

Reverent Surrender - Jars of Clay

INTRO: Rabbi Joshua, who lived in the time of Emperor Trajan, was as ugly as he was educated and wise. He was so dark complexed that he had the nickname “The Blacksmith.” Children used to chase him in the street. Yet, his wisdom made him a special friend and regular visitor with the Emperor.

During one visit the emperor’s daughter laughed at Rabbi Joshua and his unpleasant appearance, saying, “Rabbi, how is it that such great wisdom as yours should be contained in such an ugly head?”

To answer, the rabbi asked her a question. “Princess, in what vessels does your imperial father keep his wine?” She replied, “In earthen jars.” The Rabbi said, “You know all common people keep their wine in earthen jars. The emperor should keep his in beautiful jars fitting his royal status.”

Believing the rabbi to be sincere, the princess quickly commanded the butler to transfer the royal wine into the gold and silver containers. The result was that the wine when brought to the table was sour.

The princess ran back to Rabbi Joshua and asked him why he had given her such bad advice since he was supposed to be so wise. He replied, “You have learned a simple lesson princess. Wine is best kept in common vessels, and so is wisdom.” The princess never again laughed at Rabbi Joshua’s appearance.

TRAN: This morning we are going to learn a similar lesson. We are going to see that God’s power is made obvious through man weakness. It is in surrendering to the reality that we are not strong enough that God is able to shine brightest through us.

READ: 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

I want us to see three things this morning: the humility of the jars of clay, the weakness of the jars of clay, and the glory of the jars of clay.

I. First we need just a brief set up

A. What is happening in these verses is Paul is actually defending himself to the Corinthians

1. Much like Rabbi Joshua, Paul is being attacked for not being some sort of “super apostle”
2. He is not much to look at - other parts of scripture bear that out
3. He lives a common life as he shares the gospel - being a tent maker in whatever town he is ministering in
4. He doesn’t see well
5. His clothes are probably fairly simple and common - not the toga you might expect for someone representing God

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6. Basically he is getting picked on for all kinds things about his appearance and physical weakness
 - B. And Paul's basic message is "We have this treasure, the gospel, the glorious light of God in frail, simple, unassuming bodies, and lives"
 1. The reason we have such a great treasure in such simple containers is to make sure that the glory goes to God
 2. It should never be about the container, it should always be about the treasure - the gospel of God, and God Himself
 - C. For example: when people question me, or are concerned about how I dress as a pastor, thinking that somehow it is undignified for a representative of God, my response should be simple
 1. I have this treasure in a jar of clay
 2. It is not about the vessel, it is about the treasure
 - D. This is what Paul is talking about
 1. He basically has to defend his apostleship to the church at Corinth
 2. The word picture Paul uses gives us a lot to think on
- II. First, let's consider the humility of the jars of clay
- A. When it comes to the humility of the jars of clay, they are simple
 1. In fact, the jars of clay that Paul may have had in mind are likely to have looked like this [REVEAL Jars of Clay]
 2. These clay jars are not the special ornate vessels that the princess thought the wine should go in
 - a) In the case of wine, ornate vessels like silver or gold make wine go sour
 - b) Wine has to be stored in earthen vessels, jars or pots intentionally
 - c) The fancy jars ruin the treasure inside
 - d) Just like fancy jars take away from the wine, fancy jars tend to take away from the gospel and God Himself
 - (1) When we are more concerned with the packaging the gospel, the Holy Spirit comes in, rather than the gospel itself, something is seriously wrong
 - (2) Simple is better
 3. The jars of clay Paul is talking about would disguise the fact that there was something of value inside
 - a) The reason for that would be to emphasize the value of what the jar contained
 - b) So in other words, what the jar of clay contains is what gives the jar its value
 - (1) So think about it - we are jars of clay just as Paul was referring to himself as

