



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Only A Clay Pot

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or **What Makes Me Worthwhile?**

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. 2 Cor. 4:17

Earthen vessel. Clay pot. Aluminum can. Plastic bottle. Paper bag. They are all containers having little value except that they are suitable to hold whatever substance is put into them. They are cheap to make, sturdy enough, and hardly worth saving when they have been emptied of their contents. Other substances could be used to make containers, but then they might end up becoming more valuable than what they contain.

What makes a container valuable? What makes it, or anything, worthwhile? What makes me worthwhile? What makes any person worthwhile? Many times I have asked myself these questions and have struggled to find clear answers. It seems that everybody would like to believe that they are worthwhile, and that many do not believe that they are. Not unless they do or achieve something that can be seen as worthwhile.

On Sunday, June 19, 1988, I was in the worship service at Shallowford Presbyterian Church, and Paul Hooker, the Associate Pastor, was delivering the sermon. His text was taken from 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." In the development of his sermon, Paul pointed out that people use clay vessels for their wine. The reason for doing so is that silver and gold vessels taint the wine. The homely, fragile clay pots, even though they have little value in and of themselves, do not. They turn out to be a much better vessel in which to keep the wine. As I listened to him, suddenly I knew what made me worthwhile.

I am worthwhile because I am a clay pot (earthen vessel) in which God and the love of God reside. I didn't have anything to do with determining the kind of vessel I am. God made me the way the way I am. I do have a lot to do with determining how well I carry out my role as a clay pot.

People frequently say in counseling sessions, "I feel worthless and no good. What can I do to feel better about myself?"

"Nothing," I usually reply. "The only way that I know of for you to feel better about yourself is for you to believe who you are by the grace and gift of God."

Most of the time when I give that answer, I am very aware that it doesn't seem to help very much. Persons hearing it often have a puzzled expression on their faces, and sometimes respond to me saying, "But how do I do that?"

What I was trying to say when I said, "Nothing", was that, in literal fact, there is not anything to do to feel better about one's self except to change one's belief about self. That seems to be a very difficult concept to understand or to accept, since we are so

conditioned to the idea that the way to become something or somebody is to do something to achieve that goal. However, the answer holds. There is nothing to do to feel better about one's self except to change one's belief about self.

When I heard Paul explain about the homely, fragile clay pots and their appropriateness to be wine vessels, I knew that I had another answer to give to people. The reality is that there isn't anything for me to do, but I do need to recognize that I am a container – a clay pot, if you will.

Insofar as I know, every shade and kind of human being exists, ranging from those who are superbly competent in many fields to those who seem to have no ability or competence at all. Out there in this great world of ours, there are those who are extremely attractive physically. Others are outstanding in their accomplishments in athletic activities. Still others excel in business, science, politics, and in many other ways. They are seen as worthwhile because they achieve so much.

There are also countless numbers of people who do not excel in any of these areas, but go about their lives at the level of their achievements and their beliefs about themselves. Often, they judge themselves, and are judged by others, to be not very worthwhile because they achieve so little.

No amount of achieving, nor lack of achieving, makes me worthwhile nor not worthwhile.

I am aware that, whatever my ability and achievement – or lack of it – there may be something of value to another in it. I may be helpful. I may have something to offer that somebody else needs or wants. I may be able to share insights with people that open new understandings to them. What I have to offer may, indeed, be quite valuable. But I want to keep it very clearly in mind that none of that makes me worthwhile. What I have to offer may be very valuable to many, but it does not determine my worth.

But let's try to see the whole picture. Envision a person who would be described as weak, misshapen, incompetent, unable to do or be much of anything but a burden on society. What about the worth of that person? I realized that, when I think about the homely, fragile clay pot, none of those characteristics determine the worth of that person, nor lack of it.

Of course, I know that so many of our life experiences condition us to believe that worthwhileness is something we achieve. That conditioning is so complete that, it appears, the vast majority of people depend upon their being able to recognize that they have achieved something to consider themselves worthwhile.

The sad reality is that it just doesn't work out that way.

If a person already considers himself or herself to be not worthwhile, no amount of achieving will result in believing that he/she is worthwhile. Any number of people

may tell the person how much he/she has achieved and how valuable he/she is, but none of that will convince him/her that he/she is worthwhile.

