

## POTS, PRESSURES, AND POWER

by Ray C. Stedman

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I do not quite know why I am drawn to the Corinthian letters. Perhaps it is because I feel that the church at Corinth was more like American churches than any other church in the New Testament. In fact, I can go even further and say it was very much like Californian churches. I sometimes refer to the Corinthian letters as The Letters of Paul to the Californians. So in Second Corinthians 4, I would like to refer to a passage where the Apostle Paul is defending his own ministry. These Corinthians had been challenging his authority, and, in his second letter, he is explaining to them why he does certain things. The fourth chapter is a wonderful passage because it is so marvelously eloquent in explaining the power and secret of a true, Christ-honoring ministry. In the midst of the chapter the apostle comes to a brief explanation which is most helpful to us. In Verse 7 we have a brief description of true Christianity:

**But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. {2 Cor 4:7 RSV}**

There is widespread confusion today in the matter of defining Christians and Christianity. There is a common stereotype of Christianity, accepted everywhere, which is completely and demonstrably false. This stereotype runs something like this: (This perhaps may come as a surprise to some who do not really understand how others see us.) In the eyes of the world,

"Christians are men and women who have, by dint of their own self-will, achieved a certain level of morality, i.e., they don't do certain secular things, while they do do certain religious things. They have come to regard themselves as members of a very exclusive club which is especially favored by God, so that they get (or should get, anyway) many special divine favors extended to them. They gather together weekly to perform certain rather meaningless religious rituals. They believe a number of unprovable claims, but take them by blind faith. The result of all this is the production of men and women who are essentially smug, bigoted, and narrow-minded, who, as the course of history has run on, have become responsible for terrible wars, bloodshed, cruelty, and prejudice; who are the ones largely responsible for creating and preserving the ghettos which are such a problem in our own day; and who, in self-righteous priggishness, think of themselves as especially holy people because they don't smoke, drink, gamble, play cards, or go to movies (some of them, at least), etc."

I have tried to be as realistic as possible in describing what I feel is a very commonplace image, which is, for the most part, regarded as genuine by a majority of people in the world today. Of course, we immediately recognize it as a phony, fake Christianity, produced by the attempt of religious people to imitate the genuine product. In Second Corinthians 4:7 we have set forth for us the essence of the true Christian position, a genuine Christianity. That is why I appreciate this seventh verse so much. "We have this treasure," says the apostle, "in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not of us."

There are two particularly important factors about this verse: One is its description of genuine humanity -- humanity as God intended it to be. You will notice that it consists of two elements.

First, mankind is described as "vessels." This is not the only place this figure occurs in the Scriptures, and it is a most significant figure. I do not know if you have ever thought of yourself as a vessel, but it is a fundamental and essential concept of the Scriptures with regard to the human race.

What are vessels for? We would all agree that vessels are made to contain something. That is their sole purpose. They are made to hold something. They are designed and shaped to be filled with something. That is why this verse is so significant. It reminds us that we human beings were intended to contain something. We are made to be vessels, pots, if you like, made to contain something, to hold something.

The vessels in your own home (pots, cups, or bowls) are made to contain something and if they do not have

that substance in them, they are, of course, empty. It is no accident that we describe lives without Jesus Christ as empty lives, because that is exactly what they are. It is no accident that the world today is suffering from what Dr. Carl Jung calls "a neurosis of emptiness." He says, "When goal goes, meaning goes; when meaning goes, purpose goes; when purpose goes, life goes dead on our hands." This is what is happening in many hearts and lives today, both young and old alike -- a great wave of emptiness, of despair. The result is hollow men and women, who have a facade of interest, attention and activity, but within whom there is nothing but emptiness. That emptiness is what is creating the restlessness which is so characteristic of our age and which is breaking out on every side in rebellion and reaction. See how accurately the Scriptures indicate the significant element about humanity: We are made to be vessels, made to hold something, and if we do not have that something in there, our lives are inevitably empty and meaningless.

