

“PARADOXES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE” **(2 Corinthians 4:7-15)**

This morning I want to talk to you about the paradoxes of the Christian life. A paradox is something that doesn't seem to make sense, but when understood, it makes a lot of sense – it's something that is contrary to what you would expect, yet turns out to be true. I remember when my dad first taught me to back a truck up with a trailer. Common sense says that if you want to turn the trailer to the right, you turn right. That's what I did and quickly jackknifed the truck and trailer. My dad said, “To make the trailer go right, you have to turn the steering wheel to the left, and if you want go left, you have to turn right.” That didn't make any sense at all – but after several tries and failures – I found out that my dad was right.

Likewise, there are many things about the Christian life that are paradoxes... to find your life, you must lose it... when you are weak, then you are strong... if you want to be great, be a servant... to die is gain. Many people outside the Christian faith look at the teachings of Christianity and scratch their heads. It doesn't make any sense – it goes against conventional wisdom – and is upside-down from what the world thinks. But to Christians who follow the teachings of the Bible, paradoxes make perfect sense – and the longer you walk with the Lord the more you understand and appreciate how true they are.

Today as we continue our study of the book of 2 Corinthians, we are going to look at three paradoxes of the Christian life – paradoxes that radically change the way we approach life and ministry. In 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul is defending his ministry against opponents who had come into the church at Corinth after he left and were trying to discredit him. Their attacks against Paul were very brutal and personal – they criticized the way he looked, the way he spoke, and the impoverished lifestyle he led. They also pointed out all the suffering and rejection and setbacks that characterized his ministry. Wouldn't a true apostle, a true man of God, have more success? Instead, it seemed like everywhere he went, bad things happened to him.

Paul wants the believers in Corinth to know that suffering and rejection does not invalidate faith, but rather authenticates it – and to illustrate this he presents a series of paradoxes that, when understood, will not only help the Corinthians embrace Paul, but encourage them – and us – as we live out their Christian life in a hostile world.

The first paradox is that **power is displayed in weakness**. In verse 7 he says... “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” This is an amazing verse. He starts by saying, “We have this treasure.” A treasure is something of supreme value and worth, and the treasure Paul is talking about is the transforming power of Christ living in us.

In verse 6 he said... “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.” The treasure we have is the transformation that took place when God caused His light to shine in our hearts so that we could see and understand God through the incarnation of Christ. This spiritual transformation is no less powerful than when God said, “Let there be light,” and created the universe. That same power is at work when God makes us brand-new creations by His grace. There's no greater power in the world than the transformation of lost sinner on his or her way to hell who responds to the light and is saved.

The paradox is that this treasure is stored in jars of clay – or “earthen vessels” as some translations say. Here you have the greatest treasure in the world that is kept in something as simple and ordinary as a clay pot. God intentionally puts the treasure of the gospel of Christ in people like you and me.

Clay pots were very common in the first century, and were used to cook and bake, to put flour or oil in, and they were also used to store money. Since there weren't any banks or safe deposit boxes, if you had something of great value you would put it in a clay pot and bury it in the ground. Jesus talked about this in a parable about the man who found a buried treasure while plowing a field and sold all of his possessions to buy the field. He didn't care about the jar, what he wanted was what was in the jar.

A great illustration of this is the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1946, when a young shepherd boy in Israel was looking for a stray goat around some caves, and threw a rock into a cave trying to flush it out, and heard something break. He went in to check it out and found several jars of clay containing scrolls wrapped in linen. The scrolls turned out to be one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all time as they are the oldest copies of the Old Testament anywhere in the world. Many of the 900 scrolls found are kept in museum in Jerusalem shaped as a clay pot. People do not come to the museum to see the clay jars – they come to see the treasure that was in them.

