

A Vessel God Can Use

2 Timothy 2:20–26

When I was eighteen, my wife Elizabeth and I were newly married. Andrew, our first son, was still a baby, and I felt I needed a trade.

So, I enrolled in welding school. Working with my hands was not my natural gifting, but I was ready to learn. I practiced hard. And in time, my welds started looking good. I was passing the tests and even getting praise from my instructor.

Then something changed. My practice welds started to become sloppy and my tests scores started slipping. One morning the instructor said, “What happened, Marco? You were one of my best welders.”

A welder has to see through the helmet. While I was practicing I realized I could barely see what I was doing. I pulled the helmet off in frustration, and there it was: the protective lens was covered in welding spatter. I changed the lens, put the helmet back on, and I could see again. Better than that, I could weld a straight line again.

A welder does not only need a helmet. He needs a clean lens.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

God doesn’t save us only to get us to heaven. He saves us to be His vessel on earth. But He uses holy vessels—clean vessels, set apart for Him.

That is what Paul turns to next in his last letter to Timothy. Second Timothy is a father’s final charge to a next-generation leader. Paul has already told him to be strengthened by grace, share in suffering, and cut the Word straight (2 Timothy 2:1–15). Now he tells him what kind of person God actually uses.

Main Idea: God uses clean vessels who flee what defiles them, pursue Christ, and gently help captives out of the devil’s snare.

As we unfold the text this morning, we will consider three marks of a vessel useful to the Master.

1. God uses clean vessels.

First, God uses clean vessels. To illustrate this Paul writes:

“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. 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” (2 Timothy 2:20–21).

Paul is not saying God only uses one class of people. He uses people from every background. The contrast between gold and silver and wood and clay is not about status. It is about use. In a wealthy home, gold and silver were brought to the table. Wood and clay were often used for everyday work—including, at times, for waste. What made a vessel honorable or dishonorable was not the material. It was what it was used for. And if it was used for what defiles, it became unfit for the Master’s table.

So the point is not that God uses outwardly impressive vessels. It is that He uses clean ones.

Ron Hutchcraft tells of hunting through a sink full of dirty dishes for one clean glass. Then he says, God is like that. If the choice is a beautiful glass that is dirty or a plain glass that is clean, God takes the clean one. He continues:

“God’s not impressed with our abilities, or our great résumé, our connections, our education, our credentials. He doesn’t care about your cash. He doesn’t care about your charisma. All He cares about is your character.”

Notice that a vessel of God does get dirty. That is why Paul says, “If anyone cleanses himself...” We have a responsibility to cleanse ourselves from what is dishonorable—from what defiles us.

It's important to note that this is more than asking for a quick pardon. It is coming to the Lord for a washing of heart and mind. This is not only about salvation. This is about sanctification.

Jesus made that distinction with Peter. On the night He washed the disciples' feet, Peter, at one point, wanted a full bath. Jesus said, *"The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean"* (John 13:6–10).

We are washed once in salvation. But as we walk through this world, our feet get dirty. That does not mean only accidental contact with a fallen world. It also means we can live in ways that stink to God and grow used to the smell. Our conscience can grow dull. What once grieved us we begin to excuse. That is why we need ongoing cleansing.

How do we get clean, and how do we stay clean? We keep a short account with God. We confess our sins immediately. We agree with what He says about it instead of arguing our case (1 John 1:9).

R. T. Kendall has said he sometimes defines spirituality as closing the time gap between sin and repentance. How long does it take you to admit you were wrong? Years? Months? Days? Hours? Some people never do. A sensitive walk with the Spirit learns to stop even mid-sentence, because if you finish that sentence of blame or self-justification, you will grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). Don't finish the excuse. Agree with God.

Now, forgiveness can come in that moment. But cleansing of the heart is sometimes a process. Forgiveness deals with guilt before God. Cleansing deals with what the sin left on the mind and heart. You can be pardoned before the day is over and still carry what lodged inside you.

