



Vessels in a Great House

Series: 2 Timothy: The Final Charge From a Faithful Apostle

2 Timothy 2:20-26

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In the previous section of this letter that we looked at last week, Paul began to deal with the reality of the Truth War that we find ourselves in as the people of God. He dealt specifically with the situation that was confronting Timothy and the church in Ephesus, and by extension, we who are living in this age. The church in Ephesus was dealing with real turmoil and conflict as a result of spiritual and biblical error. There was great disputing over words, church squabbles breaking out, and the attempt to divide the church into factions. There were false teachers and deceitful whisperers of spiritually destructive falsehood both outside and inside the church. Some within the church were falling prey to the pressure to be accepted by certain “spiritual” cliques or leaders, losing their firm grip on the truth of God and trading God’s approval for the approval of the self-proclaimed spiritually enlightened. Paul explained how to deal with false teachers, with the whisperers of error, with the self-appointed authorities in the midst of the church that were undermining the gospel.

He exhorted us to labor to be approved by God, to labor so that you can present yourself to God as one whom He can approve, one whom He can use for the sake of His gospel, one whom he can trust, one whom He can reward, to labor so that you can be unashamed before the Lord. He called us to labor to be faithful, rightly handling the Word of God – for the sake of your own soul, for the sake of the church, which is the body of Christ, for the sake of your brothers and sisters in Christ, for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of Christ and His glory. He called us to avoid irreverent babble and worthless wrangling over words, but to rest in the twin truths that God knows those who are His and that those who belong to God will depart from iniquity. He continues in that same vein this morning by using a parable of vessels in a great house.

Vessels in a Great House (20-21) Shifting the analogy yet again, Paul says to Timothy: “Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable.” (2 Timothy 2:20, ESV) Paul envisions the church as the

great household of God. He has used that analogy once before in his first letter to Timothy when he wrote: "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:14–15, ESV)

Take note of the way that Paul described the church in his first letter – as the pillar and buttress of the truth. This phrase gives us some insight into the view Paul had of the high calling of the church in the world. Paul is saying, "This is the role of the church, to lift high, to put on display, to magnify, to show forth the truth of God in Christ, the truth of God's Word, the truth of God's glory." The church has a responsibility to believe, teach, propagate, uphold and obey what God has revealed, the Bible and the whole truth of Christianity. He saw the vital value of the church, the great house of God.

But let me say something about that for just a second. Paul has in view here the local church – not the church universal, but specifically the church in Ephesus, as an expression of the great household of God. Everything that Paul wrote, he writes to the local church. The writer of Hebrews has a local gathering in mind when he says: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:24–25, ESV) Christ's church is a family of believers who share life together. Yes, the New Testament church is made up of a universal body of redeemed saints, but all of those saints as they are located in identifiable, local, geographic gatherings and deeply connected at every level: spiritually, emotionally, financially, and relationally. If Christ had only wanted us to only be a part of the universal church then we could all just drive around each Sunday and visit a different church without ever becoming a part of the body expressed. We could attend a church without ever becoming members. We could become members without ever laying down our lives in service to Christ or for others. But that form of detached, uninvolved, type of church going was never a part of Christ's plan. These instructions from Paul can only be carried out in the context of the local church community that makes up the church universal.

Now, viewing the church as the household of God, Paul says that there are two kinds of vessels in that house – those that are for honorable use and those for dishonorable use. Now I want you to understand the picture that Paul is drawing, ok? In a great house, there would have been buckets, jars, and pots of wood and clay that would have been used for dishonorable purposes – for the disposal of garbage and human waste, for instance. But there would also

have been vessels of gold and silver that would be used for honorable purposes – eating, decorating, or entertaining.

He uses this picture of a great house with both honorable and dishonorable vessels as picture of the church and his point is that in the church at any place and in any time in history, you have both of these kinds of vessels coexisting – honorable and dishonorable. The visible church is and always has been a mixed bag. And these two kinds of vessels are made up of three kinds of people. You have the honorable vessels, the true believers, the faithful, those who are actively pursuing Christ, actively living according to the truth of God, faithfully desiring to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ and who are exhorting others to do the same, vessels who are actively at work to edify the church. Not always perfectly and not always with the same intensity and energy, some mature and some maturing – but faithful nonetheless. You have the vessels for honorable use.

