

Main Idea: In order to be a useful vessel for the Master, I must recognize three realities according to 2 Timothy 2:19-23.

- I. Recognize the conditions (19).
 - A. Being useful requires a personal relationship with the Lord.
 - B. Being useful requires personal holiness.
- II. Recognize the confusion (20).
 - A. There are two kinds of vessels in the house.
 - B. There are two kinds of vessels in the church.
- III. Recognize the commitment (21-23).
 - A. To be useful, we must be clean (21).
 - B. To be useful, we must flee (22a).
 - C. To be useful, we must pursue (22b).
 - D. To be useful, we must avoid (23).

Take Inventory: Am I a useful vessel for the Master?

1. What the Lord desires, He makes possible.
2. What the Lord desires, He deserves.
3. What the Lord desires, He will bless abundantly.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:19-23

The longer I live the greater the challenge becomes *not* to coast. We only have one life to live for the One who gave His life for us, but it's so easy to just through the motions. And I don't want to do that.

And I don't want my precious church family members to do that either.

Do you remember when you were in elementary school? Do you remember who cleaned the chalk board erasers? Now there's a question that dates some of us!

The teacher made it a big deal where I went to school. It was a real privilege to wash the erasers. We, the students, used to compete for the opportunity. Imagine that! Pleading for the privilege of washing chalk dust out of dirty erasers!

Why did we do it? I suppose there were various reasons, but it certainly had nothing to do with chalk dust and erasers. Perhaps getting out of class for a few minutes, that was part of it. But at the core there was a desire to please the teacher, to contribute, to be *useful*. To hear the words, “Thanks. Good job!”

Do you want to please God with your life? Do you want to be useful to the Lord for His good purposes, to hear Him say someday, “Well done, good job!”

I think most of us sitting in church this morning would answer, “Yes, I want to please God. I want my life to count. I want to be useful to the Lord who created me and rescued me.”

So what kind of people does God use? And conversely, are there certain kinds of people that God does not use?

We're going to find God's answer this morning from 2 Timothy 2:19-23. Join me there for a message I've entitled, “*A Useful Vessel for the Master.*”

Notice the image Paul has in mind in this text, the image of a household.

v 19 God's solid foundation

v 20 In a large house

v 20 Articles/vessels of gold/silver, and wood/clay

So God is building something, a household for His dwelling. It's the church, which is the pillar of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). It is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole

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building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph 3:20-22).”

And in this building, there are instruments, or vessels.

You have them in your house. Pots and pans and containers—vessels that hold things. And more expensive things too—held by vessels called a vase, or perfume bottle, or jewelry box.

We need these vessels. They serve a useful purpose in our households.

And so in God’s household. He uses vessels.

How can I be a useful vessel for my Master? That’s the question Paul addresses in our text. I must recognize three realities according to 2 Timothy 2:19-23: the conditions (19), the confusion (20), and the commitment (21-23).

I. Recognize the conditions (19).

Let’s set the context. When Paul wrote this letter, he was incarcerated for Christ, locked up in a secluded Roman dungeon. This was his last inspired letter, and he wrote it to his close personal friend and ministry partner Timothy. Timothy was in Ephesus, and his assignment as an apostle’s assistant was to strengthen this church and mobilize it to reproduce itself through evangelism, disciple-making, church planting, and the eventual multiplication of missions movements throughout the Asia minor, the Roman Empire, and beyond.

This is our mission. So in a sense 2 Timothy is a leadership manual. Timothy’s task is to train men for the ministry. “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2:2).”

What’s involved in being a leader/reproducer in the ministry? In chapter 2, Paul gives seven images/metaphors. A leader/reproducer must see himself as a: teacher (1-2), soldier (3-4), athlete (5), farmer (6), workman (15), vessel (21), and servant (24).

We’re looking at the sixth image. Timothy, the kind of person you’re seeking to be and reproduce must see himself/herself as a *vessel*.

“We have this treasure in jars of clay,” says Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:7. That’s what we are, followers of Jesus. Peanut butter jars. He’s the treasure, and oh, what a treasure He is! We are vessels He indwells by His Spirit, and uses for His kingdom purposes.

