

Pure Vessels **(2 Timothy 2:20-26)**

When it comes to leadership, character counts. When it comes to church leadership, character—purity of life—is essential. Those who lead God’s flock must themselves be cleansed by the Savior’s blood and model upright living. Purity includes our outward relationships, the people whom we allow to influence our lives. Purity also includes our innermost heart, the thoughts and attitudes that influence our actions. Paul exhorted Timothy to be a pure vessel, a holy instrument in God’s hands to do His work. To be a pure vessel, Timothy would need to dissociate himself from false teachers and continue to separate himself from sinful urges. As God’s servants today, we must likewise guard ourselves from detrimental relationships and destructive passions. Personal purity goes hand in hand with effective Christian service.

Clean Vessels—purity reveals itself through our personal associations (2:20-21).

Having warned about false teachers in the church, Paul now points his protégé Timothy toward the path of purity, a path Timothy had been walking for many years under Paul’s tutelage. Still, everyone needs reminders to walk closely with Jesus every day. As a clean vessel for God, Timothy would need to keep clear of false teachers and uphold God’s truth.

By way of illustration, a large house contains both honorable and dishonorable vessels (2:20).

Paul presents a simple illustration of the church and its makeup. He describes the church as a large household (compare 1 Timothy 3:15). A large house will necessarily contain a variety of “vessels,” a word that encompasses many useful items including jars, dishes, utensils—items that are instrumental in taking care of daily tasks. Some vessels in any home are intended for “honorable” purposes, vessels of gold and silver. In contrast, some vessels are intended for “common” (literally “dishonorable”) purposes, vessels of wood and clay. We might speak about the fine china in contrast to the daily dishware. For honored guests we bring out the fine china, but for routine meals we don’t risk breaking the fine china—we use our less valuable vessels.

By way of exhortation, those who dissociate themselves from dishonorable vessels will be honorable and useful vessels for the Lord (2:21).

Paul applies his illustration to Timothy’s situation as a church leader. He says that those who “cleanse” themselves “from these” will be honorable vessels. To cleanse speaks of purity, the purging of ourselves from that which might taint our character. “These” most likely refers to false teachers in the church, those who would cause quarrels among God’s people because of

their twisted ideas. Christian leaders must discern truth from error, teachers of truth from false teachers. To be an honorable vessel of God, an instrument “set apart” (“sanctified”) for the Master’s use, we must dissociate ourselves from dishonorable vessels. We don’t want false teachers to influence our thinking and we can’t afford to have others identify us with such false teachers. By drawing a marked distinction between ourselves and those who promote error we make ourselves “suitable” for our Master. We have been both “sanctified” and “prepared” for every good work of God. Paul doesn’t imply that Christians cannot thoughtfully engage false teachers or false ideologies. Nor does he imply that Christians should have no unbelieving friends. However, for the sake of the church, Christian leaders will wisely distance themselves from being identified with false teachers. Our personal associations often reveal our own thoughts and attitudes. We must choose carefully those whom we allow to influence our lives. God calls us to be clean vessels, purified instruments for His use.

**Clean Hearts—purity reveals itself
through our practical obedience (2:22).**

Purity must be evident in our inner hearts as well as in our relationships. We need clean hearts, the practical purity that comes through careful obedience to God’s holy will.

Practical purity involves continually fleeing from sinful temptations (2:22a).

“Flee youthful lusts!” This command carries the idea of ongoing vigilance—we’re to keep on fleeing from sin. Sinful desires aren’t limited to young people, of course. However, there are some temptations that seem more compelling in our youth, and without a track record of resistance these become more likely to topple our resolve. Paul’s exhortation points out a very basic strategy when dealing with temptation. We must at times simply distance ourselves from temptation, to run for our lives! Joseph’s rejection of Potiphar’s wife presents an excellent example of this strategy for dealing with temptation (Genesis 39:11-12).

Practical purity involves continually pursuing wholesome virtues (2:22b).