Then you have vessels that are being used for dishonorable purposes. This group is made up of the false brethren, the false professors, and the false teachers who sow destructive heresies into the household of God and who labor to overthrow the grace of God in Christ. But in addition to that group of false brethren are real believers in Christ who are in sin, who are enmeshed in unconfessed sin, who are acting in ungodly ways and who are damaging to the health and the well-being of the church, those who have been taken captive in mind and heart by Satan to do his will. Honorable vessels being used, for a time, for dishonorable purposes, not living according to Christ.

This is the situation at any time in the church and Paul was well aware of that fact. The church is never static. Realizing this, Paul says to Timothy and the church in Ephesus, and to us as well: “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.” (2 Timothy 2:21, ESV) In light of this ongoing dynamic in the church, Paul tells us that if we would be a useful vessel to the Lord, one that is ready for every good work, one that can be used for the edification and building up of the body of Christ we must cleanse ourselves from what is dishonorable and set ourselves apart to God.

Now make sure we understand this. Paul is talking about sanctification, not justification. He is talking about our practical righteousness, not our positional righteousness. Being a useful vessel for the Lord calls for a conscious, willful cleansing but this is never, in Paul's thinking, something that we do apart from the grace of God. Like Paul wrote in Philippians 2, for instance, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12–13, ESV) The grace of God is the means by which we cleanse ourselves, the grace of God active through His means of Scripture study, of prayer, of mutual accountability, of humble confession and repentance, of teachableness, of receiving correction and encouragement, of corporate and private worship. God uses means of grace, empowered by the Holy Spirit, but laid hold of us by faith, to cleanse us and to keep us clean.

Think about like this. If you come into the house dirty after a day of hard work out in the yard – mulching, mowing, planting stuff -- you don't clean yourself like a cat. No, you make use of soap and water, shampoo and conditioner, a loofah pad, maybe, to scrub yourself clean. The soap and water, the loofah pad are the means of cleansing, but you have to use them, trusting they will do the job, or you won't get clean.

Each of us must cleanse ourselves from what is dishonorable. What does Paul have in mind here? Well, it's pretty extensive. In the first place, it is necessary that we cleanse ourselves from what we spoke of last week -- false teaching, from spiritual deception, from unbiblical talk designed to erode confidence in the Word of God and the character of the Godhead, to erode the fundamental truths of the gospel, to erode ones' stability and standing in the gospel, to erode a biblical perspective on the nature of the church, to erode a biblical perspective on proper leadership and soul care, to erode a biblical perspective on worship, fellowship, liberty in Christ, submission to the Lord and legitimate spiritual authority, and erode obedience to Christ and a commitment to real holiness. We must cleanse ourselves from the words and the practices of the dishonorable vessels. We must purge our minds of their falsehoods and our lives from the ungodliness that is the result. We must cleanse ourselves from doctrinal error and moral evil.

But even more, John MacArthur makes the point that the way that "these things" is phrased, that it includes the vessels of dishonor themselves. We cannot fellowship with those who teach and spread spiritual falsehood, who are unsubmitive to the Lord, who refuse to be obedient to

the truth. These sorts of people are dangerous precisely because they present themselves as spiritually mature and faithful, but the truth is this: fellowship with the spiritually defiled develops tolerance for their defilement and gives them a false sense of security and well-being. That's why Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." (2 Thessalonians 3:14–15, ESV)

Moreover, there is no way that a vessel for honor can remain honorable and usable if he is continually seeking communion and fellowship with someone who is dishonorable before the Lord. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:9–13, ESV) These are serious words, but these are and have been serious times.

If we would be honorable vessels and fit for use by the Lord we must make use of the means of grace, that I mentioned earlier, and cleanse ourselves from these things in order to be set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. And then, Paul tells us how.

An Exhortation to Spiritual Growth (22-23) Paul says: "So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels." (2 Timothy 2:22–23, ESV) There is much that Paul says here, so let's take it phrase by phrase.

