

Becoming a Vessel of Honor

- 2 Timothy 2:20-22
- Aristotle said in around 300BC that a person's credibility is made up of that person's character and competence. His character: who he really is. As DL Moody said, "Your character is who you are in the dark." Who you are when no one is looking. That's character. Who you are. And competence? That's what you do. Your skills. When Aristotle was asked by his students which one of these was most important, what did he say? Character. He said you would be a more influential person if you had good character, even if you were not very competent. But if you are a competent speaker but have even a hint of hypocrisy, then you are doomed. Now that is an interesting debate that has been going on for centuries: what is more important? Who I am, or what I do? Or better, is there a connection between character and performance? Kent Hughes makes the point that the comparison is often made between an airline pilot and a head of state. "Who would you rather have at the control of the plane? A competent pilot with moral weakness or an incompetent pilot with moral character?" The problem with comparing a pilot to a president of the United States is obvious, isn't it? Flying a plane is not an intrinsically moral task. But piloting a nation is. That's why the Bible says, "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when a wicked man rules, the people groan." (Prov. 29:2) Do even a cursory examination of why kings of Israel failed, and it was always because of matters of the heart, who they were, and not matters of intellect or ability. Isn't it the same today? They say this election is a referendum on the president's performance for the past four years. But I believe it is more important that we see it as a referendum on the values and the ideas that have led to his performance. Leading a nation is a moral task. The Bible makes that clear. So is leading a church. Leading a family. Even leading a business.
- What does this passage teach us today? That God can use anything and anyone to accomplish His will, but to be used as a vessel of honor for honorable purposes, God requires that we become persons of godly character. In other words, in God's economy, there is not compartmentalizing, there is no separation between who we are and how useful we are to the Master. Let's look at this passage today and divide it this way: **The vessels. The difference. The necessary.**
- **The vessels:** In a great house there are vessels of gold and silver, wood and clay. Paul is using the big house metaphor to picture the church. The visible church on the earth is a big house and in it are vessels of honor and dishonor. Timothy would have known immediately what Paul was talking about. There were vessels that were made of clay and wood and were used for ignoble purposes, like for garbage or for human waste. There was no indoor plumbing. There were chamber pots for human waste. In our house, in a storage room in the basement, we have serving bowls that Buddy and Ginger, our retrievers used, before they went to their great reward. We have never once used those to serve guests their soup. We don't bring it up from the basement and put Blake and Seth's oatmeal in it when they come and spend the night. No, it is a dog bowl. We also have fine china that we pull out for special occasions. We never once let Buddy or Ginger use those. There is a clear separation in the big house between vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor. It is the same in the church. Jesus talked about this in Matthew 13 when said there would always be wheat *and* tares (a plant that looks just like wheat). They grow up together and you can't tell them apart. But in the last day, when the Lord returns, they will be separated. The wheat, the genuine, are destined for honor, and the tares, the false, are destined for dishonor. John Stott believes that Paul is primarily talking about the difference between good teachers and false teachers in the church. He believes this primarily because of the context: the whole letter of 2 Timothy deals with preserving and promoting sound doctrine at the same time that false doctrine is rampant and spreading in the church. So, Timothy is charged to continue to flee from that which would make him a vessel of dishonor and pursue that which would continue to make him a vessel of honor. Stott argues that Paul has simply changed the metaphor from good vs. bad workmen to honorable vs. dishonorable

vessels. I think we can continue to interpret 2 Timothy the same way we have been doing: look at this passage as applying most importantly to those who teach the church, and seeing how it also applies to every one of us.

