

“2 Corinthians - Clay Pots”

Theme: The Letters of Paul

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4: 6-10

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon

Family/Community Activity for the week: After his own encounter with God, Paul followed his call and preached to thousands of people about Jesus' love and grace. God also calls each of us to share the love and grace of Jesus. Purchase a sketch book or journal for the family. Decorate the cover, and title the book, “Jesus is Alive!” or “Jesus Shows His Love!” Invite each family member to write or draw about when they see Jesus' love and grace displayed in the world around them and in their own lives. Include everyday moments as well as more unique happenings. Review the book as a family on a regular basis and share stories with one another. Then, like Paul, share the good news of Jesus you have personally experienced with everyone!

Meditation Moments for Monday, August 28 - Read 2 Corinthians 1: 1-11. The words, trouble and comfort, stand out repeatedly in this passage, and the two always go together. Trouble is what we today would probably call pressure or stress. It is what many of you, perhaps, are feeling right now when you think about going to work. It is whatever ties knots in your stomach and makes you feel anxious or frightened about what lies ahead. It is what makes for hectic days and sleepless nights. It gnaws continually at your mind and threatens your well-being; it refuses to go away and leave you alone; it depresses you and darkens the future with forebodings of disaster.

- Comfort is more than just a little cheer or friendly word of encouragement. The word basically means to strengthen. What Paul experienced was the strengthening of God to give him a peaceful, restful spirit to meet the pressure and stress with which he lived. Where do you find comfort in times of trouble and grief? Can you think of ways you can more readily turn to God in those moments? Through prayer, worship, community?
- As you look back on troubles you have experienced, can you see how God has worked through them and transformed you?

Prayer: *God, I confess that I am often resent my difficulties. I certainly do not want to accept them. I want them removed or I complain. Help me to trust and be at peace, knowing you are with me in all moments.*

Tuesday, August 29 - Read 2 Corinthians 3: 1-6 and 16-18. The apostle reminds the Corinthians, and us today, that the Lord is in our hearts. Our hope of freedom comes from the truth that God's Spirit lives within each of us. Freedom is being out in the open, having boldness, having nothing to
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hide. Those who are free are those who do not have any reputation to defend, no image to hide behind, nothing to preserve about themselves. They can be themselves.

- Everywhere today people are longing for this type of freedom. People want to be themselves. We often say, “I’ve got to be me,” and there is nothing wrong with that. God wants you to be you, too. The only thing wrong is the way we do it. We are being taught in the world that the way to be me is to think about my advantage, my efforts, and to defend and demand them because those things determine our self-worth. Through Paul’s letter, God teaches something else. We do not have to earn God’s favor, and our performance is not going to affect it. By rejoicing in what we have and serving the God who gave it to us, we suddenly discover--and other people will discover--that we are becoming more loving.
- This process does not happen in one great transformation when we are suddenly sanctified, filled with the Spirit, or baptized. It happens as we keep our eyes on the glory of God; not on self-effort but on what God is already doing. We suddenly discover the Spirit of God has been at work making gradual changes. We are becoming a loving person, easier to live with, more attractive, more compelling. Our life is deepening as it is losing its shallowness; we are more understanding of things. That is the work of the Spirit. Notice Paul says: this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. It is not you who does it; it is God. How does a growing freedom in Christ change us? Are those around us seeing God’s glory in our lives?

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the promise that as I look at you, I become like you.

Wednesday, August 30 - Read 2 Corinthians 4:1-9, 16-18. Paul wrote this letter after many of the members in the church at Corinth had turned against him (in a church he himself had started!). It was a painful disappointment, on top of years of other struggles as he traveled and shared Jesus in the Roman world (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). Yet he trusted that, if he kept his inner spiritual focus on God’s eternal world, nothing in this world could crush or destroy him.

- Paul’s description of himself as a “clay pot” (verse 7) did not show a lack of self-worth. It merely recognized the abiding truth, with which all of us must wrestle with at times, that God is God and we are not. How can learning to see yourself as a “clay pot” help to put you in a better position to avoid human blows to your ego that can feel so crushing?
- In today’s text, Paul spoke of focusing on things unseen and eternal rather than visible things that don’t last. In Colossians 3:2-3, he wrote, “Think about the things above and not things on earth. You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” That wasn’t abstract theology—he saw his life as eternal, held safely in God’s hands, safely out of reach of any earthly failures. How much do you focus only on the “here and now”? What helps you grow toward seeing that your true life is eternally safe, hidden with Christ in God?

