

Treasures in Jars of Clay: The Jars are Fragile; the Treasure is Unbreakable

2 Corinthians 4:1-15 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For 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 God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. ⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. ¹² So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. ¹³ It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, ¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. ¹⁵ All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9) As God's people, all of us have a specific purpose: to declare him to others. We call this evangelism, sharing the Good news, the Gospel of God to others. Are you and I fulfilling that God-given purpose?

What stops you from sharing Jesus with other people? Is it time, that you are consumed with so many other things that there isn't any time for evangelism? Is it that you feel you have a lack of training, that you might end up in a position of being asked a question about God that you can't answer? Have you tried sharing your faith in God and found nothing happened with the person that you were telling, only rejection? Are you afraid that telling someone close to you about Jesus that it will change the relationship, push them away, leave you feeling rejected? Are you losing heart in the ministry God has given us? Are you afraid of being broken?

The Apostle Paul calls us "jars of clay." Jars of clay are cheap. Everybody has them. They're a dime a dozen, like cheap, plastic food containers that you send home with someone else, never expecting to get them back. They're not handled with a whole lot of care. You expect them to break. Jars of clay are fragile.

It's hard work to share our God with others that makes us feel the vulnerability of being broken. There are a lot of perplexing comments that make you feel hard pressed, perplexed, struck down, persecuted even. Talking with a member of our community, he says that he and I pretty much believe the same thing. I then say that I believe that Jesus Christ is my substitute, that he lived perfectly for me, obeying all of God's laws for me and in my place, that he covers me with that perfection, that I am perfect before God right now. He responds, "Well, I don't believe that." I run a Facebook ad for our Christmas Eve candlelight worship service inviting people to celebrate the light that no darkness can overcome in these dark times, and a random person comments that they wish they would stop seeing this garbage in their newsfeed. A week or two after our Christmas celebration, a person stops in to the church with one of our Christmas mug invites and says that we must have mistakenly given this to him. On Good Friday when we had a number of visitors because we invited them, I'm preaching my sermon and when striking the gavel to illustrate what it cost Jesus for all of our sins, one of our first time visitors gets up and walks out. I don't know if I should shout, "Wait! The best part is coming!" But I have to pull it together and keep going for the sake of everyone else there. I handed one of our Easter egg invites to a mother and her young daughter. They opened it up and read the message, "Fully paid; nothing owed," along with a picture of the risen Jesus' nail scarred hands. The mother asks her daughter, "Is that true? Only if you repent," meaning that Jesus' conditional and not an accomplished fact, veiling and snatching away from her child the Gospel truth that Jesus has paid fully for her sins and taken them all away without us doing anything to earn or deserve it. It feels like just one of these things could break me.

I told you some of my stories. I can maybe imagine some of yours. A husband who doesn't want to come to church with you, thinks it's pointless, not for him. If you bring it up, will you lose what you have gained with him, that he'll never think about coming to church again, that it's too risky to bring it up? A teenager is rebelling, doesn't want to go to church, doesn't agree with what God says in the Bible. Fear creeps in whispering that if I force this issue, they'll resent God. If I say anything, I will push them away and they will fall from what little faith they have. You share with a neighbor the joy you have in coming to church, the place you get to hear Jesus living perfectly for you and taking away your sins and so that you know that you are perfect before God right now and

they just kind of brush it off as if it means nothing or say that they are a spiritual but not religious person. You feel struck down, hard pressed, perplexed, maybe persecuted. We are so afraid of what we might lose by sharing Jesus, so afraid of being broken because we are fragile jars of clay, that we being to lose heart and don't share our God and what he has done for us.

While we are afraid of being broken, we're also realizing that our religious culture in the United States has been dramatically changing. 60-70 years ago, it was a cultural expectation that you went to church. Today, not so much. More and more people, people around us, our neighbors, our friends, our loved ones, are okay absenting themselves from the Church, from gathering with other people who profess a unified faith in Christ as their Savior. And even if they wanted to go and learn about God, it takes a whole lot of courage and gumption on their part, a whole lot of vulnerability, to step into a building of strangers, not knowing what they'll hear. This means that we have to put ourselves out there to others and bring the Church to them, even while we are fragile jars of clay.

"It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak," Paul says (verse 13) Fragile as we are, we can't as Christians hold in what we believe or keep it to ourselves. Our faith is not just between us and God. Our faith has to be shared. Why? Why do when we are fragile jars of clay? "All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God." (verse 15)

It's scary to share our faith in Jesus with others because we are so fragile, like jars of clay. But we take the risk so that other people can benefit from what we have. "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself." (verse 14) The God who conquered death and the devil when he rose from the dead, the God who paid for all our sins with his own life and his own blood, the God who covered us with his perfection, the God who created the world and calms the winds and the waves, he's the God that we have dwelling in us by faith. We feel vulnerable and fragile because we can be broken so easily. But we have a powerful God who keeps his Word and who presents us as perfect right here and right now by what he has done for us. No one can change that. No one can take that away from you. People may try to press us down, strike us, destroy us, but we have inside us this unbreakable treasure of Christ.

Though those negative evangelism experiences that perplex me, that press hard on me, that make me feel persecuted, that strike me down, I realize as Paul did: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." (verses 8-9) At so many points, Paul could have been broken, but he was not. In so many ways I could have been broken by the negative experiences of sharing my faith, and yet God has not allowed this fragile jar of clay break. So I keep telling others and I keep preaching to you. It's not me who is strong to not to get down or despair or lose heart; it's the unbreakable treasure of Christ that dwells in me. You have that same unbreakable treasure. You also have had your moments where you were hard pressed and perplexed and persecuted and struck down for sharing God with others. But you have not been broken. This shows us the all-surpassing power from God. Even though we are fragile, we are unbreakable with the treasure of Christ.

So we live out our calling by sharing the God who has taken away all our sins and made us perfect right now. We set forth the truth of what God has done plainly. Next week, we are going to talk about one ways and places that we can use in our lives right now to share the unbreakable treasure that we have in our jars of clay, to bring the Church to those not here.

We are jars of clay. We can be hurt. We can be broken. But we have an unbreakable treasure with Christ. Paul, knowing the risks, kept preaching until the day they executed him for it. We put ourselves out there too, fragile as we are, because we want others to have this unbreakable treasure. As we think of putting our fragile selves out there, keep in mind Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress." "The Word they still shall let remain, Nor any thanks have for it; He's [Jesus is] by our side upon the plain With his good gifts and Spirit. And do what they will—Hate, steal, hurt, or kill— Though all may be gone, Our victory is won; The kingdom's ours forever! (CW 201 stanza 4) "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart." (verse 1) We have the unbreakable treasure of Christ in our fragile jars of clay to share with others. Amen.