

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Jesus' GLORIOUS New Way**

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 1-4)

#### **Glory...in Clay Pots!**

(2 Corinthians 4:7-18)

Study #6

**Introduction:** Things are not always what they seem...

I can - and sometimes do - lose myself watching old-school basketball videos on YouTube.

I like the current players, but I also really enjoy watching guys like Larry Bird, Magic Johnson, Wilt Chamberlain and some even older guys. Among my favorites are those that showcase Pete Maravich, aka "Pistol Pete."

Pete was a walking advertisement for the idea that looks can be deceiving. He was way more impressive on the court than you would guess, based on his looks. There wasn't a sock made that would stay up on those chicken-stick legs. His hair was a mop.

The first videos we have of Pete show him as a gangly 8<sup>th</sup> grader playing on the High School varsity squad. He stood five feet two inches tall and weighed, maybe, ninety pounds.

Looking at him, you would never imagine that by the second game of the season, "Pistol Pete" had become the central cog on his High School team in South Carolina. But that is exactly what happened.

Pete went on to become a college standout at LSU and a pro Hall of Famer. Boston Celtics star, John Havlicek called Peter "the best ball-handler of all time."

You can't always tell a player by his looks. In fact, the externals or anything can be deceiving.

King Tut's golden mask was gorgeous, but it covered the withered face of a thirty-five-hundred-year-old corpse. And while an oyster shell isn't anything to write home about, some of them hide a beautiful pearl inside.

Sometimes, the best wrapped Christmas presents disappoint. And sometimes, the gift wrapped in burlap is exactly what you wanted.

Out of all the books I've read about leadership, the one I re-read every year was written by Gene Edwards, [A Tale of Three Kings](#). It's printed in a big font, runs about one hundred pages long, and has pictures. It's not what anyone would call great literature. But the book packs a wallop. You can't always tell a book by its cover.

One time, at a wedding in Cana, the headwaiter was flabbergasted when he sampled the best wine he had ever had, drawn from stone containers that had been holding plain old water. (John 2)

This theme of riches tucked away in ordinary vessels shows up all over the Bible. It is God's preferred means of accomplishing His purposes in the world. He delights to use the ordinary to showcase His extraordinary.

This morning, we'll see the genius of God's plan as we turn again to Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth and discover that He has stored the treasure of the New Covenant in very unremarkable vessels.

*Review...*

Over the last few weeks, Jeff and I have spoken from the opening chapters of 2 Corinthians and have seen the glories of Jesus' New Covenant, especially when compared to the Old Covenant brought by Moses:

The Old Covenant condemned. The New Covenant justifies.

The Old Covenant kills. The New Covenant gives life.

The Old Covenant fades. The New Covenant remains.

The Old Covenant prompts hiding. The New Covenant, transparency.

So...the New Covenant is way more glorious than the Old.

Believers in Jesus have been given the gift of the New Covenant. It resides in us, whom the Apostle Paul refers to as ***“earthen containers.”***

### **We Don't Lose Heart When We Remember... (vv. 7-15)**

#### **...Earthen Containers Hold Solid Gold (v. 7)**

***[7] But we have this treasure in earthen containers, so that the extraordinary greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves***

*The Potter, the clay pot*

The Old Testament often referred to people as pottery. The thought was usually that He - God - is the Potter, while we are the clay.<sup>1</sup> He designs and casts and fires the pottery so that those He has redeemed are fit for His purposes.

In our passage today Paul takes the pottery theme and runs with it in a slightly different direction.

Yes, we are pottery. And yes, we are His creation. But the point in 2 Corinthians 4:7 is not so much that we are His creation, but that we are ordinary clay pots.

To get across the idea that we are God's creations, Paul could have said that we are His golden goblets or His crystal stemware. No. We are His ***“earthen containers.”***

In the first century, these clay pots were the least expensive containers available. They were the HEB bags of ancient Rome.

*Out of the clay pot...LIGHT!*

God has placed the Hope Diamond in an HEB bag. He has placed the treasure of the New Covenant in us.

So, when you get home from a trip to HEB, you don't brag about the great bag. The bag is just the container of the star of the show: the food. The food's the thing.

If you've got a big pot that holds a bougainvillea plant loaded with blooms, you don't call attention to the pot, but to the plant. The plant's the thing.

If you are ready to ask a woman to spend the rest of her life with you, and you drop to one knee and present her with a little black box, you don't want her to admire the box. You want her to open the box to see the ring. The ring's the thing.

The assignment God gives to clay pot / HEB Christians like us is to do everything we can to put all the attention we can on Jesus.

The power of the New Covenant is unleashed when we ***“earthen containers”*** get out of the way and let everybody know that it's all about Jesus. He's the point.