First, he says, that we are to flee youthful passions. That word for "flee" is a word that means to run from something, to escape safely out of danger. The idea is that these "youthful passions" are a trap to be avoided at all costs. What are youthful passions? What characterizes the immature? Most times, our first thought is that of sexual immorality and it is true that sexual immorality is a deadly trap and that is definitely in view here, but there is more to

youthful passions than sexual immorality. Calvin speaks of these youthful passions as “those impetuous feelings and impulses to which the excessive warmth of youth makes young men prone.” In fact, the scope of “youthful passions” that commentators speak of includes such things as: anger, rash speech, exaggerations, selfish ambition, headstrong obstinacy and unteachableness, arrogance, conceit, jealousy, envy, a self-assertive spirit, impatience, contentiousness, the love of novelty, intemperance, misplaced values, rejection of legitimate authority, and spiritual instability. “Youthful passions” is a broad term. They constitute quite a trap and the truth is that some people never escape them. They are trapped in a sort of spiritual adulthood, stuck in perpetual immaturity, never really growing up into maturity in the Lord. It’s a serious problem in our day and we should flee from it.

So Paul says to flee youthful passions, but then right in hand with this, he tells us to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. The Greek word is “dioko” and it means to pursue or to chase after something as in war or in hunting. Flee from youthful passions and instead chase hard after and

Pursue righteousness – the practical expression of the character and nature of Christ, approved and godly living. It simply refers to right behavior or conformity to the standards of God’s Word. The Psalmist writes: “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.” (Psalm 119:9, ESV) There is no substitute in the Christian life for obedience. Jesus said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15, ESV)

Pursue faith – Here, Paul is either talking about growing in trust and faith in the promises of God given to us in Christ or he is talking about growing in personal faithfulness to the Lord. The fact that it can be understood in both ways is probably deliberate. The two are tied together. Faith has to do with our concept of God and His character and a growing faith, a growing confidence in the Lord, results in a growing faithfulness, a growing devotion to God. How do you pursue faith? “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17, ESV) The more you comprehend what it is that God says, the more your faith will be stimulated, developed and stirred up to lay hold of what God says. Especially, pursue an ongoing and growing assurance of the promises made in the gospel. Live in the forgiveness, union with Christ, reconciliation with God, righteousness before God, and assurance of salvation that belong to us in Christ. Living in light of these promises develops a growing and maturing faithfulness to Christ.

Pursue love – We must pursue love as defined in 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul wrote: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:4–7, ESV) Real love has substance to it. This is what is to characterize our lives – love for God rooted in all that Christ has done for us and then love toward other people, loving them with the love with which we have been loved. Jesus said: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”” (Matthew 22:37–40, ESV)

Pursue peace – The peace that Paul is speaking of is not the peace that we have with God – that has already been established by the work of Christ on the cross. God forged peace with us by dealing with the huge ground of offense between us – our sin and rebellion against a holy and glorious God, by judging Christ in our place on the cross. So that God could bring us to Himself and forge peace with us, and He could pour the blessing and benefit of His love upon us, He had to deal with our sin and our guilt and our condemnation and His wrath that we deserved as a result of our sin. He had to remove His wrath from us and the only one who could bear His wrath away, the only one who could remove the barrier of His fury against us for our sin, was His only, begotten, glorious, and sinless Son through His sacrifice on the cross. That peace is established, but this objective peace with God, forged by Christ, is the foundation of our own pursuit of peace with others that Paul is speaking of here.

Paul writes in Romans 12:18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12:18, ESV) We are to strive to be at peace with all people, as far as it depends upon us. Just as true peace with God cannot be achieved apart from dealing with the root cause of conflict, the same is true of peace between people. We are to strive for peace with people but never at the expense of truth or righteousness. There can be civility between people, but never true peace apart from dealing in a truthful way with the ground of offense. True peace carries the idea of being joined together. It comes from a Greek word that has as its root a word that speaks of gluing things together. Christ is our peace with God. He glues us to God by His own blood and that is an expensive treasure – one to be cherished. And it is why peace among brothers and sisters in Christ is so to be treasured and pursued. But again, it must be according

to the truth and it must be mutually desired. That is why Paul says “so far as it depends upon you.” Though we cannot control the response of other people, we should be pursuers of peace.

And all of these things – righteousness, faith, love, peace – Paul says we are to pursue along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. We must pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace within the community of those who call upon the Lord – those who have their hope and desire firmly planted in Christ. We are to seek the community of those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart – from a clean heart, from pure motives, whole-heartedly and unreservedly pursuing the Lord with no hidden agendas, ready to submit mind, will, and emotions to Him, those who will spur you on as you spur them on. We need that. We have to have it. It’s like this. I am looking forward to getting back into the weight room and working out with John. It’s hard to lift weights alone and really push yourself. You need to have someone with you to spur you and encourage and urge you to push hard. It is the same way in our walk with Christ. We need one another to push us along and exhort us as we pursue Christ.