How many of you know, that is why it is easier to stay clean than to get clean after you have been defiled. A vessel rinsed quickly is simple to use again. A vessel that has sat with the stain has to be scrubbed.

We see this in the life of King David. After his sin he did not only ask to be pardoned. In Psalm 51 he asked to be washed deep within:

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). He knew God could forgive the act, but the inner life could still need cleansing. Because when we sin, we do not only break a rule. We soil the heart. Again, God can forgive the deed before the day is over, but the thought that led to it can still be sitting in the house.

Some thoughts do not come and go. They stay in the mind and settle in the heart. Paul calls that a stronghold—an argument, a lie, a settled claim against the knowledge of God that has been given a room (2 Corinthians 10:4–5).

This is not a new problem. Listen to what Jeremiah said:

“O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved. How long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you?” (Jeremiah 4:14).

The problem was not only what they had done. It was what they were allowing to live inside them.

It has been said that thoughts are like birds. You cannot keep them from landing on your head, but you can keep them from building a nest. Jeremiah’s word is *lodge*. How long will those thoughts be allowed to stay? A vessel stays useful not only by receiving forgiveness, but by refusing to let evil thoughts make a home in the mind.

Beloved, we need the washing of the Word for that—and not only on Sunday, but daily. Paul speaks of the church being cleansed “by the washing of water with the word” (Ephesians 5:26).

Think of what happens if you only bathe once a week. You can put on clean clothes and still be dirty underneath.

There used to be a show called *Dirty Jobs*. It featured men and women doing work most of us would not have the stomach for — work we could not get paid enough to do. After a day like that, a bird bath will not do. You need a real bath.

Now you do not have to work a filthy job to get spiritually dirty. We live in a polluted world, and our own sinful nature will defile us on any given day. That is why Paul exhorts us not only to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), but also to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). Those are not two different tracks. They go hand in hand. The Spirit uses the Word to wash what the world and the flesh have left on us.

But we are not cleansed by the Word if we only dip into it to check a box. Think of a tea bag. Some people dip it a few times and then toss it out. The water barely changes color. Others leave it in. They let it steep until the cup is full of what was in the bag.

That is the difference. Some of us are dippers. We touch a verse and move on. Others are abiders. They stay with the Word long enough for it to get into the inner life — so that it exposes what we would rather hide, so that it confronts the thoughts that have begun to lodge, and brings us back to the Master (John 15:7; Psalm 119:9–11).

The question is not how many verses you scanned. It is whether you gave the Word time to saturate your heart and mind.

The Master still uses clean vessels. And one of the ordinary ways He keeps them clean is by washing us, day after day, with His Word.

2. God uses vessels who flee and pursue.

The second mark is this: God uses vessels who flee and pursue.

“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

To be a vessel God can use, Timothy must flee something: youthful passions. Let me emphasize that Paul is speaking to a next-generation leader, and by extension to young people in general. What does he mean?

Some hear only sexual temptation. That is certainly necessary and essential. If anyone is going to be useful to the Master, he or she must

flee sexual immorality. God's standard has not changed. Sexual relations outside of marriage is sin. And you do not wait until passion is already stirred to flee. You flee the people, places, and positions that stir it. You set the boundaries before the heat comes, not after.

But commentators like Kent Hughes note that Paul is speaking more broadly than just sexual desire. Youthful passions are the unchecked desires of those still maturing into manhood and womanhood: impatience, harshness, the love of debate, the need to be right now. Hughes writes that impatience is a chronic sin of youth. It is incomprehensible to a young leader that the situation cannot be changed today. Television resolves everything in an hour. But real church is not Church, the Movie.

Contrary to our culture, a sharp tongue, a quick opinion, and little patience for those who differ are not spiritual gifts. They are youthful passions to flee.

But notice that Paul does not only say flee. He says pursue. Run after what is good.

Pursue righteousness—right conduct that pleases God.

Pursue faith—a life of trust people can actually see.

Pursue love—love for people, including Christian who don't always act like it.

Pursue peace—not the peace of avoiding hard things, but a heart that refuses to look for a fight and seeks to live at peace with all (Romans 12:18).

