The Paradox of Growing
2 Kings 4:1-7
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[Fill up front of platform with various containers and bottles and jars]

These containers and bottles and jars all serve different purposes [show dark chocolate covered walnuts and Citrucel].

Many of them are Ball Mason jars. Some are even “perfect” or “ideal” [show jars].

A man named Mason first developed these jars but sold off his rights and died a poor man. Then the five Ball brothers perfected the process. After receiving a $200 loan from their uncle George, their business exploded. Here’s a picture of these guys. You’d think they’d be a little more joyful, wouldn’t you? Maybe they just ate some dill pickles that were stored in their jars.

These jars are used in all sorts of ways today. Some are used for canning but I also came across articles on the web with these titles…

- “50 Ways to Use a Mason Jar”
- “100 Clever Ways to Repurpose Mason Jars”
- “Over 60 Mason Jar Wedding Ideas”
- “DIY Mason Jar Room Décor”
- And on Pinterest, “One Million Ideas for Mason Jars”

So here’s a question. What do all these containers and bottles and jars have in common? They’re all empty…well, except this one with chocolate in it [hold up chocolates]. Anyone want some? Not sure how long they’ve been in the jar.

Do you feel empty today? Does life seem to be coming apart at the seams?

Last weekend we looked at “The Practice of Growing” as we were challenged to stand firmly, to be stubbornly faithful and to sacrifice fully in 2016. Today we’re going to discover “The Paradox of Growing” as we meet someone whose life was falling apart. She found help and hope in the midst of her
emptiness…and so can you. She learned this truth: *You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.*

Follow along as I read 2 Kings 4:1-7: *Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.”* 2 And Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me; what have you in the house?” And she said, “Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil.” 3 Then he said, “Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not too few. 4 Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all these vessels. And when one is full, set it aside.” 5 So she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons. And as she poured they brought the vessels to her. 6 When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” And he said to her, “There is not another.” Then the oil stopped flowing. 7 She came and told the man of God, and he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest.”

Elisha is the prophet that came after Elijah. Elijah was known as God’s fiery spokesman who confronted people with *truth*. Elisha, his understudy, was more of a tender healer who gave *grace* to people. In tandem, they ministered like Jesus, who was known as one who was “*full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). Elisha, who had been given a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit performed double the miracles that Elijah did (14 to 7 – sounds like a football score).

Elisha guided this wounded woman through a seven-step process that has application to our own lives as well.

1. **Verbalize your needs** (1). The story begins with a woman who is suddenly widowed. Her husband was one of Elisha’s seminary students and he “*feared the Lord.*” Tradition tells us that his name was Obadiah. If that’s true, then we know that he was a key player during the time when the awful king Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel were trying to annihilate the prophets.

Obadiah hid a number of the prophet-preachers in a cave and personally took care of their needs, at great personal cost. We see this in 1 Kings 18:4: “*And when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.*” Perhaps that’s why he died destitute. He may have borrowed the money in order to provide for the prophets.
To her credit, this young widow doesn’t run away but instead she “cried out to Elisha.” This word means, “to moan and to weep uncontrollably; to shriek out of grief.” She was in bereavement and facing impending bankruptcy: “But the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.”

God hears us when we’re hurting. Psalm 34:17: “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles.” 2 Timothy 2:19 says, “The Lord knows those who are his.” He is also compassionately concerned about widows and orphans. We see this in Psalm 68:5: “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.”

Some of you can relate to the pain and emptiness that this widow felt because you’ve lost a spouse. I just conducted a funeral for a man in his 50s on Friday who leaves a wife and three children. I can only imagine how alone they must feel and how alone many of you feel.

When I asked a friend for his insights into this passage, he made the point that this woman was able to state succinctly what she needed. She got right to the point and came to someone she could trust to take it to God for her. He also pointed out that she doesn’t bad mouth the creditor or blame her circumstances or even shake her fist at God.

Have you told God what it is you need? Have you cried out to Him in the midst of your despair, knowing that if He doesn’t come through for you, all will be lost? You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.

2. Admit your emptiness (2a). Elisha listens to her lament and then asks two questions: “What shall I do for you? What have you in the house?” He’s basically asking:

- What do you need?
- What do you have?

These questions help her see that she needs everything and has very little. I like how one pastor puts it: “We need more than we will ever be able to supply by ourselves...as long as we think we can, He won’t.” The first part of the widow’s answer reveals how empty she really is: “Your servant has nothing in the house...” She had probably liquidated everything at the Promised Land Pawn
Shop. It’s important for her to proclaim her poverty, to realize that she is at the end of her rope. Until she does, God cannot begin to fill her back up.

Friend, perhaps you have not been experiencing much of God lately precisely because you are too filled with yourself, or with sin, or with hobbies, or with activities, or with possessions. This woman was empty and she admitted it. Will you do the same?

*You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.*

3. **Use what you have** (2b). I love the next part of her answer. She told Elisha that she had nothing at all and then remembers that she has a little bit of something: “…except a jar of oil.” This word for “jar” is flask. Literally it means that she had “an anointing of oil.” All she had was an ounce or two to be used for a burial [hold up little jar].