Prayer: Lord God, some days all I can see are my failures, my setbacks, and my pain. On those days especially, I really need your grace to show me life as you see it, to show me your reality. Amen.

Thursday, August 31 - Read John 3:1-8 and 2 Corinthians 5:11-21. Jesus told his nighttime visitor Nicodemus that entering his Kingdom was like being born for a second time, like an act of creating new life. The apostle Paul echoed that, writing to the Christ-followers in the city of Corinth that God called them to live as a “new creation.” Those links to the creation story evoked a connection between God’s power as Creator of all that is and God’s grace recreating our inner identities, and the attitudes out of which we live.

- Scholar N.T. Wright called 2 Corinthians 5:17 “one of [Paul’s] great summaries of what Christianity is all about. In the Greek language he was using, he said it even more briefly: ‘If anyone in Messiah, new creation!’ The ‘new creation’ in question refers both to the person concerned and to the world which they enter, the world which has now been reconciled to the creator.” In what ways do you see God’s creative power at work in your life, and that of other Christians you know?

Prayer: Dear God, you’ve made me a new creation. Help me to remember that, to submit myself to you today so that as I live among others, they too will be able to see you at work in me. Amen.

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Friday, September 1 - Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 and 9:6-15. The apostle Paul urged God's people to give to God's work in the world. Paul asked his relatively well-off Gentile Christian converts to give for a fund to help Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem, who faced persecution and hardship. Both times, it mattered that people finish the project with as much generous enthusiasm as they showed at the start.

- When have you or someone you know had a sense that God was calling you into something—a project, initiative, or mission—that seemed too big to accomplish on your own? What was that experience like? In what ways did God's power and provision show itself through that experience? How do you feel about the chance to be part of God's amazing mission at your church?
- Giving is personal. Paul made it plain that God does not compare the amount we give to what others give. What matters is the spirit in which we give, in proportion to the resources we have available. Discuss with family, or with a trusted friend, your expectations or motivations for giving. How can you give cheerfully, not because of any kind of pressure? If you call FUMC your church home, and wish to give cheerfully to our ministry together, you can commit through our website, at our giving kiosks in the atrium or in the offering time each week.

Prayer: Lord God, open my eyes to see the beauty that can be created when we all pitch in. Open my hands to give freely, and open my heart to feel the joy that comes as we grow together. Amen.

Saturday, September 2 - Read Luke 22:14-21 and 2 Corinthians 11:17-34. The Passover Supper was a memorial of God's great liberating act in setting Israel free from slavery in Egypt, central to their faith. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus gathered his disciples around the table. They shared the Passover, and Jesus redefined the meal into a way of remembering his giving of his body and blood to save them (and us). But even that meal wasn't limited to "good" people—Jesus noted that Judas, his betrayer, was there!

- It's interesting that most scholars believe chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians was part of his "letter of sorrow" that he wrote when he was angry and hurt by the words and actions of some of the church leaders who betrayed him, and Paul includes a reminder of the Last Supper. Scholar William Barclay wrote poignantly, "Jesus Christ has at every communion table those who betray him, for if in his house we pledge ourselves to him and then by our lives go out to deny him, we too are traitors to him." What made the difference between Judas and the other 11 flawed, fallible disciples? How can we, even when we fail, avoid being a traitor to Christ?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for inviting me, and welcoming me, at what the psalmist called the table you spread before me in the presence of my enemies. Keep me humble and grateful for the privilege of being your supper guest. Amen. Please be sure to join us for Communion at this weekend's worship services.

Theme: Transformed by the Letters of Paul
“2 Corinthians - Clay Pots”
Sermon preached by Jeff Huber August 26-27, 2017

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4: 6-10. Memory verse is number 7

VIDEO Sermon Intro

SLIDE “2 Corinthians - Clay Pots”

I would invite you pull out of your bulletin your Message Notes and Meditation moments. At the top, you find the Scripture text we’ll be using today and then some blank lines so you can write down things you might like to try and remember. Below that are Meditation Moments for each day of the week to help you read parts of 2 Corinthians, as well as a family activity for you to do this week.

