

Sermon: Treasured Clay, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

In contemporary Christian circles, the Apostle Paul is often regarded as a devoted servant of Christ, an insightful theologian, and a person of remarkable character.

A quick review of his life story and accomplishments would be as follows:

- Paul wrote more books/letters in the New Testament than any other writer.
- As noted in 2 Timothy he came from a God-fearing family, he was a Pharisee like his father, and he was educated by a respected rabbi.
- He was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest of the twelve tribes of Israel, which was also the tribe of King Saul.
- He spoke Greek and understood Hebrew.
- As a resident of Tarsus, a major city in the region, which was a Roman province, he knew and received benefits of being a Roman citizen.
- His vocation was a Pharisee, the most religiously conservative group of Jews in his time.
- Finally, before his conversion, Paul was known as Saul and was "a Pharisee of Pharisees", who "intensely persecuted" the followers of Jesus.

Few can compare to the Apostle Paul, whose remarkable credentials were matched by his dramatic calling, one that included the light of Christ blinding him for three days and launching his mission to spread the Gospel.

However, there was more to Paul than his impressive credentials. He had his weaknesses too. While his letters were praised, his critics pointed out that his physical presence and speech were weak.

Along with these weaknesses, Paul had a reoccurring thorn in the flesh. Most scholars have proposed the thorn was some kind of physical ailment, perhaps resulting from the mental anxiety and stress of missionary work. The proposals are numerous, such as epilepsy, hysteria, depression, severe eye trouble, malaria, leprosy, a speech impediment

and rheumatism. The sheer number and variety of these speculations suggest that we probably will never be able to identify with certainty what Paul's thorn truly was.

In addition to his frail body, weak speech, and nagging thorn in his flesh, Paul endured countless hardships, including shipwrecks, stoning, and beatings with rods.

With this knowledge, we recognize all the pieces that made up the Apostle Paul as both an ordinary human being and a servant of Christ. We witness his strengths and weaknesses and his triumphs and struggles.

Throughout this second letter, Paul acknowledges his troubled relationship with the Corinth Church. Like other letters, he defends his authority and his identity as an apostle by using an abundance of metaphors like that of a soldier, athlete, or farmer. We are drawn to his phrases such as "run in such a way to win the prize" or "put on the armor of God." Yet, in this passage, Paul humbly uses the metaphor of clay jars to describe himself as an apostle, extending this imagery to all Christians.

We can appreciate how Paul contrasts the fragile clay jars with the priceless treasure of Christ they hold.

The late Eugene Tesselle, community activist and professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School once put it this way: "It is Paul's weakness that validates his authority. It is in such fragile clay that the treasure is carried. The suffering, rejection, and struggle all that seem to diminish him as a human leader serve to reveal the 'extraordinary power' of God. Paul's authority is not a personal lordship but that of a slave for Jesus's sake."

Paul is not the first to use the image of clay jars. We first hear of the reference in the story of creation where God fashions the human creature out of earthly stuff like clay.

Also, as referenced in the call to worship, God is seen as the Potter at the wheel in Jeremiah's prophetic vision.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah, in their prophecies, speak of God's power to restore God's people who are broken vessels corrupted by disobedience and sin.

Like the prophets before him, Paul sees the fragile human body as both a vessel broken by sin/lack of obedience and a vessel through which God's remarkable power is revealed.

When we fix our eyes on Jesus, remain passionate about the gospel, and extend care toward the well-being of others, we have a mindset to go about our days.

With this mindset as beloved clay pots with the treasure of Christ inside us, we endure struggles and challenges, but we are not crushed. We wrestle with doubt and anger, but do not despair. We confront hatred and cruelty but are not abandoned. We are knocked down but not destroyed. In our most challenging moments, when we feel our weakest, Paul encourages us to rely on the power of God within us. A human being is made up of many parts, and Paul displayed how every aspect of who he was, whether his heritage, intellect, or the thorn in his side was used to glorify God.

Over the past month, I have been reading and learning from authors who write about faith and disability with an open spirit.

I've only begun to scratch the surface in getting to know these devoted servants, but one individual I have come to appreciate is Dr. Amy Kelly who wrote the book, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request*.

