

# **Living in God's Church Today**

## **Honorable and Dishonorable**

*2 Timothy 2:20-26*

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# Honorable and Dishonorable

## Introduction

Harry J. Heintz shared the following story:

Recently I glimpsed the glory of finishing a task well. At Arlington National Cemetery, I saw the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers. I had watched that ceremony several times before, always moved by its solemnity and precision.

This time, however, I witnessed something new. When the changing of the guard was completed, the commanding officer asked us to remain standing in silence. Sergeant Jennings had completed 27 months of this special duty and wanted now to pay his respect to the unknown soldiers. A guard escorted his family to a place of honor.

The commanding officer handed Jennings four roses. He approached the great Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers from the First World War, knelt, and placed a rose before it. Then he moved with solemn dignity to the tombs honoring unknown soldiers from the Second World War, and the wars in Korea and Vietnam, kneeling to place one red rose upon each. He returned to his commanding officer and stood before him. At attention, with their eyes locked, they shook hands. Then Sergeant Jennings carefully removed his white gloves and returned them, his work finished. He saluted his officer, greeted his family, and left.

With tears running down my face I thought of standing before my Lord Jesus someday, taking off my gloves and handing them to him.<sup>1</sup>

Paul's Second Letter to Timothy is the last letter he wrote.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2001/august/13212.html>.

He knew that his earthly journey was going to end soon. But he also wanted to encourage Timothy to persevere in his service to God. In chapter 2 of this letter, Paul urged Timothy to remain faithful in his teaching ministry—especially in opposing false teaching. Paul used six vivid images to illustrate Timothy’s strenuous labor. So far, we have looked at the images of a dedicated soldier (vv. 3-4), rule-following athlete (v. 5), hardworking farmer (v. 6), and approved worker (vv. 14-19). Today, I would like to examine two more images that Paul used to inform Timothy that his labor for the Lord would be challenging.

## Scripture

Let’s read 2 Timothy 2:20-26:

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. <sup>23</sup> Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. <sup>24</sup> And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, <sup>25</sup> correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, <sup>26</sup> 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 2:20-26)

## Lesson

2 Timothy 2:20-26 shows us how to serve God.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Metaphor of the Clean Vessel (2:20-22)
2. The Ministry of the Lord's Servant (2:23-26)

### I. The Metaphor of the Clean Vessel (2:20-22)

First, the metaphor of the clean vessel shows us how to serve God.

Paul wrote in verse 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.”**

Paul introduced an illustration to show the different functions of people in the Church. The **“great house”** is God's house, the visible or professing church.

But what are the **“vessels”**? The Greek word for **“vessels”** (*skeuos*) refers to “an object used as a container; especially for carrying or storing liquids.” Commentator John Stott notes, “The use of the term elsewhere in the New Testament suggests that they stand not simply for members of the church, but for the church's teachers.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to mention several texts to support this assertion. For example, Jesus said to Ananias about the newly-converted Saul of Tarsus, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Years later, Paul described himself and his fellow-

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<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel the Message of 2 Timothy*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 71.

workers in a similar way when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “But we have this treasure in jars of clay.” In both these passages, “instrument” and “jars” translate the same Greek word (*skeuos*) that Paul used in verse 20 of this letter to Timothy. Paul used the image of a vessel to indicate that he carried the gospel to people.

So, John Stott rightly concludes:

From this usage, I think we would be justified in concluding that the two sets of vessels in the great house (**gold and silver for honorable use, wood and clay for dishonorable**) represent not genuine and spurious members of the church but true and false teachers in the church. Paul is still, in fact, referring to the two sets of teachers he has contrasted in the previous paragraph, the authentic like Timothy and the bogus like Hymenaeus and Alexander. The only difference is that he changes the metaphor from good and bad workers to honorable and dishonorable vessels.<sup>3</sup>

Paul set before Timothy an incredible task with an incredible privilege. He was being called to serve as a **“vessel for honorable use.”** The only condition for such service was that he must be clean. Listen to how Paul stated it in verse 21a, **“Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use.”** Moreover, the one who cleanses himself will also be **“set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work”** (v. 21b).