There's a couple of things that stand out about clay jars. One is that they were ordinary – everyone used clay pots, even poor people. Wealthy people could afford to glaze and decorate them, but most people just used common, ordinary, inexpensive pots. Throughout the Bible we see God consistently choosing common, ordinary people to do His work. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he talks about this very thing... “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:26-27). God chooses the least-likeliest people – the ones the elites of the world tend to look down on – He chooses them to be vessels that contain His glory.

Another characteristic of clay jars is that they were fragile – they were easily chipped and cracked – and when they broke, you simply bought or made a new one. There was very little value in the clay vessel – the only value it had was what was in it.

Why would God choose to place the treasure of Christ within common, ordinary, fragile people? Verse 7 says, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” The theme of God's power working through weakness is found throughout 2 Corinthians – it's a principle Paul keeps coming back to over and over. To store a priceless treasure like the gospel, it would make sense to put it in something valuable – something beautiful and eye-catching. If you buy a beautiful painting you want to put it in an equally beautiful frame. But God chooses to put His treasure in ordinary jars of clay so that all the focus is on the treasure.

Imagine going to a weight-lifting competition and a 325 lb., NFL defensive lineman squat-lifts 400 pounds. You're impressed, but not all the impressed, because that's what you would expect someone of his size and strength to do. But then you see a 125 lb. elderly man with a bad back lift 400 pounds, and you're not only impressed, but amazed. You know that he wasn't capable of doing that under his own power, there must be some other explanation.

God chooses weak, ordinary, average, fragile people to display His treasure so that when people see His power working in our lives, they will know it has absolutely nothing to do with us, and everything to do with God. When people see us overcome addictions, when they see us treat people with kindness and respect, when they see us handle adversity without falling apart, and when they see us living joyful, peaceful lives – they will say, “What's with them? What's their secret?” And they discover that the secret is not us, but the treasure that lies within us.

The power of God in our lives is best demonstrated in adversity, and in verses 8-9 Paul describes four paradoxes that show God's all-surpassing power in the worst of circumstances... "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." In these paradoxes we see – side-by-side – a reality of life – the hardships we experience as jars of clay – and the power that is at work in us to overcome anything that comes our way.

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed." Hard pressed speaks of stress and pressure – when something is coming at you from every direction and there's nowhere to turn. You have financial pressure, work pressure, family pressure, all of which gives you high-blood pressure. It's more than a clay pot can handle. But... you're not crushed. The pressure doesn't overwhelm or overcome you because the power of God is working in you. Instead of falling apart, you turn to God and say, "I'm not going to anxious, but I'm going to give all my worries to you" – and the peace of God, that transcends all understanding, will guard my heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

"We are perplexed, but not in despair." To be perplexed is to be confused, uncertain, and doubtful. You look at your life circumstances and say, "I don't get it. Why is this happening? Where do I go from here? What am I supposed to do now?" As Christians we walk not by sight, but by faith, and walking by faith naturally leads to perplexing questions.

Paul says, "We are perplexed, but not in despair." The word "despair" is a fascinating wordplay. It's the same Greek word as perplexed, except with the prefix *e-x* added, making the word more intensive. To not be in despair means that I'm perplexed, but not "beyond perplexed" or "totally perplexed." I have doubt and confusion, but not to the point of giving in or giving up – not to the point where I stop praying or going to church. Paul normalizes the feelings discouragement and being perplexed, but by faith we hang in there and rest in the fact that God is in control.

"We are persecuted, but not abandoned." To be persecuted means to be hunted down like prey. This is what Paul used to do before he met Christ – he would go from town-to-town hunting down Christians to threaten them, harass them, and silence them. Now the same thing was happening to Paul and his missionary team – they were followed by enemies trying to destroy them. 1 Timothy 3:12 says that everyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted. You may not be physically beat up or killed as many Christians in the world are right now, but if you live a godly life and proclaim the gospel, you will be punished.