While fleeing from temptation is a valuable strategy, distancing ourselves from sinful opportunities isn’t really enough. We must counter temptation by building positive virtues into our lives. Just as we’re to continually flee youthful lusts we’re also to continually pursue righteousness. We’re to intentionally strive for “righteousness, faith, love, and peace.” Righteousness refers to moral alignment with God’s character and commands. Faith is trust in God for salvation and spiritual stamina. Love motivates us to live pure lives toward God and sacrificial lives toward others. Peace refers to harmony with God, with others, and within our own inner lives. These virtues, and others like them, are worthy of our active, intentional,

continual pursuit. They don't come naturally and must be sought fervently. Thankfully, this pursuit is shared by others who "call on the Lord," that is, identify Jesus Christ as their Lord and Master. We call on the Lord "out of a clean heart," meaning that our hearts are cleansed by the Lord as we look to Him in faith. Purity of heart is possible only through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. By receiving His cleansing grace we become pure in His sight and are empowered to pursue practical purity. By His strength we flee youthful lusts while simultaneously pursuing righteousness. In this way, through purified hearts, we become purified vessels that are useful and effective for God's work.

**Gentle Servants—purity reveals itself
through our peaceful interactions (2:23-26).**

Pure relationships and pure hearts will guide us toward gentle interactions with those around us, even those who stand in opposition to both us and our faith in Jesus Christ.

As the Lord's servants we must refuse to get caught up in foolish arguments (2:23).

Paul reasserts his warning to Timothy to reject meaningless arguments (compare verse 16), the kinds of debatable questions that are "foolish" and "untaught." These kinds of arguments only give birth to fights among God's people. Church leaders need to deflect such arguments and protect the church's unity. It's easy to get caught up in such debates, but these lead only to confusion and conflict.

As the Lord's servants we must be characterized by kindness rather than contention (2:24).

Here Paul refers to church leaders and Christian workers as "the Lord's servants" (literally "bond slaves"). As servants of the Lord Jesus Christ we must represent Him in all we do. It would be inappropriate for a servant of the Lord to engage in meaningless fights or arguments. By contrast, the Lord's servant must set the example of kindness toward all people. We can reject false teachings with kind resistance. We should never attack the person, but must refute the ideas presented by false teachers. In addition, a servant of the Lord should be able to teach others the truth in contrast to error. Likewise, we must refuse to be resentful toward those who stand in opposition to the truth. The Lord's servant must remain calm, collected, confident, and corrective.

As the Lord's servants we must gently guide others toward God and His truth (2:25).

By maintaining self-control in the midst of opposition we can offer meaningful instruction. The word "instruct" carries the idea of training children, meaning that as the Lord's

servants we must patiently and lovingly train those who “stand firmly against” us. We’re to do so with “gentleness” (meekness, humility). After all, God may grant those who oppose us “repentance,” the change of mind and heart that would restore them to the “full knowledge of the truth.” This change of heart comes at the prompting of God through the gentle instruction of His servants. The goal of Christ’s servants is to lovingly, humbly, and gently guide those who are caught up in false teaching to embrace the truth of God. We’ll do this best through gentle instruction rather than through contention and quarreling.

As the Lord’s servants we must help people escape Satan’s snare and return to spiritual sobriety (2:26).

The reason that God must intervene in the heart of an errant individual (that is, grant repentance) is that supernatural forces are at play. The enemy of our soul, the devil, entraps people with lies. Paul refers to “the devil’s snare” (compare 1 Timothy 3:7). Satan “takes them captive,” a phrase that comes from a word for catching something alive. Satan takes his victims alive and leads them on a path of death. Through gentle instruction and repentance these captives can “come to their senses” (literally “return to sobriety”) in their spiritual lives. Having become intoxicated by error, they can sober up and again embrace the truth and escape the devil’s snare. The final phrase in this verse mentions “the will of that one.” Some interpreters see this as a reference to God’s will, and the flow of thought means that those captured by Satan are freed to do God’s will. Others view this phrase as a reference to Satan’s will, meaning that those trapped by the devil are bound to follow his will unless they are freed through gentle instruction and repentance. The latter interpretation seems to best fit the grammar of the sentence. Those trapped by the devil’s lies engage in doing his will and need supernatural intervention to sober up and return to God. As the Lord’s servants we can help people escape Satan’s snare through kindness and gentle instruction. Our interactions with people, including those who oppose us, must be characterized by peace and undergirded by purity. Personal purity goes hand in hand with effective Christian service.