

# Fit for the Master's Use

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## **Text:**

II Timothy 2:20-26

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. 22. So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. 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. 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.

## **Introduction:**

In this passage Paul continues to instruct Timothy in regards to his role as leader of the Church of Ephesus, and in regards to his relationship to those who were trying to be teachers and leaders, like Hymenaeus and Philetus, but were leading the church into error. He is, specifically, instructing Timothy as to what he should aspire to be—“a vessel fit for the master’s use; what he must do to achieve that goal—“flee youthful lusts, pursue righteousness etc., and avoid the foolishness of those who were leading the church astray; and finally he describes for him what genuine pastoral work will look like in verses 23 and 24.

## I. An Image

The passage begins with an image. The image is of the various types of vessels that would have been found in the house of a wealthy Roman citizen. He divides them into two categories those of gold and silver for honorable use, and those of wood and clay destined for dishonorable use. In another passage Paul speaks of God's servants as being vessels of clay, but there he is making a different point. This is what he writes in II Corinthians 4: 5-7:

For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

What he is emphasizing here is that it is the message that has great value, not the messenger. It is the gospel that is important. It is the message of Christ that saves and transforms. The messenger must never get in the way of the message. So in this regard God's servants are like clay jars in which an invaluable treasure has been placed. Our message, Paul says, has nothing to do with us and everything to do with Christ.

But in this letter to Timothy he is using a similar image to make a quite different point. He divides all of the vessels into two categories, honorable and dishonorable. Again in another passage he makes the point that within the body of Christ there is a place for both. In I Corinthians 12 he likens the Church to a body, a body that is one and functions for one purpose, but has many members or parts each one fulfilling its function for the good of the whole. In this passage he uses the same words "honorable" and "dishonorable". Here the point is that both are important and one should not be valued above the other. Among other things he says:

And on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it.”

Again this is not the point that Paul is making to Timothy. What is clear in the text is that of the two types of vessels only one is “fit for the Master’s use”, and what we should desire, what we should be aiming at is to be fit for the Master’s use. Anything else must be considered failure.

So we should aspire to be “honorable vessels” so that we might be “fit for the Master’s use. The dishonorable vessels represent those in the church, even sometimes those who are in leadership positions, who like Hymeneaus and Philetus are doing harm not good, who are living in a way and teaching things that are not according to the truth of Christ and hence leading people, not in the way of life, but in the way of death. This is a perennial problem. Jesus anticipated it in his parable of the wheat and the tares. It existed in the churches of New Testament Times, it has existed throughout history, and it exists in the present. Our responsibility, like Timothy’s, is to examine ourselves and to make sure that we are vessels of honor, that we are fit for the Master’s use, that what we are doing in the name of Christ is truly according to Christ and for Christ.

## **II. An Exhortation**

If this is to be the case we must purge ourselves from that which is dishonorable. Paul exhorts Timothy to do two specific things to achieve this goal. First, he uses, a pair of imperatives that he uses in other places, “flee” and “pursue”. We will get to the specifics momentarily, but it is worth pointing out that this is a pattern that is eminently useful for all Christians. Our lives will be, in some degree, the story of what we fled and what we pursued. If we flee the right things and pursue the right things we will finish well, but if we get confused and begin to pursue the things we should flee and flee the things we should pursue disaster awaits us. We should also add that it is impossible to pursue the worthy without fleeing the

unworthy. In fact fleeing is the natural result of pursuing. Allow me to quote one other passage from Paul. In Philippians 4:8-9 he gives us a list of things to pursue. He doesn't use the verb pursue, but he is speaking of the same thing. He says:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

He gives us a long list of good things to pursue. He says nothing of the negative, but it is automatically implied that in pursuing positive and godly things we are fleeing from and rejecting what is contrary to them. I cannot pursue truth and deceit at the same time. To love and pursue truth I must reject and flee from all that is not according to the truth. I cannot pursue what is honorable and fill my imagination with what is dishonorable. To love what is just, I must reject all that is unjust. This idea is fundamental to Christian growth and transformation. Paul's other great image of it is "putting off" and "putting on". To grow up into Christ, to become all that God intended me to be in him, I must put off, like a soiled article of clothing, all that is contrary to him and his way; then I must put on the opposing virtue which is according to Christ. We will never be "vessels unto honor, fit for the Master's use" unless we are willing to flee what is contrary to Christ and pursue what is according to Christ.

That it is general principle. Now let's consider its specific application to Timothy in his difficult position of being a leader in a church that is divided; where some are being lead astray by the "vain jangling" of teachers and leaders who should not be leaders and teachers. Precisely what Timothy is to flee is "youthful passions". One of the reasons I have read from the ESV is to avoid the KJV translation "youthful lusts". For us, lust inevitably equals sexual desire, and that is most likely not what Paul is specifically concerned with here. It is not that Timothy should not flee inordinate sexual desire; he should, and of course we should too. In the context of what is happening in the church, however, that is not the "youthful passion" that he is likely to fall into. The passage that sheds the

most light on what “youthful passions” means is probably I Timothy 3:6. In This chapter Paul’s gives a list of qualification for church leaders. In verse 6 he says: “Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.” The passions of youth of which he speaks are the errors of the novice which primarily flow from pride. They come from the person taking himself too seriously, of not understanding his position as a servant of Jesus Christ, of forgetting that he did not invent the faith, that he is only a steward in God’s house. This leads to the kinds of things that were causing problems for Timothy in Ephesus. They are things like *love of disputation*—that is loving to argue about things of little or no importance while neglecting the things that matter. Then there is *love of novelty*. Failing to be grounded in the great historic traditions of the faith and being ignorant of the true teaching of Christ and his Church. Some will reject the tried and true for the new and flashy, and they will do so to the great detriment of themselves and their hearers.

We must flee such things and pursue that which has proven itself to produce genuine righteousness, faith, love and peace and we must do so humbly within the great body of Christ eagerly reaching out to all those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart.

The second thing Timothy is exhorted not to do is to become embroiled in the vain argument and discussions of those who are the dishonorable vessels. He is to avoid them because they only lead to quarrels and he is specifically instructed to not be quarrelsome.

### **III. True Pastoral Work**

He is to go about his work in an entirely different way. In describing how Timothy should go about his work in the last three verses of this paragraph Paul gives us a beautiful description of what true pastoral work should look like. First, its aim is always the conversion and transformation of people. We are always working and praying to the end that God would bring sinners to repentance and to acknowledgement of the truth that is in Christ; that people would come to

their senses and escape from the snares of the Devil. This is a beautiful thing when it happens. It is why we are here, but in the end it is God's work. We cannot do it, but if we are "vessels fit for the Master's use, he can work through us to do it.

Secondly, true spiritual work requires patience and kindness. The Lord's servant, we are told, must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. It is God who grants repentance, gives spiritual life, and converts the soul. We must work with him doing his work in his way. When we do others will be blessed and the body of Christ will grow up to be like its head, Jesus Christ. When we don't, nothing of eternal significance will be accomplished.