

Date: 06/05/2011

Text: 2 Timothy 2:20-26

Title: The Noble Vessel

Theme: Since God has chosen to use his children for His kingdom, we are to be of worthy at His service.

Introduction:

In mid-May, the world's attention turned to the scandal by the former IMF chief executive. Along with his alleged behavior, once again the society and for that matter, the world, was faced with the issue of character and performance. As long as he is a good CEO, or, a good president, prime minister, doctor or pilot, do we really care what his/her character is. The singer on the top of the chart, or the best actor/actress can be immoral, it is ok. For the tennis fans among us, by winning the French Open, Li Na is called the greatest female athlete in Chinese history. Does it matter that she is also known for her explosive temper? As long as she is #1, who cares, right?

However, if their work gets closer to us personally, it may be a different story, right? Do you want an excellent but immoral teacher to teach your children or to teach you ethics? Do you want an excellent marriage counselor who has married numerous times to counsel your faltering marriage?

Now, how about serving in God's household? Can we or should we separate a person's work or performance from his character? In our study of the scriptures in recent years and in the context of 1 and 2 Timothy, the most important thing is the person's heart.

In conjunction with the previous passages in 2 Timothy, today's focus is once again on God's workers, the one that God uses.

I. We are to clean ourselves before being used by God.

Vs.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.” Previously we have seen Paul used different metaphors to describe a follower of Christ. There is the soldier, athlete, farmer, shameless worker and now a noble Vessel. In vs. 20 we learn that in God’s household, church, there are all kinds of vessels. Some are made of gold, silver, and others made of wood or clay. These vessels are not for decorations but to be used.

vs.20 is a description of what the vessels are. Vs.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. ” Vs.21 explains to us that believers are to become those special, honorable vessels to be used by the master. This imagery of a vessel, in a Roman passage is used to demonstrate God’s sovereignty, while here it is about becoming an instrument for God to use.

In my teaching in China, I am deeply impressed by many of the students prayers. In different cities, with different groups of ministers and believers, there is one thing common in their prayers: asking God to use them. A mother fervently prayed that God will use her 6 year old son. I am certain that many of us have also indicated our desire for God to use you. We want to be an honorable vessel in his church. To be used by God means God will use us right in our sphere of influence. To be used by God is to influence others that they will come to know God and grow spiritually. Pastors are not the only ones God uses, it includes each one of us here. If we are to be used by God, do we have any responsibilities?

In vs.21 we learn that to be used by God, we are to cleanse ourselves, to be holy. This means an active pursuit and it does not happen automatically. Since chapters 1 and 2 have much teaching about heresy and false doctrines, we can safely conclude that this holiness and self-

cleansing means purity in doctrine and life. Yes, in order to be used, we are to have correct doctrines. However, equally important is purity in life. Does it matter who you are as long as we do the job well? Does it matter what our heart is like as long as we teach and preach well? Of course it matters. Your clean heart, a holy heart is everything. What we do must be an outflow from within.

II. We are to persevere in being used by God.

We have learned that to be used by God, to be a noble vessel, we are to cleanse ourselves, to be pure in doctrine and life. How do we keep this up? Often we see a good start, and then slowly it is vaporized. We can all think of individuals who were active participants in ministry and now have become spectators. In order to persevere and be used by God, Paul laid down some simple guidelines: there are things we are to avoid and things that we are to pursue. Vs.22, “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”

1. Flee from the youthful lust. From the context of this passage, it is not a reference to those sensual matters. Different commentators had suggested that Paul here is referring to temperaments that are characteristics of youth. The following are some examples of character traits of a youth.

Impatience. Young people are known for this. Especially in today’s instant gratification social culture, we want things done right away. When we see the need to change, in this and other churches, we want to see it now.

It is said that for a large ship to complete a turn in the ocean, it would take 7 miles. Ministry in the church is like this. The bigger the church, the longer its history or tradition, the longer it will take to bring about change. I think of a church with a new pastor who wants instant

change. Soon after his arrival, he abolished interpretation and with very limited resources started another language service. This nearly split the church. This and other decisions, trying to bring about change in a church with 80 or more years of history, caused him a short tenure in that church. Flee from impatience in ministry.

Another trait of youthfulness is harshness in language. I have noticed in both the western and eastern society, young people's language is increasingly more harsh and sometimes even rude. High school teachers and college professors can attest to this. Even in ministry, whether it is congregation members or ministers, harsh language is more common than before. When we are younger, we speak our minds. I think this is good and for this reason, we, the older folks, need to listen to the younger ones around us. In our staff meeting, I want to make sure that younger ministers' voices are heard.

Sometimes, we may not speak out harshly. However, the real test is what the words within us are like. A person shared that before he became a Christian, his words were harsh and often vulgar. Having come to know Christ, his words are much more gentle and polite. Then he said that lately he finds himself reverting back to those vulgar and harsh language. Not in spoken words but words he uttered inside of him. What is our language like when we speak to ourselves? Remember, flee from the harsh language.

One more characteristic of youthful lust is the love for debate. When younger, we tend to be dogmatic, have strong convictions. It is difficult to accept others' opinions and perspective. In both the contemporary and classic commentaries, the word headstrong is used to describe youthful lust. In every discussion, our sentences are punctuated with but; yes, but; yes, but. I remember a time, when I was in my late 20's and early 30's, in a northern Ca church, I would

argue and debate in many of the co-workers' meetings. I kept asking questions; as if everyone was wrong except, of course, me.

