

**Downward and Outward**  
**II Corinthians on Walking in the Way of Jesus**  
**Part Four: 4.1-7: Carrying the light of Jesus**

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**David Henderson**

What is your life full of? What dominates your thoughts? What occupies the center?

Or, to ask the question in a bit of a more pointed way, *who* is your life full of? Who do you think about most? Who do you speak about more than anyone else? Who is the person most on your heart? Who stands at the center of your life?

Who are you full of?

I still cringe when I think of an interaction I had with two of my fellow students when I was at Gordon-Conwell seminary forty years ago preparing to be a pastor. I was driving south on Route 1A, curving out of Beverly toward the Salem drawbridge. The Rowand fish market perched on the bank of the Danvers River just ahead on my right.

In the back seat of my car were two students from Gordon-Conwell. Nancy, whom I knew a bit, had asked if I could give her a ride home from school. The other woman, a friend of hers, I didn't know at all.

I don't remember what we were talking about, or what I said, but in response to whatever it was I said, up from the back seat came these words from Nancy: "You are so full of yourself, you know that? You act as though you are God's gift to the world." And then laughter rose between them – not light-hearted, just-kidding laughter but scorn.

I was floored and offended and embarrassed.

Unfortunately at that point in my life I didn't have the tools to lean into the conversation and ask what I had said that caused offense, or to say how it felt for her to say that, so we drove the rest of the way to their apartment in awkward and uncomfortable silence.

"You are so full of yourself."

Who are you full of? In some ways it is the most important question we can answer in life. Who is my life about? Who do I care about most? Who is my life full of?

“There can only be two basic loves,” says Augustine in *The City of God*. “There is a love of God that leads to a forgetfulness of self, and a love of self that leads to a forgetfulness of God.”

Who are you full of? That’s the question asked by the passage we’re looking at today. This morning we come to the fourth chapter of II Corinthians, picking up with the first verse.

## **II Corinthians 4.1-2**

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.

If you’ve been with us over the past few weeks you’ll remember that the apostle Paul is writing a follow-up letter to the church that he founded in the city of Corinth in Greece.

Unfortunately, since he left Corinth and continued on to other cities, the Corinthian church has slipped backwards, falling back into seeing things not from the perspective of the kingdom of God, but through the lens of the surrounding culture. That has them evaluating Paul’s ministry according to the world’s values instead of using Jesus as their point of reference.

So instead of seeing Paul’s ministry as a faithful expression of the gentle and humble heart of the Jesus to whom they have given their allegiance, they judge Paul’s ministry through the lens of personal power and strength of leadership and charismatic presence and persuasive speech, they evaluate him based on the expectation of success and accomplishment and influence and reputation as signs of God’s favor, and they have decided Paul’s ministry is a failure.

So in this letter Paul is lovingly pushing back, challenging the paradigms of success that they are using as the measure of his ministry. Paul is saying, “We haven’t come to impress. This isn’t about us at all. We’ve just come to faithfully deliver God’s message.

“And we’ve done that. Some receive us and our message, others don’t. They can’t. Their hearts are darkened and their eyes are blinded, because they see things the way the world sees them.”

## **II Corinthians 4.3-4**

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

That last phrase is so rich, isn't it? "The light of the gospel ... displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

Let's just open that up a bit. I think the best way to do that is actually to walk through it backwards.

It all ends, or starts, with God and his glory. God who is eternal and powerful and personal. God who created the universe, speaking it into existence. God who created each of us, speaking us into existence as well. God who is glorious and majestic and holy and mighty and pure and perfect in every way, but who is loving and forgiving and compassionate and gracious in everything he does.

It all begins with God.

Working backwards, the passage then speaks of Christ as "the image of God." Scripture teaches that God has always existed as one God and at the same time as three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. Paul reiterates that teaching about the triune nature of God in this letter to the Corinthians when in the opening chapter he speaks of how

II Corinthians 1.21-22

God [the Father] ... makes ... us stand firm in Christ ... setting his seal of ownership on us, and putting his Spirit in our hearts.

And in the closing chapter when he prays that they would experience

II Corinthians 13.14

the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God [the Father], and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

So when Paul says here that Christ is the image of God, he means so much more than that he is a 3D printer likeness, like when Rodin created a sculpture of Balzac.