But how was Timothy to cleanse himself? Paul answered in verse 22, where he wrote, **“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with**

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<sup>3</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Gospel the Message of 2 Timothy*, 72.

**those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”** Timothy was to flee **“youthful passions.”** And he was to pursue **“righteousness, faith, love, and peace.”** This repeats what Paul wrote to Timothy in his First Letter (1 Timothy 6:11), except for “peace.”

So, Timothy was to do two things: he was to *flee* and he was to *pursue*.

Timothy was to **“flee youthful passions.”** Other Bible translations suggest, “Flee the evil desires of youth” (NIV) and “Now flee from youthful lusts” (NASB). That is, Timothy was to flee the passions associated with young men. That was the negative side.

Positively, Timothy was to **“pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”** Timothy was to pursue four positive virtues. First, he was to pursue **“righteousness.”** Righteousness refers in its widest sense to general conformity to God’s law. That is, Timothy was to pursue what is right towards God and man. Second, he was to pursue **“faith.”** Faith includes the ideas of integrity, loyalty, reliability, faithfulness, and obedience. Third, he was to pursue **“love.”** Love refers to seeking the highest good in others. And fourth, he was to pursue **“peace.”** Peace denotes a right relationship with God and people. Moreover, he was to pursue these positive virtues **“along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”** As the shepherd of the flock of God’s people, he was to lead them in demonstrating all these virtues in his life.

Christians grow when they put off (something) and put on (something else), when they flee **“youthful passions”** and pursue **“righteousness, faith, love, and peace.”** Sanctification always includes these two aspects: getting rid of

sin and walking in obedience. There is a negative side and a positive side.

Thomas Chalmers wrote a very helpful little book titled *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. The book is helpful in that Chalmers said that pursuing a new affection has great power in getting rid of sin. So, for example, just trying to flee youthful passions can be difficult on its own. However, there is great power in fleeing youthful passions by pursuing the positive virtues of righteousness, faith, love, and peace.

This past summer, I attended the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. This was my 30<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. One interesting feature is to see older men who are now able to serve the denomination with wisdom and experience. And yet, for some of them, when they were younger, they were not as able and articulate as they are now. It is encouraging to see the maturation of men who are pursuing righteousness, faith, love, and peace. May that be true of all of us.

## II. The Ministry of the Lord's Servant (2:23-26)

And second, the ministry of the Lord's servant shows us how to serve God.

Paul wrote in verse 23, **“Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.”** This was not a new instruction to Timothy. It was the sixth time in two letters that Paul told Timothy to avoid useless arguments with false teachers (1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7; 6:20; 2 Timothy 2:14; 2:16; and here in 2:23). The false teachers insisted on promoting their false teaching and would not back down. Timothy was not to engage in arguments with them since they were divisive, unprofitable, and foolish. Paul wanted

Timothy to concentrate on teaching the truth of the gospel and not waste time talking with teachers who would not submit to the truth.

An elder's responsibility is to promote the truth of the word of God. But part of his responsibility is to refute errors. He is to show the error of false teaching or belief, and he is to present the truth so that people can come to a clear knowledge of the truth. I remember a classmate at the seminary I attended. He served in a campus ministry in Europe. He was regularly engaged in evangelism. Some students would not speak with him about the gospel. But other students would engage him in a discussion. He said that he found that some students were simply argumentative and were not interested in learning the truth. They would engage in fruitless discussion for hours if he allowed them to do so. However, he gave himself a time limit with each student to see whether the student was interested in learning the truth or was simply engaging in fruitless controversy.

Paul continued in verses 24-25a, **“And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.”** Paul was referring to Timothy when he called him **“the Lord’s servant.”** Though this term could refer to any Christian, in this verse it is specifically referring to Timothy as the one called by God to serve him. Paul then went on to list qualities that were to be true of Timothy in his ministry. First, the Lord’s servant **“must not be quarrelsome.”** Timothy was not to get involved in foolish, ignorant controversies that bred quarrels. Second, he must be **“kind to everyone,”** even when he has to point out a fault in another person. Third, he must be **“able to teach.”** He must be skillful in this important responsibility as a teacher of God’s



truth. Fourth, he must **“patiently [endure] evil.”** He must be patient with those who oppose him. And fifth, he must **“[correct] his opponents with gentleness.”** He must correct others with kindness, self-control, and humility that is willing to forgive.