We are persecuted, but not abandoned. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were persecuted for not bowing down to the kings' golden image and were thrown into the fiery furnace. King Nebuchadnezzar expected them to be instantly incinerated, but saw them walking around the furnace unscathed, along with a fourth person – who was God appearing in human form. No matter what happens to you – even if you are thrown into a blazing furnace for your faith, God is with you. Jesus' last words to His disciples were that He would be with them always to the end of the age. No matter what happens to us we know that God will see us through to the end, and that gives us the power to keep going.

"We are struck down, but not destroyed." Paul has in mind a gladiator fighter or wrestler who has been thrown down to the ground, but shakes it off and gets back up. I remember watching all five or six of the Rocky movies with the kids, and Rocky – the boxer – was always the underdog and got pummeled in most of his fights. He was beat up so bad that his face was hardly recognizable, but he kept getting back up, and that's what made him a hero.

The Apostle Paul was struck down many times, but he kept getting back up. One time he was dragged outside a city, stoned with rocks, and left for dead. But bruised, bloodied, and battered, he got up and went to the next city. The only explanation for such tenacity was the power of God operating within him.

The first paradox is the power is displayed in weakness – God takes weak, fragile jars of clay and places in them the greatest power in the world. In verses 10-12 we see a second paradox: **life is produced in death**... “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 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. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.”

Paul says the same thing in three different ways, and it revolves around the paradox of death and life working in us at the same time. He first talks about death... Verse 10: we always carry around in our body the death of Jesus... Verse 11: we are always being given over to death... Verse 12: death is at work in us. The Greek word for “death” is *nekrosis*, which describes the process of dying. Paul is not so much talking about the fact that we one day will die, but as jars of clay who represent Christ to the world, we are already dying. Dying is another way of saying “suffering.” It’s saying, “I’m hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down – being a jar of clay is not easy.”

As followers of Christ, we walk the same path as Christ. Jesus left the glory of heaven to suffer humiliation, hatred, insults, and eventually death. While we will never suffer to the extent that Jesus suffered, as His followers we will suffer simply by bearing His name. Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.” Now that Jesus has gone back to heaven, the persecution He experienced is transferred to us.

When we embrace the fact that pain and suffering comes with our calling to represent Christ, we won’t be deterred when adversity comes our way. Paul expected life as Christian to be hard – he expected to be hard pressed and perplexed, persecuted and struck down – but, he says, I don’t let it overcome me – I keep getting back up because suffering is part of representing Christ.

What’s more, he says, our suffering has a purpose. In verse 10 and 11 he says twice... so that the life of Jesus may be revealed... In verse 12 he says: life is at work in you. That’s the paradox: life is produced through death. All of the stress, all of the perplexities, all of the persecution, all of the striking down, all of the suffering reveals the life of Jesus working in us.

If Paul had given into fear, if he had given into discouragement, if he said, “I can’t take one more day of being mocked and jeered and harassed,” if he had given up and turned in his resignation as an apostle, there would have been no church in Corinth – there would be no changed lives or gospel witness in Corinth. But because he kept going, the transforming power of the gospel was unleashed in city after city.

Paul ultimately ended up in prison in Rome for preaching Christ, but all that did was create a new platform for Christ to be revealed through Paul. He started witnessing to the prison guards, he led them to Christ, and they in turn spread the good news of Christ throughout Rome.

The paradox is that throughout the history of the church, some of the greatest growth spurts of the church have happened during times of greatest persecution. Persecution has a way separating the wheat from the chaff, and making the faithful more committed and resilient – whereas a lack of persecution can make us comfortable and lackadaisical. We don't have to go looking for persecution, but when it comes, we should embrace it as a golden opportunity to reveal Christ to the world.

God does His best work through cracked pots. In order for lost people to see the light of the gospel within us, God must break us. Do you remember the story of Gideon? God tells Gideon to take a small force of 300 soldiers to fight an army of Midianites that numbered in the thousands. Not only that, God tells him, instead of fighting with weapons, I want each man to take a clay jar and put a lighted torch inside, and sneak into the Midianite camp while they are sleeping and smash the jar against a rock. Not only will the sound get the attention of the enemy and cause them to flee, but it will light up the camp once the jar is broken.