Here’s the first reality for the useful vessel. We must *recognize the conditions*. It’s true. If I want to be used by God, I must be aware of two conditions.

Verse 19, “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.’”

Here’s the foundation of the Lord’s house, the church, a double inscription. One, the Lord knows His people. And two, let every one that confesses the Lord’s name depart from iniquity.

So here are the two basic conditions with which you must come to grips with if you would be a useful vessel to God.

A. Being useful requires a personal relationship with the Lord. “The Lord knows those who are his.”

One of the most repeated phrases in the Old Testament is, “I will be their God, and they will be my people (e.g. Jer 30:22; 31:33).” It’s a prophecy, and Jesus came to fulfil it, to establish a personal relationship with a people.

Jesus said in John 10:14 "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine." He also said in John 10:27 "My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me."

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8:3 "But if any man love God, the same is known of Him."

If I want to be a useful vessel for the Lord, here's where it starts. He must know me. The Lord knows those who are *his*.

You say, "Wait a minute. He knows everything and everybody, doesn't He?"

Yes, but that's not what Paul has in mind. The Lord knows everybody, but not everybody has a personal relationship with Him. In fact, the statement that the Lord knows them that are His implies what? There are people that are NOT His.

Paul actually is quoting Numbers 16:5. He has in mind a man named Korah who is exhibit A of this point. Remember Korah? He did not like Moses. He was jealous of him. Remember what he did? He rallied 250 of God's chosen people around him (2, and stirred them up against Moses (3).

Here's what Korah said to Moses in Numbers 16:3, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them."

In essence, here's what Korah said. "Moses, you don't have any right to be our leader. God is with the rest of us too. We are His people too."

Of course, that was a pious-sounding coverup for Korah's proud and jealous heart. Now listen to Moses' reply.

Numbers 16:5 "In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him."

So anyone can claim to belong to the Lord, but that doesn't make it so. "The man he chooses," says Moses. "He will cause to come near him."

And of course, the next day the Lord made it very clear that Korah was *not* His, when the ground opened up and swallowed him alive.

So not everyone that claims to be belong to the Lord truly does. In Timothy's case, there were men like Hymenaeus and Philteus (17). These church members said they believed in Jesus, but then wandered away from the truth. Did that catch God off guard?

No, Timothy, don't lose heart. *The Lord knows those who are His*.

The Lord is sovereign. He has chosen a people, and He will save them, and keep them saved. They are His, and He will not lose even one of them. "All that the Father gives me will come to me," says Jesus in John 6:37.

Do you belong to the Father? Are you one of His?

You say, "How can I know?" Jesus tells us right here. "Will come to me."

Have you done that? Have you come to Jesus and asked Him to do what He alone can do, *save you from your sins*, and make you one of the Lord's people. The Lord knows those who are *His*.

So being useful requires, first, a personal relationship with the Lord. A second condition...

B. Being useful requires personal holiness. Look at the second part of the inscription in verse 19, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness (AV, "Let everyone that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.").

It's been well said that Christians are not sinless, but they do sin LESS.

God is holy. And because He is holy, He expects His people to be holy (1 Pet 1:15). They *confess* and *turn*. They *confess* the Lord's name, and then by His power *turn* from their sin.

Repentance and faith. Faith and repentance. They go hand in hand, not really two separate actions, but two God-produced expressions of life in His people. When His Spirit enters our lives, we repent and believe, and continue to believe and repent.

Repentance means that we turn away from sin because we have now turned to God, the Savior. It begins the moment He saves us, but it will continue until we see Him.

Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.

Personal holiness is the evidence that we are His people. Every day, by His grace, we choose to turn away from wickedness.

In Isaiah 52:11 the prophet exhorts, "Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the LORD."

So if we want to be useful in God's service, these are the two foundational conditions. One, a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. And two, personal holiness.

Do these conditions describe you? Does God know you as one of His own? And is there daily evidence of this by your turning from sin?

I want to be a useful vessel, you say. Start here. Recognize the conditions.

II. Recognize the confusion (20).

What kind of confusion? Remember what Paul told Timothy to do as a minister back in 2:15? As we saw last time, "Cut it straight with the word of truth."