We see here the great secret to holiness and usefulness to the Lord. John Stott says it like this: This double duty of Christians -- negative and positive -- is the consistent, reiterated teaching of Scripture. Thus, we are to deny ourselves and to follow Christ. We are to put off what belongs to our old life and to put on what belongs to our new life. We are to put to death our earthly members and to set our minds on heavenly things. We are to crucify the flesh and to walk in the Spirit. It is the ruthless rejection of the one, in combination with the relentless pursuit of the other, which Scripture enjoins upon us as the secret of holiness. Only so can we hope to be fit for the Master's use. If the promise is to be inherited ('he will be a vessel for honorable use'), the condition must be fulfilled ('if anyone purifies himself from what is dishonorable').

To that end, Paul reiterates what he said before. “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.” (2 Timothy 2:23, ESV) Have nothing to do with nonsensical, absurd, foolish, uninformed, uneducated disputes. The idea behind the word “controversies” is that they are manufactured issues, rumblings and grumblings, forceful differences of opinion promoted by people who do not have as a goal actually seeking a solution. The word translated as “ignorant” is a word that is used to describe a “mind not subject to God, a man following his own mind and will.” All these controversies do is breed quarrels, arguments –much heat and little light. In order to do that, you will have to develop a discerning mind. Avoid these things, because as a servant of God, you have a higher expectation placed upon you.

A Higher Calling (24-26) Paul says: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.” (2 Timothy 2:24–25a, ESV) Rather than getting into quarrels and being belligerent and being drawn into arguments with the unappeasable with no clear and biblical focus on resolution, or resorting to hateful actions and words. Instead, faithful servants – certainly Paul has Timothy’s role as pastor in view here, but also all believers – are to take a different tack. Rather than being quarrelsome, Paul says,

Be kind to everyone – that is, treat everyone with the respect you should as one made in the image of God. Be winsome, not easily ruffled and treat people, even your opponents, graciously.

Be able to teach -- Certainly this is important for the preaching and teaching pastor – it is a biblical requirement, but all of us are teachers in one way or another and as it regards these quarrels, the point of this command is “to stick to the facts.” Our goal is not to engage in controversies, but to state clearly and accurately the truth of Scripture. We are not to haggle over opinions or perceptions or over selfish agendas, but to stick to the truth of the case and to hold to the Word of God as the standard in every case. Our opinion, what we personally think has no bearing and carries no weight. The standard is the Word of God and the facts of the situation. It’s easy for a discussion or a disagreement to veer off the facts and onto feelings and presumptions but the Lord’s servant is to call people back to the truth.

We are to be patiently enduring evil – not getting angry when we are treated in an evil way, not growing resentful, or defensive when you are falsely accused of wrong motives when trying to deal with someone in sin but the idea is instead to deal with evil in the church by appropriate and biblically sanctioned means. We are to endure evil confident that God will, in His own way and according to His own will, will deal with evil eventually once and for all. Then last, Paul says we are to be

Correcting opponents with gentleness – The idea is that we should correct our opponents under the control of God. The word here is the word for meekness. That doesn’t mean that we should be weak, wishy-washy, or coddle sin. The calling is never to soften the truth or

compromise biblical standards. Rather, it means to correct our opponents, those who are opposing the gospel, without arrogance, impatience, or selfish anger. It does not mean the absence of strong correction, it means meekness – under full submission to God.

Back when we were studying the Beatitudes, I said these words about meekness and they bear repeating here. This must be our mindset. Listen. If I am a meek man, I am not proud of myself; I do not seek for glory for myself. I do not assert myself, or promote myself or make demands based upon position, privilege, possession, status in life, because it is not about my kingdom or me. But I will glory in God, I will glory in the cross, I will boast in knowing God, I will be a lion for his honor, I will be bold for his truth, I will exalt Him and magnify Him above all else. My eyes will not be focused upon me, but I will fix my eyes on the infinite, almighty, personal, sovereign God and I will entrust the totality of my life to making His name renowned. Correction must be done under the control of God.