Paul may have very well been thinking of the story of Gideon because it illustrates how in order for people to see and understand the gospel, they must see it reflected in our lives. God uses us to reveal the light of Christ to a dark world, and they especially see the gospel lived out by the way we handle suffering and persecution. Cracked pots all not always pretty, but it's the only way to see the light within the jar.

The first paradox is that power is displayed in weakness; second, life is produced in death; and we come to the third paradox in verses 13-15... **faith is emboldened in affliction**. In verse 13 Paul quotes from Psalm 116 where the psalmist gives thanks to God for delivering him from imminent death and extending his life. Paul identifies with this Psalm because his life was often at the brink of death, but God delivered him – and like the psalmist, he proclaimed his joy and thanksgiving to God. Rather than let his affliction crush him, it emboldened him, and filled him with determination and confidence.

He writes... “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, 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. 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.”

Paul says, “I have the same spirit of faith this psalmist has... each time God delivers me from death just gives me more courage and boldness to speak for Christ.” What's remarkable about Paul and all the disciples of the early church is that they weren't afraid to die. Paul's philosophy of life was “to live is Christ, to die is gain.” If I live – fantastic – it gives me more opportunities to preach... if I die, it's even better because I get to go be with the Lord forever. Is this your attitude?

Oftentimes as Americans our main motivation to live is because we don't want to die, and we do everything possible to keep from dying. But when our motivation for living is to glorify God and let people see the light of Christ through us, then we should not care about dying. For sure we want to eat right, take our vitamins and maintain a healthy weight, but it's primarily for the purpose of serving God better – and if God takes us home, it's all the better for us.

This week I was thinking about how many Christians have died an early death. Jesus Himself only had a three-year ministry before He died in His early thirties. Stephen, the first martyr, died young. The Apostle Paul probably died around age 60, most likely beheaded by Nero.

All of the twelve apostles, except John, eventually died a martyr's death long before they reached old age. And John may have wished he had died sooner given all the torment and persecution he suffered. Why were all these believers not afraid to die?

The reason is stated by Paul in verse 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.” What's the worst thing that can happen to you if God has promised to raise you up with Christ on the last day? They can crush your body, but God will give you a new, glorified body. They can end your earthly life, but God will give you eternal life.

There were times, as Paul mentions in chapter one, when he was burdened beyond his strength to endure and despaired of losing his life – he was every bit human – but what sustained him was the fact that God would deliver him – whether it be in this life or ultimately in the next... “If my death is what it takes to make the glory of Christ known, then so be it – I know that God will raise me from the dead just as He raised Jesus from the dead.”

Paul summarizes his thoughts in verse 15 when he says, “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.” “If I yielded to intimidation and pressure and threat of persecution – if I stopped speaking about Christ – people would not see the light of Christ and they wouldn't be saved.” We can't allow affliction to derail us from our purpose, and what keeps us going is knowing that God is using our affliction to cause more and more people to hear the gospel.

What's more, all of the people who are reached through our affliction causes thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. It's just as Jesus said in Matthew 5:16... “Let your let so shine before men so that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” We are just the clay jar – the treasure inside us is what matters. Our only desire is to draw attention to Christ so that God receives all the glory.

Nothing about what Paul says in this passage makes sense apart from the transforming work of God in your life. It makes no sense that the treasure of Christ's life and salvation would be stored in mere jars of clay – it makes no sense that you would keep getting back up after you are struck down time after time – it makes no sense that suffering produces life – or that we become bolder through affliction.

But it makes perfect sense if you know Christ and His power in working in you and through you. And the longer you walk with Him, and the more you shine His light to the world, the more true these paradoxes become, and the more power they give you to do what God has placed you on earth to do.