

Earthen Vessels
II Corinthians 4:7

INTRODUCTION:

More than one person has referred to some pastor as “a cracked pot.” They may have been closer to the truth than they realized. The Apostle Paul uses this kind of figure to explain his own ministry. He declared under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us". The New International Version catches the force of the clause when it reads, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay".

The figure used by the Apostle probably goes back to an ancient practice on the part of kings. They would use ordinary clay pots as a place of storage for their valuable treasures. Sometimes they would melt their precious metals and pour the! Into such pots for storage. God has chosen to place the precious treasure of the Gospel into such earthen vessels. This is a - bold affirmation-of the - frailty and the humanity of the men that God uses in ministering His Gospel to others.

As we begin our ministry together, I feel compelled to share some implications of this text with you tonight. This text has been burning in my heart for several days, and I must share it with someone. I need what it says, and you need what it says. Each of us needs a fresh reminder of the humanity of your pastor and of those who minister to you on the staff of the church. Even though we have the Gospel of Jesus Christ in us, we are still earthen vessels. There are three things worthy of our consideration.

I. THE EARTHEN VESSEL REVEALS MINISTERIAL LIMITATIONS

This text has many helpful insights for me and for you. The role of the minister is subject to great misunderstanding by both the minister and the congregation.

By this figure the Lord reminds us that the minister labors with all of the limitations known to man. He is just another human being. Someone has quipped that there are really three kinds of human beings --- male, female, and preacher --- but not so. We are all earthen vessels. This means that the minister of the Gospel has mental limitations. He does not know everything --- not even everything about the Bible. He may know more about it than most, but his power as a minister does not depend upon his native mental powers, He will be subject to all of the mistakes made by other human beings. His grammar may not always be correct. His explanations may not always be exact. His memory may suffer from lapses. He is just like you at this point.

He also is limited physically. He is an earthen vessel. When you cut him he bleeds just like everyone else. When he forgets that he is an earthen vessel and works too hard, he pays a price physically just like everyone else. I bear in my body the marks of having ignored some of these facts. God's man is an earthen

vessel. His power as a minister of the Gospel does not always depend upon his physical strength, for Paul discovered that he had greater power in his ministry when his physical strength was weakest.

He is also limited emotionally. He is an earthen vessel. If he is not careful of his walk, the minister can be subjected to fits of depression just like all other men. It is a matter of record that some of God's greatest servants have been those who were inclined toward days of deep depression. Martin Luther often suffered from such bouts with depression. Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist, also knew such times of deep emotional depression.

I can still remember the shock that came to me as a teenager when I discovered that my pastor was not perfect. It happened in a rather innocent way. I happened to be with him when he became irritated and said something that surprised me. I just could not believe that a preacher would ever lose his cool, and that he would actually blurt out something like that. What I had discovered was that my pastor was an earthen vessel.

But God knew this when He chose the man to be a minister of the Gospel. The man does not have to pretend to God that he is something more than an earthen vessel. God knows the truth. This explains the first verse of our text, "Therefore seeing we have this ministry as we have received mercy, we faint not." We were never chosen for the ministry because of our ability or achievement --- but because of His mercy. In His mercy God chose us being fully aware of every limitation upon our lives. I believe that I can carry this a step further. God has not sent me to be your pastor because of some worthiness in me or because I am adequate. He knew that He was placing an earthen vessel in this pulpit. My being here is an expression of the mercy of God.

But God has a purpose in it. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us". God deliberately uses human beings, with all of their limitations, for the spread of His word, so that He might be able to fully express His power. God has deliberately so arranged it that, if anything good and lasting comes from the ministry of the Word everyone will know that it is a work of God and not of Men.

This touches on a problem that most every minister experiences at some time in his ministry. He is tempted to become a Messiah. He will assume responsibility for bringing in the kingdom. He will try to walk on the water. He will begin to think that without him the work of the Lord would grind to a quick halt. But the truth is clear. The pastor is not a Messiah. He was never meant to be anything more than an earthen vessel. The power still and always has belonged to God. It is not by might, nor by the powers of man, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. if we will acknowledge our humanity and cast ourselves upon the Lord in

utter dependence, He will do that which we cannot do collectively or individually.

II. THE EARTHEN VESSEL FOCUSES CONGREGATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

The people of God can make a tragic mistake. They can put more value upon the vessel of clay than they do the treasure. The thing of supreme value is the treasure of the Gospel. We must never forget this.

They can also make the mistake of making the earthen vessel the object of their expectations rather the Almighty Lord God. They treat pastors like schools treat coaches. No matter what kind of players he has to work with, every coach is expected to have a winning season every year. If he does not have a winning season, he begins to hear boos for his decisions and calls for his resignation. Everyone knows what we need is a new coach. Now obviously a coach is important to the team, but he is not the whole show. The pastor has an important role to play in the life of the church, but he cannot bear the burden of being the object of congregational expectations and hopes. Recent studies have shown that churches do best when they have strong, pastoral leadership, but this does not mean that he can bear the burden of congregational expectations.

The pastor cannot do everything. You have realized this so you have provided a large staff to assist him. This is very wise. There is a staff to provide in the pastoral care. You must allow them to be spiritual shepherds in your lives if they are to fulfill their calling in this place. I see us as making up a ministering team in this fellowship.

But the pastor and staff cannot do everything. There are some things that the congregation must do if they are to be done. The pastor and staff cannot minister to everyone. If we are to minister to this whole city with the love and concern of Jesus Christ, then every member of this fellowship must become a working member of the ministering team. You must become an agent of the divine love wherever you go. You must begin to assume some personal responsibility for the welfare of the church and community.

But even the pastor, staff, and congregation cannot do everything. There are some things that only God can do. Indeed, without Him none of us can do anything. Only God can make our work effective. Only God can give unity to the church. Only God can revive the discouraged and wayward. Only God can give life to those who are dead in sin. Only God can work the miracles of grace that we want to see in this place. Only God can make this the great temple of worship and praise that we want it to be. Only God! We are just earthen vessels --- power belongs to God.

Do you see the importance of this? Please do not make me the object of your expectations --- but rather focus them on the Lord God. He-is the God who can do the impossible. The things we really want to happen around First Baptist Church are things that only God can do. When they are done, we will want to bow together in His presence and give Him the glory for the things He has done.

CONCLUSION:

Understanding this text brings a great freedom to my spirit. With your help and God's grace, I am free to be God's man among you. I do not have to pretend to be something I am not -- all God expects me to be is an earthen vessel that is dependent upon Him for everything. I want to conduct my affairs within this understanding.

Understanding this text brings great encouragement to me. Surely God is just waiting for this church to give Him a chance to show what He can really do. The eyes of the nation have been on you over the recent years. They have watched you as you have struggled and hurt. If we will let God be God in this fellowship, the eyes of the nation will be on us again. This time the eyes of the nation will be upon us to see what God has been able to do. Are you ready?