

As most of you have heard by now, we are on a journey of “calling each other to live out our God-given purpose in Christ every day.” That is our new mission and that is where God is taking us. And implied in that are a few assumptions:

1. That your God-given purpose can be known and that you’ve made progress in knowing it. Part of the journey is helping each other do just that.
2. That you WANT to live out our God-given purpose. There have always been people perfectly content with making a living but not making a life.
3. That you are a useful vessel.

We continue this morning in our series in 2 Timothy called *Reminded*. Paul began by reminding his young protégé of the things he is to know and believe and has transitioned to reminding him how he is to live out his purpose from God in Ephesus. Last week, Paul called Timothy to present himself to God as an approved worker, someone who rightly handles God’s Word with effort and excellence. This week, he calls Timothy to be a vessel unto honor, someone who is available and prepared to be useful to God.

[2 Tim 2:20-21] ²⁰ 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.

Paul says the gold and silver vessels have an honorable use while the wood and clay vessels have a dishonorable use, the encouragement being that Timothy is to pursue having an honorable use.

Ministry is a character mission. I can be unfaithful my spouse and still practice medicine. I can fly on my private jet to get to conferences on global warming. I can even lie to the FBI or make deplorable statements about women and still be President of the United States. But if I want to be useful to God, character matters. Obedience precedes calling. We can live out our purpose from God only if we live in the will of God.

And what he’s making clear here is that **God uses those who make themselves useful.**

Usefulness is a choice. It is a personal responsibility each of us has. It is a way of life we can opt-in to or opt-out of. And the way we opt-in to a life of usefulness is by cleansing ourselves from that which is dishonorable, making ourselves a vessel unto honor.

Paul gives us three encouraging phrases to describe a vessel unto honor. They are **set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, and ready for every good work.** “Holy” is a word we often hear and use that speaks of God’s perfection, majesty, and one-of-a-kindness. But here Paul is using it to describe someone set apart for a specific purpose, and that purpose is to do the work of God’s Kingdom. They are **useful to the master of the house.** That means they are available to be put into service. They are **ready for every good work.** That means they are prepared to undertake whatever the Lord calls them to do.

Many of you are about to interact with vessels unto honor...but I'm not talking about anything spiritual. We are about to head into the holiday season. My sweet stepmother is a collector of all things Hummel. You know, the stuff with the kids in lederhosen. In her collection are a set of Hummel dishes, and they are special. I believe her current rule is that you must have a driver's license and pass a background check before you are allowed to come within ten feet of them. These dishes have their own resting place, set apart from the other dishes, ready to be used. And they get used for a special, honorable purpose: Their purpose is to set a beautiful table on days like Thanksgiving and Christmas. I bet many of you are the same. You have a separate cabinet with fine dishware that's used on special occasions. They are set apart, available, and ready for a special purpose. They are vessels unto honor. That's what Paul is trying to get across here. The is one big difference, though. These dishes get used only a few times a year for special occasions. But the work of God's Kingdom is always a special occasion, and the vessels set apart are the only ones the God uses.

So if you want to be a vessel unto honor, if you want to be useful, and if we know God uses those who make themselves useful, Paul continues by saying **Make yourself useful**. How do we do that? The command to cleanse yourself is an interesting one. There might be a check in our spirit because that doesn't seem to jive with the Gospel. Jesus said his blood is poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Paul says we have redemption through his blood. John tells us the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. Our salvation is through Christ alone, through the shedding of his blood, and not by anything we do ourselves. Paul is not speaking of salvation but of conduct that keeps us set apart and prepared to live out our purpose from the Lord.

[2 Tim 2:22] ²² So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Paul seems to set these up as opposite ends of a spectrum. He has youthful passions on one side and this list of Christian virtues on the other.

Youthful passions: Paul is probably not primarily referring to sexual passions here, but more about things that come to mind when you think of having a teenager in your house. If you have a teenager in your house, or if you've had one, tell me if this sounds familiar: Impatience, intolerance, independence, argumentative, self-centered, self-assertive, showing favoritism, and exaggerative. Timothy is definitely not a teenager, but maybe he had exhibited these immature behaviors before and Paul wanted him to not only put a stop to it, but to run away from it, to escape. Paul knows how damaging they can be to Timothy's ministry in Ephesus, and he doesn't want him to even mess with it. Just like you wouldn't stand next to a raging fire, because at some point you would get burned, but would instead flee from it, Paul tells Timothy to flee from these behaviors because there is a potential to get burned.