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- (2) The thing that gives us value is who is on the inside
 - (3) It is not you at your best - sorry to burst your bubble
 - (4) It is the Holy Spirit
 - (a) Paul said that our bodies are...the temple of the Holy Spirit
 - (b) It is the treasure that is contained inside that gives us value
- B. A second thing about the humility of the jars of clay - they are expendable
1. These jars are easily breakable [SHOW LID] and offer little protection from outside elements - except perhaps dust and water
 2. These jars were so cheap, if one broke, it could be easily replaced
 - a) Glass back then could be melted and used again
 - b) Earthenware vessels, when they broke, they were just discarded
 3. Please don't stretch this part of the illustration too far
 - a) It does not mean that if we break, God just gets rid of us and starts again
 - b) However, it should put us in our place that our importance is not even close to the treasure is contained inside
 - c) When we get the ideas in our head that we accomplished this or that and forget that it is the God that lives in us, that is at work in us that accomplished things in our lives, then we have overblown our importance
 - d) Perhaps worse would be when we think that God needs us
 - (1) God does not need us. Period.
 - (2) God chooses us.
 - (3) And because God does not need us, but chooses us, that makes our value inestimable - we cannot calculate how valuable we are because of the choice of God
- III. First we have the humility of the jars of clay, but second we have the weakness of the jars of clay
- A. We mentioned how easily breakable earthenware containers are, but Paul gives four examples of weaknesses in verses 8-9
- B. His first example is that we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed
1. For Paul, he faced hardships that we rarely even have nightmares about
 - a) Later in 2 Corinthians Paul tells us of these hardships
 - (1) Five times he received 39 lashes from the Jews
 - (a) Do the math
 - (b) That is 195 times a whip hit his back (not counting single hits he might have sustained)
 - (2) Three times he was beaten with rods
 - (3) Once he was pelted with stones
 - (4) Three times he was shipwrecked

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- (5) He spent a night and day in the open sea
- (6) Paul's own words from 2 Corinthians 11:26-28 "I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."
- b) Paul faced pressures we can hardly imagine
- 2. We face hardships and pressure too
 - a) Ours may not be the same as Paul's, or even for the same reason, but we feel those pressures nevertheless
 - b) We have the pressure of work obligations piling up on us
 - (1) The boss is riding us to get the project done on time and under budget
 - (2) The volatility of the job market - we are secure today, and fearful tomorrow
 - (3) Or even job loyalty - in the past you could count on your work being appreciated, but now, the boss only cares about the bottom line
 - c) You have pressure from family
 - (1) Crazy time obligations that you wish others could walk 5 minutes in your shoes to understand
 - (2) Concern for your kids
 - (a) That they make good friends, choose wisely who they date
 - (b) Concern that they truly are "in Christ" and learn to love Him the way they should
 - (c) Concern for their health and well-being
 - (3) And oh, yeah, in the middle of all that, you want to maintain a good marriage relationship
 - (a) You want to have time together to enjoy being with one another
 - (b) You want to feel the depth of your love grow as the days, months and years pass along
 - (c) And life pushes against that
 - (4) And this is just your immediate family - then there is extended family
 - d) You have the pressure of health

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- e) You have the pressure of finances - how to handle them, what are our values and priorities
 - f) You have the pressures of the world trying to conform you to its values and ways that are not what God wants
 - g) That's a lot of pressure
- C. Paul's second example is perplexed
- 1. Simple enough to understand - we don't understand what or why
 - 2. For Paul, there were probably many times he was at a loss
 - a) Paul could not understand why the Galatians would turn from Christ back to their old traditions and understandings when Christ was clearly displayed to be the Messiah
 - b) Paul was torn between two desires - departing to be with Jesus, or remaining here on earth to help the churches grow
 - c) Very puzzling things, and no doubt Paul faced those type of things over and over again in his life
 - 3. We are no different
 - a) We struggled to understand the best decision for our family
 - (1) Do we move to a completely new location and a new job that offers more money, or stay here for our kids and our church family
 - (2) How do we handle discipline issues now that the kids are getting older?
 - (3) Mom or Dad is now getting older, how do we handle taking their keys away, breeching the topic of assisted living
 - (a) How do we pay for all of this?
 - b) We struggle with decisions for all parts of life
 - (1) Jobs
 - (2) Relationships
 - (3) School, etc
- D. Paul's third example: persecuted, yet not abandoned
- 1. Trying to compare Paul's persecution to our own is like comparing apples and oranges
 - a) They might be in the same family
 - b) But that is the only comparison
 - 2. As of now, in this country, if we stand up for our faith we might get laughed at or thought to be foolish
 - a) Rarely do we hear of someone suffering harm or death
 - b) However there are exceptions
 - 3. Persecution is another area that displays our weakness as jars of clay

