

Christians are a strange people. Every day we live a kind of paradoxical existence. Nowhere is this more evident than in our attitude towards the cross. We sing hymns about clinging to the “old rugged cross.” Or we sing, “At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away.” We even revel in the blood that was shed there. We sing, “There is power, power, wonder-working power, in the precious blood of the Lamb.”

When you think about it, all this is rather strange. I mean, some people must hear this stuff and think, how strange, even morbid. This thing, which was a symbol of loss and shame and criminality, has become for us a symbol of victory, freedom, and power.

How could there be power in a cross? When we think of power, we think of corporations flexing their corporate muscles, smashing the little guys. Or we think of the military with sophisticated weapons and highly trained soldiers to crush the enemy. On a personal level, we think of controlling and influencing others to reach our goals and be successful.

But there's a paradox Christians have always embraced. We embrace a powerful God with the power to speak the universe into existence with a word, hanging limply on a piece of wood. We see omnipotence surrendering to impotence. We see One who could have ended his life so differently, waiting until the last dramatic moment to display his power, calling down angels to crush his enemies, but instead, he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Most of us understand it was on the cross. Jesus died in our place; he paid our debt, and he purchased our forgiveness. We get that. That's why we glory in the cross. But we stop short of embracing the full meaning of this for our lives. We're content to see this divine surrender as just that—divine, something Jesus had to go through for us. Something that frees us for a life of joy, meaning, and power. But far too often, we don't see how this paradox of the cross is something we are called to live out each day as well. The cross isn't just some gold-plated trinket we wear to remember how he died for us. It's a way of life. In fact, it's as true for us as it was for Jesus; it's only through the cross we can know true power.

In 2 Corinthians 2-4, Paul has been describing and defending his ministry. Some in Corinth thought he lacked the right credentials and was far too unimpressive to be a true apostle. Yet Paul

defended himself as minister of the New Covenant. He's shown how the glory of the New Covenant far surpasses that of the old. In the Old Covenant, we try to keep the law to find life, while under the New Covenant, the law is written on our hearts. In the New Covenant, the Spirit gives righteousness and life, while the Old Covenant brings condemnation and death. In the New Covenant, we remove the veil from our faces and focus on Christ, who transforms us into His image through His Spirit. And there's power in that. In fact, in 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul described what's happened to us as a powerful act of creation:

For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

That's power! But just so we're not mistaken, Paul goes on to tell how this power is displayed, and once again, we're confronted with this paradox.

God's Power is Displayed in our Brokenness

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (v. 7). Paul likens us to jars of clay. Back in his day, clay jars and pots were found in every home. In contrast to those made of bronze, they were inexpensive and fragile. They were the ancient equivalent of our disposable containers. Paul may be thinking of small clay oil lamps commonly used back then to provide light. Again, he's just got done talking about the light of the Gospel shining in our hearts. But his point is clear—we're fragile and broken. We're just cracked pots! Our value isn't in our durability, beauty, or power, but in what we hold. The glory of a clay jar isn't in what it is, but in what it contains.

Paul says we contain a treasure. I hope you can feel the tension in the contrast: cheap, fragile, disposable pots with something of incredible value inside. Almost paradoxical, isn't it? It's like storing a million dollars in Tupperware. The treasure is the light of the gospel Paul just finished talking about. It's the good news of Jesus, which transforms our lives. That's the treasure we hold in these jars of clay.

And it's because of this contrast between what we are and what we hold that something is demonstrated in our lives *“to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”* You see, if you have a beautiful and expensive jar or pot, then people will notice that instead of what's inside. But if the pot isn't much to

look at or brag about, then the focus will be on what's inside. So we have this powerful good news inside of us. It transforms our lives, and as we share it with others, it will transform theirs. But when you look at us, it's obvious there's not much there; it's all about what we carry.

In his book *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell documents the lives of many leaders and entrepreneurs who succeed not in spite of their brokenness but because of it. He calls this "the advantage of disadvantage." He cites a study that one-third of highly successful entrepreneurs are dyslexic—Charles Schwab being among them. He tells the story of a university donor meeting filled with successful business people. When the speaker asked how many of them had a learning disorder, half of the hands went up. Gladwell writes,

There are two possible interpretations for this fact. One is this remarkable group of people triumphed in spite of their disability: they're so smart and so creative that nothing—not even a lifetime of struggling with reading—could stop them. The second, more intriguing, possibility is they succeeded, in part, because of their disorder—they learned something in their struggle that proved to be of enormous advantage.

That's what Paul is saying: our brokenness can become an enormous advantage. Why? Because it's only in our brokenness, we learn it's not about us. We're just clay pots. It's through our brokenness the power of God is displayed. Why then do we so often operate under the assumption that the more powerful, impressive, and successful we are, the more people will see the power of God? Why do we think if people see our weakness, they'll ignore the God we serve? Paul says the less impressive you are, the more impressed they'll be with God!

