

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 28, 2010)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

GLORY Resides in God's Clay Pots

(2 Corinthians 4:7-18)

Study #7

Introduction: "Pistol" and the New Covenant...

The "package" looked wholly unimpressive.

There wasn't a sock made that would stay up on those chicken-sticks that passed for legs. A floppy mop of hair graced an innocent, if somewhat goofy, face. He was a gangly 8th grader playing on the High School varsity squad. He stood five feet two inches tall and weighed ninety pounds, soaking wet.

Looking at him, you'd never guess what was inside the package that was Pete Maravich. But by the second game of the season, 8th grade "Pistol Pete" had become the central cog on his High School team in South Carolina.

Pete went on to become a college standout and a pro Hall of Famer, called by Boston Celtics star John Havlicek "the best ball-handler of all time."

You can't always tell a player by his looks.

Of all the books I've read about leadership, one of the most insightful and powerful was a one-hundred pager written by Gene Edwards titled, A Tale of Three Kings. It's short. It's even got pictures. It's not what anybody would call great literature, but the message packs a wallop. You can't always tell a book by its cover.

One time, at a wedding in Cana, the headwaiter was flabbergasted to discover the most delicious wine stored in what he had thought were clay pots holding water. You can't always tell what's in a container by looking at the outside.¹

The outside of anything can be deceiving.

King Tut's golden mask was gorgeous, but it covered the withered face of a 3,500 year old corpse. An oyster shell isn't anything to write home about, but it can contain a beautiful pearl.

It turns out that God delights to hide riches in ordinary containers. And He has tucked away His most precious treasure inside "clay pots" like you and me.

We Don't Lose Heart When We Remember...

...Our Clay Pots Hold Solid Gold (v. 7)

[7] But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves

He is the Potter, we are the clay

The Old Testament frequently announces the theme that God's people are pottery. The idea is that He Himself is the Potter and we are the clay.² He designs and casts and fires the pottery so that those He has redeemed are fit for His purposes.

In our passage today Paul takes that theme and runs with it in a slightly different direction.

Yes, we are pottery. And yes, we are His creation.

But the point in 2 Corinthians 4 is not so much that we are His creation, but that we are *earthenware* vessels.

¹ See the story in John 2, where Jesus had supernaturally turned the water into wine for His first public miracle.

² Is. 64:8; Jeremiah 18.

Paul could have referred to us as God's silver or golden goblets. He could have described us as beautiful wooden containers. But, no. He says that we are clay pots.

In the first century, these were the least expensive containers available. The earthenware vessel was the Wal-Mart bag of ancient Rome. God has placed the Hope Diamond in a Wal-Mart bag. He has placed the treasure of the New Covenant in us.

His light shines from our clay pots

There is a story from the Old Testament that illustrates what Paul is describing here. We find the story in Judges, chapter 7.

There was a man named Gideon who was chosen by God to be a judge in Israel. On one occasion he was told to deliver the Jewish people from their enemies, the Midianites, who had raided the land.

Now Gideon was a rather obscure man who came from one of the more minor tribes of Israel (Manasseh). Yet God had set him apart as a judge. And when Judge Gideon gave the call, some thirty two thousand men of Israel responded, ready and willing to fight the Midianites.

That number represented a good response and would have been a fine fighting force. It might have matched the Midianites, man for man on the battlefield. But the Lord wasn't at all satisfied with that number.

It's not that He was disappointed that more men hadn't come forward. No, He was concerned that the Jewish army was too large. So, the Lord told Gideon to announce that any man who was frightened in advance of the battle should go home.

Well, twenty two thousand men who had come at Gideon's call admitted that they were frightened - and they went home, leaving ten thousand to fight the Midianites.

That's a 75% reduction in force. But the Lord still saw that as WAAAYY too many Jewish soldiers. So, he further whittled the number down to three hundred.

It was going to be three hundred Jewish soldiers against the entire army of the Midianites. The Jews were hopelessly outmanned.