I read a story recently about a man who was going through his parents’ things after his mother had passed and his father was suffering from Alzheimer’s and no longer able to recognize him. He found a shoebox filled with letters that became particularly meaningful because they were from his father, written to his mother, while his dad served overseas during World War II. He caught a glimpse into his father’s heart that he had never seen before. Every letter revealed to him something about his dad, but also something about his mother who received each of the letters and kept them safely stashed in this shoebox. Finally, they painted a picture for him of what the world was like during World War II.

When we read the letters of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, we have an opportunity to see the heart of Paul and something of the heart of the recipients of each of those letters. Finally, we have an opportunity to see what was happening not just in the world, but in the churches to whom these letters were written. Today we turn to the third letter that we find listed in the New Testament, which is 2 Corinthians. We have learned that there are 13 letters from Paul, nine were written to churches and four were written to individuals and we find them in order of longest to shortest. Our hope is to give you some background and historical understanding of each of these letters, and plot the main themes so that you can read them on your own and have them make sense for today. Paul was particularly concerned about transformation and people becoming more like Christ, and nowhere is background and context more important than it is in understanding this letter that we will look at today to the people of Corinth.

The truth is that this letter is confusing. Some have read it, have been really turned off by the content because it doesn’t make any sense and it seems like Paul is bragging about himself. The letter doesn’t seem to flow and it’s perplexing, until we understand what was happening at the time. Once we do, we can get a sense of Paul’s heart and understand the Corinthians, hopefully better understanding Paul’s word for us today as we read the letter. I won’t have time today to do lots of background on the church in Corinth or the city of Corinth, but would encourage you to watch or listen to or read last week’s sermon which you can find on our website or get from the church office.

To help us understand better what Paul was feeling when he wrote this letter, I would like to introduce you to Steve. Steve is a businessman who has a good job, and has been with

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his company for many years. He has always been faithful and never been late to work. He has been recognized by his company and received numerous awards for achievement in helping the company reach its goals. But his heart is traumatized when he feels he has been stabbed in the back by his coworkers. He sits down to write them this email.

VIDEO Steve's Email

(Dear Jim, Susie and John, I heard from a friend what you had said about me at last week's staff meeting when I wasn't able to be there. How could you? Who do you think you are, anyway? I have worked for this company since it started 10 years ago, and poured out my entire life into it during that time. I am very good at what I do, leading the company three of the last four years. And yet, in one fell swoop, you undermined my entire career. You should be ashamed of yourselves. I launched the very division that you work for. I brought in our largest clients. I have single-handedly hired most of the staff. And yet, you question my work ethic; my abilities; and my commitment? Who Do You Think You Are? Have you forgotten that I even hired you?! I don't know what you're trying to pull, I can only tell you that you have missed the mark, and I hope you see the error of your ways, and do what you can to set things straight. As you can tell, I am pretty steamed, and more than a little confused. Steve.)

If you have ever been stabbed in the back, had someone undermine you with their words, then you cannot only identify with Steve, but also with the apostle Paul as he was writing 2 Corinthians. Last week, we began our study of the letter to the Corinthians, by remembering that the apostle Paul started the church in Corinth around 51 A.D., which was less than 20 years after the death and resurrection of Christ. He started the church on his second missionary journey, nurturing the leaders and preaching the gospel so that many came to follow Jesus as their Savior. He led every single one of the first members of that church to Jesus Christ. He was their first and only pastor for 18 months, leaving to start new churches in other communities in the Greco-Roman world.

After completing his second missionary journey, he began his third missionary journey on which he spent three years in Ephesus. While in Ephesus, he receives word that the church in Corinth is troubled, partly because the new Christians are having a hard time leaving behind their old Greco-Roman lifestyles so they can follow Christ completely. He writes a letter to them, challenging them to hold onto their faith in the midst of a world that is hostile towards much of what following Christ entails. That was his first letter to the people of Corinth and we don't have it anymore. Scholars call it the, "Lost letter of Paul."

