

2 Corinthians 4:5-7

The past few weeks have been filled with the deaths of many prominent and well-known celebrities. Perhaps one death which may have escaped your notice was the death of Billy Mays, television's salesman of the century. Billy Mays appeared on infomercials for everything from Oxiclean to ESPN-360.com. He was a living icon in the infomercial world. You might not recognize the name, but if you've stayed up late watching TV, there's no doubt you've heard his signature phrase: "I'm Billy Mays here for..." With Billy Mays the man often became more important than the product. It didn't matter what you were selling. If you could get Billy Mays & his energy to sell it, then you would be seeing dollar signs. The ministry of the gospel is absolutely not a business looking for dollar signs. The work of spreading the gospel is not about finding the best adman. In our lesson for today, the Apostle Paul takes the focus off the man. He takes the attention off of pastors and teachers, off of Christians, and he focuses us squarely on Christ. **We Preach Jesus Christ as Lord! He shatters our darkness and he uses our weakness.**

**1. He Shatters Our Darkness.**

Let me describe a congregation for you: problems with regular giving to the Lord... cliques and divisions among the members... people living together in sin... lawsuits even between believers... the desire for worldly wisdom rather than God's truth... questions about propriety in worship... issues surrounding the Lord's Supper... struggles with the roles of men and women in God's world... uncertainty about spiritual gifts. This description may sound similar to our 21<sup>st</sup> century, but this was the situation in the city of Corinth, to which Paul wrote his letters 1 and 2 Corinthians. His first letter to the Corinthians addressed these problems and the people had listened. 2 Corinthians shows Paul's joy! They had received God's word and taken it to heart!

But there were still problems in Corinth. A group of false teachers had taken root in the congregation and were causing trouble for Paul. This was a group Paul mockingly called the "super-apostles". These super-apostles challenged Paul's personal integrity and his ministry. Ultimately these wannabe apostles were confronting the Corinthians with a serious and practical question: Is it about the man or is it about the message? It was a Billy Mays issue. Where does our confidence come from as Joe & Jane Christian? If what the super-apostles were claiming was in fact true, what happens to the ministry of the gospel?

The apostle writes, "We do not preach ourselves, but [we preach] Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Paul is not about to preach himself as lord and master of the Corinthians. That would have made him no different than the super-apostles. The message Paul has about himself is that he is a servant, bound to the Word and the people of God. Jesus is Lord and God, not Paul or any other teacher of the Word. Martin Luther confessed in the Small Catechism, "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man born of the Virgin Mary, is my LORD."

Why does Paul put all the focus of his preaching on Christ? Why do we focus on Christ? **Because he shatters our darkness.** Paul tells us, "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 the glory of God in the face of Christ." Paul knew what darkness was like. The Light had shone in the darkness, but the darkness did not understand Jesus the Light. And so Paul, at that time known as Saul a zealous Jew, had persecuted and put to death followers of Jesus. But the light of Christ had shone in Paul's life. The light flashed around him on the road to Damascus. He fell to the ground and heard the voice of Christ, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And from then on, he would no longer persecute but preach Jesus as Lord.

By nature all we see is darkness. We were born in darkness and we were perfectly content with the darkness. Even today darkness appears in our lives. The super-apostles are not the only ones who were guilty of being self-absorbed. Darkness looms when we think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Darkness looms when we see only our needs and wants and do not consider others better than ourselves. This past week I had a chance to visit some of the Manitowoc area churches and pastors. One pastor told me, "First German is the hub, everything and everyone in this town is connected to FG in some way." So, does that lead us to say, "Good, it's about time somebody remembers how important we are!" That, my friends, is the darkness talking. Shouldn't we rather fall on our knees, confess our own sins, thank God for his gifts, and ask for his blessing upon us as we seek to pass on his holy Word to the next generation?