Well, here's the confusion. Not every minister does that.

Notice verse 20, "In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble."

This "large house" apparently refers to the church, and specifically to the church as we see it, the *visible* church.

What does Paul say you can find in this large house or church? He makes a comparison. First, he says...

A. There are two kinds of vessels in the house. Your house, my house, any house. Look through the house and you'll likely find two kinds of vessels. Likewise...

B. There are two kinds of vessels in the church. He refers to gold and silver "articles" or "vessels", and says they're used for noble purposes (AV, "to honor"). Then he mentions wood and clay vessels, and says they're used for ignoble purposes (AV, "to dishonor").

What's he talking about? Again, it's a very common picture. Start with the picture, then move to the point of the picture.

The picture? Your house. Houses have all kinds of vessels in them. Peanut butter jars and crystal goblets, gas cans and brass vases, soap dispensers and porcelain jars, paper cups and antique china.

What do they all have in common? They are *skeuos*. That's the Greek word Paul uses. They're all vessels.

But what makes these vessels different? As Paul points out, they're made out of different materials, and therefore, they have different functions and purposes.

Some are made from expensive materials (gold/silver), and you naturally use them for honorable tasks (like serving special guests for a delicious dinner). Others come from

cheap materials (wood/clay), and you use them for the dirty tasks (like mopping the garage floor, or disposing the garbage).

And you don't mix two. You don't store gas in a crystal goblet. And you don't put a beautiful flower arrangement in a dirty water bucket.

What's the point of Paul's word picture? These vessels seem to refer to people in the church, but who specifically? Who are the gold and silver vessels that do noble tasks, and who are the wood and clay vessels that serve ignoble tasks?

MacArthur says the honorable vessels represent believers who are faithful and useful to the Lord. "They are the good soldiers, the competitive athletes, and the hard-working farmers mentioned in verses 3-6. By contrast, the dishonorable vessels are the cowardly soldiers, the lazy athletes, and the slothful farmers, defiled people fit only for the most menial, undistinguished purposes."¹

So, says MacArthur, noble and ignoble both refer to ways in which genuine believers are useful to the Lord, some useful for very noble purposes because they are godly and committed (which he will define in verses 21-23, whereas others serve only ignoble purposes in the Lord's work because they're not as godly and committed as they ought to be.

I think he makes a good point. If you want to be useful to the Lord, you must be godly and committed.

The great evangelist D. L. Moody could barely read or write when he was 17 years old, and in a Bible class couldn't find the book of John but searched the Old Testament. But once He came to know Christ, he became a new man.

"The world has yet to see what God will do with and for and through and in and by the man who is fully consecrated to Him."

God used those words to turn Moody into a vessel that He used to reach hundreds of thousands for Christ in the 1800s.

Without question, many true believers are sitting in churches, not being used to their fullest, because they're not as godly and committed as they ought to be.

But I think Paul has another concern in mind with this illustration. Remember, he just mentioned Hymenaeus and Philetus in verse 17, two church members, apparently leaders, who denied the resurrection and were destroying the faith of others.

I think this may be the primary confusion Paul has in mind. In the visible church, that's the one you can see on Sunday morning in Ephesus, or Wheelersburg, there are gold and silver vessels like Paul and Timothy and Onesiphorus. But there may also be wood and clay vessels like Phygelus and Hermogenes, and Hymenaeus and Philetus.

Not every church member is a vessel the Lord can use for His noble purposes. Some may not even know Him.

Yet since He's sovereign, God can use even these vessels for His purposes, and does at times. He used pagan Assyria to smite disobedient Israel (Isa 10:5). He used Nebuchadnezzar and the wicked Babylonians to accomplish His holy purpose. He used Cyrus the pagan Persian.

But those were not noble tasks. God chooses to use gold vessels to fulfill His noble purposes.

I once did a funeral for a man. I had never met this man, but his family told me he did not attend church. His reason. The church had hypocrites, and he did not want to be a hypocrite.

¹ John MacArthur, *2 Timothy*, p. 87.

