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“A Vessel of Honor”

Being set apart and useful to the Master for every good work.

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In times of theological and moral declension we must be reassured the church is on a solid foundation and be increasingly vigilant to separate from iniquity and present ourselves as vessels to be used honorably by the Master of our souls.

"Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work." (2 Timothy 2:19-21)

We are living in a generation of theological and moral declension. Christianity, in general, has lost its identity in America and the culture of our society is amid a rapid downward spiral. Furthermore, the moral decline has made its way into Christ's churches. It is tempting in times like ours to become discouraged and worried about the future of the church. We may even wonder if it will last another generation. Our feelings are most likely similar to the feelings of God's people in Timothy's generation. **In times of theological and moral declension we must be reassured the church is on a solid foundation and be increasingly vigilant to separate from iniquity and present ourselves as vessels to be used honorably by the Master of our souls.**

Background

Our text today comes from the second letter of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, Paul's close friend and associate in the work of the ministry. Paul viewed Timothy as a "beloved and faithful son in the Lord"¹ and as his "true son in the faith."² He often sent his letters by the hand of Timothy to the churches, most likely because he trusted him to deliver the message faithfully. This second epistle to Timothy is written as Paul is awaiting his impending death³ and provides warning regarding the influence of false teaching in the church as well as an encouragement to Timothy to stay true to the faith that has been passed down to him⁴. There were some members and teachers within the church who had swerved from the truth, among whom two were called out (Hymanaeus and Philetus) for teaching the resurrection of the saints had already passed, upsetting the faith of many.⁵ It is with this in mind that Paul gives Timothy the encouragement found in our text that God's foundation is sure and an admonishment for him to be a Vessel of Honor.

Definitions

Vessel - (G4632); σκεῦος; skeuos (*skyoo'-os*) a vessel, implement, equipment or apparatus (literally or figuratively)⁶; *something containing: chosen vessels, ministers of the gospel, as appointed to bear the glad news of salvation to others;*⁷

The implication is that our lives are to be at the disposal of the hand of the Master. We do not operate on our own accord, but at his bidding and direction. He uses us as we see fit and we are waiting to be filled with his goodness and to be used for his purposes as he so desires.

¹ 1 Corinthians 4:17

² 1 Timothy 1:2

³ 2 Timothy 4:6

⁴ 2 Timothy 1:14

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:2:16-18

⁶ Strong's Greek Dictionary

⁷ Webster's 1828 Dictionary

“Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?” (Romans 9:20-21)

Honor – (G5092); τιμή ; timē (tee-may') a value, that is, money paid, or (concretely and collectively) valuables; by analogy esteem (especially of the highest degree), or the dignity itself.⁸ The esteem due or paid to worth; high estimation.⁹

This “honor” that our text speaks of comes from the Lord and not from anyone else. He is the Master of the House and is the one who chooses to use us or not use us based on His purposes.

Therefore a “**Vessel of Honor**” refers to a man that the Lord holds in high esteem and finds in him a high degree of usefulness.

The Illustration

Paul’s encouragement to Timothy comes in the form of an illustration comparing the church of God to a house or a building of God. The first part of the illustration (v.19) refers to the structure of the house, specifically its foundation. The second part of the illustration (v.20-21) refers to the contents of the house, specifically the vessels that are to be used by the Master of the house.

The Structure of the House: A Firm Foundation

“Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” (2 Timothy 2:19)

False teaching and immorality within the church bring about many uncertainties. It is apparent that there are men (among whom are Hymanaeus and Philetus) who are causing arguments within the church to the ruin of the hearers, speaking irreverent babble that is spreading like gangrene, and teaching false doctrine to the people that is upsetting the faith of some.¹⁰ This is enough to discourage a minister, make him want to resign his church, and make him feel like nobody cares about the truth that he is trying to uphold (see Elijah for an example).¹¹ **Paul reassures Timothy that the church is built upon a solid foundation!**

On one hand you have the uncertainty brought about by immorality and false teaching. On the other hand you have “God’s firm foundation.”