But, secondly, mankind is not only vessels, but "earthen vessels," i.e., made out of dirt, made from clay, from very common material which has nothing in itself of any value, nothing pretentious. Something is there, yes, but nothing of any real value in itself. Here, of course, is the concept with which so many struggle today and which the humanist vigorously rejects. He says that man is the substance of all things. But the Word of God takes a very humbling and realistic approach to mankind and says that we are nothing but insignificant bits of clay.

Of course, there are all kinds and grades of clay. Some of you are rather fine china -- you crack easily -- still you have a very fine texture, though it is nothing more than clay. Others of us are more like sun-dried mud, and we crumble at the first knock which comes along. But at any rate the matter is gathered up in this one phrase -- earthen vessels. We are all made of common clay and that is why we all have the same problems. As someone has well put it, "We're all made in the same mold -- only some are moldier than others!"

That is a wonderfully realistic view of human life. Pots we are, made to hold something, but of little value in and of ourselves. This corresponds so exactly with the words of Paul when he warns the Galatians not to think of themselves more highly than they ought, "For if any one thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself," {Gal 6:3 RSV}. This is the biblical picture of man.

But notice how the picture is completed here. In the Christian life, the apostle says, we have a treasure in those earthen vessels. And he describes it as "transcendent power." That is the glory of the Christian life, of humanity as God intended it to be. The vessel is not much in itself, but it holds an inestimable treasure, a treasure beyond price. Now, these are glowing words. They speak of a reality, of something genuine. It is indeed a treasure, a treasure so valuable that the world would give everything it has to get it. Throughout the rest of this week there will be money expended in large amounts to try to discover the secret of this treasure, what might be called "the lost secret of humanity." Billions are poured out every week in a vain effort to identify this treasure and to channel it into the normal affairs of human life.

It is a treasure because it is a power, a transcendent power. Do you know what *transcendent* means? "Something beyond the ordinary, something above ourselves, something wholly other, something different, unusual." It is not like the ordinary kind of power, which tears things apart, destroys, blasts, or breaks. This is a strange kind, a kind which unites, which harmonizes, gathers, breaks down barriers and middle walls of partition. In other words, here is the power to change a life or a society from within, not from without. It does not make superficial, external adjustments, changing the outward face of things, but a genuine transformation which arises from within, which completely and permanently changes an individual. As individuals become changed, the society of which they are a part likewise becomes changed.

Do you know any other power like this? This is why I glory in the ministry of preaching, because it is the declaring of an unrivaled power. There is nothing like it in the world. The gospel has no rivals whatsoever. There is no other philosophy, or approach to life, which can anywhere nearly compare with it. It is completely unique. It is so tremendous because it is the power which really changes men and women.

You can imitate this power, dress up the outside, see what it is supposed to look like, and, for a time, produce something which resembles it, and which may fool yourself and others for awhile, but which, in the long run, is nothing but a cheap and shoddy imitation of the real thing. Sooner or later its real character becomes evident to all, as it cannot stand the tests which are applied to real Christianity. No, this is not something fake, not

phony. It is a genuine transformation, a permanent change within an individual.

The secret, as you well know, is Christ alive in us. As the apostle puts it in clear terms to the Colossians, his ministry is to make known,

... the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery [that's this treasure], which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. {Col 1:26-27 RSV}

This is real Christianity -- Christ in you, not merely to take you home to heaven when you die, but to manifest his life anew in you right now, to live again his life in you in terms of your situation and circumstances. This is the treasure. We have this treasure in earthen vessels, and designedly so. God put it in failing, faulty, weak, sinful men and women in order that it might be evident that the power does not originate in us. It is not a result of a strong personality, or an extroverted nature, or a highly honed and trained mind. No, it is not a result of any of these things. It is something which arises from the presence of God in the heart. That is why God so delights to call people like us -- the stupid, the weak, the faulty, the failing -- and to manifest his life and grace through us.