So God told Gideon to tell these remaining three hundred soldiers to place lit torches inside earthen jars and circle the camp of the Midianites in the dead of night.

At the sound of Gideon's trumpet, they were to break the jars, allowing the light of the torches to shine brightly all around the enemies' camp.

They did exactly as they had been commanded. And, at the sight of the torches, the Midianite soldiers were demoralized, thinking that they were surrounded by a much larger force. Israel won a great victory as the panicked enemies self-destructed.

That story from Judges illustrates what living on the basis of the New Covenant is all about. The battle was won when the soldiers simply displayed the light that was hiding in the clay jars.

Paul is saying here that it is the assignment of clay pots like you and me to get out of the way and let the light of the Gospel SHINE! Let Jesus shine out of our lives! Let the glory of the New Covenant - everything coming from God; nothing coming from us - shine!

In the days of Gideon, God intended that there be no question as to where victory came from. With three hundred soldiers, the Jews' victory couldn't be attributed to their military might. It was clearly a God thing.

And God intends today that there be no question as to where our joy and power and love and victory come from.

We are clay pots. And we house the most incredible treasure imaginable - the treasure of the New Covenant.

By design, He has placed this treasure of the New Covenant into failing, faulty, weak, and sinful people so that it will be clear - when lives are changed - that the power is from God.

When change happens, it is not the result of my strong personality or your keen, finely honed mind or that Christian's good breeding.

Impact arises solely from the presence of God in the heart, unleashed when we simply let Him shine.

Which is not to say that the life of a clay pot is all sunshine and ease. Paul goes on to highlight some of the problems to which clay pots are subject.

...Life arises from Death (vv. 8-12)

Clay pots get abused (vv. 8-9)

[8] we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; [9] persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed³

One of the greatest misconceptions held by many - and taught by many - is that living as a Christian smoothes out life's wrinkles. Of course it is true that living for Jesus and obeying the Bible's teachings will resolve problems that come our way because of sin.

But living for Jesus will not temper the winds of fate. It will not keep us from all disease and heartache. It will not cause bridges spanning troubled waters to magically appear.

The purpose of God in the lives of His children is NOT that we would escape the dangers and difficulties of life. It is that we would demonstrate to a watching world that when we encounter these difficulties, His strength will enable us to handle them with grace and love and peace and joy.

Paul mentions four categories of difficulties - *afflictions, perplexities, persecutions, and being struck down.*

Afflictions are the normal irritations everyone faces. The car won't start. There is a sharp pain that comes out of nowhere. The kids misbehave. You lose your job.

³ Interesting thought - Paul's sufferings were evidently greater than the book of Acts (for whatever reason) permits us to see.

Then, he mentions being **perplexed**. This is the anguish of just not knowing quite what to do! We are all faced with situations where no road forward offers a guarantee. We all face conundrums like this. How often have you simply not known what to do? You have a choice between the lesser of two evils. There is no clear-cut win-win solution. But you've got to do something. It's perplexing.

And then there are **persecutions**. We understand them even if we haven't experienced them. Jesus promised them. Paul knew them firsthand. Any of us might taste them at any moment as we boldly live for Jesus.

Being **struck down** is the catastrophic - the stunning reversal of fortune, shattering blows which seem to come out of the blue - cancer, accidents, heart attacks, strokes, riots, wars, earthquakes, insanity.

But, in each and every circumstance, Paul says that he experiences no final defeat. Never crushed, never despairing, never forsaken, never destroyed.

I read this list of dismal experiences and wonder how Paul could have made it, much less made it with a loving heart intact! He goes on to tell us that the doors of LIFE and LOVE can only be opened by cooperating with the process of DEATH and DYING.

Clay pots learn to live as Jesus died (vv. 10-12)

[10] always carrying about in the body the dying⁴ of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. ⁵ [11] For 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. [12] So death works in us, but life in you.

⁴ Does not use the normal word for death here (*θανατος*), but the word that represents a process, making dead (*νεκροσ*).

