealing God's presence to us.

Let's pray.