SLIDE "Lost letter of Paul" to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9)

SLIDE A letter from the Corinthians to Paul (1 Cor. 7:1)

Following that letter, he received word back from the people of Corinth while he was still in Ephesus. Some who came to visit told him about divisions in the church over many issues and it created confusion. A handful of people had decided they were beyond Paul's leadership and had matured past the point of needing him to be there as apostle. They wanted to follow one of the more charismatic leaders like Apollo's or another of what would be called, "Super-Apostles." Some even felt they should be the leader of the church in Corinth. It was a relatively small group in the church, but they were gaining influence and they were criticizing Paul.

SLIDE Paul's reply to their letter is our 1 Corinthians

Paul writes a letter back to the church in Corinth which is our 1 Corinthians, challenging them not to promote divisiveness in the church. He answers their questions about some of the problems the church was facing. We looked at some of those issues last week.

And then something happened, which often happens when we send a letter or email to *(Message Notes and Meditation Moments for August 26-27, 2017)* For more, go to www.fumcdurango.org

someone trying to make things right. Things got worse. Have you ever experience that? Then you know how Paul feels. The letter that Paul sent which we now have as 1 Corinthians was received by some in the spirit in which he was sent, but it was received by others who were looking down upon Paul and twisted it out of context. They attributed to him motive that he did not really intend, and when they twisted his words, they made Paul look foolish and painted a picture of him which was not accurate.

When Paul hears word of this, he decides to go to Corinth in person. He takes a three-day trip from Ephesus to the city and he confronts them face-to-face. This trip was not mentioned in the book of Acts but was mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians. He calls this his “painful visit,” which tells you something about how that visit went. When he confronts that small group of people who are causing division and speaking poorly of him, unfortunately, Paul got angry. In his anger, he no doubt said some things which made matters worse instead of making them better. None of us can identify with Paul on that point, can we?

As the situation began to deteriorate, Paul finally left Corinth and headed back to Ephesus after just a few days. While back in Ephesus, he thinks of all the things he wished he would have said, but didn’t say. Since he left, he has discovered other itinerant preachers who have come into Corinth and they also are claiming to be apostles. Paul has never heard of them and these “Super Apostles,” were also maligning him. They accused him of having his hand in the offering plate, yet Paul didn’t take anything from the Corinthians, not even a salary. They questioned his work ethic and ability and added fuel to the fire of those who had something against Paul. Paul then writes what he calls his “sorrowful letter.”

SLIDE A “sorrowful letter” from Paul to Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:3 & 7:8)

We don’t think we have this letter anymore, although some scholars argue that part of it may be included in 2 Corinthians, added on later as chapters 10 - 13. Paul lets them have it in this letter and he calls the “Super Apostles,” false apostles. He speaks to those stirring up dissension and he defends his ministry. He reminds them that he was commissioned by Christ to be there apostle and that he would never touch their money, because it belongs to God.

SLIDE 2 Corinthians is the 4th letter

That brings us to 2 Corinthians. We know that Paul wrote four letters to the church at Corinth. We know of the “lost letter.” We know he wrote 1 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 2:3 and 7:8, he mentions another letter, the “sorrowful letter.” That would be four letters altogether, and some scholars believe that 2 Corinthians is a compilation of three letters. Like that man who discovered a shoebox full of letters, imagine multiple page letters that get mixed up and put back together again. Someone in the early church may have taken these various strands of letters and put them together into one story that tries to make sense.

SLIDE 2 Corinthians 10-13 may be part of the “sorrowful” 3rd letter

Some scholars believe that 2 Corinthians, chapters 10 - 13, is part, or all, of the “sorrowful letter” we mentioned earlier. It’s a letter where he is angry at the false apostles and trying to defend his ministry to those who would tear him down. With that in mind, I want you to hear this excerpt from 2 Corinthians, chapters 10 and 11.

BIBLE *1 Now I, Paul, appeal to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ—though I realize you think I am timid in person and bold only when I write from far away.*

7 Look at the obvious facts. Those who say they belong to Christ must recognize that we belong to Christ as much as they do. 8 I may seem to be boasting too much about the authority given to us by the Lord. But our authority builds you up; it doesn’t tear you down. So, I will not be ashamed

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of using my authority. 9 I'm not trying to frighten you by my letters. 10 For some say, "Paul's letters are demanding and forceful, but in person he is weak, and his speeches are worthless!" 11 Those people should realize that our actions when we arrive in person will be as forceful as what we say in our letters from far away.