In our culture, oil is something we try to avoid because it clogs our arteries but in Bible times it had a multiplicity of good uses.

- It was an expensive commodity that was freely traded. In John 12:3-5, we read of Mary who took a pint of oil and poured it on Jesus’ feet. This made Judas gasp because he knew it was worth about a year’s wages.
- It was used in lamps to provide light in homes (see Matthew 5:15).
- It was used in cooking, similar to how we use butter today (see Ezekiel 16:13).
- It served as a cosmetic. Psalm 23:5: “You anoint my head with oil…”
- It was used as an ointment for injuries (see Isaiah 1:6).
- It was offered as part of the sacrificial system (see Exodus 25:6).
- It was used to anoint kings (see 1 Samuel 16:13).
- It was used to prepare bodies for burial (see Matthew 26:12). Perhaps this widow was saving the little that she had for her own funeral service.
- It symbolized abundance as stated in Jeremiah 31:12: “…they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD — the grain, the new wine and the oil.” To not have much oil was humiliating and a sign that God had withheld blessing.
- Oil also symbolized joy in Isaiah 61:3 where it is referred to as: “the oil of gladness.”
- In addition oil is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit and communicated that God’s presence dwelt with someone (Acts 10:38).
With all this in mind, this widow had lost her joy and was humiliated by all the hurt she had been through. And yet, she still had *some* left! And she’s told to take the little that she has and do something with it because what she had was enough for God.

When the young boy offered his “Lunchable” to the Lord, it ended up feeding five thousand men (see John 6:9-11). Samson took a jawbone as his only weapon and struck down a thousand men (see Judges 15:15). What do you have right now? It might not be much but maybe it’s important to you. Or maybe you think it’s not very valuable. Whatever the case, will you surrender it to God so that He can multiply it?

*You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.*

4. **Obey what you hear** (3). This woman is then given a command that seems very strange. She’s to go to the neighbors and ask for empty jars and containers. I imagine that this was very humbling for her to do. And she’s told to get as many as she can: “and not too few.”

She’s already empty and yet is told to go and gather some more emptiness. She could have used some jars that were filled with jelly [hold up jelly jar] or pots of porridge, but what does she need empty jars for? What will she tell her neighbors when they ask why she wants them?

Did she say something like this: “That wild-eyed Elisha told me to do this” or did she simply ask, “Can I borrow some jars and pots and pans?” or did she express some faith, “I have nothing, but God is about to meet my needs.”

It strikes me that she needed to know her neighbors in order to obey this command. Likewise, God is calling us to know our neighbors, to look for ways to serve them, and to allow them to help us when we’re hurting. Do you know those you live near to? Can you imagine the witnessing opportunities this widow is about to have?

The key issue here is to obey, even when it doesn’t make sense and when it’s not easy to do so. Joshua was told to hike around Jericho once a day for six days and then on the seventh day to march around it seven times in a row (see Joshua 6:3-5). This was crazy but he obeyed and the walls got wobbly and fell down.
What is God asking you to do right now? Some of you know but you’ve been delaying. Delayed disobedience is essentially outright disobedience. Don’t cut corners when God makes it clear what you are to do. No matter how strange or unusual or illogical it may seem, when God says it, we must do it.

That reminds me of the man who told his pastor he was going to visit Mount Sinai. His plan was to climb to the top and read the Ten Commandments out loud. The pastor wasn’t very impressed for he knew the man well. He turned to his church member and said, “Instead of traveling thousands of miles to read the Ten Commandments, why not stay right here at home and obey them?”

If we work at obeying what we hear, we will learn that we have more than we think when we offer the little that we have.

5. Get alone with God (4-5). After going out in public to get the jars, she was then told to spend time with God in private: “Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all these vessels. And when one is full, set it aside.” Shutting the door probably kept the creditor and the nosy neighbors away. But more than that, it gave God the opportunity to show up in the privacy of her house. Look at verse 5: “So she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons. And as she poured they brought the vessels to her.”

Sometimes we miss out on miracles because we don’t take the time to get alone with God. Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God…” Are you getting alone with God on a daily basis? It’s in those times of Scripture reading, prayer, reflection, and meditation that God often breaks through the clutter of our lives.

Remember: You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.

6. Make room for blessings (6). On Wednesday morning I stopped at Caribou Coffee to do some work. I ordered a cup of coffee and savored every swallow until I drained the cup. I then got up to use the rest room and when I came back my cup was filled to the brim with more java! It was a miracle! I looked around and saw Donna Glynn smiling. When she saw that my cup was empty, she
filled it up. So here’s a question. Could she have filled my cup if it was already full?

As the widow kept pouring, [demonstrate] her boys kept bringing jars to be filled in verse 6: “When the vessels were full, she said to her son, ‘Bring me another vessel.’ And he said to her, ‘There is not another.’ Then the oil stopped flowing.”

