



6<sup>th</sup> June | 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

First Pentecost Series: 2 Corinthians

A community shaped by the Gospel not by the culture

## God is looking for weaklings! Those who trust in His strength alone.

### Main Point:

The message which pulsed through 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth was the same as the dominant message today: "Power, success and wealth is the ultimate goal". The community of Jesus' followers were being heavily influenced by this message, and therefore rejected any hint of weakness, especially from their leaders.

Apostle Paul's life, however, was modelled after Jesus' life which is marked by suffering and weakness. Paul teaches that disciples of Christ only truly experience God's strength and power when they rely on the treasure of the Gospel, God has hidden within their hearts.

### Main verse:

**"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."** (1 Corinthians 4:7)

### Intro |

We all are probably aware that YouTube has become extremely popular in the world today. In fact, it is the second most visited site in the world. With over a billion people watching videos every day, from a library of more than 31 million video channels – you can watch how to fix anything, be entertained by anything, learn about anything and in the process be exposed to advert after advert of people selling you their goods, services, opinions and advice.

Even those of you who only visit YouTube to watch our service, will know that every video is prefaced by an advertisement – specifically selected based on your interests, location, buying history and age-bracket.

YouTube is not only the primary place to find out how to clean your stained upholstery, or how to bake the perfect loaf of bread, you can be reassured that whatever the topic, or the information you require – there is an expert on YouTube selling you an ebook containing everything you need to know, for just \$20.

In our world, everyone likes to be 'in the know', the expert on their chosen area of interest. Once you are the expert – you can then gather a following, influence them to think as you do, and ultimately sell them your knowledge – which leads to wealth, power and success.

It's like that today, and it was just like that in 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth.

As we journey through Paul's final letter to the Christian community, we'll see how easy it is for us to become so influenced by the surrounding culture, we lose sight of what it means to be shaped by the Gospel of the cross of Christ.

Before we dive into today's passage, we'll see how the struggles faced by 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinthian Christians are almost exactly the same as the struggles **we** face today.

**Point 1 | The culture of Corinth was a lot like today's – success, expert knowledge, and strength are what is valued most.**

Corinth was like the Darling Point or Vaucluse of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century – a hub of cultural and religious diversity, as a major centre of trade and commerce. Its wealth attracted people from across the known world and it quickly became the hotspot for intellectuals to discuss new philosophies and religious ideas.

With no YouTube, people gathered in the marketplace to be awed and persuaded by elegant orators expounding their latest ideas. While they weren't selling a product or service like we see on YouTube, they were selling their opinions and beliefs – setting up themselves as experts in knowledge, life and wisdom.

The ordinary person, whether tradesmen or shop keeper, could not help but be impressed by their cleverly constructed arguments, designer label clothing – they looked impressive, sounded impressive – and were the epitome of success.

**Point 2 | Today's success-driven culture has a completely different value system from that demonstrated by Jesus and Paul.**

Because Corinth was an upcoming cosmopolitan city, Paul first visited it during his second missionary journey (read Acts 18). He stayed in the home of Priscilla and Aquilla and worked as a tentmaker, teaching in the Synagogue every Sabbath and sharing with the community which gathered in their home. After about an eighteen months Paul moved onto Ephesus.

While in Ephesus, Paul received news that the community at Corinth were not doing well. They were succumbing to the immoral influence of the surrounding culture.

So, Paul wrote a rather stern letter urging them to create clear boundaries between believers and those in the wider community who were behaving immorally. But Paul's instructions were not heeded, and significant immorality seeped into the church community, to such a degree that not even the non-Christians would have dared to sin in such a way (1 Corinthians 5:1).

By the time Paul heard about it the believers were becoming proud about their tolerance of this sin. Also, there were factions, lawsuits, the Lord's Supper was not being properly shared amongst this incredibly diverse church community.

So, Paul wrote a second letter, which we call 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, addressing these issues (1 Corinthians 5:9-11).

However, this letter was not well received. A group of false teachers had infiltrated the Christian community, boasting of their authority as 'apostles of Christ'. They gained support by discrediting Paul, casting doubt on his integrity.

Paul immediately responded by visiting Corinth, but his time with them was painful and tense (2 Cor 2:1). So, Paul wrote an even more severe letter, which history has not preserved for us to read.

The severe letter, however, did cause them to heed Paul's instructions, and they responded with 'deep sorrow' and loyalty towards him (2 Corinthians 7:7).

Although encouraged, Paul knew that as long as his motives and credibility were being questioned, the church community would not grow.

So in this letter Paul acknowledges that things have been tense since his painful visit, and he makes clear he's forgiven them. He wants an open and honest relationship.

But Paul knows he needs to confront why had they rejected him in the first place.

Paul shows them that their elevation of these 'super apostles', due to their wealth and eloquence, is actually a betrayal of Jesus. It reveals a totally distorted value system.

You know, we see, this distorted value system on YouTube and TV as advert after advert blares across our screens.

You're happily watching your video – *like how to make marmalade set* – and all of a sudden a person appears walking through their mansion, with their Mercedes in the background, attempting to grab your attention so they can tell you how they alone can train you on how to make your first million dollars in 6 months. They've done it, so they're the expert, and they will show you how you too can become the expert!

What they are actually selling you is the world's value system – strive for wealth, power and control, and you too can become the expert at how to succeed in life.

The more this value system infiltrates our hearts and minds, the more we become consumed with trying to be the expert or appearing to others as though we are stronger and wiser than they are.

