

Weak Minister, Powerful Message, Part 1**The Container – What are these jars of clay?**

The word for “clay” or “earthen” comes from the Greek word from which derives the term “ostrakon” in our own language. One dictionary defines it thus: “An ostrakon is a piece of pottery usually broken off from a vase or other earthenware vessel. In archeology, ostraca may contain scratched in words or other form of writing which may give clues as to the time when the piece was in use. The word is derived from Greek ostrakon meaning a shell or a shard of pottery used as a voting tablet. The plural of ostrakon is ostraca.”

In this case, the “ostrakon” is the root Greek word which refers to the whole clay vessel in which things were stored. 2 Timothy 2:20 is the only other use of the word in the NT. It is a container which can hold something of little value or something of very great value. For instance, the dead sea scrolls were found in such pottery after almost 2000 years of sitting “in storage.” They were not fancy containers, but had precious contents.

The earthen vessels refer to the frail human body and spirit—the whole person. This metaphor reminds us of the fact that God made man from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). God fashioned man’s body from raw materials already existing on the earth, and breathed into it the breath of life. We have temporal bodies that do not last forever. Furthermore, we are creatures; we are not the creator. This distinction forever will be observed in eternity.

This verse applies to the most physically frail and most physically strong minister of the gospel. Every person is weak; it is God whose strength matters. Men are expendable; ministers are not the issue in the proclamation of the gospel—the message is. This is not to say that people are unimportant; rather, they do have value. But the comparison between the two things shows the far surpassing value of the abiding message.

The Contents – What is inside the jars of clay?

Even though the “containers” are frail, what is in them is priceless. They are referred to as a treasure. The common word for treasure is used here, like “treasures in heaven” (Matt. 6:19-21). But what is the treasure? It is the message of the gospel. In terms of verse 6, that is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ.

A very plain assumption is made in this text, and that is that **the gospel is a treasure**. It is far better than any kind of earthly treasure that we might amass. Heaven is where our main investment should be. Of course, we often act otherwise. Additionally, we ought to cherish the gospel that has been given to us. It should not be a boring thing to focus on.

The Cause – Why has God caused it to be this way?

So you have the message of the gospel carried about in frail human vessels, through whom the ministry of that gospel is carried out. What a paradox. It would seem that a powerful message would be displayed in powerful messengers. But it is not.

Why has God caused it to be so? **The point of the verse is that God has arranged the combination of weak vessel and priceless message to ensure that no one mistakes where the power comes from. It comes from God, not from people.** The outstanding nature of the power of God is obviously from the message, not the vehicles of the message.

1 Cor. 2:3-5 gives essentially the same idea. Paul was present with the Corinthians in weakness, he was not a great persuasive speaker, but his ministry did demonstrate the Holy Spirit and power of God. All this was so that the Christian’s faith would not be in man’s wisdom but in the power of God.

It ought to be quite obvious that man’s wisdom runs out of steam after only a short distance (far less than a lifetime). But God’s power is everything—it is what saves us (Rom. 1:16, 1 Cor. 1:18), keeps us (1 Peter 1:5), sustains us (Rom. 15:13), empowers ministry (Rom. 15:19), and will resurrect us (1 Cor. 6:14). Eph. 1:19 points this out.

The recognition of the fact that it is God’s power and not man’s should be evident to a) the minister; b) the church folks at large; c) all those to whom the message is presented.

The Contrast – Why does the verse start with “but”?

The force of the contrastive “but” is that this truth acts as an offset to the great privileges of apostolic ministry, or our personal ministry, for that matter. We do have a great treasure in us, and we have been given a ministry that is second-to-none. But this gives us nothing to boast about in ourselves. We are still mortal beings, though privileged with the message of life and light in the gospel.

The Pressures on the Clay Jars

The following table demonstrates the two sides of the equation laid out above. On the one hand, the earthen vessels are subjected to such pressures that you would expect them to crack under the pressure, if not totally be crushed. But on the other hand, the power of God ensures that the ministers are able to do what God wants them to do.

These troubles demonstrate that the “vessel” is the whole person, not just his physical body, because there are troubles like perplexity, which have to do with the mind, not the body per se.

Demonstration of the Weakness of the Vessel		Demonstration of the Power of God	
Troubled	This means to crush, press, or experience difficulty, 2 Cor. 1:6, 7:5; 2 Thess. 1:6-7, Heb. 11:37.	Not Distressed	Not limited, crushed. 2 Cor. 6:12 uses the term to refer to restricted love.
Perplexed	Confusion about a strange situation, as in John 13:22, Acts 25:20, Gal. 4:20.	Not in Despair	Not to the point of being utterly at a loss, or to renounce all hope.
Persecuted	To be pursued, chased, John 15:20, Rom. 12:14, Gal. 5:11, 6:12, 2 Tim. 3:12. Often used of believers who need to pursue certain qualities in their life; here it is the believers being pursued! Paul used to persecute the church.	Not Forsaken	Not left behind or abandoned. Heb. 13:5 is probably the most outstanding example of this notion. Though men will abandon us, God will not (2 Tim. 4:10, 16).
Cast Down	This means to be knocked down. It is also used of laying a foundation (Heb. 6:1), so it refers to something low down.	Not Destroyed	This is the same word that is used in 4:3 of those who are perishing because they are blinded to the gospel.

We can catalog all manner of trouble experienced by Paul in his missionary work. For instance, he suffered difficulties in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:44-52); Iconium (14:2-5); Lystra (14:19-20); Philippi (16:18-24, 35-40); Thessalonica (17:5-9), Berea (17:13); Corinth (18:12-17); Ephesus (19:23-41); and Jerusalem (21:27-36 and through the end of Acts). What a litany! This is not the same as run-of-the-mill apathy or opposition toward the gospel. That we expect. Such trouble is opposition cranked up a few notches.

Despite all the troubles, the ministry goes on because God is the power behind it.

Conclusion

This passage reminds us of the supremacy of a God-centered approach to ministry if we desire His power to be manifested. Man is not the centerpiece of God’s work, as the power resides not in him but in God. We do well to take this truth to heart. And troubles are to be expected!