God wants there to be no question as to where our joy and power and love and victory come from.

By design, He has placed this treasure of the New Covenant into people who fail, are weak, and who sin so that it will be clear - when lives are changed - that the power for change came from God.

When lives are changed through the ministry of a church or this or that Christian, it's not the result of a church's external trappings, or of a Christian's winning personality or great education of fine upbringing.

Impact arises solely from the presence of God in the heart, unleashed when we simply let Him shine.

Which is not to say that the life of a clay pot is all sunshine and rainbows. Paul highlights some of the problems to which clay pots are subject.

#### **...Life arises from Death (vv. 8-12)**

<sup>1</sup> Check out Isaiah 64:8; Jeremiah 18.

*Clay pots get abused (vv. 8-9)*

**[8] we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; [9] persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed<sup>2</sup>**

Those are the words of the Apostle Paul, not the words of some immature or rebellious brand-new Christian. By these words, Paul puts the lie to the idea that Christian living smooths out life's wrinkles.

Living for Jesus will not temper the winds of fate. It will not keep us from all disease and heartache. It doesn't magically create bridges over troubled waters.

Yes, of course, God does, sometimes, provide deliverance from terrible hardship. Often, though, He does not. And that is because His overriding purpose is NOT that we Christians would escape the dangers and difficulties of life.

His overriding purpose is that we would show a watching world that when we encounter these difficulties, it is His strength that empowers us to meet them with grace and love and peace and joy.

Paul mentions four categories of difficulties, and the first category is that of **afflictions**. Afflictions are the normal irritations everyone faces. The car won't start. You get a sharp pain that comes out of nowhere. The kids don't sleep or misbehave. You didn't get the raise you expected.

Next come **perplexities**. Perplexing situations present us with the anguish of just not knowing quite what to do. We are all faced with these situations where there is no clear-cut way forward. Regularly.

How often in the last week have you simply not known what to do? Whichever direction you choose, there is no guarantee of a good outcome. So often we have a choice between the lesser of two evils. A win-win isn't possible. But you've got to do something. It's perplexing.

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<sup>2</sup> Interesting thought - Paul's sufferings were evidently greater than the book of Acts (for whatever reason) permits us to see.

And there are **persecutions**. We understand them even if we haven't experienced them. Jesus promised them. Paul knew them firsthand. Any of us might taste them at any moment as we boldly live for Jesus.

Being **struck down** is the catastrophic - the stunning reversal of fortune. Shattering blows that change everything. Cancer, accidents, heart attacks, strokes, divorce, the death of a loved one, war, famine, earthquakes.

But, in each and every circumstance, Paul says that he is not defeated. Afflicted, but never crushed. Perplexed, but never despairing. Persecuted, but never forsaken. Struck down, but never destroyed.

I read this list of hard, hard experiences and wonder how Paul could have made it, much less made it with a loving, joyful heart intact.

Listen.

*Clay pots learn to live as Jesus died (vv. 10-12)*

**[10] always carrying around in the body the dying<sup>3</sup> of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.<sup>4</sup> [11] For we who live are constantly being handed over to death because of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our mortal flesh. [12] So death works in us, but life in you.**

This is how you and I can lead a bafflingly beautiful life in our clay pot bodies. All we have to do is carry about the dying of Jesus.

And what does THAT mean?

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<sup>3</sup> Does not use the normal word for death here (*θανάτος*), but the word that represents a process, making dead (*νεκροσ*).

<sup>4</sup> Verse 10 tells us that we have to make a conscious choice to agree to give up our demand for recognition and significance. Verse 11 assures us that God will faithfully place us in situations where we have to die whether we choose to or not. In both verses, the result is "the life of Jesus, manifest in our mortal flesh." (or "New Covenant ministry carried out in clay pots")

Well, ask yourself, *“What characterized Jesus as He was dying? What would have struck you if you had been a bystander, not knowing anything about Jesus, watching as Jesus hung from the cross?”*

Would you have looked at that scene and thought to yourself, *“That is a very powerful man up there, hanging on the cross.”* No.

Anyone walking by the cross would not have seen in Jesus someone to imitate, a popular man, or a winner.

The cross was a place of weakness and rejection. On the cross, Jesus allowed Himself to be a clay pot. Yet, it was on the cross, in weakness, that God accomplished His greatest work.

To *“carry around in the body the dying of Jesus”* is to learn to live the way He died.

It is to no longer be hung up on all the things that make us look important to other people.

It is to come to the end of independence.

It is to depend on God to do His work through us.

It is to let His light shine through our cracked pot lives.

Our temptation (MY temptation) is to want the life of Jesus, the resurrection power of Jesus. I’m not always looking to live as He died.

Maybe, you, too?

We want God to work through us, but we want to be interviewed about it by Joe Rogan.

