WE HAVE TREASURE IN JARS OF CLAY

2 Corinthians 4:1-18

Key Verse: 4:7

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”

In the last passage we learned that the ministry of the new covenant is glorious, more glorious than any other work done on earth. In today’s passage Paul testifies how he carried out this glorious ministry and how he could live a victorious life despite hardships. Let’s learn the secret of spiritual victory through Paul’s example.

I.  The ministry of light (1-6)

Verses 1-6 tell us how Paul conducted himself as a minister of the new covenant. We discover Paul’s attitude (1-4) and Paul’s message (5-6).

First, Paul’s attitude (1-4). Look at verse 1. “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” We have the glorious ministry of the new covenant only by God’s mercy, not our own achievement or merit. For example, Paul had been a blasphemer, a persecutor and a violent man. But the grace of Jesus was poured out on him abundantly, and he became a minister of the new covenant. Then Paul went through many hardships to carry out this glorious mission. On one occasion, more than 40 men took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul (Ac 23:13-15). In the midst of such constant threats and persecution, he could lose heart. However, he did not lose heart. Instead, he lived a life filled with the Spirit. Sometimes when we serve God with much sacrifice and do not see visible fruits, we are tempted to lose heart and despair. Yet when we come to God, he renews our hearts. Galatians 6:9 says, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”

Instead of losing heart, what did Paul do? Look at verse 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 every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” There were many people who sought their own benefit through the gospel ministry. They claimed that they were doing God’s work, but they were doing their own business. Paul was different. Paul worked for the glory of God with a pure motive. He did not water down the truth according to the situation. Rather, he taught the truth plainly as it is. Paul lived according to the truth and spoke the truth without compromise. 2 Corinthians 13:8 says, “For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.” People know that it is good to live according to the truth. However, many do not do so for fear that they will lose their self-interest. When we live by and speak the truth, we will suffer and be persecuted. But God will use us to advance the gospel and God will give us victory. Truth always wins in the end.

Even though Paul lived by and spoke the truth plainly, not everyone accepted his gospel message. To some people it was veiled; they could not understand it. They claimed to have many reasons not to believe and accept the gospel. Some said the message was too simple, and others complained about the minister who proclaimed it. The late Bertrand Russell1 gave many reasons why he was not a Christian. However, the problem is not with the gospel. Those who hear the gospel must decide to accept it or reject it, and some reject it. Ministers sometimes blame themselves when this happens. But should not if they spoke the truth plainly. Some people reject the gospel out of pride or because they love evil more than truth (Jn 3:19-21). These people can become the prey of Satan. Look at verse 4. The god of this age, Satan, blinds them to the light of the gospel. They cannot see the precious value of the gospel; spiritual things seem foolish to them. So they say to believers, “Why do you spend your weekend serving God instead of having fun?” The gospel is light. But only those who believe receive this light.

Second, Paul’s message (5-6). What did Paul preach? Look at verse 5. “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” Here Paul contrasts his preaching with that of the “super apostles.” He didn’t preach himself but Jesus Christ as Lord. Why is it important to accept Jesus Christ as Lord? It is because Jesus Christ gives us salvation. Romans 10:9 says, “That if you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” To believe that Jesus is Lord is to believe that Jesus is our Savior who saves us from sin and death. It is to believe that Jesus is our King who rules our lives with love and peace. It is to believe that Jesus is our Lord who leads us to the eternal kingdom of God. This was the message of the apostles in the book of Acts (Ac 2:36; 17:3; 18:5). They proclaimed Jesus Christ as the true Messiah promised by God through his prophets in the Old Testament. People long for the Messiah who can save them from their sins and the power of death and rule their hearts with truth and grace. But they do not know who he is. So they wander around here and there looking for the Messiah. Only Jesus Christ is the true Messiah. St. Augustine said, “Thou has made us for Thyself O God, and the heart of man is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”  No one can enjoy true rest for his soul until they meet Jesus as their Lord. God, who made light as his first creation, shines spiritual light into the hearts of those who believe Jesus Christ is Lord (6). This light drives out all darkness, and we can see the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Our message should be that Jesus Christ is Lord. When we preach this message, God shines his light into people’s hearts. Here we find clear direction for fall semester ministry. It is to proclaim: Jesus Christ is Lord. Many students are walking in darkness. They suffer from meaninglessness, despair, fatalism, sorrow, and so on. But when they accept the message that Jesus Christ is Lord, God shines his light into their hearts. They can know that God is living, and God loves them, and they have true salvation in Christ. All other religions teach people to follow doctrines to be saved. But mere doctrines cannot save men from sin and death. Only the person of Jesus Christ can save men from sin and death. That is why we must proclaim “Jesus Christ is Lord” on our campuses.