In the next two verses we have the experience of Christian living:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; {2 Cor 4:8-9 RSV}

That is life, isn't it? There are all the pressures common to man, unremoved in the life of a Christian. I have grown tired of saying what every Christian spokesman must say -- that it is quite false, the idea which so many seem to have, that when you become a Christian everything smooths out, and you are given a membership in a red carpet club through life, so that mysterious bridges appear over all the chasms, the winds are tempered for you, and there are no pressures, no difficulties, no problems. No, no. What a far cry that is from reality! The problems, the pressures are all there. This is life in the raw. Look at these categories:

- Afflictions: These are the normal trials which everybody faces, Christian and non-Christian alike. Your washing machine breaks down on Monday morning, your mother-in-law arrives just when you didn't want her, sickness strikes in your family, heartbreaks come -- these buffettings of life which come to everyone. They are all so normal, so daily. I tell you, these last two weeks I feel as though I've been fighting ten rounds a day with Cassius Clay!
- Perplexities: This refers to all the pressing calls for decisions, when we don't know what to decide. We are at a loss, we can't see the end, we don't know how it is going to turn out. We are afflicted with fears, anxieties, worries, and uncertainties, all gathered up in this word "perplexities."
- Persecutions: These are the misunderstandings we all run up against, the ostracisms, the cold shoulders which are shown to us at times, the malicious actions and attitudes, deliberate slights, attacks on our character and our reputation, and oftentimes, the bigoted, prejudiced, unfair practices of members of society against one another, all part of the Christian's life as well as the non-Christian's.

And finally,

- Catastrophes: "Struck down!" Stunning, shattering blows which drop out of the blue into our lives -- accidents, fatal illnesses, war, earthquake, famine, riot, insanity -- these terrible episodes which shatter a family or an individual, and leave us frightened and baffled. All these things are part of normal Christian experience. There is no change in the problems, the pressures.

But look at the reactions. "Afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed." There is a power within, a transcendent power, different than anything else, which keeps pushing back with equal pressure against whatever comes from without, so that we

are not destroyed, not crushed or despairing. That is what the Christian life is intended to be. There is no question about it. We are called to this kind of victorious experience.

Perhaps every one of us who knows Jesus Christ has experienced something of this at times. We know the truth of it. We know how Christ can undergird us in times of sorrow and strain, but usually it is in the big things, the shattering things, that we experience something of the reality of this. But the point of this passage is that this is intended to be a constant, continuous experience. What Paul is saying is that we are to meet the pressures with an answering inner pressure, not only in the big things but in the little things as well. Our homes ought to be different, because the home is the ultimate test of the spiritual life. Others are watching you -- particularly how you live at home -- and they are waiting to see if you really are different.

Let me share with you a very practical application of this from First Corinthians 13. I am not always pleased with these paraphrases of Scripture, but this one is helpful:

Though in the glamour of the public eye, I sway the emotions of men by my oratory, or by my silver singing, or by my skillful playing, and then go home and gripe because supper is late or because my clothes weren't made to suit me, I am become as sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.

And though I am able to impress others with my vast knowledge of the deep things of the word of God, and though I am able to accomplish mighty things through faith so that I become famous among men as a remover of mountains, and have not the love that reads the deep longings of the hearts around the family circle and removes the barriers that grow up in shy and tender hearts, I am nothing.

And though in the glamour of public praise I bestow all of my goods to feed the poor, and though I win the name and fame of a martyr by giving up my body to be burned, and yet close up like a clam at home, or behave like a snapping turtle, knowing nothing of the glory of giving myself in unstinted self-denying service to those nearest and dearest, it profiteth me nothing.

Now abide fundamentalism, premillennialism, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love!

What makes the difference? What is the secret? How do you transform your life into a continuous expression of this kind of living? The apostle gives us that secret in Verses 10 and 11:

**... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. {2 Cor 4:10-11 RSV}**

There it is! There are two factors. One is an inner attitude to which we must consent (Verse 10). The second is an outward activity to which we are exposed (Verse 11). But the result is the same, you will notice. Each verse closes with these words: "...so that [in order that] the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." That is, in our outward life, now. Not in heaven some day; now! "...so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." Not our immortal flesh, not sunshine some day, but now!

What is the secret? Well, Paul says, it is the death of Jesus, the dying of Jesus, the cross of Jesus. The key to experiencing the life of Jesus is the death of Jesus. The key to discovering the glory of this treasure hidden within (the living out of the life of the Lord Jesus now) is the accepting of the meaning and practical result of the death of Jesus. That is the key. Twice he gives it here.