There is a Japanese word, *kintsukuroi*, which means "golden repair." It's the art of restoring broken pottery with gold, so the cracks are literally illuminated. As a philosophy, *kintsukuroi* celebrates imperfection as an integral part of the story, not something to be disguised. The artists believe when something has suffered damage and has a history, it becomes more beautiful. In *kintsukuroi*, the true life of an object (or a person) begins the moment it breaks and becomes vulnerable. The gap between its once pristine appearance and its visible imperfection deepens its appeal. Jesus is the ultimate *kintsukuroi* artist. He takes those broken and damaged pieces of our lives and uses them to enhance the beauty of God's grace at work in us.

Paul goes on and describes in more detail how this process takes place in our lives. Look at what he says, "*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed*" (vv. 8-9). How's the power of God displayed in our lives? Only through our weakness and suffering.

He describes this in a number of ways. He says we're "pressed on every side." This points to a variety of pressures that squeeze us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It can be anything from a major trial to small irritations. He also says we are "perplexed." Sometimes we're at a loss to understand why this or that is happening to us; we're at our wit's end. Then he says we're "persecuted." The word means to be hunted like prey. Finally, he says we're "struck down." Our opponents aren't lightweights. They push, and we fall. They hit, and we hurt.

This made me think of our mission partners, Arman and Lillit, who serve with Young Life in Armenia, reaching out to high school kids. Armenia is in an all-out war with Azerbaijan. Many of their male Young Life leaders have gone to fight, and some have been killed. Every few days, Young Life leaders have gone into the bombed areas to help those who've lost homes or need medical care and food. They're scared. In the last few weeks, they've taken over 100 kids to the zoo, bowling, movies, or whatever works to take their mind off the war. There's also a resurgence of COVID. It's been a constant struggle to handle all the challenges they're facing. I'm sure Arman and Lillit could relate: pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. But they understand that this is the normal Christian life.

But Paul doesn't leave us there. He shares how God sustains us in the midst of our suffering and brokenness. He says we may be hard pressed in every way, but we're not crushed. We may be perplexed, but we're not despairing. We may be persecuted, but we're not abandoned. We may be struck down, but were not destroyed. I like the way Barclay puts it, "We're sore pressed at every point but not hemmed in. We're at our wit's end but never at our hope's end. We're persecuted by men but never abandoned by God. We're knocked down but not knocked out."

This isn't about keeping a stiff upper lip; it's about a strange manifestation of power. The power doesn't always remove us from the hardship, but it sustains us in the midst of it. We go through the same things everyone else goes through, but we're kept by God. Believers get COVID too. We get cancer, lose our jobs, or go through a divorce. These things happen even as we walk closely with God. By all human reckoning, we should be bitter, hardened, angry, and without hope. Yet God sustains us. He can even give us joy in the middle of the storm. Some of the most joyful, hopeful people I've known are going through the hardest things. And it's not a put on. How can that be? It's the power of God. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. vv. 10-11

Our suffering and hardship aren't meaningless because Paul says we carry around in our body "the death of Jesus."

Notice he refers to our Lord here as Jesus repeatedly. That's unusual for Paul, but he's focusing on our Lord's humanity, his life of humility, service, and sacrifice. The cross was the culmination of everyday choices Jesus made to deny himself. Notice twice Paul uses the word "always" because this isn't an occasional thing we go through; it's a lifestyle. It takes place not just in the major crisis we face but also in everyday challenges and irritations. And it's not something we have a lot of choice in. Notice how he says, "We are always being given over to death..." By whom? By God! We don't get to choose our trials. We don't get to choose where this dying takes place. Have you noticed that? We say, "God, I can handle this, but never that. That's off-limits." It doesn't work that way. He chooses our crosses. He chooses the pressure points. He chooses where we die.

But, here's the good news—it doesn't stop there. Our death is the key to manifesting what he calls "the life of Jesus." You see, in all we go through, his purpose is good. His purpose is the manifestation of His life through our mortal bodies. These clay pots are bursting with life.

The late Chuck Colson, who went from being a successful lawyer with a top position in the White House to prison, understood this. He wrote,

The great paradox of my life is every time I walk into a prison and see the faces of men or women who've been transformed by the power of the living God, I realize the thing God has chosen to use in my life ... is none of the successes, achievements, degrees, awards, honors, or cases I won before the Supreme Court. That's not what God's using in my life. What God is using in my life to touch the lives of literally thousands of other people is the fact that I was a convict and went to prison. That was my great defeat, the only thing in my life I didn't succeed in.

But we can't have the life of Jesus without the death of Jesus. We can't have the power without the weakness. We want the power of God, but we want it to come with peaceful, untroubled, and calm circumstances. But it almost never does because as long as we're strong, we'll depend on ourselves. So often, instead of surrendering, we buck the very thing God has set up for his strength to be displayed. We say, "Lord, why does it always have to be so hard?" We think we have rights. We have the right to get a certain kind of life. But we're fighting God, and we won't win. We may as well surrender now. Are you in a situation you can't control? Are you being misunderstood or mistreated? Have you been denied the very thing you always thought would make you happy? Let it go. Submit to God's plan. Let him demonstrate his power in your weakness.