- You have heard the story of how DL Moody was a shoe salesman in Chicago and one day heard an evangelist named Henry Varley say, "The world has yet to see what God can do in and through and with and for a man wholly committed to him." Moody said, "By God's grace, I will be that man!" And God took an uneducated, uncultured shoe salesman and made him a vessel of honor. But what does it take to become a vessel of honor, useful to the Master? Verse 21!
- **The difference:** "If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use." Notice first of all that the offer is to anyone. Shoe salesmen like Moody. Shepherders like Amos. Fishermen like Peter and John. Notice also that there is a promise attached to a condition. Not a maybe. If anyone cleanses himself, he WILL be a vessel for honorable use. This is amazing grace. Notice the difference between the household vessels and the vessels who belong to Christ. Buddy and Ginger's bowls will NEVER become fine china. They will always be vessels of dishonor. But in God's economy, the reality rises above the metaphor. God's grace enables a sinner to become a saint, a vessel of dishonor to become a vessel of honor. The master of the house lays down only one condition: the vessel He uses must be clean. It is not giftedness that is necessary. Or the right background. Or the best personality. No. It is purity.
- Sandwiched in between the closing verse of the previous section, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart iniquity," and the closing verse in this section today, "So flee youthful passions," is this command to cleanse ourselves from what is dishonorable. Remember the context of this passage and this chapter and this book is sound doctrine. So I believe the first way to cleanse yourself is to disassociate with those who will contaminate you. Or already have. Paul said, "Avoid irreverent babble." He said Hymeneus and Philetus teach stuff that spreads like gangrene. Have nothing to do with them. Don't hang out with them. Don't go to their parties. More importantly, it's not about lack of contact as much as it is refusing to drink their koolaid. Don't read their books. Don't believe their lies. Look at what God said to Jeremiah. **Jeremiah 15:19** Do you see how our influence is to be one way? We are to influence the dishonorable by being honorable, faithful, committed to God alone. If we allow them to influence us, we and they are the losers.
- What does it look like to be an honorable vessel? Powerful stuff here. Set apart as holy. Robert Murray McChyne said this to Dan Edwards on 2 October 1840 after his ordination as a missionary to the Jews: 'I trust you will have a pleasant and profitable time in Germany. I know you will apply hard to German; but do not forget the culture of the inner man,—I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword,—His instrument,—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.'
- Useful to the Master: Amazing grace that God chooses to use us. We can be useful to the Master. Wouldn't that be a wonderful epitaph? "He was useful to the Master." Or this one, "She was..."
- Prepared for every good work. She could be counted on because she was prepared for every good work. The word for prepared carries with it the idea of willingness and even eagerness, not just preparedness. The only way we can be prepared is to have His Holy Spirit. But we also have a will. J. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, was asked once, "What is the hardest mission in the world?" Without any hesitation whatsoever, Hudson Taylor replied, "The hardest mission in the world is submission to God." We want to be a vessel of honor. We know that means cleansing ourselves. But how can we?
- **The necessary:** So flee youthful lusts. Now Paul is going to get even more pointed in his writing. In order to be a vessel that God can use, we must flee something at the same time we are running

towards something else. This is non-negotiable. No one ever stumbles into purity. No one. It is an intentional pursuit. **Young people, I could make the argument from this verse that your life can be predicted by what you are running from, what you are running to, and who you are running with.** Do you know that? Run from youthful passions. Run to righteousness, faith, love and peace. And run with those who call from the Lord with a pure heart. That last one is so important. Be in fellowship with people who love the Lord with a pure heart! It is guaranteed they are also running from youthful passions.

- Youthful passions. We might be tempted to see the word passions, or “lust” in some translations, and just associate sexual temptation with it; we think of Potiphar’s wife trying to lure young Joseph into her spider’s web and we see him fleeing from the house. But there’s more to it than just sexual temptation. What are the passions of youth? We can summarize them this way:
- Pleasure, Power and Possessions:
- Pleasure: Wanting to do what feels good, and what gives you the most immediate satisfaction, no matter whether it is right or wrong. In fact, how can something that feels so good be wrong, we reason as a young person. Or, as the song from my youth said, “If loving you is wrong, I don’t want to be right.” Flee the youthful passions of lust, or laziness, or gluttony. Just a practical suggestion: do the hard things first very day. That may start with getting out of bed and having time for the Word and prayer before you rush off to start your day. It may mean that the phone call you dread but is necessary is made early, not put off until the end of the day or the week, or never. Finish that task you started months ago. Fleeing from the lust for pleasure, or, always doing what I want to do and feeling the way I want to feel.
- Power: wanting to have control, to be the center of attention, to have the first word in the conversation, or the last word, to be adored and admired by others. Fleeing the youthful passion for power may include letting others talk. Asking people about their thoughts, their desires, their day. Getting involved in things where you will not even be noticed but you will help someone else succeed.
- Possessions: wanting what I want when I want it; uncontrolled lust for things and perhaps for the glory that goes along with them. How do I know there’s also the glory that comes from the possession that we crave? Because the middle-aged man in the 2013 Jaguar XK convertible is not just content to just enjoy his new car; he has to look over at you at the stoplight as you are sitting next to him in your 8 year old minivan. And grin.
- Jesus was a young man of 30 when He was led into the wilderness by the Spirit and there tempted relentlessly in these three areas. Pleasure: “turn these stones into bread, Jesus,” the devil said. “You know you’re hungry. Satisfy that craving. It can’t be wrong to eat, can it?” (Jesus: “Man shall not live by bread alone...”) Power: “Cast yourself down from the temple; you can do it and no harm will come to you. Go ahead. Show off a little.” (“You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”) Possessions: “All of this I will give to you, Jesus, if you will fall down and worship me.” (“You shall worship the Lord God and Him only shall you serve.”)
- You say, but that was Jesus, and this is me, and you just don’t know the pressure I am under at school or work. You don’t understand the temptations that I face every day. I am reminded of the pastor who heard that from some young men he was challenging to pursue holiness. He took them outside to the large lake where sailboats were sailing past this way and that. And he spoke this verse: One ship sails East, And another West, By the self-same winds that blow, ‘Tis the set of the sails, And not the gales, That tells the way we go.
- There are two vessels in the house. The difference between them is purity. The necessary, nonnegotiable steps to take are to **run from** youthful passions, **run toward** righteousness, faith, love and peace, and **run with** those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.