II.  Treasure in jars of clay (7-18)

In verses 7-12 Paul testifies that he lived a victorious life in the midst of hardships. In verses 13-15, Paul proclaims that his victory came from faith in the Risen Christ. In verses 16-18 Paul concludes that he did not lose heart.

First, we are not crushed (7-12). Look at verse 7. “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” Here Paul uses the metaphor of treasure in jars of clay. What is the treasure? The treasure is the gospel, Jesus himself. Why did Paul call the gospel a treasure? A treasure has value because it is rare and unchanging. People treat gold and diamonds and precious gems as treasures. When the economy fluctuates many people want to buy gold because it is stable; it rarely decreases in value and is always precious. On the contrary, jars of clay are common, fragile and of little value or beauty. So people usually do not put treasures in jars of clay. They put treasures in beautiful and expensive chests and keep them in a secret place. They use jars of clay as flower pots. However, God put treasure in jars of clay.

Jesus is the treasure. In what respect is Jesus the treasure? John 1:4 says, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” Jesus is the Author of life. To thirsty souls, Jesus is the living water which quenches (Jn 4:14). To the hungry, Jesus is the bread of life which satisfies (Jn 6:35). To the blind, Jesus is sight (Jn 9:5). To those who are wandering, Jesus is the way to God (Jn 14:6). To those suffering from the sting of death, Jesus is the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25-26). In Jesus there is no darkness, no sorrow and no death, but only life and light and love and peace and joy (Rev 21:4). In Jesus are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3).

We are like jars of clay. We are nothing but dust and we have no real value or beauty. If we were to drain the water out of a person, the elements that remain—sodium, potassium, calcium and so on, would be worth about $3.50. We are nothing. But when we have the treasure in our hearts we  become valuable beyond measure and precious because of Jesus, our treasure. Everybody wants to live a life full of spirit, joy, peace and meaning. We can do so when we accept Jesus in our hearts as our treasure.

Fanny Crosby was blinded by an accident when she was a very young girl. Before meeting Jesus she was sorrowful, bitter, full of complaints, and miserable. But after meeting Jesus she was changed into a woman of joy, peace, humor and grace; she was full of spirit. She wrote over 9,000 hymns. She had a treasure in her heart; it was Jesus. Her life became a treasure. Many around us are the same. Mother Barry and Dr. Joseph Chung are always spirited and joyful no matter what. It is because they have a treasure in their hearts: Jesus. Shepherd David Hull is always smiling and joyful and ready to serve others. It is because he has a treasure in his heart: Jesus. In ourselves we do not have joy or peace or life. We are just clay. We are vulnerable to temptation, we go up and down like a roller coaster, and we are fragile; we break easily. But when we have Jesus in our hearts we become full of strength and joy. We are full of spirit. It is not because of us, but because of Jesus Christ who is the treasure.

Usually people put treasure in precious and expensive containers. It is not proper to put treasure in jars of clay. However, God put the treasure in jars of clay. Why did God do so? Look at verse 7b. “…to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” God wnats to show plainly that the marvelous power of the gospel is from him, not from his servants. Why do we need to be reminded of this? Sometimes when God works mightily his servants become confused as if they have done great work. They think they are the treasure, and become proud and useless. God reminds us that we are like jars of clay, mere containers which carry Jesus. A good example is John the Baptist. He gained popularity through his successful ministry and people thought that he might be the Christ. He clearly said, “I am not the Christ.” John denied himself more and more, saying, “I am not,” and “no.” (Jn 1:19-28). He knew that Jesus is the treasure; he was only a jar of clay. That’s why God’s all-surpassing power worked through his message. We need this kind of attitude. When we really deny ourselves and reveal Jesus, then God’s all-surpassing power works through us.