We want that sister who is struggling to “get better” but we also want people to know that we counseled with her prior to her getting better.

We can’t have it both ways.

We can’t aim to be powerful AND present an all-powerful Jesus. We can’t say, “It’s all about Jesus” AND grab for credit when He does something gracious and powerful.

New Covenant living means that we live as Jesus died, content to be weak, admitting to our clay pottedness.

We remember that out of Jesus’ weakness on the cross came resurrection life and salvation for everyone who trusts Him. So, we embrace weakness. And out of our weakness New Covenant power will be unleashed.

### **...Resurrection brings Glory to God (vv. 13-15)**

***[13] But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written: “I BELIEVED, THEREFORE I SPOKE,” we also believe, therefore we also speak, [14] knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and will present us with you. [15] For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace, having spread to more and more people, will cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.***

We don’t lose heart because no matter what we are going through, the resurrection principle holds. Life comes out of death. God’s strength comes out of our weakness.

There is nothing more pro-active you can do to unleash New Covenant power than to admit you are a clay pot holding solid gold. Embrace weakness, that God might be strong through you.

As the chapter ends, Paul tells us that we will not lose heart and hope will remain when we focus on the INTERNAL, the ETERNAL and the INVISIBLE.

### **We Don’t Lose Heart When We Remember... (vv. 16-18)**

#### **...The INTERNAL (v. 16)**

***[16] Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer person is decaying, yet our inner person is being renewed day by day.***

Did you hear that? The outer person is decaying. Amen. Amen. Amen.<sup>5</sup> The physical body in which we live is wearing down.

I grimace when I hear talk about how the ancient all-star, Tom Brady, aged 44, has now retired. Oh, wait. He unretired.

Or you may remember when Greg Popovich put Tim Duncan on the “Did Not Play” list for a game in 2012 against the New York Knicks because he was “old.” Tim was 36 years old at the time.

Yes, of course, professional athletes may be on a slightly different timetable than the rest of us, but for all of us, bodily decay is an unavoidable “given.”

Paul is right. The outer person, the shell, is running down and the parts are wearing out. But there is a very positive flip side to the ageless issue of aging for the Christian. The flip side is that the “inner person” is being **renewed** day by day.

Our bodies are changing, and by a certain age the trajectory is clear, due to the ravages of use and time. But our inner person is also changing. It’s getting better, stronger, more alive.

God’s plan is that the older we become, the more we reflect the character of Jesus.

If we don’t want to lose heart (v. 16), we’ll focus less on the inevitable decline of the physical body and more on cultivating the inner life of the spirit.

And I will take a minute here to say, “*Thank you!*” to our elder brothers and sisters who are living this out right before our eyes. And yes, I’m watching and learning from you. I’m right behind you.

We are blessed with senior citizens who are becoming sweeter with the years, more winsome, less judgmental, more gracious, more patient and kind, more prayerful.

God bless you, my friends, for modeling that Paul writes. The outer shell ain’t what it used to be, but the inner person is getting stronger and stronger.

And there’s another thing we’ll do. To avoid losing heart in following Jesus, we’ll fixate on the eternal, not on the temporal.

...**The ETERNAL (v. 17)**

***[17] For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison***

Difficulties we all face in this broken-down world *NOW* are producing dividends, reward, “***an eternal weight of glory***” for *THEN*.

And to what was Paul referring when he mentioned “***light momentary afflictions***”?

Based on what we know of his life, he was thinking about stuff like imprisonments, beatings, dangers, stonings, shipwrecks, persecutions, and physical deprivations. Paul went through all of these.

And all of this is exactly what a man named Patrick, who grew up in Britain in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, experienced.

You know that Patrick’s special day was this past Thursday. So, with a nod to the holiday, but mostly because of 2 Corinthians 4:17, here is a bit of the story of Saint Patrick.

When he was a teenager on vacation with his family at a beach in what we know as England, Irish pirates attacked. While the family escaped, Patrick was captured, taken to Ireland, and sold as a slave to a Druid tribal chief named Miliuc.

Patrick had been raised in a Christian home in Britain, but Jesus did not become real to Patrick until he was enslaved in Ireland. There, in pagan Ireland, he grew strong in faith.

After a few years of living as a slave, Patrick escaped, made his way to the sea, boarded a ship, and returned to his family in Britain - but that is not the end of the story.

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<sup>5</sup> The “outer man” is our physical body. Nothing sinful is being implied. Paul is not talking here about “the flesh” as the principle of sin in fallen humanity.

Patrick had a dream calling him to return to Ireland - where he had been enslaved! - to tell the Irish about Jesus.

His parents and the church leaders in Britain fiercely opposed this idea. They feared that Patrick would be tortured and killed by the pagan Druids.

