

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (NIV 84)

Theme: Focus on the Treasure, not the Vessel

If you have something valuable you want to protect it. If you don’t want people to steal it you might hide it somewhere, put it into a safe, or you might set-up some type of security system in your house to deter or catch anyone that might take it from you. If it is something breakable, you might put in a place where it can’t be touched, only looked at. If you have a lot of money, you will probably take it to a bank so that they can keep it safe for you. The point is, if you have something valuable you try to protect it as best as you can. At least, that is one way to go about it; another way is to hide something in plain sight. They figure that people will be looking for safes and things of that nature, but if you hide it in some non-descript location no one would ever think about looking there. At times in ancient days people would chose to hide valuable things in clay jugs. These were usually used to store water or wine, or things of that nature, no one would think about looking in one of those for something valuable, so it could be effective. On the other hand, it was a risky choice, if someone decided to look in the jug—it was so out in the open. And if it was something valuable, such a fragile vessel offered no real protection.

That is the picture Paul is using when he says in verse seven, **we have this treasure in jars of clay.** The treasure is the gospel; we’ll get to that in a little bit. We are the jars of clay. We are the non-descript fragile vessels which God entrusts with the treasure of his gospel. We constantly sin against him and go against his Word; and yet God chose us to be the vessels that carry that Word! We are all sinners who fail, make mistakes, are lazy, and so on. When it comes to protecting and sharing the gospel we are the same—we are lazy, we often fail to do so, and we make mistakes when we share it with others. We are weak

and fragile—not able to protect anything and we are ugly, not able to attract anyone to the gospel.

I’m no different, of course. I’ve been your pastor for over six and a half years, you know that quite well: I’m a sinner just like you. I’ve made mistakes; I haven’t always shared the gospel as I should have, and at times I could have worked harder for the gospel. This is the text of the first sermon that I preached here at Holy Cross—on the fourth of July, 2010. I warned you then that I’m just a jar of clay like you who won’t be perfect—not for one single day, and as you have seen over and over again, I was right!

Maybe you’ve noticed, maybe you haven’t; but before I preach each sermon—usually during the introduction of the Hymn of the Day, or sometime during that hymn; I say a silent prayer. In that prayer I thank God that he has entrusted to me the treasure of his gospel even though I am a jar of clay; that I don’t even deserve to be called a child of God because of my horrible sins and yet God has called me to watch over your spiritual lives. I ask him to help me to make his gospel front and center; and that the meditation of my heart and the words of my mouth are pleasing to him (which comes from Psalm 19). That is me: a sinful jar of clay, entrusted with the treasure of the gospel.

That’s why during my time serving you; I haven’t talked much about myself or bragged about what I have done—I’m nothing, just a jar of clay. To paraphrase John the Baptist, “I must decrease, so the Lord can increase.” However, pastors are sinners just like you, and there is the temptation to become big-headed if things are going well; or to fall into despair if things aren’t going as planned. During Paul’s day there were a group of false teachers going around claiming to be superior to Paul. He sarcastically referred to them as the “Super-Apostles.” They preached themselves, building themselves up in the name of the Lord and at Paul’s expense. They wanted to gain followers instead of following the words of Christ, so they taught their own doctrine and tried to avoid offending someone at all costs. But they changed God’s word so much that Paul calls it a “different gospel” which was about a “different Jesus.”

We still see that today. Sure, there are some who will boast and brag about themselves and what they have accomplished, but not many. Instead they are more subtle as they preach their own agenda. Many

will try to avoid offending anyone and they hesitate to call people sinners who deserve damnation; and they certainly don't want to come off as too judgmental. They twist portions of Scripture or take them out of context to make it say something that it doesn't really say. They want everyone to love them and talk about how great they are. In effect, they are preaching themselves.

And there is a tendency for members to think that it is all about the pastor. That the success of the congregation depends on how good or not the pastor is. And they want their pastor to be funny; to be entertaining. They hope he is a good story-teller, that he's not weird, and that he gets along with the congregation. They don't want to be told that they are sinners. They don't want to bother learning the stories written in the Bible, let alone God's teachings. They want to go to church to feel good about themselves, to get some advice, or to have a good time. Sadly it is rare when someone simply desires to grow in their faith as they listen to their pastor. What many people today want is the "Super-Apostles" of Paul's day. And if things are going well, praise and adoration are often heaped on the pastor and people talk about how great he is. But if things aren't going quite so well then we start to complain. If the pastor is not everything we want him to be, then we start blaming him for things, or think something is all his fault.