⁸ Strong’s Greek Dictionary

⁹ Webster’s 1828 Dictionary

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 2:14-18

¹¹ 1 Kings 19:14

The Church of Jesus Christ is built upon a firm foundation. The errors of a few will not collapse the building as a whole because the foundation is strong. Human fickleness or infidelity cannot keep God from preserving the church to the end!¹²

"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18)

"For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:9-11)

The foundation of the church is Jesus Christ and God's divine revelation of him to his people. The reason the church is on solid ground is because it is built upon the Son of God! Religion built upon man will fail, either in time or eternity, but the living Church of God will stand being built upon the eternal Son of God!

God has put a "seal", or inscription, upon the foundation of this great house. This practice was common to the people of God and is described in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 which is recited on a daily basis, as a prayer, by many Jewish people (and we would do well to make it our prayer):

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

This is the inscription God has put upon the foundation of His church:

- a) "The Lord knows those who are his."
- b) "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

The Lord Knows Those Who are His – the first seal is most likely a reference to Numbers 16:5

"And he spake unto Korah and unto all his company, saying, Even to morrow the LORD will shew who are his, and who is holy; and will cause him to come near unto him: even him whom he hath chosen will he cause to come near unto him." (Numbers 16:5)

This was spoken during Korah's rebellion when he assembled 250 of the most respected men among the people of God in order to rebel against Moses and the priesthood of Aaron.¹³ Korah and his men put God to the test and claimed that Moses and Aaron were not truly the chosen servants of God. Moses then asked God to reveal who were his true servants. God judged Korah, and all the men with him, by causing an earthquake to swallow them up into the depths of the earth. The Lord knew who were his

¹² John Calvin's Commentary of 2 Timothy

¹³ Numbers 16:1-40

and those who were spreading falsehoods eventually fell beneath the earth's surface by the judgement of God.

Take heart, those of you who are earnestly contending for the faith once delivered unto the saints. The Lord unerringly knows who his true children are and who his faithful servants are. We may be uncertain, but He is absolutely certain.

Let Everyone Who Names the Name of the Lord Depart from Iniquity – the second seal may be a reference to the same scriptural account (Numbers 16:26) or may be a reference to Isaiah 52:11.

"And he spake unto the congregation, saying, Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be consumed in all their sins." (Numbers 16:26)

"Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD." (Isaiah 52:11)

Both of these scriptures have similar implications. In Numbers 16:26, Moses warns the people to separate from Korah and his men or they will be judged along with him. In Isaiah 52:11 the warning is against aligning with the false, apostate, church. If we bear the vessels of the Lord (carry the gospel) we must not identify with falsehoods, false teachings, and false churches.

"Naming the name of the Lord" – invokes a relationship. If we go by the name of the Lord (or Christ) we are professing we have a relationship with him. We cannot have a proper relationship with him and be in apostasy at the same time. These are incongruent and exclusive of each other. Those that claim the Lord's name are commanded to separate themselves from false teaching!

Though it may not be the primary message, it is important to note that both God's Sovereignty ("The Lord knows those who are His) and Man's Responsibility (Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity) abide here together. This tension exists within the whole of Scripture and we ought to live within that tension. An emphasis on one without the other can cause us to fall into error.

The Contents of the House: Vessels of Honor and Dishonor

"But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work."
(2 Timothy 2:20-21)

The illustration moves from the structure of the house to the contents of the house. Paul uses language like this in other epistles that bear his name:

"Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is." (1 Corinthians 3:12-13)

"Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21)

A Variety of Vessels

Within this great house there are a variety of vessels. In this illustration the focus moves from the varied types of vessels to two words: "honor" and "dishonor."

There are many types of vessels within the house, used for different purposes. In the same way, there are many different people within the church of God, used by God for various different works. Furthermore, God calls ministers with varying abilities, personalities, etc. to do various works. We should avoid jealousy and be content with the ministry to which He calls us, remembering who it is we are serving.¹⁴

"But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand." (Isaiah 64:8 KJV)

We sing a song based on Isaiah 64:8 in worship services at our home church to remind us to yield to God and allow him to mold us and make us what He chooses for us to be:

"The Potter's Hand" (Darlene Zchech)

*Beautiful Lord, Wonderful Savior,
I know for sure all of my days are held in Your hand,
Crafted into Your perfect plan.*

*You gently call me into Your presence
Guiding me by Your Holy Spirit.
Teach me, dear Lord, to live all of my life through Your eyes*

*I'm captured by Your holy calling
Set me apart I know your drawing me to Yourself
Lead me, Lord I pray.*

*Take me, mold me, use me, fill me;
I give my life to the Potter's hand.
Call me, guide me, lead me, walk beside me;
I give my life to the Potter's hand.*

We are utterly dependent upon the Lord! When God made man, he was nothing but dust until the life-giving breath of God came into his nostrils¹⁵ and God knows we are nothing but dust without him.¹⁶ We are merely lifeless vessels until His Spirit moves upon us!

