

Believers are Challenged to Be Like Clean Vessels

2 Timothy 2:20-23

2 Timothy 2:20-23: *“But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor.”* ²¹ *Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.* ²² *Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.* ²³ *But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.”*

Background Notes

Remember, Paul was writing this letter to Timothy from prison - his second Roman imprisonment. Paul knew it would not be long before he would be called upon to be a martyr for Christ and the gospel. 2 Timothy 4:6 - *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand.”* Meanwhile, Timothy was at Ephesus, where Paul had assigned him to stay and build up the young church. In this letter, Paul challenged Timothy to be a steadfast and faithful Christian.

In chapter 2, seven models of the faithful Christian are given. We’ve already looked at five of them. In verses 10-13 we have the sixth: the model of the **clean vessel**. The key idea in the model of the clean vessel is **availability**. Are we available for the Lord to use us? Are we clean vessels?

Verse 20 should be discussed as part of our background notes: *“But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor.”* The idea here is that in a large house there will be fine china and crystal goblets that are used for special purposes (“vessels for honor”), but there will also be garbage cans and the pails for washing the floor (“vessels for dishonor”). Obviously you don’t mix the two - you keep them in separate places. You don’t put the floor-washing pail on the holiday table as a punch bowl!

In verse 20, is the “large house” just background for the illustration of the vessels, or does the house itself represent something as part of an extended metaphor? In view of the context, I believe the large house represents Christendom – everything and everyone that professes to be Christian. In Christendom, there are true believers and there are those who only profess to be Christians, but are not true believers.

Remember our Lord’s parable about the wheat and the “tares,” or weeds? The “tares” *looked* like wheat - but they were *not* wheat; they were not true believers. These “professing” believers would be the dishonorable vessels in verse 20. Also within Christendom, there are true believers – the wheat – or the vessels for honor in verse 20.

Paul used this same concept in Romans 9:21-22: *“Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.”* So the vessels for dishonor in Romans 9:21-22 are clearly unbelievers. I think the same holds true for the model of the vessel in 2 Timothy 2.

In verse 19 the true believers were likened to the solid foundation. *“Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”* Here the true Church is likened to the firm foundation. I think that is also part of the extended metaphor of the vessels. There is the true foundation – that’s the Church as established by our Lord Jesus, pure in its early days. But upon that true and firm foundation a “large house” has been built – Christendom. In Christendom, all is not pure and true: there are the “vessels for honor” and the “vessels for dishonor.”

Doctrinal Points

1. Like a vessel, the faithful Christian is available because he separates from all that is bad.

Do you want to be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, and prepared for good work? Then there must be separation in your life. We must cleanse ourselves from these things (v21). Notice, it’s **our** responsibility. We are to do this if we are to be clean vessels, available for the Master’s use, prepared for every good work.

Question: What are these “things” from which we must separate ourselves (v21)? Are the “things” the dishonorable vessels? Or are the “things” the youthful lusts (v22), and the foolish disputes and speculations (v23), and the wickedness and iniquity (v19)?

I think the primary idea is to separate from the dishonorable vessels. However, since the dishonorable vessels are characterized by youthful lusts, foolish and ignorant speculations, and wickedness or iniquity, we could say that “these things” from which we must separate are all these people and all these lifestyles. That’s why our doctrinal point says “all that is bad.” Like a vessel, the faithful Christian is available because he separates himself or herself from all that is bad.

How do we separate - and to what degree do we separate? I believe that there will be degrees of separation, depending on how bad the situation is. Within Christendom there is a whole range of vessels, from the honorable to the dishonorable. The dishonorable vessels are those who falsely profess to be believers. Some of them will be characterized by doctrinal impurity, some by moral impurity, some characterized by both.

On the other end of the spectrum are the vessels for honor – the true believers – those who call on the Lord from a pure heart (v22). But there is a whole range in between. Some true believers do not practice separation from evil. They might be mixed up with doctrinal impurity, or with moral impurity to one degree or another – or with both! That’s the way it is in Christendom today. Thus there will be degrees of separation – or degrees in the amount and kind of fellowship in which we can participate with other believers.

