

The Character of a Useful Servant

2 Timothy 2:23-26

Paul insists that pastors (and all believers) strive to become honorable vessels fit for the master's use.

LTS: Col. 3:1-17

I remember what it was like when I first believed. I remember how convicted I was over my life of sin and rebellion against God's law. I still recall the brokenness I experienced when the H.S. gently replaced my hard heart with one that was soft and malleable to the Spirit's leading and reshaping influences. I will never forget what it was like to be washed, justified, redeemed and reborn. It was like waking up from a long dream, or like being raised from the dead. God's super-abounding grace came in like a flood and I knew that I was not my own anymore.

Truth be known, I didn't want to be my own any more. When I lived like my own master, I ruined everything. But on that day I eagerly surrendered my own autonomy and willingly became a slave of Christ. After crying out for forgiveness and saving grace, a new motivating force entered my soul. I wanted to be a useful instrument in my Master's hands. I wanted Him to take my life and do with it whatever he pleased. I had no idea what that would look like. I just knew that the safest and happiest place in all the world would be found under the perfect leadership of my new master.

If you are a true child of God by grace, through faith, then you know what I am talking about. You are eternally grateful for the fact that God has washed all your sin away and granted you the righteousness of Christ, but you want more. You want to NOT only belong to him but to be used by him. Like in the apostle's illustration of the household of God, you can totally see yourself as a vessel in that house. You have no qualms with being identified as a slave in the home of Master Jesus. You don't care what he calls you so long as you can be useful to him as he works in the world to draw sinners to Himself and finish building his church.

This is what Paul is talking about in the text before us both last week and this morning. He pictures the church as a large house where there are various kinds of vessels. Some (like gold and silver vessels) are fit for honorable use. Others (like wood and earthenware vessels) are fit only for dishonorable use. Paul wants Timothy to be a vessel for honorable use in the household of Jesus. This is especially true because Timothy was a pastor.

So, in this passage, *Paul insists that pastors* (and all believers) *strive to become honorable vessels fit for the master's use*. But what essential qualities make such a man. For that matter, what qualities should mark any Christian who desires to be a useful instrument in the Redeemer's hands?

In these verses Paul identifies seven important qualities that mark a servant as honorable and useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. But before we consider these things, let's take a moment to read the text together.

Read 2 Tim 2:20-26

What are the seven qualities of a useful servant?

I. He is Serious about Personal Holiness

1. Now, I won't belabor this point because it was the focus of last week's message. Suffice it say, then, that honorable and useful vessels are NOT necessarily the ones that are most gifted or theologically educated, but rather the ones that are pure.

- A. Have you ever gone to one of those buffet restaurants and suddenly realized that the plate you picked up at the beginning of the line was dirty?
- B. Have you ever been served a fresh cup of coffee only to discover someone's lipstick is still on the rim of the cup?
- C. Listen, when I sit down to eat I don't much care what the plate is made of or how artistically appealing its design. I just want it to be clean.

2. And so it is with the Master of the house. The honorable vessels that are useful to the Master are the clean ones.

3. Therefore, Paul says (21) "If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart [or "having been sanctified"] for the Master of the house, ready for every good work.

4. How do you pursue the holiness the Master requires? Verse 22 says "*So flee youthful passions*" (*Run from them. Shun them. Amputate them if you have to*), and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace along with all those who call upon the Lord from a... pure heart."

5. Notice Paul's repeated emphasis on holiness:

- 2:19. "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from evil."
- 2:22 "Flee youthful lusts..."

- 2:22. And do it with others who have a pure heart.
6. So if you want to be an honorable vessel fit for the Master's use, you have to be serious about purity.

II. He is Not Quarrelsome

Read v. 23

1. This is the 3rd pres. Act. Imp. Verb in this passage. The First was "Flee." 2nd "Pursue." And now 3rd, "*Have nothing to do with*" (or "Refuse") foolish or ignorant controversies.

2. This is one of those sins that is endemic to youth. It tends to be one of the "youthful passions" Paul has just warned about." And I must say that young seminarians in particular are especially susceptible to this sin. Often when a young man gets his first real taste of the rich treasures of Scripture; when he dives into the complexities of robust theological thinking for the first time, he may discover that it tends to provoke within him and unhealthy (even sinful) appetite for foolish and ignorant controversies. Notice with me...

