

"Earthen Vessels"

By Teresa Beck

2Corinthians 4:6-7 – “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.”

It has been on my heart for some time to explore this idea of the Christian as an earthen vessel and the treasure that we hold. I believe there is good reason, God’s reason, why Paul uses the analogy of an earthen vessel when speaking about Christians who are in ministry. Those of us who minister in any capacity, from taking a meal to a widow to preaching to thousands, must always keep in mind that we are earthen vessels that hold the treasure that is the Light of the world: we are decidedly not the treasure.

The Making of an Earthen Vessel

Earthen vessels do not make themselves. We understand in a plain reading that this verse is speaking of the human body, or specifically the Christian’s body, as an earthen vessel. We, as physical children of Adam, share his heritage of being formed of the earth. Adam did not form himself but was formed with God’s own hands:

Genesis 2:7 – “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

All human beings are formed by God. None of us can claim that we have formed ourselves: even the anti-theist evolutionists cannot fathom the power and wisdom that gave the “breath of life” to human beings. Men cannot begin to comprehend the Potter’s hands or appreciate His workmanship. Some of us wish that we were not what God has made us, but we are not the Potter; we are only the things formed from the clay:

Romans 9:20-21 – “Nay, but O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, ‘Why hast thou made me thus?’ Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?”

The peculiar thing about human beings is that, while God formed us according to His will, He gave us our own will so that we can choose the use of our own earthen vessels. We can allow ourselves to be filled with whatever we choose. When God reveals to us that He is the Potter and that Jesus Christ, His Son, endured the cross for our salvation, we can choose to follow Christ and be filled with the Holy Spirit, or we can choose to reject Christ and be filled with ourselves.

When we choose ourselves, we are never filled. We become a sieve rather than a vessel so that all of the honor and riches we heap upon ourselves run through, and we are left empty and useless. When we choose Christ, we are filled with the Holy Spirit of God. Even so, we have our own will with which to contend. Christians still must war with the flesh, fighting the desire to fill ourselves with honor and riches and seeking to be filled daily with the Spirit, even to the point of overflowing. To accomplish this, which is no accomplishment of ours, we must allow ourselves to be molded by the Potter on a daily basis:

Luke 9:23-25 – “And he said to [them] all, If any [man] will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?”

Conforming to the Image of Christ

Jesus Himself became an earthen vessel. I cannot imagine the depth of His condescension to come from the glory of heaven to the filth of the earth. The only analogy of which I can conceive is that of a great king choosing to become a pauper, removing his crown and ring and leaving his beautiful castle filled with riches, feasts, and subjects who bow down to him constantly and walking through the gate into the poorest village to sit in the street in rags and beg for bread. Unlike the king turned pauper, however, Jesus came to earth as a man to be our kinsman-redeemer, the only one who could reconcile us to God.

Philippians 2:5-8 – “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

We hear so often that we are to imitate the behavior of Jesus in feeding the poor, visiting those who are imprisoned for righteousness’ sake, preaching the Gospel, and serving others. This passage, however, does not speak of behavioral imitation but of submission of our thoughts. “Let this mind be in you...” is not a command to act but to think. Jesus, though He knew He was God, became an earthen vessel. Taking on flesh was what we would imagine to be the worst humiliation our God of glory could endure. Eternal God, eating food, walking hundreds of miles, getting splinters in His fingers as he worked with wood, submitting to the authority of His parents, grieving the deaths of loved ones, all the while understanding that he would die for all of Mankind.

When we are baptized as Christians, we identify with the death of Christ publicly, being raised to new life in Him. As we mature in our Christian life through prayer, meditation, Bible reading and study, we should not just take on more of the behavior of Christ, but we should be taking on the mind of Christ. Jesus “took upon him the form of a servant,” even though He was God Almighty.