1 I hope you will put up with a little more of my foolishness. Please bear with me. 2 For I am jealous for you with the jealousy of God himself. I promised you as a pure bride to one husband—Christ.

5 But I don't consider myself inferior in any way to these "super apostles" who teach such things. 6 I may be unskilled as a speaker, but I'm not lacking in knowledge. We have made this clear to you in every possible way. 7 Was I wrong when I humbled myself and honored you by preaching God's Good News to you without expecting anything in return? 8 I "robbed" other churches by accepting their contributions so I could serve you at no cost. 9 And when I was with you and didn't have enough to live on, I did not become a financial burden to anyone.

12 But I will continue doing what I have always done. This will undercut those who are looking for an opportunity to boast that their work is just like ours. 13 These people are false apostles. They are deceitful workers who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 But I am not surprised! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

Can you hear the anger, frustration and irritation in this part of the letter? If you have ever been in a situation where some were saying things about you which were untrue and hurtful, then you can understand what Paul was feeling. Maybe when you were in school, one of your best friends stole your girlfriend or your boyfriend. Maybe somebody took credit for your work on a project at work or at school. Maybe at work there was a promotion you were hoping to get and one of your coworkers planted seeds of doubt in the minds of your boss and you lost that opportunity. I have at times seen some of you here in the sanctuary during the week with tears in your eyes. You have share with me how someone backstabbed you at work; how a promotion at work which should've been yours was lost because someone undercut you or took credit for your work; or someone said something so hurtful in your workplace or at school, that you didn't think you could go back. This is what Paul is experiencing.

We read these chapters in this letter and we wonder how we can hear from God. It seems like Paul is defending himself and talking a lot about himself and he is angry, so what is God's word to us in this setting? I think there are several things God would say to us through this part of the letter. First, when we read these chapters, we don't read them like other parts of the Bible, where we might read it word by word and look for meaning. You will find some gems in chapters 10 - 13, but I think we might miss the forest for the trees if we do it that way in this section of Scripture. I think it is more helpful to take a step back, understand the context, and see God's word to us through Paul's life and experience in this letter to the people of Corinth.

SLIDE God's word to us when WE are guilty party

I believe God longs to speak to us about those times when we have been the guilty party of stirring up problems for someone else. Paul tells them to stop, and I think that's God's word for us today if we have been doing this. It wounds God and it wounds others and it is not God's plan for us to say untrue and hurtful things about others. The Scriptures are filled with references to not malign other people or gossip about them or stabbed them in the back. There actually is more about that than many other things we get fixated on in the church, but there is not a soul in this room who hasn't somewhere along the way been guilty of this. That

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includes myself. It may not be in the context of the church, but maybe at work or at church or in our neighborhoods. Somewhere along the way, we see someone having remarkable success at work or at school, and we become a little jealous of that person. We stand around the coffee pot or in the hallway with our friends and we find ways to knock them and put them down because it makes us feel better. There are times when we secretly want that girl or that guy that someone else got and we make fun of both of them. There are moments that we don't even understand why we pass on gossip, or make assumptions about someone else's motives. The first word from God for us today is that we should stop doing these things because they cause more brokenness.

SLIDE Stop saying things which hurt other people.

The book of James tells us that our tongue is the most powerful part of our entire body. Our tongue is more powerful than our biceps or our heart. Do you know why? Because we can destroy another human being with our tongue. So, we are called to be careful about what we say, and what we hint at, and our innuendos that we make about others and their motives. These things can destroy and they are not in keeping with our faith as we seek to follow Christ.

The second word that I think God would speak to us in this part of Paul's letter is a word of grace, and speaks to us about Paul's humanity.

SLIDE How do we respond when someone criticizes us?