He means that Jesus *is* God. The visible Son makes the invisible Father known. Jesus is God in our midst. When you see him, you see God. Christ is God putting God on display.

The glory of Christ is all that makes him God being brought to light so that we can see it. It is his divine nature and character revealed, lit up, put on display.

"The light of the gospel ... displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

So this gospel, this good news that Paul is teaching, throws light on Jesus, who throws light on God. The gospel reveals the Son who reveals the Father.

Which leads straight to the next section.

So here, Paul says, is glorious God.

Here is glorious Jesus, the visible Christ revealing the invisible God.

And here is the glorious gospel, revealing the visible Christ, who reveals the invisible God.

And then here is me, Paul says. Me carrying around in myself, us carrying around in ourselves, this treasure that is Jesus who resides in us.

So now my visible life is meant to reveal the now invisible Christ, who reveals the invisible God. I, we, re-present him to this world.

## II Corinthians 4.5

For – in other words, that’s why – what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

So back to the opening question: What is my life full of? Or more accurately, who is my life full of?

Paul says, “We preach not ourselves.” Rick Warren famously begins his book *The Purpose-Drive Life* by saying, “It’s not about you.”

Preach literally means herald. Paul says what we herald is not ourselves. A herald was someone who went around blowing a trumpet and announcing the coming of something special, someone important.

Contrary to how the Corinthians thought Paul should present himself as a Christian leader, our call is not to stand up in front of the world and say, “Ta da! It’s moi! Aren’t I something?”

No, what we herald is *him*. And not just him. But him *as Lord*.

The two earliest affirmations of Christian faith are these:

Jesus is *Christos*. He is the Messiah, the King. (Acts 18.5, 28)  
And Jesus is *Kurios*. He is the Lord, the Master. (Romans 10.9, I Corinthians 12.3)

These two confessions say essentially the same thing.

Jesus arrives on threshold of this planet – and he arrives on the threshold of our lives – with the full authority of divinity. He is the supreme authority. He has ultimate

supremacy. All other powers are under his power. All other authorities are under his authority.

That's why we have the image of a crown up everywhere you look – we preach Jesus as the one who it is all about, the one who has the last word, who has the authority and who receives the glory, the one who is the head of this church and the Lord of our lives, the one who is King.

But that's not all.

If Jesus is King, that makes us his glad subjects.  
And if Jesus is Master, then we are his joyful servants.

Whenever we declare that Jesus is Lord, we also declare our allegiance to him, we confess our having placed ourselves under his authority, having turned our will over to him. Now he gets the final say.

Which makes us his servants and yours.

This is the reasonable implication, the logical outworking, of the greatest commandment. If the King's great command is for me to love him and also to love you, then that makes me both his servant and yours.

You remember we've defined love as seeking God's best for you even when it costs me. That's exactly what it means for me to be, as Paul says here, your servant for his sake.

For the follower of Jesus, a life of sacrificial regard for others is normal, not exceptional.

According to Augustine, God created us to have a love for God in which we find our rest and our peace and our fulfillment and our enjoyment in him.

And he created us to have a love for others in which we always see Jesus in the picture, and we love that person for his sake, for the sake of what he is doing in their lives, and for the sake of what he is doing in our lives.

## **II Corinthians 4.5**

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.

## **II Corinthians 4.6**

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.

Genesis 1 tells us that when God created everything out of nothing, “everything was engulfed in total darkness.” (Good News Translation)

Then God said, “Let there be light!” And there was!

In just the same way, in a new work of creation, God makes his light shine in our darkness. That experience of the light of God shining into our darkness and revealing to us the glory of God in the face of Christ – that experience transforms us and makes us new. As Paul will remind us in the next chapter,

### **II Corinthians 5.17 (Message)**

Anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life emerges!

He not only makes us new. He makes *our relationship* with him new as well. He takes hold of us when we are far from him and draws us near, reconciling us to himself through the sacrificial self-offering of Jesus on the cross, and bringing us into a love relationship with him that will last forever.

### **II Corinthians 5.18 (God’s Word)**

God has done all this. He has restored our relationship with him through Christ. (GW)

By his Spirit, Jesus lives within us.