Let’s make some observations:

- **The size of her blessing was directly related to how obedient she had been in getting the jars.** Obedience leads to blessings. By the way, some of you have been saved but have not yet been baptized. Your next step of obedience is to take the plunge!
- **God’s ability to provide always exceeds our capacity to receive.** There was no limit to the amount of oil. The only limit was the number of empty vessels.
- **God used what she did have (a little oil) to provide what she didn’t have (a lot of oil).**
- **God pours out His blessings when we are willing to pour out what we have first.** We must be empty in order for God to fill us.
- **As long as the boys kept bringing, God kept blessing.** Or as someone has said, “When faith asked no more, God worked no more.” Jesus said it this way in Matthew 9:29: “According to your faith will it be done to you.”

A young girl went with her mom to an old-fashioned country store. After her mom paid for her purchases, the clerk invited the girl to help herself to a handful of candy. The girl held back and just waited. The clerk was surprised and asked, “What’s the matter? Don’t you like candy?” The child smiled and nodded so the clerk put his hand into the jar and dropped a generous portion into a bag. When they got inside, her mother asked why she had not taken the candy when the clerk first offered some to her. Revealing her wisdom, the daughter replied, “Because his hand was bigger than mine!”

Friend, is the size of your faith limiting what God wants to do in your life? *You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.*
7. **Give what God has given you** (7). Notice how this amazing narrative ends in verse 7: “She came and told the man of God, and he said, ‘Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest.’” Here are some principles.

- **In her going, she was able to share the good news of God’s provision.** We’re called to go with the gospel as well. Let’s do all we can to bring more empty jars to Christ!
- **She paid off her debts first.** Get out of debt as quickly as you can. Proverbs 22:7 says, “The borrower is the slave of the lender.” It’s like the bumper sticker that says, “I owe, I owe, it’s off to work I go.”
- **God meets our needs and provides even more than we need.** This family had enough to pay their debts and enough left over to live on. Solomon asked for wisdom and was also granted riches and honor (1 Kings 3:13). Ephesians 3:20 reminds us that God loves to over-answer: “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine…”
- **God will meet our needs but not necessarily our greeds.** Luke 6:38: “Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.”
- **God wants us to put Him first in our giving.** Malachi 3:10: “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”

Let’s summarize what we’ve learned.

1. Verbalize your needs
2. Admit your emptiness
3. Use what you have
4. Obey what you hear
5. Get alone with God
6. Make room for blessings
7. Give what God has given you

*You have more than you think when you offer the little that you have.*
Man, I wish I had thought to bring more jars today [pick up various shapes and sizes].

Actually, there are a lot more jars here…walk out into aisles. 2 Corinthians 4:7: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”

We all come in various shapes and sizes, colors and condition. Some of you are pretty banged up and others look beautiful [like this sterling silver pot]. Some are pretty flashy; others are very frail. Some are new; others are not so new. Some look fairly harmless; others are quite explosive [pick up gas can].

Listen. The key is not the container but whether or not Christ the treasure is inside! Some of us have filled ourselves so full of stuff and sin and self that there’s not room for Him.

Your purpose is to be a container for Christ. Pastor Andy shared that when our team was in Burkina Faso they saw gasoline stored in various bottles without warning labels [show gasoline in bottles]. These bottles were never designed to store something so dangerous. Likewise, some of you are storing that which will destroy you.

It’s time to empty ourselves. What do you need to get rid of? One of the guys who recently got baptized has been convicted about how alcohol has been controlling his life so he made a decision to pour it all down the drain. At one point he had $13,000 of alcohol in his apartment! Here’s a picture he sent me this week [show picture of liquor bottles in sink].

His decision made me think of 2 Timothy 2:21: “Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.”

Are you empty enough to be used by God or have you been filling yourself up with stuff that doesn’t satisfy anyway?

Do you feel empty and used up and lost? If you haven’t put your faith in Jesus, Satan is coming for you. He wants to take you and your family. The only way out is through the One who paid your debt. His name is Jesus. One song puts it this way: “He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay.”
It’s interesting that some of these jars say they are “perfect” or “ideal” [hold up jars]. None of us can make that claim, can we? We are marred and scratched and broken. Listen. God is not looking for perfect containers but He is looking for empty ones.

Are you ready to have the work of Christ on the cross credited to your account right now? If so, please pray this prayer with me: “Lord Jesus, for too long I’ve kept you out of my life and I’ve filled my life with that which does not satisfy. I admit that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. I owe a debt I can never pay and so I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I’ve been living. Thank you for paying the price for my freedom. By faith I gratefully receive your gift of salvation. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank you for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe your words are true. I receive you as my substitute. Be my Savior and Lord. I surrender to your leadership in my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. Amen.”

We’re going to close this morning with a song called, “Empty Me.” While it’s being sung, I’m going to ask you to do one of two things. If you prayed and committed yourself to Christ just now, I’m going to ask you to come down front by these empty containers. Go ahead and come right now.

If you’re already a believer, I’m going to ask you to stand right where you are to indicate that you are ready to empty yourself so that Christ can fill you up. By standing you are admitting your emptiness and that you want the oil of Christ to fill you. Listen to these words:

*Holy fire, burn away my desire for anything
That is not of you and is of me.
I want more of you and less of me.
Empty me, empty me.
Won’t you fill me with you?*