Instead, a useful vessel for God is to pursue these virtues of righteousness, faith, love, and peace. Paul is telling us to run hard after these things so that our lives are characterized by them. I know it sounds like a lot of church speak, but these are at the heart of the Gospel and at the heart of our relationship with Jesus. And they are vital to our usefulness. **Righteousness** – Jesus put us in eternal right standing with God, but we have a responsibility to live that out in daily obedience, living within the bounds given to us in God's Word. **Faith** – Hopeful trust in God, in his character, and in his assurance he will accomplish what he's said, and that he has a purpose for

our lives. **Love** – Caring for, serving, and putting the needs of others before your own. **Peace** – Pursuing fellowship, harmony, and unity with others. And if peace has been broken, pursuing reconciliation.

Notice that if I’m moving towards one, I’m moving away from the other. Cleansing requires motion; motion away from youthful passions and towards righteousness, faith, love, and peace.

[2 Tim 2:23-25a] ²³ 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.

Part of Paul’s instruction to Timothy to flee youthful passions is to keep him from engaging in these foolish conversations. Timothy’s zeal for the truth may have caused him to want to jump in the middle of these things, get in a verbal sparring match, and strive to defeat his opponent. And if our primary concern is victory for ourselves, the triumph of the truth becomes secondary.

Paul is serious about avoiding quarreling. We may not perceive that, given the word “quarrel”, but there is a severity to what Paul is referring to. This is one of ten times Paul speaks out against quarreling in his letters. He knows it’s fruitless and destructive, and he knows the more time we spend in meaningless debate, the less time we spend declaring the Gospel.

There’s a tension here we need to manage and a discerning spirit we need to engage. We could read last week’s passage and this week’s passage and conclude that false teaching and wrong ideas should just be ignored, as if they don’t even exist. But in 1 Tim 1, Paul tells Timothy to **“remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith.”** Part of our calling is to address falsehoods with the truth. Our challenge is to discern if the other person is really interested in that or is just trying to pick a fight.

Right now our Student Ministry is in a series based entirely off of questions our students have submitted. They are really good questions. I’ve seen them. But some of them include ideas of what Paul may call a foolish controversy. However, they are asked in the sincere spirit of discovering the truth. They are not trying to stir up debate or arguments. They want to know! And since that’s the case, we’ll answer those kinds of questions all day long.

Paul says we are to **patiently endure evil**, literally “ready to bear evil treatment without resentment.” Resentment is divisive. It pits us against the very person God may be using us to serve, whether inside the church or outside of it. We don’t have to look very far for examples of how resentment does that.

Christmas is going to come early this year. We’re going to wake up. It’s going to be quiet and peaceful. Birds will be singing a little more loudly. The hot cocoa will taste just a little bit sweeter. It’s going to be the morning of November 9, the morning after election day. It can’t come soon enough. This political climate has been a great test for the church because of how nasty it’s gotten. As the rhetoric has built and the revelations of wrongdoing have come, people

have gone on the attack of not only the candidates, but those who support them. Many responses have been anything but patiently enduring.

This week, Beth Moore wrote an article about how hostile things have become, how it's found its way into the church, how it's damaging our faith, and how so many are responding in a way that violates what Paul is saying.

In our uncivil war we are weighing the sins of our candidates like jagged stones stacked on our personal pan-size Scales of Justice. Once we've properly reaffirmed everything we already believed, we congratulate ourselves by hurling the stones at anyone who doesn't see our enemies the same way. We simultaneously demonize and deify those of other opinions, telling them they're idiots while holding them personally, publicly responsible in advance for all the inevitable transgressions of their candidate. Meanwhile we are collectively committing a sin ultimately more consequential than anything the media can uncover on our candidates between now and Election Day. –Beth Moore

Whether it's politics, Dak vs. Romo, or the ever-increasing hostility towards our faith, we've got to fight against the temptation of resentment. Patient endurance is the unexpected and potentially winsome response we can give to those who seek to do us harm. It keeps our hearts right, it keeps us humble, and it allows us to continue to be for the person God is using us to serve.