- A. The word for "foolish" here is comes from *moros* from which we get the word *Moron*.
- B. The term "ignorant" means untrained, half-educated, or stupid.
- C. The term "controversies" usually refers to debates or arguments.
- D. The word "breeds" means to father, to beget, or to produce offspring.
- E. These are very graphic and condemning terms. When you put them together what you have is half-educated boys who know enough theology to be dangerous, who engage in moronic arguments that breed quarrels like feral hogs breed pigs. Not a flattering picture.

3. Back in v. 16, Paul commands that we "*avoid irreverent babble, for it leads people into more and more ungodliness and their talk will spread like gangrene.*"

4. Paul is saying, don't act like that. Flee such youthful passions. Instead of becoming great a debating nonsense,

- Strive to become great at being righteous (obedient).
- Strive to become great in practical faith, trusting God's promises and commands.

- Strive to become great in loving others as Christ has loved you.
 - Strive to become great at reconciling people and restoring them to peace with one another.
4. *“The Lord’s bondservant must not be quarrelsome.”*
 - A. As a side note, the term “Bondservant” (slave) is usually a technical term for an elder or pastor.
 - B. Paul uses it to refer to himself (slave of Christ). So does Peter, James, Jude , and John.
 5. Notice that these previous qualities are negative in orientation (*“Flee youthful Lusts, and Refuse ignorant controversies*). Paul is telling us what we must “put off” in order to be honorable vessels fit for the Master’s use. The rest have a positive orientation. Paul now tells us what to put on.
 6. The third characteristic of an honorable and useful vessel is that...

III. He is Kind to Everyone

Read v. 24

1. The conjunction “but” is an adversative calling for the opposite of being quarrelsome; namely, “kind to everyone.
2. Whether you are a pastor or a faithful Christian in the local church, the Lord is calling you to a spirit of gentleness with others. The Lord’s “slave” is never a fighting man. He shouldn’t have a reputation of asserting himself, his own opinions, his own agenda all the time. He must be slow to anger.
3. Part of the idea here is that serving the Master means we represent him accurately before others. And what do we know about Jesus? Well, Jesus speaks of himself when he declares (Matt. 11:28) *“Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls.”*
4. If our life ambition is to represent Jesus to the world then we need to conform our character to His. And what we learn from Matt 11 is that Jesus was gentle and humble.

5. At this point in the message I just want to encourage you to thank the Lord for the elders he has placed in leadership of this church. I am personally grateful to God that I get to serve the body of Christ with such wise, competent, humble, gentle men. I'm not talking about one or two of them, I mean every one of them. The Lord has used them (and continues to use them) as models of humble, shepherdly, gentle, competent leadership. And I confess, I need their influence in their in my life to teach me how to lead more gently and humbly.

6. Unfortunately, too many pastors/elders lead in a harsh, demanding, controlling manner. In fact, I have a dear friend whose church of some 200 people has recently abandoned their pastor and the church building because the pastor was so unyielding and controlling, that when confronted with sin he chose to keep the empty building for himself and force the Lord's people to find another place to meet. This is NOT evidence of a gentle, humble servant.

7. O' may the Lord continue to protect Calvary Bible Church from such leaders who Lord their authority over the people rather than washing their feet. The Lord's servant must be gentle to everyone.

8. The fourth characteristic of an honorable useful vessel is that...

IV. He is Able to Teach

1. Now this is where we can explicitly see that Paul's primary target for these exhortations is Timothy, himself. You will remember that back in 1 Tim. 3 Paul offers us a list of characteristics of qualified elders for the local church. Like this list, most of the characteristics are moral. The elder/pastor is to be above reproach in a number of key areas of his life. But there is one characteristic that involves a skill; namely, the elder must be "able to teach." Biblically qualified deacons on the other hand are NOT required to be skillful teachers. But elders/pastors are.

2. Therefore, as we look for a man who will be able to come and replace Keith when he launches the next church plant, we will be looking NOT only for a humble servant, but for a man who is able to teach as well.

3. If you are a pastor/elder you are not required to carry this burden. Nevertheless, I would say that for the sake of your wife and children you should strive to know the word of God well enough that you can answer questions and practice discernment

with enough proficiency to keep your family on the right path biblically and theologically.