We notice that impatience, harshness and the love for debate are not helpful in ministry. They are alienating and energy draining. They don't edify believers; only driving them away from church and ministry. For this reason, flee, run away from such youthful lusts.

2. To pursue what is good. Besides fleeing, Paul also balanced it with to pursue, to run after. There are 4 objects we are to run after if we want to be used by God as a noble vessel. First, to pursue righteousness. This refers to doing things right and according to God's standards. In our society and churches as well, we often focus on what works. We let our ends justify the means. Yet, the scriptures teach that what is even more important is that we do the right thing.

The second object is faith. In the scripture, faith means to believe in God; in his faithfulness, goodness, love and power. Since the 1980's, with the rise of positive thinking, our understanding of faith has shifted its focus. We put faith in people and circumstance. This by itself is not wrong. We have to believe in people until they have proved untrustworthy. However, we often hear this: I have faith that you will get well; I have faith that you will get a good paying job; I have faith that everything will turn out good and marvelous. Yet the scripture tells us that we are to have faith in God. Even though my situation is unbearable, I can not understand why this happen to me, I still believe that God is good, faithful, loving and powerful. For this reason, I ask him to help me with my little faith.

The third object we are to pursue is Love. This means loving others. By now, we know that even among the saints, some of us are very difficult to love. The scripture never tells us to love those that are lovable, kind and good to us. Instead, we are to love those that rub against you, those whose personalities are opposite of us.

The last object of our pursuit is peace. This means living in harmony with each other. In this community of faith, we are to pursue, keep pursuing so we can live in harmony, peace with each other. We have heard so many sad stories that Christians and non-Christians alike, left the church because they see quarrels and fighting among believers. Flee from those empty, needless and endless arguments, for they will only promote disharmony among us.

Lastly, we are to pursue this with other like-minded believers. Instead of being impatient, harsh and lovers of debate, spend time with other believers to pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.

III. We are to be pastoral in our ministry as we are used by God.

Having reminded Timothy to cleanse himself, what to avoid and what to pursue, Paul now told Timothy what to do in his ministry. Paul instructs him how to carry out his responsibilities with his opponents around him. As we read Vs. 24,25, <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,” it gives us a picture of tranquility, very pastoral. It reminds us of 1 Thess 2’7b-8, “like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” There are 4 injunctions here: be kind, be gentle, be able to teach, be patient. They are the opposite of the youthful character traits.

1. Be Kind. As a servant of God, don’t get into any kind of quarrels with others, be kind. Being kind is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It means to be considerate, be sensitive to their needs. Do whatever you can for his/her good. When I am kind to you, I’ll be thinking about

what is best for you, and not my own pride or needs. Very often when I officiate wedding ceremonies, my concluding remarks have been: be kind to one another.

2. Be gentle. Another injunction to Timothy is to be gentle when he corrects his opponents. There will be a time for confrontation, but do it in a gentle way. Be kind and gentle with them. Being gentle means not harsh or stern. Being kind and gentle does not mean we are like a jelly fish or door mat. No, there are times we are to stand firm, keep our ground, but we do it with a sensitive and considerate spirit. We do not use words to hurt or destroy but to build them up. Gentleness is the hallmark of Christ's followers. Jesus Christ: humble and gentle.....

3. Able to teach. This is similar to what Paul wrote about an elder's qualification: able to teach. Paul tells Timothy that when surrounded by wrong doctrines and their teachers, don't quarrel with them. You are to continue to be kind to them, and also continue to teach God's truth and teach well. Sometimes we have the tendencies to keep pointing out what is wrong with this and that teaching. It is important to point out what is wrong, but even more important to learn and teach what is correct. As a leader in his church, Timothy was to lead by feeding them with God's truth.

4. Be patient. This is also translated as not resentful. How do you feel when others criticize you, speak evil of you? What kind of emotions do we have when we feel others have twisted our words and have totally misunderstood us? The feeling is not good, there is resentment building up against that person. When we are resentful towards a certain person, then it is hard to live in peace and harmony. William Barclay said that being resentful can do great damage to the Christian church. In order to rid resentment, we are to learn to forgive.

A final word about the consequences of such attitudes and behavior. Vs. 26," and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." When

we persevere in God's way, Timothy's opponents may turn back to God, be repentant of their wrong teachings and attitude. Please also note, this burden of their repentance is not on our shoulder but lies in God's timing and sovereignty. God will give them a repentant heart.

Conclusion:

Does our character matter? Do we have to connect Performance with character? As long as he is skillful in directing IMF which will affect the global economy, what he does in his private life is none of our business. Or as long as he is a skillful senator, we should be able to accept his morality or the lack of it.

As we look at what is happening or has happened around us, one also sees the reality that a person's character will sooner or later affect his performance. Who can, 3 years ago imagine that in 2011, John Edwards would be indicted for his mishandling of campaign money to cover an affair. What is inside will eventually come to the surface.

For this reason, in God's economy, if we are to be a vessel treasured by God, used by God, it starts with our heart, what's within us, our character. If we are to be used by God, we are to cleanse ourselves and be holy. This inner cleansing is to be manifested in our relationship with others. We are to avoid quarrels, instead be kind, gentle, patient and forgiving. Looking closely, this is the image of Jesus Christ. As a vessel God uses, our responsibility is never to call attention to ourselves, but to point others to the Lord of the vessel.