⁵ There is a subtle shift in emphasis between verses 10 and 11. Verse 10 tells us that we have to make a conscious choice to agree to give up our demand for recognition and significance. Verse 11 assures us that God will faithfully place us in situations where we have to die whether we choose to or not. In both verses, the result is "the life of Jesus, manifest in our mortal flesh." (or, "New Covenant ministry carried out in clay pots")

So here is how we can lead a bafflingly beautiful, attractive, winsome life in our clay pot bodies. All we have to do is carry about the dying of Jesus. OK. So what in the world does that mean?!

Well, ask yourself, *“What characterized Jesus as He was dying? What marked Jesus on the cross?”*

Was it power? Did He perform miracles? Would a bystander looking at the cross have thought to herself, *“That man is powerful!”* Would a man walking by the cross have said, *“There’s a guy who’s got his stuff together.”* Not hardly!

The cross was a place of WEAKNESS and REJECTION. On the cross, Jesus allowed Himself to be a clay pot. Yet, it was on the cross, in weakness, that God accomplished His greatest work.

And to *“carry about in the body the dying of Jesus”* is to learn to live the way He died.

It is to no longer be hung up on all the things that make us look important to other people. It is to come to the end of independence and it is to depend on God to do His work through us. It is to let His light shine through our cracked pot lives.

I wonder why, then, today, so many of us are crushed and despairing, believing ourselves forsaken, and virtually destroyed by the tough stuff that comes our way?

Is it not because, while we want the life of Jesus, and we want the resurrection power of Jesus, we are not willing to live as He died?

We want the power of God, but we want to be powerful too. We want God to work through us, but we want to get a write up about it in Christianity Today.

We want that brother who is struggling to “get better” but we also want people to know that we counseled with him prior to his improvement.

New Covenant living means that we live as Jesus died, content to be weak, admitting to our clay pottedness.

We need to remember that out of Jesus’ weakness on the cross came resurrection life and salvation for everyone who trusts Him. In the same way, out of our weakness New Covenant power will be unleashed and God will be glorified!

...Resurrection brings Glory to God (vv. 13-15)

[13] But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE,”⁶ we also believe, therefore we also speak, [14] knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you. [15] For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people⁷ may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.

We don’t lose heart because no matter what we are going through, the resurrection principle holds. Life comes out of death. God’s strength comes out of our weakness.

There is nothing more pro-active you can do to unleash New Covenant power than to admit you are a clay pot holding solid gold. Then, be all about Jesus and simply let His light shine.

As the chapter ends Paul tells us that we will not lose heart and hope will remain when we focus on the INTERNAL, the ETERNAL and the INVISIBLE.

⁶ From Psalm 116, where the psalmist declares by faith that the trials and the pressures he is going through are going to have some effect and impact on his surroundings. He cannot see it yet, but he says it is going to be true because God has said it.

⁷ Cf. “Majority” - 9:2; 1 Cor. 10:5; 15:6; Phil 1:14. Most (if not all) uses of “Majority” are references to the church. The point is that grace may extend in depth as well as by breadth. Paul was thankful that a majority of the church at Corinth had grasped the importance of depending on the grace of God.

We Don't Lose Heart When We Remember... (vv. 16-18)⁸

...The INTERNAL (v. 16)

[16] Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

Did you hear that? The outer man is decaying. Amen. Amen. Amen.⁹ The physical body in which we live is wearing down.

I inwardly grimace when I hear sports commentators talk about how ancient Brett Favre is. He's 41. Tim Duncan is getting old - at 34.

Now, professional athletes may be on a slightly different time table than the rest of us, but for all of us, bodily decay is a "given" I've noted with alarm as the years have passed.

The type on most anything I want to read is annoyingly small. And yes, I am truly grateful to God for the sliding Zoom feature on Word.

People are more and more difficult to hear. Everybody is speaking so softly these days.