What is the form a servant? A servant thinks only of the will of his master. He does any task to which he is appointed, without consideration of his own reputation or reward. He does not seek praise for his work, hoping only that his work will be useful and pleasing to his master. He does everything to the best of his ability so that his master will be pleased, and he presents his work to his master without pomp or show. He does not consider whether he is personally equipped to do the task his master has given him, but he trusts his master to equip him for the task, knowing that his master will give him anything he needs to accomplish it.

James 4:5-7 – “Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, the spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”

In Jesus, we have a righteous and good Master. As we submit to Him as clay to the Potter, He molds us and shapes us into a useful vessel. As clay, we are formless until He forms us and useless until He uses us. When we attempt to mold ourselves into what we think He would want us to be, we ridiculously interfere with the work He is trying to accomplish in us. We must, as clay, submit to His hand and become what He makes us to be, knowing that He is all wise, all good, and all-knowing. As human beings, we have a fleshly will that will prevent us from submitting to Him if we allow it. We have hopes, ambitions, and dreams. Some of our ambitions are centered on serving Christ, but we must be careful. Are we allowing Him to mold us into what He wants us to be, or are we attempting to mold ourselves into what we think He would want us to be?

Isaiah 55:8-9 – “For my thoughts [are] not your thoughts, neither [are] your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For [as] the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Being conformed to the image of Christ includes thinking His thoughts after Him, not thinking His thoughts for Him. It means that, just as Jesus submitted completely to the will of the Father while on Earth, we must likewise submit to the will of the Father – the Master Potter. When we do as He directs us, we cannot fail because the Master Potter is perfect, and He absolutely cannot fail. He will mold us perfectly for the task He gives us, and He will give us everything we need to accomplish that task, “*that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.*”

Romans 12:1-3 – “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, [which is] your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what [is] that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think [of himself] more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.”

Being a Vessel

In plain terms, an earthen vessel is a jar of clay. Such jars were used in biblical times to hold water, grain, and other goods. When grain was sold at market, no thought at all was given to the vessel but to the quality of the grain. When water was drawn from a well, the beauty of the vessel into which it was drawn had no effect on the quality of the water. In fact, it makes sense that more thought would be given to the integrity of the vessel than to its aesthetic value, since its primary purpose was to carry something of value. Of course, the vessel would need to be clean so that it wouldn't corrupt the contents, but it would not need to be attractive. A good earthen vessel would be used for many years to transfer goods from one place to another, being emptied and refilled over and over.

Luke 6:38 – “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.”

When we view ourselves in the right perspective as earthen vessels, we see that the only reason for anyone to ever look at us is to behold our contents. Jesus has cleansed us, and He is the Light that fills us. We are of little value unless we are being filled and emptied and filled and emptied again on a regular basis by our Lord. God wants to fill us with His Word, living water, to be poured out for others in the form of prayer, preaching, teaching, service, and other ministries.

Matthew 5:14-16 – “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Many of us, unfortunately, try to “make” the contents of our earthen vessels and offer them to God, as Cain did, but God did not accept his sacrifice because Cain was not serving God according to God's instructions. Jesus, on the contrary, was the perfect earthen vessel, submitting to the Father always. Cain wanted God to accept his sacrifice his way; Jesus sacrificed Himself according to God's plan from the beginning of the world for the salvation of all Mankind. Cain would not humble himself in submission to God, but wanted God to honor him for the grain he grew, and he later died without God; whereas Jesus, King of Glory, became the lowest of men because of His love for us and is exalted at the right hand of the Father, “*for whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.*”

If we are to serve God after the pattern of our Savior, we must obey God and depend on Him to provide us with whatever we need to accomplish the task He gives us. In truth, not one of us is worthy, not one clean, not one equipped to do the work of God; nevertheless, He chooses to use earthen vessels to deliver to others the treasure of His Son, Jesus, the Light of the world. We need not be worthy because He makes us worthy; we need not be clean because He makes us clean; and we need not be equipped because He equips us. We need only to be emptied of ourselves so that He can fill us.

1 Corinthians 1: 26-29 – “For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, [are called]: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound

the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, [yea], and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence.”

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