

FOR HONORABLE USE
2 Timothy 2:20-26

INTRODUCTION: When I was growing up my grandfather raised beagles. In each of the houses they owned, there was a “dog lot” in the backyard with 4-8 beagles—he owned hundreds of dogs and won hundreds of field trial trophies over the years.

Beagles are not the quietest dogs, nor are they the pickiest about what they eat. So my grandfather usually fed them a combination of dry dog food and whatever was in the “slop bucket,” a rather nasty galvanized bucket filled with what people in our day send down the disposal. As kids we could not imagine that even the dogs would eat anything that came out of that bucket! One could easily say that this vessel was not intended for “honorable use.” The nice glasses and plates in the kitchen were never confused for the “slop bucket!”

Paul tells us that in every large house, that is those that have the means, there are different kinds of vessels. Some are like wedding-gift china and crystal set apart for only the most special occasions—and some are like the “slop bucket” my grandfather used to feed his dogs.

His point was simple—you cannot use dishonorable vessels for honorable purposes! In the church (the great house), there are always going to be those who have been set apart and made clean for holy purposes. There will also be those who, although saved from their sin, are not progressing in holiness and are not prepared to fulfill any good work God might have.

THESIS: Clean vessels pursuing godly character will be prepared for every good work God brings our way.

God wants more clean vessels among His people!! In this portion of his letter to Timothy, he explains the principle—then presents the way for each vessel to become clean—then gives instruction about how each vessel can be useful for the honorable work of the gospel!

I. A CLEAN VESSEL SERVES CHRIST WITH HONOR

--In every “great house” there are many different kinds of vessels, most of them intended for a specific use.

--Without getting too specific, suffice it to say that it is unlikely that one would use the same vessel (pot, bowl, container) for cooking and serving food that would be used for less hygienic purposes such as waste disposal!

--Paul’s reference to this “*great house*” is, of course, to the church...a natural progression of his metaphor immediately after his comments about the “*firm foundation*” (2:19) upon which such a great house must be built.

--Since all of us are vessels of some sort, God wants us to be vessels for honorable use—the fine China and silver goblets of the household, not the chamber pots and trash cans!

2 Tim. 2:21 *Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.*

ILLUS. Every church has both kinds of vessels—1) pure and holy ones useful for the work of the gospel, but also 2) defiled and impure ones made unworthy for the work of the gospel through false teaching or personal ungodliness.

The good news for us all is that once we were all unclean vessels before the grace of Christ cleansed us from unrighteousness! But Paul goes beyond the message of salvation here—he is speaking to the need for each member of the church to be made pure and holy for the honorable ministry of representing Jesus Christ authentically in every way.

We want nothing about what we believe or how we behave to defile the purity of His name, or to cast shadows on the radiance of His glory!

A. CLEANSE YOURSELF TO BE A VESSEL OF HOLINESS

--What remains in you that makes you unsuited for the holy privilege to be a bearer of the image of Christ...the honored assignment to be a witness to the saving grace of Christ?

--Even after we have been saved by His grace, much work remains for the Spirit to do in us before we are worthy to be vessels holy enough for the Master's use!

...anyone who cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy...

NOTE. We need to be reminded of something important here. We are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ...we have no possible way to save ourselves.

However, here Paul tells Timothy that "*anyone who cleanses himself from what is dishonorable...*" and some may get the wrong idea that we have the capacity to make ourselves clean, to purify our own hearts and make them holy.

The truth is that only God can do that! He saves and He sanctifies through no contribution of ours! So what does Paul mean when he says "*cleanses himself?*"

--We are to appropriate what has been made available to us through Jesus Christ.

◆ *By faith, we are...*

- Redeemed because of His sacrifice
- Cleansed because of His blood
- Purified according to His Word (Eph 5:26)
- Set apart as holy by His Spirit
- Prepared for His good work (2:21)

--He has done what must be done and now invites us, exhorts us, to appropriate by faith the work of Christ on our behalf, to take Him at His word that He will cleanse us, then enable us to remain pure by the abiding power of the Spirit in us.

B. COMMIT YOURSELF TO BE A VESSEL OF HONOR

--So each of us faces a decision—to follow a course of dishonor by ignoring His provision for our purity, or to become a carrier of honor by committing ourselves to yield ourselves to the touch of His healing, empowering hand.

--We must be committed to submit ourselves to the cleansing touch of Jesus Christ as He hears our confessions of sin and forgives us...as He hears our cries of repentance and enables us to walk in the newness of His ways.

--When we were saved from sin, Jesus Christ began a work that He intends to carry through on...and He calls on us to commit ourselves to allow that work to continue through to completion.

Phil. 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

--So God is at work for us...God is at work in us...and God wants to work through us!