But no matter how great the pastor is—even if many do actually consider him a "Super-Apostle" in reality, he is still a jar of clay. He is still a sinner. But he is a jar of clay holding a treasure. In reality it doesn't matter who is up here preaching the gospel as long as he is preaching the gospel. Since the gospel is the treasure and not the pastor you don't come for the vessel. You aren't a member here, you don't come to worship and Bible Study because of the pastor, the vessel; you come for Christ and the treasure of his gospel. And since the gospel is what is important; since the gospel is the treasure, don't stop coming because of the vessel. The vessel should never be the focus or the reason why you worship or not; rather it should be Christ and his gospel.

The gospel ministry is not about the person but the Savior. Not me pointing to myself; or you pointing to the Pastor, but me pointing you to the Savior, and you pointing not to me but the Cross. And I think you understand that. Many of you have been listening to me for 6 and 1/2 years. And if it was about me, this sinful jar of clay, you would

have never come back. But it's not about me; it's about Christ and what he has done. And that is why you come back; not to hear me, but to hear Christ through me. And you will still worship when I'm not here, not to hear the new guy, but to hear Christ! And of course, the opposite is true: If you don't come to hear me or any other pastor, you're not coming to hear Christ, for he said, **those who reject you, reject me.**

And so we preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord. And that is why you listen to me. Because he is the one who brought us to faith through the gospel and keeps us in the light of faith. Just as he created light with his word he created faith in our hearts through that same word. At the beginning of creation darkness covered over the entire world, complete and utter darkness, not a single thing was giving off light. But God broke that darkness when he said, **let there be light.** And there was light for the first time by just his Word. And then God made the sun, moon, and stars to give light to the world.

Our hearts were no less dark. We were completely blind, lost in the darkness of our sin and unbelief. But the Lord who created light out of darkness by only his Word created light in our souls by only his Gospel. Because of him, we now see Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We have seen the glory of God in Christ. Through faith we have experienced his love and grace first-hand. He is a loving and forgiving God, who gave up his life in order to save us from our sins only to rise from the dead to win for us eternal life. Through Christ we will share in his glory forever in heaven!

Christ has saved us by his perfect life, suffering and death, and by his resurrection. Through the gospel he has brought us to faith so that we receive all that he has done for us and through that same gospel he keeps us in the one true faith. Everything for our salvation has been taken care of by Christ. He is the one who shines the light of the gospel into our hearts. So it's not the person preaching the gospel, but the one who works through the gospel. That is why you listen to me and any other pastor—it's not about the pastor; it never has been. It's about Christ and his grace.

Paul rightfully calls it a treasure. And what makes the gospel a treasure? Only in the gospel do we learn about Christ—who he is and what he has done to save us. Without the gospel we are still in the darkness of sin and unbelief and on our way to the eternal damnation.

But through the gospel we are enlightened, brought to faith in Christ as we gain our knowledge of his glory. Paul says in Romans 1, **I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.** He says later in chapter 10, **faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.** What makes the gospel a treasure? It is the best story ever told; it has the power of the Holy Spirit, and through it we are brought to faith.

The gospel is a treasure. And so may you focus on the treasure, treasure the treasure, not the man. Whether you like me or not, forget about me, I'm the unimportant jar of clay for better or worse, leave me behind. As for those after me, may you love and honor and respect those who come after me; not necessarily because of who they are, but because they are the vessel that carries the treasure of the gospel. They are a broken vessel, sinful like me. So treasure not the man, but the treasure!

Obviously I'm not the treasure, the gospel is. I'm nothing but a jar of clay, a sinner, weak and fragile, who for some reason the Lord entrusted with something so precious and valuable. And yet despite me, you are still here after six and a half years—and I thank God for that every day. May those who follow after me not preach the vessel but preach the treasure. May you look past the jar of clay and look toward the gospel. For it truly is a treasure; a treasure that saves. Amen.