But, despite these objections, Patrick left Britain and returned to Ireland, taking the Good News of Jesus with him.

Over the years of his service in Ireland, Patrick faced all kinds of opposition.

He was often ambushed and attacked while evangelizing. For a while, he was re-enslaved. There were attempts by the Druids to kill him by both poison and spear.<sup>6</sup>

Patrick suffered mightily, but many Irish men, women, boys and girls came to faith in Jesus through his ministry. His **“momentary, light affliction”** has produced for him **“an eternal weight of glory.”**

We know that enslavement, torture, imprisonment and death for faithfulness to Christ were not confined to Patrick’s lifetime.

Today, in nations like China, Vietnam, Cuba, the state of Chiapas in Mexico, Ukraine, and throughout the Middle East, Christians suffer for living openly for Jesus. They may be imprisoned or killed.

When we read 2 Corinthians 4:17 we remember them. Paul says that there is a direct correlation between the sufferings we faithfully endure in this life and the glory we will enjoy in the life to come.<sup>7</sup>

Know for certain that your:

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<sup>6</sup> In his autobiography (*Confessions*), Patrick wrote, “As every day arrives, I expect either sudden death or deception, or being taken back as a slave or some such misfortune. But I fear none of these, since I look to the promise of heaven and have flung myself into the hands of the all-powerful God, who rules as Lord over all.”

<sup>7</sup> I firmly believe that we can include those sufferings we endure because we are living for Jesus AND those sufferings we endure simply because we are living in a fallen world.

faithfulness to your spouse,  
your fight for purity,  
your commitment to your children’s welfare,  
your diligence at your place of work,  
your generosity with time and treasure to advance Jesus’ Kingdom, and  
whatever suffering you may ever endure because of your outspoken faith in Jesus...

all contribute to **“an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.”**

Paul is calling us to a VERY counter-intuitive life.

First (v. 16), we are to make a far greater investments in the health and growth of our **“inner person”** than in the outer person.  
Second (v. 17), we are to spend much more time and energy preparing for the next life than in getting all wrapped up in this life’s gains.

He closes by urging us to one more counter-intuitive focus, if we are to not **“lose heart.”**

...The INVISIBLE (v. 18)

**[18] while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.**

All day every day we are bombarded with sensory stimulation. It is understandable that we would pay a lot of attention to what we taste and see and feel and hear and smell.

Paul says, *“Careful. Don’t depend on these senses for a final verdict on your life’s meaning. These are not reliable indicators of the actual ‘score’ in the world.”*

Everywhere Paul looked, he SAW Christians being persecuted, SNIFFED the incense from the worship of the Greek cults, FELT the lash of the persecutor’s whip, HEARD reports of churches in disarray.

If he had depended solely on his senses to get the current score on who was winning the war for the hearts and souls of men and women, he might have been tempted to lose heart.

Just like you and I will be tempted to despair if we use what we see and hear as the scorecard for what really counts.

We see war atrocities in Ukraine. We see corruption in high places. We see injustice against the weak. We see our Christian family members suffering terribly in tough places. We see people we love untouched and unmoved by Gospel truth.

Yes, there are problems, and the problems are everywhere. Right in our faces. But there are overarching realities that are bigger than our problems.

To get God's perspective on the internal and eternal scorecard, we have to look at the invisible.

With the eyes of faith, we see...  
 ...a powerful God who is taking history somewhere.  
 ...a gracious God who offers eternal life to all who believe in Jesus.  
 ...a creative God who turns human wrecks into trophies of grace.  
 ...a loving God who uses "*earthen containers*" to be His lights in a dark world.

God's final victory hasn't yet been won. But we see it by faith's eyes. Scripture promises it, so we embrace it - and we don't lose heart.

### **Conclusion:**

Truly, all is not as it seems.

Ugly oysters produce pearls, thin plastic HEB bags hold precious groceries, and all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, Pistol Pete Maravich could REALLY play ball.

So, you and I may not look like much. And there is, actually, nothing all that special about us. But God has placed within us a tremendous treasure.

It is His New Covenant plan that your friends will respond to the way you deal with life with real puzzlement -

*"I don't get it. You are so ordinary. But I've watched you respond to great loss with peace, to adversity with joy, to success with grace. What's up with that? What gives?"*

And you then get to tell your friend that it isn't you. It's Jesus.

You get to tell your friend that you're learning to live the way Jesus died. To be content with weakness, content to be a clay pot.

You're embracing your dependence on God.

You're paying more attention to the internal than the external, putting more focus on the eternal than the temporal, and looking past what your physical senses are screaming at you to the invisible realities of God's grace and love.

And you then get to invite your friend to join you on this journey by taking their own "next step" - maybe even a first "next step" - with Jesus.