¹⁴ See John 21:20-23, Peter's concern for John's ministry

¹⁵ Genesis 2:7

¹⁶ Psalm 103:14

The illustration regarding the vessels within the house makes more sense when we contemporize the message. You may have in your house a set of "China" like we have that was given to us on our wedding day. We reserve this for the most special occasions and our most distinguished guests. We have another set of dishes we use when "common company" comes over. We have yet another set of dishes (including plastic cups, etc.) that works fine when it is "just us." All of these are useful to us within their proper setting as long as they are clean. We would not use dirty dishes for any purpose at all.

The Master of the house perfectly chooses what vessel to use for the proper occasion. A clean piece of china could be used for all occasions if he so chose. The more common dishes would be fitting for some occasions. The vessel that is dirty would be fitting for no occasion because it has a need to be cleaned.

As God's chosen vessels we would want to be ready for any occasion the Lord would have to use us. It would be our desire to be ready for every good work. **If we are living in iniquity, however, we are not fit for any good work for the Master.**

It cannot be stressed enough the importance of the people of God, and especially the ministers of God, keeping their lives free from iniquity. Private, secret sins are killing the effectiveness of the Lord's church!

Again, it is not the lack of talent and abilities that limits are usefulness to the Master but, rather, complacency, immorality and coddled sin. When sin is tolerated in our lives, it doesn't matter how talented we are we lose our effectiveness for His kingdom!

The Need for (and possibility of) Cleansing

If a man purges himself from these:

Purge – to cleanse thoroughly. The implication is one of two things:

- a) To separate from false teachers – to deal with them, discipline them, and remove them from the church. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

"Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:" (1 Corinthians 5:6-7)

- b) To cleanse from what is dishonorable and focus on inward purity – both theological and moral
 - i. If there is theological error in our teaching then it needs to be repented of, removed, and replaced with sound doctrine.
 - ii. If there is moral error in our life then it needs to be repented of, removed from our life, cleansed by the Spirit of God, and replaced by holiness and moral living.

This required cleansing is a work of the Holy Spirit and not merely the result of our own will and fortitude!¹⁷

"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:25-28)

Vessels of Honor

"If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work." (2 Timothy 2:21)

If we are cleansed (By the Holy Spirit) from the iniquities that would make us dishonorable we will be a vessel of Honor.

- a) Set apart (sanctified) for the Master's Use
- b) Useful to the Master of the House
- c) Prepared for profitable work

Practical Application

The remaining verses of 2 Timothy 2 teaches us practically how to be a vessel of honor to be used by the Lord. Time fails us to go over these in detail, but a study of these would be a great help to our ministry:

- a) Flee youthful passions¹⁸
- b) Pursue righteousness, love, and peace¹⁹
- c) Avoid foolish controversies and pointless arguments²⁰
- d) Be kind to others²¹
- e) Be prepared to teach the truth²²
- f) Patiently endure evil²³
- g) Influence others to good and godliness²⁴

Conclusion

As ministers of the gospel we have every reason to take heart. The Foundation of the Lord is still sure and the Lord knows who are his. Because of this we must not give up, but press forward to God for his cleansing and help to bring the gospel to the next generation. We need to be a tool fit for the use of the master so we can have success passing down the faith to the next generation.

¹⁷ See 1 Corinthians 6:11

¹⁸ See Proverbs 6:23-35; 1 Corinthians 6:18

¹⁹ See Matthew 6:33; 1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 4:8

²⁰ The minister is not to be quarrelsome, see 1 Timothy 3:3

²¹ See 2 Peter 1:5-7; 1 Corinthians 13:4

²² See 2 Timothy 4:2; Matthew 28:20; Isaiah 62:6

²³ See Matthew 5:39, Turn the Other Cheek, and Matthew 5:44, love your enemies

²⁴ See 1 Timothy 4:12