One other thing. The way that this phrase is written in the Greek -- correcting his opponents with gentleness – it could be translated, as it is in the King James as “instructing those who oppose themselves.” It’s a legitimate way of translating these words and this translation gives us some insight into what spiritual error does to people. When they get stubborn, when they are sure they are right, when they insist on their own point of view, and give themselves to quarreling or personal attack, all they are doing is opposing themselves. They stand in their own way, become their own worst enemy, and create their own problems, sort of like children. And that is probably why Paul uses the word that speaks of correcting a child.

Paul lays this higher obligation, this higher expectation, on us because the goal to which we should be looking is this: “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.” (2 Timothy 2:25–26, ESV)

Our goal in dealing with the opponents of the gospel, our opponents, those who are opposing themselves is that God may grant to them repentance, that He may open their eyes to see the truth and to believe it. That’s goal whether it is the truth about the gospel, about certain doctrines, about some controversy that they are stirring up, some personal or doctrinal falsehood that they are promoting – the goal is their repentance.

In fact, the words here are so picturesque. Paul envisions these opponents as captives of Satan. His hope for them is that they would come to their senses -- the Greek word means to return to sobriety after being in a drunken fog. Satan drugs his captives so that they do not think clearly. They are in a haze of confusion and delusion. When God grants repentance, they begin to think clearly. Oftentimes they respond by saying, "I was so deceived!" They need to escape the snare of the devil. Sin and false teaching, erroneous thinking, spiritually destructive and deceitful whispering ensnares people and enslaves them. When God grants repentance, they are free indeed after having been captured by Satan to do his will. And that can only come by the Word of God. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32, ESV)

This is so important because so often we see things only on the natural plane, on the level of what we can see and touch, and Paul is telling us that we need to see things from a spiritual perspective, the battle ongoing, the purposes of God unfolding even in the midst of real sin. Now listen, it doesn't mean that our handling of controversies will always result in immediate repentance. Sometimes God delays in granting repentance to someone for reasons that we may not understand, working out other purposes that we cannot see or comprehend. Other times, for reasons only known to God, He does not grant repentance at all but even then we must acknowledge the truth about God. "Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding: far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong." (Job 34:10, ESV)

This is a strong and serious text to us today. How we live and how we respond to the Word of Truth matters. There are vessels in the household of God – those for honorable purposes and those for dishonorable purposes and Paul has a very sure word to Timothy and to us today. Labor hard to be an honorable vessel. Keep yourself from false beliefs and false living. Flee from youthful sins, pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace with others that are committed to the same thing. Don't get into worthless arguments. Embrace the higher standard to which you are called in Christ so that others, through your faithfulness, may escape the snare of the devil and become vessels of honor for the Lord. No higher honor can be imagined than to be an instrument in the hand of Jesus Christ, to be useful to Him for the furthering of His Lordship and His purposes, to be available for whatever God desires at any time.

I want to close with these words from Charles Spurgeon: There are some Christians whom the Lord cannot much use, because, first of all, they are not cleansed from selfishness. They have an eye to their own honor or aggrandizement. The Lord will not be in complicity with selfish aims! Some men are self-confident—there is too much of the “I” about them—and our Master will not use them. He will have our weakness, but not our strength! And if we are great somebodies, He will pass us by and take some little nobody and make use of him. The Lord cannot use other men because they are too apt to be proud. If He were to give them a little success, it would be dangerous to their Christian existence! Their poor brains would begin to swim and they would think the Lord could hardly do without them! Indeed, when they meet with a little encouragement they swell into such wonderful people that they expect everybody to fall down and worship them!

God will not use them, neither will He set upon His table vessels which are in any way defiled. There must be purity! A man may work his heart out in the ministry or the Sunday school, but if he is practicing some secret sin he cannot prosper—it is not possible that God should honor him! There may be a measure of apparent success for a time and, in God’s Sovereignty, He may use His Truth, itself, in spite of the man, but the man himself will not be useful to the Master. Littleness of Grace and contentedness with that spiritual poverty, also puts many a man aside. We must be full if God is to pour out of us to the thirsty! We must be full of His Light if we are to illuminate the darkness of others! We cannot reveal to the world what the Lord has not revealed to us. Oh, for a holy character and holy communion with God! Then we shall be golden vessels fit for the Master’s use and so, according to the text, we shall be ready for every good work—ready for the work when it comes and ready at the work when it has come—because completely consecrated to God and subject to His hand.

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