For example, in the area of doctrine, we must totally separate from individuals who call themselves Christians but deny the deity of Christ (such as Unitarians). There can be no fellowship there. But what about fellowship with someone who feels it is proper to keep the Old Testament Sabbath as part of Christian living? With that person there can be a degree of fellowship.

What about the moral area? What about a Christian who is a materialist - to the extent that he is causing others to stumble? There must be some separation, or we may be caught up in the same problem. We must separate from persons who call themselves Christians but are, for example, *practicing* homosexuals. You can't have close fellowship with those who are openly breaking a dictate of the moral Law of God, as evidenced in both the Old and New Testaments. This doesn't mean we ignore or refuse to befriend those in the homosexual community, but we can't have true Christian fellowship with them - even though some of them may be true believers. The same degree of separation would apply with people who openly defy God's Law in other moral areas.

If we spend time in fellowship with those "*who call on the Lord out of a pure heart*" (v22), we will automatically be separating ourselves from evil. Crystal goblets don't spend time in the same closet as the grimy pails. True believers should fellowship with other vessels of honor. The proper practice of separation is not easy, but it must be done if we want to be honorable vessels that are available for the Master's use.

God uses honorable vessels to accomplish His purposes – but God can also use dishonorable vessels in a negative way, to accomplish His purpose. Psalm 76:10 says, "*He makes the wrath of man praise Him.*" God can use anything for His purposes, but the point here is that we should seek to be *honorable* vessels, available for *honorable* use by the Master.

The good news of these verses is that you can be a vessel for honor, ***sanctified and useful*** for the Master, ***prepared for every good work***.

2. Like a vessel, the faithful Christian is available because he pursues all that is good.

Verse 22: "*Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*" If we want to be honorable vessels, we must flee youthful lusts – and we must actively pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. The verbs here are in the present tense, and that means it must be *continual action*.

Notice, by the way, in reference to lust: Don't try to ***fight*** the flesh! You ***flee the flesh!*** The "youthful lusts" mentioned here don't just mean sexual lusts. No, youthful lusts refers to any ***strong desire to do what is wrong***. Greed and selfishness and egotism and the love of money would fall into that category. Listen to the very similar exhortation in 1 Timothy 6:10-11, "*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their*

greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.” Notice - we must flee the wrong things, but we must also actively pursue the right things!

Christian fellowship is very important. Spend time *“with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”* This verse really helps us to answer the question of “how to separate.” If we are actively turning away from those strong desires of the flesh and actively and continually pursuing righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart, then biblical separation will be automatic. If you stay busy in the Lord’s work, you will automatically practice biblical separation!

If you’re a Christian who is actively involved in pursuing righteousness, faith, love and peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart, then you’re available! You’re a clean vessel, fit for the Master’s use. Remember, like a vessel, a faithful Christian is available, because he pursues all that is good.

Practical Application

Let’s not “major on the minors”!

Verse 23: “But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.” Getting involved in foolish and ignorant disputes and speculations is characteristic of false teachers and false teaching, just like the godless chatter (*“profane and vain babblings”*) mentioned in verse 16. We need to be aware of it, so we can avoid getting involved in it.

Here are just a couple of examples of foolish, time-wasting disputes: Is there life on other planets? Could Jesus have caught a cold or the flu? As a carpenter, could the Lord have ever bent a nail, or cut a board too short? Foolish speculations! They’re not evil questions, and they might even be interesting to discuss briefly, but they can be a waste of valuable time. And they can result in disputes - even real strife! A question such as “Could the Lord have caught a cold?” would not be out of place in a Christology course - but even there we must be careful not to become involved in foolish conjecture.

So let’s not major on the minors! Let’s not speculate beyond what the Bible clearly teaches – whether it’s about the humanity of our Lord Jesus, or extra-terrestrial beings, or any other such speculations. Let’s spend our time discussing worthwhile topics.

Let’s not major on the minors!