So when you and I wade out into the world, wherever God takes us, to school, to work, into the community, the stunning reality is that, wherever we go, we carry within us the light of the transforming love and power and presence of Jesus within.

God has always been in the business of bringing humanity face to face with himself. To what great lengths he went to do this, squeezing his boundless, brilliant light into the span of a single human being and then walking among us in the person of Jesus – “the light of all mankind” (John 1.4), “the true light that gives life to everyone” (John 1.9).

Then, after three years of walking among us in human form, then came the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension – and the light of Christ became invisible again.

Except it didn’t. God is still in the business of bringing humanity face to face with himself. But now it is through the likes of us, shining his brilliant light from within us.

### **II Corinthians 4.6**

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.

Our call is to put the light of God on display. Can you imagine a greater privilege? Can you think of a role of greater significance?

## II Corinthians 4.7

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

This is one of those passages that is often misread. Jars of clay we take to mean fragile, easily broken, even broken already. Many translators supply the word “cracked” or “fragile”, but that word isn’t there in the Greek. It just says earthenware vessels, jars of clay.

Fact is, most ancient pots were pretty thick and sturdy.

Paul’s point is different. He wants us to see not that we are fragile but that we are *common*. Unremarkable. Everyday. Earthenware vessels were *ordinary*.

The remarkable things about everyday vessels is that they are unremarkable. Think wheelbarrow. Watering can. Garden hose. Envelope. Plastic cup. Paper bag. That’s us.

While growing up I often heard my mom distinguish between our everyday plates and the “fine china” we had in the cupboards and the sideboard in the dining room.

Fine china calls attention to itself. I still remember the elegant white Wedgwood soup bowls with their little pedestals and paired handles from which we tried to sip our soup without slurping or spilling on special occasions.

The clay pots Paul is describing here were different. They were just ordinary containers: everyday jars, jugs, pots, vases, cups, plates, bowls, lamps. They weren’t treasured or treated with special care. They were just things for holding stuff. It was what they *contained* that was of value. Food. Light. Life.

Ordinary containers don’t live with the illusion of their own importance. Paul wants us to remember as followers of Jesus that we are everyday containers, not fine china. We are delivery mechanisms. Conduits. A means by which something precious gets passed along.

Think about it. We look right past most of the kitchenware in our house to the thing it happens to hold – say, the lime marinated grilled chicken and roasted veggies on the plate or the raspberry lemon sparkling water in the glass we had not too long ago for dinner. I couldn’t tell you what plate it was on or what glass held it, but boy, was it good!

“We have this treasure in jars of clay.” But the one we carry around within us? This is Paul’s point. By contrast to the ordinariness of the containers he indwells – us – he, the treasure within, is exceptional, all-surpassing, far excelling us containers that he inhabits. There is no comparing.

I love the Arabic proverb that says:

A donkey is still a donkey even if it carries the Sultan's treasure.

When God turns us out toward others, sending us into their lives in his name, what he wants them to experience – to be moved by and impressed by and drawn to – is *him* in us, not us. The treasure, not the vessel. To see past the container to the Treasure we carry, and seeing him, to say of him:

“Who is like you . . . O Lord— glorious in holiness, awesome in splendor, performing great wonders?” (Exodus 15.11)

“Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?” (Song of Solomon 6.10)

The Message version of II Corinthians 4.5 says:

### **II Corinthians 4.5 (Message)**

Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; [we’re proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you.]

It is the John the Baptist dynamic all over again: he must increase, we must decrease. And the more we decrease, the more he increases.

Many of you know Gail Johnston, a gifted artist from our congregation. One Sunday about ten years ago I asked her to bring her potter’s wheel up on the platform and make a pitcher during my message. It looked a whole lot like this one, which is another of her creations.

At the end of the sermon I interviewed Gail. That was when she introduced me to the idea of the wheel, the well, and the wall.

First the *wheel*. She explained that a potter begins by centering the clay on the wheel – a crucial task, one that, if not done just right, will cause the potter to have to fight with the piece from that point on. If it isn’t centered as it should be, the clay will push and pull against the potter’s fingers instead of flowing through them.