How do we respond when someone says something hurtful about us or questions our motives or integrity? I don't know about you, but I get defensive. Even if it's constructive criticism, and it's something I can learn from others, I find my defenses creeping up to protect my ego. I'm embarrassed and even ashamed that sometimes those feelings come up inside of me because I'm supposed to be a pastor and I preaching this to you today. Let me just remind you, that every sermon I preach, I am first preaching to myself. I figure that if I can't hear this word to me, then how dare I share with you!

I pray for God to take that spirit of defensiveness away from me. I want to be teachable and able to learn from others, but the comfort I received from this passage is that Paul himself got defensive when he was attacked and criticized. ***He may have even blown the whole thing a little bit out of proportion! Can you believe that? I would never do that! You would never do that, would you?*** Does someone ever say something about you that put you on the defensive and then you blow it out of proportion? I think Paul might have done this in this section of 2 Corinthians. There is some comfort in knowing that even one of the Saints of God struggled with defensiveness and blowing thing out of proportion.

I think there is one more word from God that is even more important than either of those. It is found not really in the verses that Paul writes, but in his witness itself about how he replies and responds to these difficult relationships. What do we feel like doing when people are saying bad things about us at work or at school? I talked recently to a young pastor that I know in our conference that I've been trying to encourage. He's been at the church he serves just over a year and it's a church with a difficult history and they were dying when he arrived. He has been trying to initiate some very important changes that are critical for the church's survival. These are changes that the church needed to embrace, but we know of course that people are resistant to change. As a result, certain members left the church. Others, some staff members, got angry and began to say things. He told me recently than this past year he is never felt like this, but he has wanted to quit. He just wanted to walk away and give them their church because they clearly don't realize it's God's church and it doesn't belong to them.

Maybe you have felt like quitting or giving up when the going got tough and there was criticism or adversity or rejection of your ideas. Paul felt like doing this, no doubt. He was (*Message Notes and Meditation Moments for August 26-27, 2017*) For more, go to www.fumcdurango.org

used to people not liking him, especially the pagans or people who didn't receive the gospel that he was preaching. But when these Christians at Corinth rejected him, those to whom he had brought the faith and he considered his children, there was pain. He felt like giving up, but he didn't do it. Instead, he put his eyes on God and chose to focus on Christ and know that somehow God would see them through. He sought Christ had suffered, and said that even if he had to do that, he would continue to march on, because he knew that what he was doing was what God called him to do. He would not give up.

SLIDE We don't give up - Keep our eyes fixed on God

Some of you sitting here today who are facing difficult situations in your life. You may feel like giving up right now, and I think God's word to you today would be, "Don't give up." The people who do great things in their life for God, at work or at school or in their neighborhood their communities, are not those whose lives are smooth sailing all the time. In fact, if you're going to do great or extraordinary things, people will criticize you. If you are a leader, people will criticize your leadership. If you are a parent, your children will criticize your parenting. If you are a student at school, you will have peers who criticize your dress or your work or for your faith. If you are going to do great things for God, people will not always like it. The people who do great things in life, are not those who have smooth sailing all the time, but the ones who buckle down, hold on and keep pressing on. Paul actually says this in a and later letter to the church at Philippi in Philippians 3:14.

BIBLE ***Press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.***

Press on. Don't give up.

I think all of these things are captured in chapters 10 - 13, and the reason that some scholars believe this is a fragment from a separate letter is because it is radically different from chapters 1 - 9, which has a different feel. Chapters 10 - 13 seem to capture that time when Paul wrote the sorrowful letter, but Paul tells us in chapters 1-9 that he has left Ephesus after sending the sorrowful letter to Corinth. He sent Titus to deliver that message and then he went to Philippi. Titus shows up in Philippi several weeks later and he gives Paul good news. Things were not quite as bad as Paul thought and the church had recognized the error of it's ways. Most of the believers never followed those false apostles, and the church has reaffirmed that Paul is their leader and their apostle. Even the ring leaders who were opposing Paul have recognized they were in the wrong and they have apologized and those false apostles have left town.

