

THE CONTEXT :: Paul has been attacked elsewhere, and in Corinth, as an ineffective leader, one unworthy of being followed. He develops this tension between himself and the community, and also among those within the Corinthian community in terms of who they follow as leaders in the previous section: 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:18

we commend ourselves to... :: the last time Paul employed this verb was to talk about himself, beginning a section in which he defends himself by describing his theological reasons for how he lives and acts:: 2 Corinthians 3:1-17 : “¹ Are we beginning to **commend** ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; ³ and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, ⁶ who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

...¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

veiled :: the last time this word was used in the letter was in 2 Corinthians 3:18 “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

THE IMAGE OF GOD:: this expression refers backwards (and forwards) to Colossian 1:15-18 :: “¹⁵ He [Christ] is THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.” This theme of “visibility” is developed throughout Paul’s letter in this portion...he’s insisting upon a visibility that is invisible to those who are blind. Spiritual blindness was a common metaphor used by Jesus in his dealing with the religious leaders of his death who focused on the letters of the law, versus the spirit of the Torah and relationships among God’s people.

slaves:: don’t forget that the same word in Greek (in which Paul is writing) means both slave and servant. The word strikes us differently in our modern hearing than it did for the people of Paul’s Greco-Roman culture.

2 Corinthians 4:1-15

New Revised Standard Version | (NRSV)

¹ Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ² We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth **we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.** ³

And even if our gospel is **veiled**, it is **veiled** to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is THE IMAGE OF GOD. ⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your **slaves** for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, “**LET LIGHT SHINE OUT OF DARKNESS,**” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have **this treasure in clay jars**, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸ **WE ARE AFFLICTED** in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in **THE BODY THE DEATH** of Jesus, so **THAT THE LIFE OF JESUS MAY ALSO BE MADE VISIBLE** in **OUR BODIES**. ¹¹ For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, **SO THAT THE LIFE OF JESUS MAY BE MADE VISIBLE** in **OUR MORTAL FLESH**. ¹² **SO DEATH IS AT WORK IN US**, *but life in you.*

¹³ But just as we have the same **s.p.i.r.i.t.** of faith that is in accordance with scripture—“I believed, and so I

spoke”—we also believe, and so we speak,¹⁴ because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.¹⁵ Yes, everything is for your sake, so that **grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.**

AS YOU READ AND REFLECT ON THIS TEXT:

- ↪ How have you experienced the paradoxical power of God in your life? How have you glimpsed life in death, hope in affliction?
- ↪ When have you experience affliction or suffering that didn't break you? What kept you from breaking? What grew from the affliction or suffering?
- ↪ Who in your life has helped to make God (more) visible through their actions, words, relationship, presence, teaching, generosity? How did they do that?
- ↪ Paul is saying that God's word: Jesus Christ is made visible in his life (and by extension our lives)? But it's in our authenticity and presence, not our power and perfection. How is that challenging for you? How do you struggle to make God visible in your life: actions, words, relationships, choices?
- ↪ How might the Spirit of God be calling you to live, or to accept to live, as one who holds treasures in jars of clay?

WE ARE AFFLICTED | OUR BODIES | OUR MORTAL FLESH | DEATH IS AT WORK IN US :: Paul opposes flesh and body/the material world. This opposition was present in Greco-Roman culture as the “spiritual” was always considered superior to the physical or the material. But Paul pushes farther than this duality. He uses it as a metaphor to talk about what John calls those who are born not of the flesh, but of the spirit: the children of God.

LET LIGHT SHINE OUT OF DARKNESS:: the metaphorical contrast of light and darkness, which dominates the first chapter of the gospel of John, has its antecedent in the First Testament when used throughout the prophets as a metaphor for God's impending revelation: See Isaiah 60:2 for example “For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.”

this treasure in clay jars, for Paul this is a metaphor for our human vulnerability. It's his literary way to contrast the spirit and flesh (which he writes about in Romans); but even more precisely to contrast the way in which he is being judged for his actions which seem less than honorable in their culture, and the absolutely clear (at least to him) manifestation of God's power in his way of living the gospel. In ancient times clay jars (used to hold water, food, nard, oil) was the cheaper version. Metal was much more expensive. So you would equate “godly” things with metal, or the more precious metals, rather than the cheap, breakable clay of the earth. Of course this evokes the story of Genesis in which humankind is made of clay. It also evokes Isaiah in which...

Grace... :: Paul's trust and speech amid all this is grounded not in a set of ideas -- an ideology -- that he can use to control others. Rather, it is grounded in the one who raised the Lord Jesus, who will not only raise him but also bring him along with the Corinthians into Jesus' presence. This is why he can say that everything is for their sake -- because grace, as it extends to more and more people, is always about an overflow of thanksgiving, to God's glory. It's as if he's painting a word picture of an upward spiral of grace as opposed to a downward spiral of hopelessness.