--He wants us to be holy vessels, as clean as the message we carry and pure as the Savior we serve.

II. A HOLY VESSEL PREPARES FOR EVERY GOOD WORK

--How are we to be made fit for "honorable use?" **Two ways:**

2 Tim. 2:21-22 ...he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. ²² **So flee** youthful passions **and pursue** righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

--To be honorable, fit for the work of the Master of this great house, the church, **we flee** from all that makes us dishonorable, and **we pursue** all that sets us apart as holy and worthy.

--Paul used the same words in the first letter to Timothy:

1 Tim. 6:11 But as for you, O man of God, **flee** these things. **Pursue** righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

A. FLEE YOUTHFUL PASSIONS

Gordon Fee: translates “youthful passions” not as the ‘lusts’ of a sensual nature (which usually speak of sexual matters), but of ‘desires’ that are the “headstrong passions of youth, who sometimes love novelties, foolish discussions, and arguments that all too often lead to quarrels.” (p. 263)

--Frequently this exhortation is aimed at sins of a sensual nature, as if the word passions only refers to sexual concerns.

--However, there are many “youthful passions” that have nothing to do with sensual matters, but seriously impact the purity and the pursuits of our hearts.

- **The headstrong passions of those who...**

- ...have not grasped their own mortality

- ...are too self-absorbed to have a sane estimation of themselves

- ...measure success by comparison instead of by competence and contentment

- ...whose words can be brusque and manner contentious, untempered by godly seasoning

--Exuberance to show that you are right and a zeal for defending the truth may lead you to run toward the wrong things—trying to do the right thing but in the wrong way!

--Knowing our natural tendency to head in that direction, Paul uses strong language and says “*Flee! Run as fast as you can away from wrong desires fed by your intemperate youthfulness!*”

--But he offers not just a warning, but a word of wise counsel...

B. PURSUE GODLY CHARACTER

--The greatest pursuit is that which brings about the greatest likeness to Jesus.

--The call to follow Him expects that we will never cease to pursue Him with everything we've got...nothing half-hearted will do!

--The call to follow Him expects that we will never try to pursue Him by ourselves...but alongside others who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

--We need their encouragement and depend upon their company to spur us on “*not forsaking our own assembling to together*” as some try to do alone!

1. Righteousness

--In conduct, always pursue what is right and choose to do "the upright" thing no matter what it costs you!

2. Faith and Love

--Two Christian virtues always mentioned by Paul when addressing godly character—without faith, we rely on ourselves and without love, we live only for ourselves.

3. Peace

--The peace of God among His people is crucial to growth in Christlikeness—otherwise, they spend more time patching up differences than in pursuing what it takes to conform to the image of Christ.

--It is important to pursue peace, knowing that relationships naturally drift away from it than toward it...so if we expect to be honorable vessels, we must be peace-makers and peace-keepers for Christ.

III. A FRUITFUL VESSEL BEARS WITNESS WITH GRACE

2 Tim. 2:23-26 *Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. ²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*

A. WINNING ARGUMENTS DOES NOT WIN CONVERTS

--As long as I have been a believer, I have never seen nor heard of anyone losing an argument about the gospel and then trusting Christ.

--Pride being as strong as it is, something happens when we have been defeated, even when it is verbal jousting and wrestling over words and ideas.

--If we desire to be vessels of honor for the Master's use in spreading the Good News, we must learn to distinguish between winning an argument and speaking the truth in love.

ILLUS. How many of you have been in the middle of an argument (or in marriage, we refer to them as discussions!), and realized that you were wrong! What did you do then? Admit it readily and apologize for being difficult?

Not likely, when pride gets involved! We try to find an exit point where we can save face! We say things like, "Well, there's no point in talking about this with you anymore...let's just forget about it!" Or, "You're obviously not interested in what I think, so have it your way!"

Until there is a humble spirit and an interest in hearing as much as being heard, the argument will have no winners and seldom end well with good feelings on both parts.

--Often an argument degenerates into unkind words, hurt feelings and defensive attitudes.

--Getting back to the love of Christ becomes quite difficult if you have just leveled someone with your words and belittled them with your verbal assault.

--Any discussion that leaves you feeling "I guess I showed them..." usually means that you showed them something other than the kindness and mercy of Jesus Christ.

B. SHOWING KINDNESS LEADS TO REPENTANCE

--The alternative to "winning arguments" but becoming a skilled quarreler is to show kindness, just as God showed you His kindness.

Rom. 2:4 *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*

--Kindness *leads gently* while arguing *pushes harshly*.

ILLUS. If you find yourself confronting a hostile opponent, you cannot always control the tone of the discussion. But you can determine not to stoop to their level of attack by making a commitment to respond to them with the disarming language and attitude of love and kindness.

