

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the face of God's  
Glory and our Treasure, Jesus Christ, our Lord, amen.

We're already into the third week of our Sermon Series on Second Corinthians this summer is flying by! If you hadn't already noticed, we skipped chapter three and moved on to Chapter four. In the part we skipped over, Paul compared the Law of Moses, which guided the Jewish faith to salvation, with the Gospel Good News of Jesus Christ. In his comparison, Paul laid out basic tenets of the Christian faith, concluding the Gospel of the Grace of God is for all people and is far superior to attempting to reach salvation through the keeping of the Law.

So today, our examination of these verses from chapter four begins with Paul's further defense of this ministry he has been proclaiming. He wants the Corinthians to know he is an Apostle only by the grace of God. This might be a line we often skip over, but I want to take a moment to remember who Paul is and why people might be skeptical of his message and the sincerity of his ministry. Before Paul was Paul, he was Saul the zealous Pharisee who persecuted this new faith called Christianity. In the book of Acts, Saul held the coats and stood by nodding his approval while an angry mob stoned Stephen, Christianity's first martyr. Later, when he was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus where he intended to hunt down more Christians and have them killed, Jesus stopped him on the road. Saul was blinded by the light of Jesus, sent into a nearby town for

instructions, and was then given his sight back. During this conversion and commissioning Saul's name was changed to Paul, but everyone still knew who he was and remembered how much he wanted to put an end to this newfangled Christian fad. So, before people even heard a single word about Jesus or the Gospel, Paul had to convince them of his authority and his sincerity regarding the message he proclaimed. Because he always talked about himself, some people misunderstood his message and accused him of making the Gospel all about Paul. Another thing we need to remember is that Paul actually did suffer a great deal because of his proclamation of the Gospel. He was beaten, arrested, shipwrecked and imprisoned for the sake of the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Finally, he was beheaded outside the city limits of Rome. Paul sacrificed so much to bring the message of God's grace to the Gentiles. It grieved him when people wrote him off and discounted his testimony and his witness about Jesus.

No one likes being written off, as if somehow, you're flawed and incapable of change for the better. That's why it's so important to forgive the mistakes people make and focus on encouraging one another in positive ways. When children are small, they make a lot of mistakes. If parents only focused on those mistakes and missteps, most children would grow up seriously dysfunctional. It's called the self-fulfilling prophecy. Tell someone they're bad over and over and pretty soon, guess what, they turn out to be bad. On the other hand, tell them over

and over how good they are and find positive things to reinforce good behavior and the exact opposite happens, most of the time they can change for the better...

Paul, I'm sure, had to deal with his former way of life when he persecuted Christians. After he met the risen Lord, Jesus, on the road to Damascus, and after he became a believer, it took a lot of convincing to get those early believers to trust him at all. I'm sure quite a few people wrote him off. Even in his letters to the Corinthians, Paul still had to defend his role as an apostle, an eyewitness of Jesus, sent by Jesus, to proclaim the good news of forgiveness through Jesus.

Even though Paul had to defend himself, he made it clear that defending himself was not his main goal. He was there to preach Christ. As Paul said, "...we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Jesus is Lord. Paul was only a servant. Any reference Paul made to himself had to be understood with these facts in mind. Jesus is the one who was present at the creation of the world. Jesus is the one who is true God. Jesus is the one who forgives us through his death on the cross and his resurrection. If there is any good in us, it is Jesus shining through us. If we accomplish anything for God's Kingdom, it is Christ working in us. Christ Jesus was Paul's sure defense because Christ Jesus forgave him and called him in spite of all Paul had done. Jesus re-created Saul into Paul and He makes us new as well. This is why Paul's words now shout for joy as they declare to you and me that

“God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

God’s light shines in you!

Further, God did not, has not, and will not write us off. He will not give up on us even though we may be tempted to give up on ourselves. I’ve been tempted to write myself off so many times saying, “this is just the way I am, I will never amount to anything. I’ll never be good enough. I’m like the pottery that the Old Testament talks about that the potter throws away and smashes. I just cannot break my wicked habits.” It’s easy for us to imagine God has already given up on us, that there’s no hope. Yet God can get pretty far with an old cracked and broken clay jar. The literal translation from the Greek is an Earthen Vessel... He can do a lot with a clay pot made from the dust of the earth! We may feel like we have been flattened, crushed, and torn, “But,” as Paul says, “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

I get the impression Paul is talking about clay pots that have not been dried in a kiln. They’re still bendable, still able to be formed and molded and shaped by the Potter, even though the process may be painful. “God’s not done with me yet,” as the saying goes. He has not written me off. Neither has he written you off. Paul continues by saying, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not

destroyed.” Those are pretty amazing words considering all the hardships he’s been through. On the one hand they clear up the false notion that nothing painful ever happens to Christians. On the other hand, they show us there’s more to life than we can see with our eyes or even understand with our minds. Even if we should die, as believers in Christ we are not abandoned by Him nor destroyed. God is waiting to bring us home for the sake of His Only Begotten Son, our Savior.

Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is able to identify some of the reasons for his suffering. He is a jar of clay with a purpose, and so are we. It’s the ultimate example of what’s inside being the thing that counts. Our outward distress and our weakness, even to the point of death, only serve to emphasize the treasure is within us, the life of Christ, the death and resurrection of Christ, the power of Christ’s forgiveness, the awesome wonder of His love. We are just pottery, so to speak, but inside we’ve been given this treasure, the gift of faith, to believe in and trust in a Savior who stubbornly refuses to write us off. We believe in Him and trust in Him. It’s not our wisdom or our strength or our power that we proclaim. Rather, we declare the glory of God. We kneel down in our weakness so that others can see Jesus. We appear ordinary in order that others can see how extraordinary God’s love is in Jesus Christ. God can get pretty far with a clay jar.

Clay is special, not because of what it is but because of what comes into it from the outside, because of what it can hold. It can be used to make containers

for some pretty special things. In the waters of holy baptism, God fills us with His Spirit, gives us faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, puts his name on us, and says, “I’m not going to write you off.”

Maybe your life feels like a cracked and broken clay pot right now. The good news is that God can fix even broken pottery. Remember, God can go pretty far with a clay jar. Jesus took on our human frailty. He entered this world as one of us. He knows what it’s like to be a clay pot. He knows what it’s like to be tested by every kind of trial. He knows what it’s like to be crushed, broken, and forsaken. He did all of that for you, so the Potter could know His pottery inside and out, and so the Potter could love His pottery inside and out. You are special, not just because I say so, but because of what God put into you. With his strong, yet loving hands, God is forming you, as a person who is already forgiven and made new, into the person, the servant, He wants you to be. We have this treasure in jars of clay just waiting to get out. May your treasure be set free and to allow God’s Glory, the shining face of Jesus, to be seen in you. Amen.