



PART 2

PAUL IN CORINTH: LEADERSHIP UNDER FIRE

Chapter Eight

A LEADER MADE OF CLAY

CLAY POTS ARE HUMBLE

There's a deliberate paradox in [2 Corinthians 4:7](#): “treasure in earthen vessels.”

[2 Corinthians 4:7 \(NASB\)](#)

⁷ “But we have this **treasure in earthen vessels**, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.”

Treasure is normally stored in more elaborate containers than earthenware, of course. Jewels are set in gold. Gold is often displayed in ivory or alabaster containers, decorated with fine handiwork. Few would think a plain terra-cotta pot is a suitable container for something inherently invaluable. It's too modest, too ordinary, too humble.

“But,” Paul wrote, “we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” The “treasure” he spoke of is the promise of the new covenant ([2 Corinthians 3:7–18](#)), the gospel message ([2 Corinthians 4:3](#)),

[2 Corinthians 3:7-18 \(NASB\)](#)

⁷ “But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading *as it was*,

⁸ how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?

⁹ For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory.

¹⁰ For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses *it*.

¹¹ For if that which fades away *was* with glory, much more that which remains *is* in glory.



¹² Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in *our* speech,
¹³ and *are* not like Moses, *who* used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away.
¹⁴ But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ.
¹⁵ But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart;
¹⁶ but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.
¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is liberty.
¹⁸ But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 4:3 (NASB)

³ “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.”

“the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:6).

2 Corinthians 4:6 (NASB)

⁶ “For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Why is such a priceless treasure contained in clay pots? “[So] that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us” (v. 7). The more feeble the vessel, the more evident it is that the power is God’s.

2 Corinthians 4:7 (NASB)

⁷ “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, **so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.**”

Paul was not about to get into a debate with the false apostles over whose looks or oratorical ability were superior. He said in **2 Corinthians 10:12**,

2 Corinthians 10:12 (NASB)

¹² “For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.”

He wasn’t the least bit interested in weighing himself against men who measured themselves by such superficial standards. “But,” he said (paraphrasing **Jeremiah 23:9**) “he who glories, let him glory in the LORD.’ For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends” (**2 Corinthians 10:17–18**).

Jeremiah 23:9 (NASB)

⁹ “As for the prophets: My heart is broken within me, All my bones tremble; I have become like a drunken man, Even like a man overcome with wine, Because of the LORD And because of His holy words.”



2 Corinthians 10:17-18 (NASB)

¹⁷“But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD.

¹⁸For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.”

The Lord *had* commended Paul, notwithstanding what he looked like or talked like. Paul was quite content to be a clay pot in the service of the Lord. He was seeking not the approval of men but the eternal “**well done**” of the heavenly Judge.

Consider again the nature of a clay pot. It is simply baked clay. Dirt baked hard. God knows that is what we all are—though we have a tendency to forget. “**For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are *but* dust**” ([Psalm 103:14 NASB](#)).

He said to Adam, “**Dust you are, and to dust you shall return**” ([Genesis 3:19](#)).

Genesis 3:19 (NASB)

¹⁹“By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.”

Paul said, in effect, “**That’s all I am: kiln-dried mud.**”

Clay pots were a common feature in Paul’s day. They served many functions. Every kind of household vessel was made of clay, from tableware to washbasins and garbage containers. Baked clay was cheap, breakable, replaceable, and unattractive.

In [2 Timothy 2:20 NASB](#), Paul wrote, “**Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor.**” Honorable vessels would include fine tableware, decorative earthenware, goblets, water pots, pitchers, and other utensils reserved for meals and formal occasions.

Dishonorable vessels would include chamber pots, garbage receptacles, and other items for unclean uses. Most of the dishonorable vessels were made of clay. None of them had any intrinsic value.

Occasionally, clay pots were used as simple, inexpensive vaults, especially when a treasure was meant to be hidden. Priceless jewelry, gold, silver, title deeds, valuable documents, or other treasured items could be sealed in a clay jar and buried in the ground to keep them safe and hidden.