Can you imagine how Paul feels at this moment? How do you feel after there has been conflict and strife and then it is finally resolved? People come and tell you, "I'm sorry for what we did. We didn't mean to hurt you." Don't you breathe a sigh of relief? Don't you feel a sense of joy in your heart that things are restored? That is the tone of chapters 1-9. Paul is writing and recognizing that he might've been a little heavy-handed. Maybe he was a little harsh. Maybe he blew things a bit out of proportion and so in those first chapters he has an apologetic tone. He tells them that he didn't mean to hurt them and that he loved them so much as a church and he just wanted them to come back. We find this tone in 2 Corinthians 2:4-11.

BIBLE ***4 I wrote that letter in great anguish, with a troubled heart and many tears. I didn't want to grieve you, but I wanted to let you know how much love I have for you.***

5 I am not overstating it when I say that the man who caused all the trouble hurt all of you more than he hurt me...

...7 Now, however, it is time to forgive and comfort him. Otherwise he may

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be overcome by discouragement. 8 So I urge you now to reaffirm your love for him...

...10 When you forgive this man, I forgive him, too...11 so that Satan will not outsmart us. For we are familiar with his evil schemes.

Let's say someone stabs you in the back—they cost you a promotion or they stole someone's love for you or they took credit for something that you did. How would you respond when they recognized the error of their ways? If we are honest, most of us would hold a grudge. We might be bitter inside and refuse to forgive that person after what they did to us. We hope they are feeling squeamish and guilty and we are happy about it if they are! Let them deal with their guilt for as long as possible because what they did can never be fixed. That's how we might be tempted to respond.

But this is not what Paul does. He writes that he has forgiven the person who did the hurtful thing, and he wants the people in the church in Corinth to forgive him as well. Paul wants them to take him back and love them again and restore them to their fellowship. This is a powerful word to us as a summary of this entire section of 2 Corinthians 1-9. I think about times I have carried a grudge in the past. I was especially struck by verse 11 this week as I was reading through this letter.

BIBLE ***We do this so that Satan will not outsmart us. For we are familiar with his evil schemes.***

Satan loves nothing more than to divide and conquer. He loves to divide the church. That's why there are so many churches in America, because we begin the fight with each other and we separate. God has a way of taking that and bring about good from those separations and divisions, but there is still pain and hurt that follow us when we allow these kinds of divisions. When people are reconciled to each other, either in families or at work or in the church, Satan is not happy about that, but there can be a consolation prize, and that is bitterness. It's making sure that we hold a grudge against somebody else.

This is why Paul says that he knows the devil's schemes. He says he won't give in or be outwitted by Satan, so he is going to give up his grudge and his bitterness and instead, show grace. I'm guessing there are many in this room who are currently holding a grudge against somebody. Maybe it's been from a long time ago, and we've held it all these years. Maybe this fresh, from the last few days or weeks. We need to recognize that the grudge we carry in the bitterness that invades our hearts is part of Satan's scheme to rob us of joy in our lives, and keep you separated from other people and from God. That bitterness is meant to diminish your faith and bring you doubt.

Paul's word to us is to not be outwitted by that bitterness. Understand that God's will for our lives is to release those grudges. One thing you might do today is take your Bible memory verse and write the name of a person for which you are holding a grudge. Every time you try to memorize your verse this week, you can then pray, "God, please help me let go of this grudge. Please, help me show grace by your great power."

For some of us, it may mean going home and writing a note to that person. That doesn't mean going home and writing that you forgive them for all the terrible things they did to you, because they may not even know that all those things hurt you! Generally, people don't understand what it felt like to be in your shoes, so don't write that because it will not help. Instead, you might write something like this, "Inside, I have been harboring some ill feelings towards you. I don't want to hold on to those things anymore. I'm sorry if I have said or done anything to you that was hurtful. I don't want to hurt this way anymore and I don't want there to be this distance between us anymore. I hope you'll forgive me so we can be friends."

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That sounds so easy when the preacher says it, but it's a bit harder when we are sitting in front of the computer trying to compose an email or sitting down at a table to put pen to paper. It may very well be that God is calling you to do something like that today so I hope you'll listen for his voice.

So much of this letter has to do with criticism and complaints raised against Paul. Paul has an interesting response to this. He was very clear to defend himself against false accusations. It was important for him that people knew he didn't have his hand in the money at Corinth. It was important for him to be able to say that Jesus called him. It was an important for him to stand and say that he was doing his best to follow Christ. But once he said all of that, he said something else to put it in perspective that is a powerful word to us today.

