

The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Lesson 4

This Treasure in Earthen Vessels

The Church at Corinth was plagued by false teachers from within who claimed to represent Christ, but in fact still held on to vain beliefs that salvation was by works and obedience to the law. Therefore they spoke against Paul, against his new testament teaching, against his ministry, and the gospel of salvation by grace received through faith. Paul's second letter to Corinth is primarily a defense of his ministry, the new covenant, and the gospel. In the previous chapter 3, Paul proved the surpassing glory of the new covenant. Now in chapter 4, through a series of contrasts, he puts the emphasis on the greater value of what God is doing with the message of the gospel as apposed to any works or obedience of men.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-7

1. What "ministry" is Paul referring to (2 Cor 3:6; 5:18)? What "mercy" had Paul received (1 Timothy 1:13-14)? Why would he be tempted to "lose heart" (2 Cor 1:8-9)?
2. Paul very subtly contrasts his ministry with the false teachers in 2 Cor 4:2-7. What has he now renounced (Acts 26:10-16)? Did he manipulate or peddle the word of God (2 Cor 2:17)? How did Jesus describe the hypocrisy of the false teachers who have their own agenda and "adulterate the word of God" (Matt 23:27-28)?
3. The most difficult part of this ministry of the word of God, which is the "manifestation of truth", is rejection. Why do so many reject the gospel (2 Cor 4:3-4, John 3:19-20, Romans 10:1-4)?
4. In 2 Cor 4:3-6, Paul writes about the impact of spiritual blindness using the imagery of the veil of Moses (3:15), and the "darkness" of the world of the unbelieving. Who alone can break through this darkness (2 Cor 4:6, John 1:4-5; 8-12)?
5. Spiritual darkness envelopes the unredeemed until God shines the light of the gospel in their hearts (2 Cor 4:6). What did Jesus say to an unbelieving audience in John 8:12? What is the fate of those who stay in the darkness (John 8:24)? Who did Paul give thanks to for seeing the "light" (Colossians 1:12-14)?

6. The climax of this passage is found in 2 Cor 4:7. What do we have in this earthen vessel (physical body)? Paul has described “this treasure” in the previous 6 verses. Name at least six words or phrases which explain what this treasure is (2 Cor 4:1-6). Who has given us this treasure as a blessing and a stewardship?

7. Jesus taught parables concerning the value of this treasure in Matt 13:44-46. What did the man do to possess this treasure (Matt 13:44)? How valuable was the pearl (Matt 13:45-46)?

8. Paul’s ministry of the gospel has a different power source. Where does his “power” come from (2 Cor 4:7)? Who gets the glory and why is that important (1 Cor 1:29-31, 2 Cor 10:17-18, Luke 18:9-14)?

9. What did Paul’s opponents criticize him for (2 Cor 10:10)? What is more important, the message or the messenger? Therefore, is Paul’s argument for the treasure in an earthen vessel convincing? Do human weaknesses present a barrier to the ministry (2 Cor 12:9)?

10. The original Greek word for vessel in 2 Cor 4:7 was ostrakinos, a common clay pot that was cheap, breakable, and plain. Would the value of such a clay pot be defined by the pot or what was stored in it? What is the impact of this treasure on the vessel (2 Cor 3:18, Rom 8:1-2)?