And our attitude and affections are important because opportunities to share the truth, to share our faith, are going to come. And in those moments, Paul says we are to be **able to teach, and do so gently with those who oppose us**. Now, remember that Paul is writing to Timothy who is in the middle of it with false teachers. We may look at this command to be able to teach and think, "Whoa, this is beyond me." But this isn't a command to all have the gift of teaching, be able to parse Greek verbs, be able to get up in front of a bunch of people and declare the Word of God. The idea is that all of us would be able to communicate the foundational truths of God. Remember a few weeks back, Gary challenged everyone to be able to write the biblical narrative on a 3X5 card. That's the idea here, that we could sit with someone and tell them "Here's what the Bible says." And then we go through: The purpose of God. The presence and penalty of sin. The provision of sin. The power of salvation. It's not a call to biblical expertise, it's a call to biblical literacy.

As we encounter those with differing views, we are to gently correct our opponents. This is a big one for me. I've been told I come across harsh at times. Now, I'm German, and pretty much everything we do comes across as harsh. But this is a great reminder to be mindful of my approach. Gentleness does not mean we are weak or wishy-washy on the truth. Gentleness, which could also be translated as meekness, means we are to exude strength under control.

I recently met with a guy who is struggling with what he believes. He made a decision for Christ a couple years ago, but those beliefs have come under assault, and he's spinning. He is very well read and has investigated other world views and philosophies and science, and he's got all this swimming around his head and heart, causing him to really question the Gospel, and he wanted to talk about it. The first thing I needed to do, and we talked about it earlier, was to discern if this guy wanted to sit in my office and have a meaningless debate or quarrel, or if he was

genuinely seeking truth. It was clear he was sincerely looking for answers. And the second thing I needed to do was to answer his questions and objections gently with the truth of the Gospel. I could have blasted him. I could have told him he's a fool for entertaining any of that stuff and that he was turning his back on Jesus. And he would have been no closer to the truth than when he first walked in my door. So we had a heavy, deep, truthful, and respectful conversation. And you want to know the impact it had? None. I really don't think he moved off of where he's heading. But guess what? The next time he wants to talk about Jesus, he knows he has a safe and respectful place with me.

Because here's what's at stake. These conversations are not an opportunity to win an argument. They're an opportunity to win someone to the Gospel. **[2 Tim 2:25b-26] 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.** Gently sharing the truth could be what God uses to change a mind, to turn someone away from what they believe and to the truth of the Gospel. And as they believe and absorb and live out God's truth, the grip of the devil is loosened, and they start to become a vessel of honor, useful in carrying out the will of God.

So what do we do with this?

Now, if I was harsh, I'd just tell all of you to clean up your act! But I'm gentle, so here's my encouragement to you. Take the time this week to do a sober self-assessment of where you are with regards to these behaviors. Here are four diagnostic questions you can ask yourself:

1. **Are my actions characterized by maturity?** Which direction are you heading on the spectrum of youthful passions and righteousness/faith/love/peace? Flee the first, pursue the latter.
2. **Am I drawn to controversial topics and conflict?** Do you like a fight? If you do, take a minute to consider the cost of that.
3. **Towards whom am I holding resentment?** Ask God to change your heart towards that person and begin to tear down that wall.
4. **How do I respond when someone disagrees with my beliefs?** Is your motivation to tell someone how wrong they are or to tell them how right they can be? In 1 Thessalonians, Paul refers to his gentleness like that of a nursing mother.

Don't go it alone. While usefulness is an intensely personal decision and discipline, it's also a team sport. Paul tells Timothy to pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace in the fellowship of other believers pursuing the same things.

Live your life with the expectant hope and excitement that God is going to use you. Paul reminds Timothy he has been called to a holy calling and has a purpose in Christ Jesus, and I want to remind you that the very same thing is true for you and for me. Whether you are a millennial looking for a cause or a movement to join or a senior looking to finish the race strong, you have a place and a purpose in the Kingdom of God. The master of the house is calling, and he wants to put you to good use.