Most people read 2 Corinthians and it seems like Paul is bragging, but if you read it carefully that's not what he is doing. He actually embraces their criticism at several places in the letter and says basically, "You're right. I'm not much of an apostle. I'm imperfect and I have issues because I'm human. I used to persecute Christians and I even killed some of them." He gives us these powerful words in chapter 4.

BIBLE *6 For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. 7 We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. 8 We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. 9 We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. 10 Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.*

In essence, Paul summarizes his life and ministry, by saying that he is imperfect and broken down and has experienced troubles and been crushed and perplexed and hunted down and knocked down, which is all the more proof that anything that happens is done by God. If anything great has happened in our lives, it is not because of anything we have done, but because of God.

GRAPHIC **Clay Pots**

I found this cracked, clay pot in our storage shed. It's a crack pot! You are not to put it up on a pedestal for everyone to look at. What you do with the clay pot, is put planting soil in it and then use it to grow something beautiful. The only purpose of the clay pot is to hold and display the thing of beauty. Paul says that this is his purpose in life. It's not that you would be impressed with him or say he is a charismatic preacher, or look how handsome he is or how perfect. Paul says that his sole purpose in life is to be a clay pot for God, so that other people might look at the pot, but they might see God's glory.

That's what I love about Paul and I think that's God's calling in our lives as well. What we are meant to live for is not that others would look at us and say, "Wow, look how cool she is. Look at the clothes he is wearing. Look how stylish and sophisticated they are. Look how much they know. Look how successful they are."

Instead, when people would look at us, the hope is that they might see God shining through. The truth is that we are all crack pots. Let's say that together out loud.

SLIDE **"I am a cracked pot!"**

Some of you looked at the person next to and smiled, as if to say, "Finally, they admit it!" But this is true of all of us. Every single one of us is imperfect, and God loves us this way (*Message Notes and Meditation Moments for August 26-27, 2017*) For more, go to www.fumcdurango.org

because then God can really use us. This is the main point of 2 Corinthians for our lives today. So, let's say this together out loud.

SLIDE "I am a cracked pot...and God loves me!"

As I was finishing this week's sermon, I met with several of you who are getting baptized this weekend, or reaffirming your baptism. I was reminded of a young man who came to our church many years ago after having spent several years in jail for something he did when he was 18. He knew it was a mistake, but while in prison, he found God. He was very active here in this church, and his main ministry was to go to the prison and share the cracks from his life, in hopes of sharing the gospel that would change their lives. He took them bibles, and prayed with them, and worked to get them support when they got out of jail. He took the pain and hurt of his life and allowed God to turn it into something beautiful.

What's interesting, is that when I was looking for an image of cracked clay pots. I found this image all over Google. Check this out.

GRAPHIC Cracked Pot Fairy Garden

Who would have thought you could do that with a cracked clay pot! But, this is Biblical. This is how God works. God's word to us from Paul in 2 Corinthians is...don't give up when we are facing difficulty. Everyone will face difficulty. Keep pressing on.

When someone has wronged us, evil wants you to buy into harboring in your heart anger and resentment, bitterness and strife. Don't let that happen. Let go and show grace.

Finally, remember that we are called to be clay pots, letting Christ shine through us. This is our scripture memory verse for this week, and I hope you will put this card somewhere that you can say these words several times a day. Let's say those words together as we close.

BIBLE *7 We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.*

Let's pray...

SLIDE Prayer

O God, we give you thanks and praise for your forgiveness and grace, your love and your power. You know there are times that we have said things about other people we should not have said. We have hurt other people with our tongues and with our lips. Help us O God, not to gossip. Help us in our own insecurity, not to tear other people down. Forgive us.

Lord, you know there are some in this room who felt the sting of others saying things about them that were unkind, untrue and hurtful. Lord, help us not to give up in the midst of those hurtful moments. Be our strength when we are weak. Help us to let go of the resentment and bitterness. Help us to find a way to return blessing for curses, and to reach out with grace and love.

Finally, we pray that when people would look at us they wouldn't just see us and be impressed, but we pray that they might see you through us and be impressed with you. To that end, we give you our hearts and our lives this day. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen

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