At the age of 11, Amy was diagnosed with a condition called general dysfunction, meaning doctors were unable to determine the cause of the lack of circulation in her leg. She can walk short distances with a cane, but for longer periods she relies on her wheelchair for mobility.

From a young age, she found herself in awkward conversations with people especially on Sunday mornings who wanted to pray away her disability. She knew they had good intentions, but often, she felt worse around Christians who made her feel defective or as though she would only be accepted if her story included a miraculous cure.

Amy views her disability as an opportunity to reveal God to others. As a wheelchair user, she has observed that many people with a disability in Scripture are chosen by God

to play significant roles in advancing the kingdom. We have already spoken about Paul and the thorn in his flesh. In addition to Paul,

- Isaac became blind
- Jacob walked with a limp
- Leah had weak eyes Moses had a speech disorder
- Elijah felt depressed and suicidal Mephibosheth had two lame feet
- Timothy had stomach issues and frequent ailments

Jesus, our good shepherd, offers abundant life regardless of whether we are disabled or non-disabled. And Amy reminds us that "When we limit our understanding of faithfulness or of holiness to nondisabled people, it limits our understanding of God, and it allows for us to be fooled into thinking that independence is a virtue, and non-disability is somehow holy, or good."

Authors like Amy and Paul keep our eyes on the bigger picture, not focusing on what the world tries to pray away but rather helps us see all our human parts can be used to glorify God.

Amy has come to be grateful for herself and her disability. She just wishes other people could be ok with her disability too.

One of my friends who suffers from a chronic illness says that 96% of people with chronic medical conditions in the United States have invisible disabilities.

My friend's statement reminded me of a mission trip some years ago where my youth group served in flood relief on Staten Island. By the end of the week, everyone seemed to be tired of each other, though excited to explore New York City. Except for one youth.

Leading up to the trip, I visited this youth and her family at their home and reviewed the mission trip details. Everything seemed fine, except for the New York tour. The youth had a genetic condition that caused blisters on her feet if she walked too much or walked on hot surfaces. For the all-day tour of New York, she would need to use a

wheelchair. She didn't want to use it, but she knew her feet wouldn't hold up for a full day of walking. Over the years, since she didn't "look" like someone with a disability being young and appearing healthy, people often accused her of faking her condition.

After a lot of hesitation, she finally agreed to use the wheelchair for the New York tour because one of her dreams was to see the city. The night before the New York Tour, we explained to the youth group about her invisible disability and the need for the wheelchair. Everyone agreed to take turns pushing her throughout the city. The following morning, the guys were eager to push the wheelchair and wondered if they could pull off some wheelies. To the youth's surprise, everyone enjoyed the experience, and she got to spend one-on-one time with every youth and advisor in the group.

Throughout the day, we encountered curbs that weren't lowered. The group slowly started to realize how difficult it was to navigate the city in a wheelchair.

The turning point came at the end of the day, when we tried to take the subway. At this station, there were only stairs. I can still remember one of the youths shouting, "How do people in wheelchairs expect to get around in this city?"

That was the moment it clicked for him and for all of us. After spending the whole day pushing her wheelchair, we finally understood on a small scale what it was like to move on wheels rather than feet. Everyone gets around differently, some with two legs, some with skateboards, some with bicycles, and others with wheelchairs. The challenge is that much of our world is built with greater accessibility for those who walk than for those who ride.

Thanks to a youth's vulnerability and trust in our group, she brought our mission team closer together, even more than our Sandy Relief efforts earlier in the week. She reminded us that as beloved children of God, we all have dreams, and on that day, one of hers came true thanks to 20 kids and a remarkable young girl who sometimes uses a wheelchair.

This youth, along with Dr. Amy and the Apostle Paul, each had one or more disabilities. Yet, as treasured clay pots, they embraced both their strengths and limitations to glorify God helping others do the same.

As the body of Christ, we are vessels through which God accomplishes good and gracious things. Formed in God's image, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and redeemed by Christ's love, we are God's handiwork wonderfully and fearfully made. Let us embrace this truth, further God's kingdom, and praise God for who we are in Christ. With the treasure of Christ within us, may we, as jars of clay, reflect God's surpassing power and faithfully follow Him together.

Amen