Again, you are not trying to win an argument but love a person! Sometimes the first step in that process is simply to listen, ask questions and look for points of common ground.

"You may be right..." are four words that can be extremely effective in taking the sting out of an adversarial conversation. You are not agreeing with them, but neither are you drawing an irrevocable line in the sand and daring them to step over it.

--Paul tells Timothy not to lose his cool...not to get drawn into heated debate with those who clearly do not know what they are talking about!

2 Tim. 2:23 *But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.*

--Granted, if you leave kindness aside, you can decimate the arguments who want to argue about things they know little about, have thought less about them, and are mere parrots repeating without reflection what they have heard someone else say.

--But why embarrass or humiliate them when they are far more likely to respond to your kindness than to your "besting them" in what could easily turn into a one-sided debate and inadvertently concede the popular role of underdog for those listening in!!

C. REMOVING OBSTACLES LEADS TO TRUTH AND FREEDOM

--Remind yourself of the goal—win the person by loving them, not the argument by laying them out!

--We are supposed to remove obstacles to the gospel, not place more of them in the way!

1. Show a gracious spirit, and perhaps God may grant repentance

--I love the careful way Paul expresses himself here—not making promises that God alone can control.

2 Tim. 2:25 *...God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth,*

--In other words, you may do everything just right, and they still might choose to reject Christ and have nothing to do with the truth!

--Only God by His Spirit can do that—not human reason and not even a gracious spirit dripping with lovingkindness always succeeds.

--What he wants us to know that it is indeed easier with sugar than with vinegar to gain a positive hearing for the hope of the gospel.

a. Not quarrelsome

--You can argue a point of view without being a quarrelsome person! Honorable vessels are useful when they are not unnecessarily offensive in the way they state their position.

b. Kind to everyone (yes, even the hostile)

--If the other person is unkind, unloving, even inclined to use whatever ungodly, unethical means he can—we still treat them with kindness. We cannot treat fire with fire, fighting bitter words with bitter words in return.

ILLUS. Sometimes your adversary is counting on you being bound by the standards of godliness while he has no such limits placed on what he says and does!

Remember that sometime when you hear someone seem to gain and keep the upperhand in charges they make, or positions they take. They may be depending on the Christ-like person having to take the 'high road' of righteousness while they hit below the belt, speak falsely and harbor great bitterness.

Regardless, we are to be kind to everyone—even when we are being victimized by the evil design of their attacks against us and the truth we hold forth.

c. Capable of communicating truth

--To be effective, we not only need to be clean of heart and mind, but we need to know what is true and how to talk about it winsomely and accurately.

--While you don't want to come across as a 'know it all,' you should be able to explain in simple, understandable, personal terms what it means to know God through faith in His Son!

d. Patient in the face of evil

--Not everyone will react negatively and go on the defensive, but sometimes you will run into someone who are harsh, even abusive and mean-spirited as they attack not just what you say, but cross the line and treat you in an evil way.

--That is not going to happen as often as you think, but when it does, when we are wronged for doing what is right, patience goes a long way!

e. Correcting with gentleness

--If the opportunity presents itself without you having to produce a counter-attack, you can offer correction to falsehood with a gentle spirit to match your kind words.

--Again, your attitude matters every bit as much as your words!

2. Model a loving spirit, and perhaps they will be won!

--Our prayer is that God's love...

...will penetrate hearts

...make sense

...break the chains

--In his previous letter to the Ephesians, Paul made it clear that speaking with love does not mean sacrificing truth.

Eph. 4:15 *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,*

--Even though we cannot save anyone, God can! He wants to release those trapped in the snare of the devil, blocked by obstacles to belief.

--He uses vessels of honor within His household of faith and "prepares us for every good work" to lead others to Christ and grow them up to maturity in Christ.

CONCLUSION: Useful as the “slop bucket” was to my grandfather in feeding his beagles, our Heavenly Father calls us to feed His sheep from pure vessels...calls us to sow the seeds of the gospel with clean hands from honorable vessels.

Would others say that your progress in purity qualifies you for the honor of making a Glorious Savior known? Would you say that your life offers a clean canvas upon which to present compelling pictures of the beauty and majesty of Jesus Christ?

Three Application Questions:

- 1. Am I the kind of vessel God finds useful for every good work, or is there much cleansing that still needs to be done?*
- 2. In my daily life, am I more likely to pursue Christ-likeness or ungodliness in how I direct my actions and affections?*
- 3. Is there any place in my life for loving, intentional conversations that will lead someone to Christ (to the knowledge of the truth)?*

Clean vessels pursuing godly character will be prepared for every good work God brings our way.

Are you the kind of vessel God finds available for honorable use? If no, by the means God gives you in Christ, cleanse yourself! If yes, ask Him to show you where He wants to use you and then step out in faith and see what He will do!