4. The fifth characteristic of the honorable, useful vessel is that...

V. He is Patient When Wronged:

1. The ESV says, “patiently enduring evil.”

2. If you have ever led any group of people for practically any purpose at all, then you probably have learned that to lead is to become a target for opposition. This was certainly true in Timothy’s case. Paul had specifically and repeatedly charged Timothy to confront false teachers, forceful women, and passive men in the church. And while that may be what faithfulness requires, it is a sure way to make enemies.

3. But once again, we are called NOT only to serve Christ in the world but to represent him in the world. People observe how we respond to being mistreated. As Christians we are to respond to unjust treatment the way Jesus did. And Peter tells us what that looks like.

A. 1 Peter 2:19–23

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

B. How you respond to unjust criticism and mistreatment reveals a lot about our faith. It says something about our maturity in Christ. It, perhaps, exposes a certain pride and a “need” for honor and respect that is contrary to our claim to be nothing more than slaves of our Master. He is our model for how to respond to suffering. We represent him well in this world when we respond to unjust treatment by patiently enduring it without sinning in return, and by entrusting ourselves to Him who judges justly.

4. The sixth characteristic of an honorable/useful servant is that...

VI. He Offers Gentle Correction:

1. Paul’s words are, “correcting his opponents with gentleness.”

2. We must be careful NOT to conflate the command to be gentle with a mandate to never confront. No, Jesus confronted many people and he is the standard of gentleness.

3. When there is willful sin, it MUST be confronted. In Galatians 6, Paul instructs us as follows:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

4. It is a fearful thing to confront one of your peers on their sin. But whenever I have to perform this unsavory duty, I try to remind myself of Prov. 28:23, "*Whoever rebukes a man will afterward find more favor than he who flatters with the tongue.*".

5. Again, this is what Jesus does for us, doesn't he? One of the evidences that he loves us is that he doesn't let us get away with our sin. He confronts us directly, but with gentleness. Why? Because his goal is not punishment, but restoration.

6. And that brings us to the final characteristic of a vessel of honor that is useful to the Master.

VII. He is Motivated to Rescue:

Read. v. 25-26

1. There are always those who oppose the faithful teaching of the word. Whether it has to do with the nature of justification, or the means of sanctification; whether it has to do with apostolic teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage, or gender roles in the church and home, there will always be opponents.

2. Such people must be confronted, but the goal of such confrontation should always be restoration. And that burden becomes a little lighter when we remind ourselves that only God can grant repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth."

3. Wives, you can't make your husband repent. Husbands, you cannot make your wife repent; nor can you force your children to repent. Your job is to gently correct them when necessary and pray that God will do what only He can do; namely, lead them to repentance.

4. I have found it helpful to remember NOT only that God alone can grant repentance, but that sometimes the person I am confronting is not merely in error but have also been ensnared by the devil. They have been captured by him to do his will.

5. The term, “Come to their senses” is a sobriety term. It’s as if the devil has intoxicated them with some life-dominating sin and they need someone to come and restore them to sobriety again.

6. And by the way, this is not the first time Paul has used this analogy. In 1 Tim 3:7 he warned that an elder “*must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the snare of the devil.*” In this case the man in question is intoxicated by his own high opinion of himself, his abilities, his wisdom and he needs someone to bring him back to the humility of a servant.

Likewise In 1 Tim 6:9 “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

7. Paul is saying, such people need to be confronted, but we must do it with the attitude of gentleness and with the goal of rescuing them from the snare of sin.

“Questions convict the conscience,

But accusations harden the heart.

Paul insists that pastors (and all believers) strive to become honorable vessels fit for the master’s use. How do we do that?

We built the following characteristics into our loves:

1. He Pursues Personal Holiness
2. He Refuses to quarrel
3. He is Kind to Everyone
4. He is Able to Teach
5. He is Patient When Wronged
6. He Offers Gentle Correction
7. He is Motivated to Rescue

Gospel:

This is NOT a prescription for how to enter into relationship with God.

No one is justified in God's sight by their good works or noble character. We become acceptable to God ONLY by placing ALL our faith in the merits of Jesus's righteous life and atoning death.

Paul says, "It is by grace you are saved through faith, and that NOT of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works lest anyone should boast.