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- E. The final example that Paul mentions as a weakness of these jars of clay is being struck down
 - 1. The word picture is a tree falling over - succumbing to the ax
 - 2. As we have said there were many times Paul was struck down
 - a) By rocks, rods and whips
 - 3. For us, in this life we succumb to the weight of the world
 - a) Especially when we feel the weight is all on our shoulders
 - b) When we do that to ourselves, we were not designed for that
 - 4. We are designed as jars of clay
 - a) Vessels design for a divine purpose
 - b) However that purpose was never to shoulder the weight of our world, much less the entire world
 - c) We will be struck down every time
 - F. But the hope is in the final piece of the puzzle
 - 1. We have the humility of the jars of clay
 - 2. We have the weakness of the jars of clay
- IV. Finally we have the glory of the jars of clay
- A. Look at verse 7 again - “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us”
 - B. The “this treasure” that is mentioned is debated as to exactly what it refers to
 - 1. Some say the light of the knowledge of God’s glory from verse 6
 - 2. Some say it goes further back in the book of 2 Corinthians
 - 3. To me, I would agree that the light of the knowledge of God’s glory is probably correct from the passage
 - 4. Think about what that means
 - C. “The light of the knowledge of God’s glory” can be another way of saying the gospel
 - 1. The gospel that we accept when we say “yes” to Jesus
 - 2. The good news that we are accepted by God because of faith in the work of Jesus Christ
 - 3. This is the treasure
 - D. A second treasure we can honestly speak of that resides in these jars of clay when we accept Jesus is the Holy Spirit
 - 1. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts
 - 2. He is our guide, our conscience, and the power that helps us to do whatever God calls us to do
 - 3. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have

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received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.”

4. The Holy Spirit is one of the most amazing treasures that most Christians do not take advantage of
- E. Why is this treasure so great?
 1. Let's think back for a minute over the examples of weakness that Paul gave in verses 8-9
 2. We are pressed but not crushed
 - a) I have been through difficult times in ministry
 - (1) Times where you wanted to cry for people that refused God's love
 - (2) Times that made Christians look bad to the world as they fought with one another
 - (3) Ugly, ugly times
 - b) Do you know what got me through those times
 - (1) Knowing that I was not alone
 - (2) The Holy Spirit was in me, and with me - relying on Him to guide me
 - (3) Going back to the gospel again and again and knowing that I am accepted by Christ - in spite of my flaws, and sins
 - (4) Knowing that, because I am a part of the family of God, what is hurting me, is hurting my Savior as well
 - c) No matter how hard I was pressed, I knew I would never be crushed because of my relationship with God
 - (1) Oh, I had some doubts during a few of those times
 - (2) But that is when I had to press in all the harder to my relationship with Christ
 3. We are perplexed but not in despair
 - a) For me, ministry offers innumerable times when you throw up your hands and think, "I have no idea what to do"
 - b) I can't imagine that everyone else's life is any different
 - c) There is always hope because of the treasure we have in these jars of clay
 - (1) John 16:13 "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."
 - (2) Claim that promise - the Holy Spirit will guide you into truth
 - d) When you are confused beyond imagination - claim the promise of God that He will lead you to the truth - when you fully rely on Him
 4. We are persecuted but not abandoned
 - a) This may be the one we have the least in common with Paul

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- b) He was truly persecuted for his faith at a level that few of us have been
- c) A promise like this is what got Paul and Silas singing in a Philippian jail
 - (1) They are locked in the stock in a dark prison for a crime they did not commit
 - (2) That would leave me pretty bitter and feeling like God failed somehow
 - (3) Yet Paul and Silas sang worship to God because they knew that God would never leave them or forsake them
 - (4) And we have the same promise
- d) Finally, struck down but not destroyed
 - (1) There is several places I could have placed these verses, but turn to 2 Corinthians 12:7-9
 - (2) There is no doubt that Paul felt struck down by this “thorn in the flesh”
 - (a) He begged God to remove it
 - (3) Yet God simply said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”
 - (4) It was because of Paul’s weakness that Paul experienced so much of God’s grace
 - (5) 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 “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. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him”

V. Conclusion

- A. This passage is a great picture of surrender
- B. We need to accept our role as jars of clay
 - 1. Humble
 - 2. Weak
 - 3. And filled with the most glorious treasure imaginable
- C. When we surrender our hearts and our lives to this, God’s glory will shine through us because “His grace is sufficient for us”