And notice where this pursuit happens: “along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” We do not become useful vessels in isolation. We pursue these virtues with those who call on the Lord, because He is the source of them.

From the beginning, the people of God have been marked by this. After Cain killed Abel, Scripture describes the godly line of Seth this

way: “At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26).

The company you keep is part of how you stay clean and how you grow. Are you keeping company with people who prioritize these virtues—and greater still, the pursuit of Christ, whom they call on day and night?

Our first calling is not ministry. It is to the Lord Himself. Calling on the Lord is our first pursuit, not our last resort. Ministry is the overflow of that pursuit. When we are distracted from Him, we are drawn to unhealthy things.

The enemy does not always have to destroy a servant. Often he only has to distract him.

3. God uses vessels captured by Christ, not controversy.

The third mark is this: God uses vessels captured by Christ, not controversy.

Paul writes, “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.” Then he describes the Lord’s servant: “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. 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 2:23–26).

Again, foolish controversies breed quarrels. They form people who love winning more than souls, who love the fight more than the flock.

We live in a day that feeds on this. People love a good conspiracy. Whole shows and monetized podcasts are built around it because it appeals to an unsatisfied heart. Even Christians can get sucked in.

What it produces is not a vessel useful to the Master. It produces people who will argue for hours over their view of end times, but invest

very little in rescuing a lost person who is already a captive of sin and Satan.

A vessel captured by Christ will not live to win arguments. He or she will reflect the ways of Christ: kind to everyone, able to teach, patient under evil, gentle in correction.

Why this kind of servant? Because the opponent is not first an enemy to defeat. He is a captive to awaken so that God may grant repentance. What is repentance? It's a change of mind that leads to a change of action. Paul says they may "come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will."

The snare is not only a bad habit. It is what we saw earlier—a stronghold. Strongholds of the mind are arguments and lodged thoughts that rise up against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:4–5). The devil captures people alive for his purpose. And he does it through the mind. That is why a quarrelsome servant is so dangerous. He may win the argument and still leave the person in the trap. But a servant captured by Christ aims at the heart and the mind, so that God can grant a new way of thinking.

Sometimes we need help for this. That is why Paul places correction inside a gentle, patient relationship. We also need the daily wash of God's presence and Word, so that our own minds stay clean and get clean. Again, a vessel useful to God is not only forgiven. He is being freed from the thoughts that once made him useful to the enemy.

Brothers and sisters, that is the life-saving mission we are all called to. We do not set people free by our cleverness. God grants repentance. We are the vessels. He is the Rescuer.

When we are captured by Christ, not controversy, God can use us to rescue those still captured by Satan.

Earlier I told you I could not weld a straight bead because I didn't know the lens on my helmet was covered with spatter. Some of us are not walking straight because we cannot see straight. The lens over the eye of your heart is filthy.

You know, my wife is always saying to me, “Give me your glasses. They’re filthy. How do you see through them?” I take them off and hand them to her. She cleans them and gives them back. And she is right. I was not seeing as well as I thought. Sometimes I do not even know it until I put them back on after she cleans them.

Some of us do not realize how crooked the walk has become, how much beauty we are missing, how little we can see and taste that the Lord is good—because the heart is unclean. Give the Master your heart. Not once a year. Every morning. Let Him wash the lens and put it back on you, so you can see straight, walk straight, and view others through His eyes.

Conclusion

Beloved, the vessel God uses is not the one with the most degrees, the most money, or the most charisma. God is looking for a cleansed vessel—men and women set apart for His kingdom work. Do not settle for a forgiven record and an unwashed mind.

Jesus did not die and rise again so we could sit and wait. He died and rose so we would stand and serve. Every one of us has a part in the unfolding of God’s redemptive purpose.

So let us heed the charge of this text. Cleanse yourself from what is dishonorable. Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord. Then serve gently—not to win the argument, but to see captives come home.

May we be the kind of vessels the Master can powerfully use for the good of others and the glory of His name.