But Jesus' entire life demonstrated a way to live with an entirely different value system – one shaped by the cross.

That brings us to today's passage.

**Point 3 | God prefers to choose weaklings: people who are quick to admit their power and strength are totally derived from God.**

The verse we'll focus on is number 7:

**"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (2 Corinthians 4:7)**

For the past few weeks over and over again you've heard me say that at the cross of Jesus Christ, the barrier which stood between humanity and God was torn in two.

This released the powerful Spirit of God to pulsate through the world.

But those who have made marmalade know - you can't just pour boiling syrup into cold glass jars – the glass will crack every time.

You have the prime the jars.

In the same way, before the disciples could receive God's powerful Spirit, God had to divinely prepare their hearts.

There are seven essential divine acts only God can do which prepare our hearts for His powerful Spirit:

1. God FORGIVES us and removes our Debts.
2. God JUSTIFIES us and changes our Status.
3. God REGENERATES and transforms our Hearts.
4. God RECONCILES us and becomes our Friend.

5. God ADOPTES us and makes us Family.
6. God REDEEMES us and changes our Ownership.
7. God SANCTIFIES us and changes our Behaviour.

God does all of this – to prepare our hearts to receive the ultimate treasure - the light of the knowledge of the glory God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Often we forget just how precious this treasure *is* that God has placed within us?

It reminds me of an episode of “Antiques Roadshow”. A lady pulled out of her handbag a rather plain looking vase. To tell you the truth, it looked rather boring, like something you might find on the self of the Bazaar. Well, it turned out the vase dated back to the 1700s and was made by Joseph Glass.

The antique expert told the lady “At auction I would expect this vase to go for at least £20,000.”

The look on the lady’s face was priceless.<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes the greatest treasures come in ordinary containers.

For Paul “jars of clay” referred to ordinary kitchenware. Clay pots were used by common people to store grain, hide valuables, and to keep oil for lighting their lamps. For us, they are like the glass jars we put in the recycling bin after we’ve used them.



Paul is saying, “We’re not like a vase from the Ming dynasty. We’re cheap brown pots you can buy for \$4 at Borne Again Bazaar.” And this is where God “hides” His gospel - in fragile jars of clay - people who are here today and gone tomorrow.

When Jesus selected those who would take his message to the world, he didn’t go to the elite of Egypt, Greece, Rome, or even to the elite of Israel. He went to the shore of Galilee and found a bunch of fishermen.”

I think God absolutely delights in choosing the most ordinary, unexpected people through whom to preach His great salvation message.

Then when He wanted this great salvation message to be recorded on paper, He passed by Socrates, Hippocrates, and Plato.

And he chose what history would tell us was a little bow-legged Jew with an unimpressive face without great public speaking abilities (*one of the criticisms of the Corinthians against Paul was that wasn’t a polished speaker – see 2 Corinthians 11:6*).

God put **in** that little clay pot the priceless treasure and he’s still doing it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/1250965/Antiques-Roadshow-vase-rare-Joseph-Glass-Slipware-pottery-valuation-cost-price-BBC-video>

Notice - He's still doing it. *God intends to bless the world by "hiding" the gospel in "clay pots" that don't seem very impressive by worldly standards.* We wouldn't do it that way. But God had a special purpose in mind.

He does it so that when great things happen, the people around us will come to only one possible conclusion. They'll look at us and say,

*"All I know is, it can't be him. It can't be her. He's not that smart. She's not that strong. It's got to be God."*

God wants the world to see what He can do through people whose trust is in Him alone. And that's why he puts the treasure of the Gospel in fragile "jars of clay." He delights in people like us!

So, if you're feeling feeble and weak - Praise God! The weaker we are, the more God can do through us.

## Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. Reread the story of Gideon (Judges 6 and 7).  
God arranges things so that the whole world will know that this sort of life-changing power comes from God and not from us. In Judges 7, when the Midianites attacked Israel with 135,000 soldiers, Gideon led an army of 32,000 men in the counterattack. That's a 4 to 1 advantage for the bad guys. Evidently God didn't like those odds because he told Gideon to tell all those men who were afraid to fight to go home (v. 3). Twenty-two thousand men departed, leaving him with only 10,000. That would make it 13 to 1. Evidently that was still too low so God instructed Gideon to dismiss all the soldiers who didn't lap water like a dog (vv. 5-6). Only 300 men were left, making it about 450 to 1. That suited God just fine so he told Gideon to attack whereupon Gideon divided his men into three groups of 100 for a night time assault. He instructed his men to wait until the changing of the guard, and then blow the trumpets, hold up torches, and shout **"A sword for the Lord and for Gideon"**(v. 20). That "ambush" so greatly shocked the Midianites that they fled in fear and confusion, attacking each other in the process, leading to a total rout by Gideon's band of 300 men. Guess who got the credit when the battle was over? God said, **"You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength"** (Judges 7:2 NLT). Sometimes God has to "cut us down to size" so that when the battle is over, he alone gets the glory.
2. When has God had to 'cut you down to size' so that He can use you?
3. In what ways do you like to rely on your own strategies and plans, rather than allowing yourself to feel weak, so God's power is your own only strength?
4. To what extent do you avoid the feeling of weakness?
5. How do we find great reassurance knowing that God picks the weak, in order to shame the wise?

*Pentecost Devotional:*

### The Rise of the Kings | 1 & 2 Samuel

As we are giving attention to the New Testament series of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth our devotional will focus on the Old Testament lectionary passages which journey through 1 and 2 Samuel.