In verses 8-15 Paul testified that he won victory over many hardships through Jesus Christ. Paul was, “...hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (8,9). Usually if people are hard pressed on every side they get stressed out, they give up, they become mentally ill, they are crushed and they even commit suicide. It is because they have no inner power to overcome the hard pressure. But Paul was different; he had Jesus in his heart. He said in verse 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.” Paul wanted to experience Christ’s resurrection power. In order to do so, he was willing to participate in the suffering of Christ. he said, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...” (Php 3:10). When Paul shared Jesus’ sufferings, he also shared Jesus’ resurrection power and he became a blessing to the Corinthians (12). It is easy for gospel workers to say that their environment is challenging or unfavorable to the gospel due to persecution or pressure or perplexing difficulties. But the real problem is not outside, but inside ourselves. If we have Jesus in our hearts we can overcome all the hard situations and create a new history. Paul’s situation was indeed difficult. When we study the book of Acts we see that there was a lot of persecution and misunderstanding. But he never despaired, never gave up, and was never crushed. He had a never-giving-up spirit. He always trusted Jesus and overcame by the all-surpassing power of God. In this way he could live a victorious life, and so can we.

Second, “I believed; therefore I have spoken” (13-15). In verses 13-14 we see that Paul had resurrection faith. He believed that God who raised Jesus from the dead would also raise him with Jesus. He believed that God is living and God is Almighty God. God raises the dead and nothing is impossible with God. Through Paul’s sufferings and victory, the Corinthians could witness the power of Risen Christ and understand the blessing given to them. Then they could give thanks to God and give glory to God (15).

In this part we can find another secret to live a victorious life. When we consider Paul’s sufferings, they were enough to crush anyone. Anyone who could survive such sufferings is already a great person. Simply to bear these sufferings without giving up was a great victory. Yet Paul went beyond this. Out of his resurrection faith he opened his mouth and began to speak the word of God. Verse 13 says, “It is written: ‘I believed, therefore I have spoken.” Paul had spoken the word of God boldly in the midst of hardships. The gospel spread through him to many people and many cities and he could overcome the world with his faith in the Risen Christ. Here we learn that even though we are hard pressed on every side and confront harsh difficulties every day, when we believe in the Risen Christ we can find power to preach the gospel boldly and to raise Jesus’ disciples in any situation.

Third, we do not lose heart (16-18). Look at verse 16. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Paul’s conclusion was that because Jesus was in his heart he did not lose heart. Outwardly his body was wasting away, as is true for all of us. As we get older we cannot move as fast as we did in the past. Gray hair begins to come out of our scalps even though we dye every day. Our eyesight becomes dim. We lose strength in our bodies. As time goes by we suffer from all kinds of maladies that come from aging such as arthritis, back pain, memory loss, and eventually we die. We are wasting away gradually. It is very natural and no one can stop it. But those who live by faith are being renewed inwardly day by day. How was it possible?  Jesus living in their hearts heals them and restores them in the image of God day by day. Instead of getting older, they get newer and newer every day until the full image of Christ is restored in their inner beings. When we meditate on the word of God, the word of God controls our mind and heart and enables us to live powerful lives. When we hold on to Jesus, inwardly we can be renewed day by day. As time goes by we become more and more spiritual. But many people will waste away as time goes by, not only outwardly but inwardly. They lose their first love and lose vision. They lose pioneering spirit and become powerless like old wineskins. We should be renewed inwardly even though we are wasting away outwardly. Let’s pray that we may be renewed inwardly by meditating on the words of God.

Look at verses 17-18. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Paul realized that his troubles were light and momentary. However, they help us to achieve eternal glory. We can receive eternal glory through sufferings. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. We fix our eyes not on the things of the world but on the kingdom of God. When we do so we can live a victorious life in this world.

Through today’s passage we learn how to live a victorious life. It is by the power of Jesus. We are like jars of clay. We are fragile and vulnerable to Satan’s temptations. We have no power to overcome the difficulties that confront us. But when we have the treasure, who is Jesus in our hearts, we can overcome all kinds of difficulties and live a victorious life.