And it seems to me that people in leadership are getting younger and younger. Airline pilots and physicians look like kids. Presidents of nations and major corporations are young, while so many of my contemporaries are getting old.

My high school just had a major reunion for all classes a few weeks ago. I didn't attend out of fear that my classmates might have changed so much that they wouldn't recognize me.

⁸ From Peterson's *The Message*: So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without His unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.

⁹ The "outer man" is our physical body. Nothing sinful is being implied here. He isn't talking about "the flesh" as the principle of sin in fallen humanity.

Yep, the outer man is running down and the parts are wearing out. But there is a very positive flip side to the ageless issue of aging for the Christian. That is that the "inner man" is being **renewed** day by day.

Our bodies are changing due to the ravages of use and time, but our inner person is also changing - and it's getting better. God's plan is that the older we become, the more we reflect the character of Jesus.

If we don't want to lose heart, we'll focus on cultivating the inner life of the spirit. And there's another thing we'll do. To avoid losing heart in following Jesus, we'll fixate on the eternal, not on the temporal.

...The ETERNAL (v. 17)

[17] For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison

Afflictions - difficulties in this broken-down world - *NOW* are producing dividends for *THEN*.

And to what was Paul referring when he mentioned "**light momentary afflictions**"? Things like imprisonments, beatings, dangers, stonings, shipwrecks, persecutions, and physical deprivations.

The Bible is teaching that there is a direct correlation between the sufferings we endure in this life and the glory we will enjoy in the life to come. (And there is good reason to include both those sufferings we endure because we are living for Jesus AND those sufferings we endure simply because we are living in a fallen world.)

Know for certain that your faithfulness to your spouse, your fight for purity, your outspoken boldness for Christ on the job, your generosity with material riches to advance Jesus' Kingdom are all contributing to "**an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.**"

So, we really want to make a far greater investment in nurturing the inner person than in paying attention to the outer person. And preparing for the next life is much more timely than getting all wrapped up in this life's gains.

And Paul wraps up by assuring us that the invisible is way more beautiful than the visible!

...The **INVISIBLE** (v. 18)

[18] while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

All day every day we are bombarded with sensory stimulus. So it is understandable that we would pay attention to the tasted and seen, the felt, heard, and smelt.

Paul says here, though, that we should be careful to not depend on these senses for a final verdict on our life's meaning.

Think about the things Paul experienced. He saw Christians being persecuted, sniffed the incense from the worship of the booming Greek cults, received reports of churches falling away from the faith, and saw believers living in sin.

Had he depended solely on his senses to get the score on who was winning the war for the hearts and souls of men, he might have been tempted to despair.

Just as we might despair when we look at our world today.

Africa is decimated by AIDS and war. Earthquakes and disease have all but destroyed Haiti. Atrocities against humanity occur globally. Injustice continues unabated against the poor, the unborn, the elderly, and the infirm.

Closer to home, we are aware of messes at the highest levels of governmental and in homes. We can easily get discouraged when we see people and situations untouched and unmoved by Gospel truth.

As one former Elder here used to say, *"There's no problem here that a little miracle from God wouldn't resolve."* - and yet the miracles are slow in coming.

Yes, there are problems. And the problems are right in our faces. But there are overarching realities that are bigger than our biggest problems. There is a God who is sovereign over all. There is a God who has everything under control, who is allowing things to play out, and who is taking history somewhere.

We don't SEE those realities all the time. But we BELIEVE them - after all, Jesus told us so. And even though the final victory of God and of righteousness is unseen, we look to that victory and refuse to lose hope.

Conclusion:

All is not as it seems.

Ugly oysters produce pearls, thin plastic Wal-Mart bags may hold diamonds, and, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Pistol Pete Maravich can play ball.

So, you and I are God's secret weapons. We may not look like much. There's nothing special about us. But inside God has chosen to house the power of the New Covenant.

And we unleash those New Covenant resources when, like Gideon's three hundred soldiers, we release the light within by getting out of the way and letting our friends know that it really is all about Jesus.