Once centered on the wheel, two tasks remain: the well and the wall. The *well* is the hollowed out center of the piece, without which, of course, it is worthless as a cup or



bowl or dish or a pitcher because it is full of itself and incapable of holding anything else.

When she makes a vessel Gail empties the clay *of itself*, pressing it down, spreading it out, opening it up. The lump of clay is displaced from itself, pressed out and away from the center it has occupied until her transforming touch.

Then she starts pulling up the *wall*, molding the piece into a shape designed to receive and to hold. Tugging the low, thick, hollow of clay with her fingertips, applying pressure on both the outside and the inside at the same time, she begins to raise it up into usefulness, forming sides around the emptied center. Again and again she squeezes and stretches the wall up until it finally takes the desired shape.

It is still the same lump of clay. Nothing has been added or subtracted by the press of her fingers. But it has been transformed into the inverse of itself.

Could this be *the* central work of God in a soul? Hollowing out the center to make room for him, then raising us up into a Jesus-shaped life that reflects his touch and serves his ends, and then sending us back out into the world, clay jars containing priceless treasure? I think so.

Who is your life full of?

Thomas a Kempis, in his book *The Imitation of Christ*, writes:

Blessed are they who passionately wish to be emptied for God,  
[who say], You alone ... can fill me completely. (Book Four, 221, 223)

The temptation is great to want to be special in the eyes of others, to be thought well of, to be esteemed, to want people to say of us, "Isn't she something? Isn't he wonderful?"

In his beautiful poem about Mary, the mother of Jesus, Gerard Manley Hopkins holds her up as an example of what it means to be a servant of God. She understands that she

This one work has to do –  
Let all God's glory through  
(“The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe”)

What does that look like? I think this morning of the example of my dear friend Nathan and his beautiful wife Sawson and their ministry not only in Cairo but all across Egypt and all through the Middle East.

There is nothing flashy about Nathan or his ministry. A number of you gathered to hear him last night. As he was describing all the different ministries he and his wife are

involved in – educating children and serving refugees and training pastors and so much more – I found myself thinking how simple it all is. It all boils down to just two things:

Find a need and meet it in the name of Jesus.  
And let his love shine through in all I do.

Treasure in jars of clay, carrying the light out into the world.

Before you leave this morning I hope you'll stop by the table in the back and take the time to learn just a bit more about the many ministries they are part of.

Who are you full of?

I know many of you enjoyed watching the Olympics this summer. We certainly did.

Amid all that competition, with every athlete chasing to be the best in the world, it was inevitable that some athletes would make it all about themselves, fanning the crowd into applause, beckoning for more, elevating themselves.

What a delightful exception it was to encounter Christian athletes like Steph Curry and Coco Gauff and Simone Manuel and Brody Malone and Hunter Armstrong.

Here were two especially striking examples to me of athletes who chose not to make it about themselves.

After winning her third straight Olympic gold medal in the 400 hurdles, Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone said:

"I credit all that I do to God. He's given me a gift, . . . and I want to use it to glorify Him. So whenever I step on the track it's always the prayer of, 'God, let me be the vessel in which You're glorified, whatever the result is — how I conduct myself, how I carry myself, not just how I perform.'"

I also loved the example of shortboard surfer Gabriel Medina from Brazil. After the run that earned him the bronze medal, coming out of the tube, he cut left, crested the wave he had just ridden, and launched himself into the air.

### **Gabriel Medina's Medal-Winning Run**



Photographer Jérôme Brouillet caught the moment in what many consider to be the most iconic image of the 2024 Olympics.

A fellow Brazilian was asked about the picture. He said he understood immediately what the sign meant. "It's like he's saying, 'It's not me you should be looking at, it's God. This moment of glory is not mine, but his.'"

\* \* \*

So two questions for us to consider before God this morning as we close.

- Has the light of the gospel come into your heart? Have you recognized that Jesus is God revealing God? Have you opened your heart to receive him, to let him come in and dispel the darkness and fill you with the light of his presence and to rule over your life with love? If not, what is keeping you from doing that right now?
- And if so, to what extent do you get out of the way and let that light shine through you? Are you carrying the treasure that is Jesus around in this world in a way that calls attention to you, or to him? Who does your life point to? Who are you full of?

## **II Corinthians 4.5**

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.