It seems odd to me that, even though it just doesn't work, many people persist in holding the belief that if we can just reach the right pinnacles or achieve the right things, we can then believe ourselves worthwhile.

How much difference it makes if a person will only recognize that she/he is a clay pot in which God and the love of God reside.

I know. I can refuse to recognize or acknowledge that I am worthwhile. I can insist that I'm not worthwhile unless I can see myself as made out of silver or gold or some other valuable substance. I can point out my lack of worthwhileness because I have failed to achieve some high goal or ambition, or have failed to become what I think somebody else expects me to become.

I can knock myself out trying to become what I think father or mother, or somebody else, wanted me to become. I can continue to do and say whatever things I think might gain their approval, if I can only do it right or good enough. I can become very good at whatever it is that I do. The reality is that no matter what I do, or how much, or how much people tell me that I have their approval, it is never enough unless I believe, to start with, that I am worthwhile because God has made me that way.

I am the clay pot in which God and the love of God reside. I hold within me that beautiful treasure. That's what makes me worthwhile.

Under these circumstances, the issue is not whether I'm worthwhile. That is a given. Even if I don't believe in God and in the love of God, it is still true. I am worthwhile because God has created me that way. I am the repository of truth and love. I am the clay pot in which God and the love of God reside.

Two questions point up the real issue. What do I believe about my worthwhileness? And how do I give expression to that belief in my life?

There is something significant – and relieving – about seeing myself as a clay pot. I don't have to look to competencies and achievements and recognitions to make or declare me worthwhile. I am free to be who God has created me to be. I am free to give expression to my competencies, to achieve whatever I achieve, and to receive such recognition as I receive without my worth ever being in question.

There is a problem. I read the words. They seem to make sense. I want to believe them, but I don't seem to be able to. That belief thing rears its ugly head again. How can I just drop all that conditioning? How can I get to where my sense of my worthwhileness does not depend on what I have achieved and what I have acquired? That belief system is so deeply engrained.

The simple reality is that all that conditioning can't just be dropped. It takes work – hard work and persistence – to incorporate new belief about one's self. I have to revise my thinking. I have to revise my picture of myself. I have to revise my motives.

Only a clay pot, having little value in and of itself. But what it contains is of such great value. That is the new belief.

In Atlanta, the modern equivalent of the clay pot is an aluminum can with Coca-Cola in it. Consider the can. The best skills of people in marketing and advertising have been used to produce that can. They want it to look good. They want people to find it attractive. But people don't buy the can because they think the can is valuable. It is the Coke inside that gives worth to the can. It has little value in and of itself. After it is emptied, it is to be crushed and thrown away, or recycled.

The purpose of the can is to communicate to the would-be buyer that what is inside is really worth buying. It was made to accomplish that task.

So, in like manner, I am created to accomplish a task. I am a clay pot in which God and the love of God reside. I have no other purpose for being. I am different from the clay pot or the Coke can in that I am not passive. They are. They don't have any decisions to make. They can't attempt to be anything else than what they are. They can't declare themselves worthless because they are simple, fragile containers. They don't have any vision of themselves as anything. They have no free will.

But I do have free will. I can see myself as anything I choose. I can declare myself worthless until I do something that I have decided will make me worthwhile. I can deny that God and God's love reside in me. My denying it doesn't make it any less true, but it does affect how I approach my life.

There is the key. Who I see myself to be, and what I believe about how I obtain worthwhileness profoundly affect how I live my life. My belief about myself and about the source of worthwhileness must change.

Maybe the best setting for that change to take place is meditation and prayer. Sometimes I call it visualization. In the quiet time of meditation, prayer, and/or visualization, I look at myself and what I have been taught to believe. I look at myself. Am I willing to believe that God and God's love reside in me because that is who God created me to be – God's clay pot?

If I am willing to believe that I am God's clay pot, then I am willing to be the clay pot out of which all with whom I share receive God and God's love. Like those who drink from the Coke can receive the Coke that is in it.

God's clay pot. Maybe that would be a better title for this paper. I am only a clay pot. How could I ever desire to be anything more than a clay pot in which God and the

love of God reside? How could I ever have a higher goal in life than to express God and God's love?

I am worthwhile. God made me that way. God and the love of God reside in me. Whatever I do – or say – the purpose is not to achieve worthwhileness, but to manifest the worthwhileness that God has bestowed upon me. I am God's clay pot.