One fellow pastor comes to mind as one who exemplifies Paul’s instruction to Timothy. The pastor I know has a very sound understanding of theology and its practical application. He courageously stands for the truth of God’s word and the gospel. He opposes false teaching. And he is always gracious and kind in his teaching. Sadly, his example is not true for many. Far too many are abrasive and divisive. Their teaching may have some truth in it but also includes elements that are contrary to sound teaching. And, sadly, many people are under the spell of their teaching and they have been led astray.

Having just urged Timothy not to be quarrelsome with the false teachers but to be kind and to correct his opponents with gentleness, Paul wrote in verses 25b-26, **“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.”** All true repentance is produced by God’s sovereign grace. Without God’s grace, all human effort is useless. Both faith and repentance are given by God’s sovereign grace. Paul hoped that the false teachers that Timothy was called upon to oppose would receive God’s grace, and that would enable them to repent and come to a knowledge of the truth.

I was trying to think of someone who would illustrate the truth of Paul’s statement. After thinking for a while and not coming up with any names, it struck me that Paul himself illustrated the truth of this statement. He was extremely well

educated in Judaism and was a Pharisee and a son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). He was so zealous about his understanding of God's word that he had Christians imprisoned. He was in the snare of the devil and was doing his will when Jesus encountered him on the road to Damascus. God granted him repentance which led to a knowledge of the truth. And Paul became the greatest champion for the truth of God's word and the gospel that has ever lived.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed 2 Timothy 2:20-26, we should be wholeheartedly committed to loving and serving God.

One of the great preachers of the last generation in this country was Haddon Robinson. He told the following story:

Several years ago, I helped lead a tour in Turkey of the churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation. On the last night, we were in the city of Izmir and were having dinner at one of its nicer hotels. Our guide had been in the United States for at least ten years and spoke English flawlessly. As we were eating, he began to ask us questions, serious questions about the Christian faith. I said to him, "If you're a follower of Islam, and if you died tonight, would you be sure you could stand in the presence of Allah?"

"No," he replied. "There are five things that Muslims should do. I've done two out of five."

Then we began to talk about the gospel. We talked about it long into the night, and before we left I said to him, "Look, you're serious about our conversation, I know. It would not be faithful of me not to ask you if right now you'd like to put your trust and confidence in Jesus Christ."

He said to me, "You don't know what you're asking me. Do you know what would happen if I did that? If I announced

it to anybody, my wife would leave me. My family would disown me. My boss would fire me. I may want to leave to go back to the United States, and the government would not give me an exit visa. I'd give up everything. You go back home tomorrow. I would not expect you would support me, and I would starve to death in my own culture.”

As far as I know, he did not trust Christ that night. But some people have made that decision and suffered all of that loss and endured those hardships because they are Christ's followers.

If you think that Romans 8:28—“All things work together for good to them who love God, to them who are the called according to his purposes”—is a promise that you'll have a middle-class life in a lovely little church in a nice little town where you may even get a pass to the country club, you're wrong. Paul did not promise that.<sup>4</sup>

Do you want to serve God? First, you must commit your life to him. You must repent of your sin. And you must believe that Jesus paid the penalty for all of your sins. You must make a radical turn from your old life to a new life in Jesus Christ. You cannot begin to serve God until you first belong to him.

And second, if you want to serve God, you must flee and you must pursue. You must flee from everything that hinders you from serving God. And you must pursue those attributes that make you more and more like Jesus.

May God help each one of us to serve him faithfully.  
Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/october/1102411.html>.

## Living in God's Church Today

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can  
be found at:

1. <https://tampabaypresbyterian.org/SermonAudio>.
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp).
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