I have good news for you! God has made his light shine in your heart. It's the light of knowing Jesus, crucified and risen to rescue all people. In our text for today, Paul compared the creation of light in the universe with the creation of light in our lives. The light of Christ in your heart is no less spectacular than the light created on the first day of creation. In the beginning there was only darkness, but **God shattered the darkness.** In your life there was only darkness, but God shatters your darkness with knowledge about Jesus. Because of his light, your sins are forgiven. Your failures and sins, committed in moments of darkness, are scattered like shadows in a bright light. The darkness of sin disappears in the light of his forgiveness. There is no corner of your heart that his light does not shine. There is no shadow in his peace, no short in his lamp of love for you!

## 2. He uses our weakness.

**We preach Jesus Christ as Lord.** But Paul still has something to say about himself and all Christians. We fit into God's plan with more than passing significance. Christ's love compels us and the Spirit of God fills us. Therefore, in the spread of the gospel, **God uses our weakness.**

St. Paul writes, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." The treasure we have from God is the knowledge of Jesus. Our faith is a precious treasure. It's precious to know his Son as our Savior from sin and it's a gift we would not know without his Word. But what about those jars of clay? What are the jars of clay? Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, we are fragile creations. You and I are the jars of clay. These bodies we have will wear out. We are made of clay, but God takes the most valuable treasure in the universe (the knowledge of Christ), and he entrusts it to fragile humans.

Take a moment with me and reflect on what Paul is saying about jars of clay. Imagine that you are moving. Our new principal and I and our families can easily relate, but put yourself in moving mode. Where do you pack your most valuable belongings? Your fine china, crystal stemware, valuable figurines and keepsakes, wedding pictures and photo albums, where are they packed? They are packed in cardboard boxes! You can easily tear a cardboard box into pieces. They are light and on their own they are weak. But when the box is filled with packing paper and other stuff, it isn't so easy to damage. It also becomes valuable because of what's inside. So it is with God's jars of clay. **He uses our weakness** and fills us with the knowledge of Jesus. Now we have value. Now we have purpose.

We are jars and we have learned of Jesus from other jars of clay. Maybe that jar of clay had the title of pastor or teacher or father or mother, but what's the point of putting the treasure in clay jars? Wouldn't it be better to have angels spread the good news, rather than fragile, sinful human beings? We are constantly falling flat and getting in the way of God's work, couldn't God just step in and broadcast his message in HDTV without us? God says no way! His plan "show[s] that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Our weakness highlights God's power. My weakness, your weakness, everything we are as clay jars makes clear that God's power is at work. Paul experienced this truth in a unique way. Paul had a thorn in his flesh. He pleaded with the Lord Jesus to take it away. But Jesus said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul's weakness assured him that God's power was at work. He confessed, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Gideon saw strength in his fellow Israelites as they gathered to attack the Midianites. 32,000 fighting men were united with weapons in hand. But God said, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into your hands" (Judges 7:2). So Gideon sent home the 22,000 men who said they were scared. But still God said, "You have too many men." So Gideon dwindled down his fighting force again, this time taking only the men who drank water by cupping their hands. 300 fighting men were left to take on the Midianites. But that was exactly God's design. Now the only reason for victory over the entire army of Midian would be God's gracious rescue. Gideon was reduced to weakness—God showed his strength.

The LORD Jesus holds the power and **he uses our weakness.** Even if we may see ourselves as weak or insignificant God has a place for us in the body of Christ. Think about the parts of the body that we regard as not that important. The pinky toe, for example, is an important appendage. Take away the pinky two and you are likely to walk with a slight limp all your life. We see that God uses all our gifts and even our weakness to his glory.

God able to do this because the power of the gospel differs from our normal thinking. Often a good math teacher will receive the praise and credit when there is a room full of good math students. That's normal and good in our schools. But teaching the gospel is not like teaching math. God works through his Word, as we share everything he wants us to know. God the Holy Spirit works to convert hearts and change lives by the Word. *Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God alone be the Glory!" This is not just something Johann Sebastian Bach wrote on his music. It's God's truth!

Thank God the power of the Word does not rest with human beings. We are jars of clay, fragile in our weakness. No Billy Mays is needed to spread the message of light in Jesus. God uses simple men and women. **We preach Jesus Christ as Lord.** It is that simple. But don't let that lead to indifference to the work we have from Christ. We are the ones doing the preaching, he is the One granting the blessing. AMEN.