What is the cross? The cross of Jesus had only one purpose. It was to bring to an end an evil man. Now that may be striking to say about Jesus, because we do not usually think of him as an evil man. But remember that Scripture says, in this very letter, that "he was made sin for us," {2 Cor 5:21 KJV}. He became what we are. When he became what we are, there was nothing else God could do except to put him to death. He brought him to an end. That is what God intends to do with what we are, apart from dependence on Jesus Christ. He desires to bring it all to a crashing end in the death of a cross.

The cross puts to death the proud ego, that factor within us which, when we do good, wants to blow a trumpet

so everyone can hear. Or when there is an opportunity to show off, it makes us eager to get in line. It is that faculty within which wants no one else to be as educated or as popular or as skillful or as beautiful as I, that faculty which resents it when another is chosen for what I want. "Share my sin and you're my dear brother, but correct my errors and you're a snake-in-the-grass!" It is the thing which struggles to be the center of my life, and expresses itself in self-excuse, self-pity, self-indulgence, and self-assertion, the ego which seeks constantly to be ministered to. This is what the cross puts to death.

And the secret of experiencing the life of Jesus is an attitude which welcomes the cross and gladly consents to having the ego crucified within us, put to death, allowed no expression, allowed no place of indulgence in our life. When we do that, then the life of Jesus becomes manifest immediately, and shines out.

I think the apostle is thinking here of the story of Gideon and his band of three hundred men who gathered around the camp of the Midianites. You remember that they had torches hidden in earthen vessels, earthen jars, which obscured the light. They circled the camp of the Midians and, at a given signal, broke the vessels, and the light flared forth {see Judg 7:20-22}. There was a great victory over the Midianites who saw, as it were, an army surrounding and threatening them. That is what Paul is getting at. The vessel must be broken. There must be that which grinds down this proud ego within us, this self-expression. As we consent to that, the life of Jesus comes flowing out. "Rivers of living water" begin to flow from us {cf, John 7:37-38}.

Look at the second factor in Verse 11: "For while we live we are always being given up to death ..." Now, this is different. The first factor is an attitude we accept, to which we consent, but this one is in the passive voice. This is the kind of action in which we are the object. We are being given up to death. This refers to those circumstances, trials, and pressures that God puts us into which force us to lean upon Jesus Christ. We feel we are being sentenced to death. You will find this illustrated in Chapter 1 of this same letter. The apostle says, Verse 8:

**For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. {2 Cor 1:8-9 RSV}**

That is why you get into trouble. That is why pressures come, and why problems arise in your life. That is why you never can get things worked out finally. You seem to get all the problems taken care of and you settle back and BANG! -- another one hits. You are being delivered up to death in order that you might trust in the One who dwells within, not in happy circumstances, nor in pleasant surroundings, but in the Lord Jesus within. Then the life of the Lord Jesus is made manifest in your mortal flesh. God works through the Scriptures to teach us the attitude we are to have, and also through the circumstances of our life to force us to experience it, so that the light hidden within, the treasure within, may break out, and men and women may see it, and be blessed and strengthened.

That is why Paul closes with these words,

**So death is at work in us, but life in you. {2 Cor 4:12 RSV}**

The blessing goes to someone else as well as to you when this is carried out.

Surely this fittingly leads us to the celebration of the table of the Lord. I hope that it will have fresh and rich meaning to us as we come to it now. It is the death of Jesus, producing the life of Jesus to be manifest within us, releasing the fragrance of the Lord Jesus to lives around us, and in our own lives as well.

## **Prayer**

Our Father, we need periodic reminders of what we are in ourselves -- empty pots made to contain God, made to hold the Almighty, useless and meaningless and empty without him. Lord, we pray that we may learn to accept gladly, cheerfully, and understandingly the experiences which come our way which force us to rely upon your grace. And even more,

that we may learn to accept these snubs to our ego, these humiliating experiences which crush us, but which also produce the life of Jesus within us. Help us to do this in honesty and genuineness today. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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