The Investment of Faith

For Paul, dying with Jesus to experience the life of Jesus wasn't without a purpose. He believed he was making an investment in

all of this. The cross is an investment because it bears fruit in the lives of others. Look what he says,

So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. vv. 12-15

Paul believed his carrying around the death of Jesus would bring life, not just to himself, but to others as well. That's why he says, "death is at work in us, but life is at work in you." Paul suffered; he gave up his personal rights, believing there would be a harvest in the lives of others. They would benefit from his choice to surrender to the process. Paul quotes the writer of Psalm 116, who was going through his own trial. But he expressed his faith in that psalm that God would deliver him. Paul says, "I have the same spirit of faith as him. Like him, I believe and therefore I speak. I keep preaching even though I know there's a price to pay. I keep investing in the lives of others."

And what does he believe? What keeps him going? Verse 14 tells us, "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself." That's our hope. That's what keeps us going amidst difficulty. Even death can't defeat us. Why? Because Jesus defeated it. He was raised up, and we'll be raised up with him. Paul says, "He will present us with you to himself." The verb "to present" means to place side by side. We do all this not just for our own sake but for the sake of others, who through our life and ministry, will be raised up and stand side by side with us before the throne of God.

Paul says, "all this is for your benefit." He says, "As we invest in you, grace spreads to more and more people so more people give thanks and God is glorified all the more." We invest in you; you invest in others; grace spreads, thanksgiving multiplies, and God is glorified. There's nothing that glorifies God more than thanksgiving. With Thanksgiving right around the corner, here's why we give thanks: it glorifies the Giver! It glorifies the grace of the giver rather than the deservedness of the recipient. Why give thanks if you earned it? But you didn't earn it. That's why it's called grace. When we live the cross then grace spreads, and God is lifted up.

The British author A. N. Wilson celebrated Easter in 2009, who only a few years before was known for his scathing attacks on Christianity, at a church with a group of other church members, proclaiming that the story of Jesus was the only story that made sense out of life and its challenges. He said,

My own return to faith has surprised none more than myself My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I've known—not the famous, not saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in light of the resurrection story, or in the quiet acceptance that they have a future after they die.

When we give up our lives in following Jesus and serving him, the investment is lived out in the lives of others. I die; you live. I go to the cross; together, we're raised to stand side by side in his presence. Some of you are prayer warriors. Some of you are CPCKids teachers or small group leaders. Some of you work with students. Some of you volunteer at Street Church. Some of you are bold in sharing your faith at work.

I think of you who are parents, who'll spend years pouring your life into your little ones—soccer games, music lessons, doctors' appointments, homework, runny noses, and sleepless nights. When does it stop? You get weary, don't you? You wonder if what you do makes a difference. Sometimes all you hear is the negativity, and you think, "Who needs this?" You may never have thought of it this way, but you're dying so others may live. You may never be able to see the results this side of heaven, but your investment will cause grace to spread, and how sweet it will be to stand side by side with them before your Master.

The Lazy B Ranch was 260 square miles of scrub brush on the New Mexico-Arizona border when the Day family moved there in 1881. Harry and Ada May Day had to drive 200 miles to El Paso for their first child to be born. They brought her home to their four-room adobe house with no running water or electricity and no school nearby. With so few educational resources, their child's future looked dim, but Harry and Ada May were dreamers. Ada May subscribed to a variety of well-known newspapers, and when her daughter was four, she started home-schooling her. On one vacation, they loaded her and her little brother into the car and visited every state capital west of the Mississippi. They climbed to the top of every state building. Their daughter, Sandra, went to Stanford, then to law school, and then she became the first female Supreme Court Justice in our nation's history. The day Sandra Day O'Conner was sworn in, she put on her robe and walked to her seat with the other justices. She looked out and saw her mother, and that's when the tears started to flow.

What causes a woman like Sandra Day O'Conner to go so far? Sure, she had a keen intellect and a lot of determination. But most of the credit goes to a determined little ranch woman sitting in an adobe house, placing many of her own desires on hold, reading hour after hour to her child, and traipsing up and down the stairs of State Capital buildings.

So let me tell you that it's worth it. Keep investing in others. Die to yourself that they might live. You may or may not have children, but God has given you a world of people to invest in—love them; give your life up for them. The worst thing you can do is live for yourself. If you want to die alone and depressed, that's the best way to do it.

You see, there's that paradox again: it's only through the cross that we can know true power. Former Senator Mark Hatfield put it well,

Service to others, solely for their own behalf and even entailing deep sacrifice is the true essence of leadership and the ultimate form of power. There is power in servanthood which transcends all notions of power sought after so avidly in the secular political sphere of life. All this was evidenced most clearly in the life of Jesus of Nazareth...His method was not to seek public acclaim or devise a calculated strategy, but rather to surrender in utter faithfulness to God's will, exemplifying through a total self-giving love the heart and the message of his mission.

God's plan for displaying this power is to put his treasure in weak, fragile jars of clay. We experience this strange power as we are sustained in our weakness and brokenness. When we model the death of Jesus, others will see his life. This brokenness is an investment that bears fruit in the lives of others. It's only through the cross that we can know true power.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2020 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1451-9FC