That's an unfortunate (and unwise) response to a common reality. Yes, there are hypocrites in the church. Jesus Himself predicted that would be the case in the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt 13). You can't tell them apart, not at first.

But that doesn't surprise the Lord. He knows there are two kinds of vessels in churches. There are people like Hymenaeus and Philetus, Timothy. That is the confusion. There are gold vessels, and clay ones too. And God will use them all, the former for honorable purposes, the latter for dishonorable.

So Timothy, don't leave the church because there are hypocrites there. You determine that, by the grace that is in Christ Jesus (verse 1), you will be the kind of vessel God can use for His noble purposes.

"How can I do that?" you ask. That brings us to a third reality. To be a useful vessel, we must recognize the conditions, the confusion, and...

III. Recognize the commitment (21-23).

Verses 21-23, "If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels."

If we want to be used of God, we can't be passive. Paul challenged Timothy (and us) with a fourfold commitment (four verbs revealing four responsibilities).

A. To be useful, we must be clean (21). "If a man *cleanses himself* from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work"

God uses clean vessels. Why? For an obvious reason. An unclean vessel contaminates the contents. It's tough to get living water out of a rust bucket!

What should be our attitude towards ministers, preachers, televangelists, who don't "cut it straight with the Word"?

Listen to what Paul told Timothy...

"If a man cleanses himself from the latter (AV 'purge himself')." You don't store your goblets and gas containers in the same cabinet. You keep them separate.

Again, I think Paul is telling Timothy what to do with false teachers like Hymenaeus and Philetus. The verb, "cleanse" or "purge", is the Greek *ekkathara*. It means "to cleanse thoroughly." When the doctor does a catharization, he's checking to see if there's something in there that doesn't belong, and if so, he gets rid of it, or bypasses it.

If you want to be useful to the Lord, it starts here. We must be clean.

Of course, to become clean we must believe in the One who alone makes a person clean, inside and out, Jesus the Christ. Jesus died on the cross to take away our sin, and conquered death on the third day. And once we receive Him, His Spirit, the *Holy Spirit* makes His home in us and begins the daily cleansing process.

Timothy was to have nothing to do with the teachers in the church that were spreading non-truths. He was to stay away from them, and their message, and anything else that would contaminate him.

So must we. We must be clean. Who are your friends? What do you read, and watch on television, and listen to. Are you seeking to be a clean vessel?

What happens if I choose to be clean? What is true of a clean vessel? Notice four traits of a clean vessel in v 21.

1. *He honors God.* The AV says “he shall be a vessel unto honor.” The NIV, “he will be an instrument for noble purposes.”

2. *He is “made holy.”* The AV says, “sanctified.” Sanctified means “to be set apart.” A sanctified vessel is a vessel that is a holy vessel, a clean vessel, a vessel God can use for His holy purposes. Its purpose on Sunday is no different than its purpose on Monday through Saturday. It’s a holy vessel.

3. *He is useful to the Master* (AV “fit for the Master's use”). He knows he belongs to the One who died for him, and he’s available, yielded.

So answer this. Can God use you? Are you in a position where God can do whatever He wants with you?

Let’s talk about debt for a moment. Debt can hinder usefulness, for we end up working at both ends of the candle just to eliminate debt. So that ministry opportunity is out of the question. If you’re in debt, God certainly can help you and set you free. But from now on, before you choose to assume debt, think about how it will affect your usefulness to the Lord.

4. *He is prepared to do any good work.* Being a clean vessel isn’t an end, but a means. God doesn’t admire His vessels, but uses them. To do good works (Eph 2:10). To do *any* good work. God is constantly bringing our way good works He intends us to do for Him, not to earn His favor, but because we have it and others need it.

Do these four traits describe you? Are you honoring God with your life? Are you consecrated to His service as a holy vessel? Are you useful to the Lord? And are you prepared and ready to do any good work He sends your way? You are if you are a clean vessel.

And to be a clean vessel, you must purpose *not* to become entangled with those who are *not* clean vessels. Cleanse yourself from these, says Paul.

There’s a second commitment, and it works with the first.

B. To be useful, we must flee (22a). Verse 22, “Flee the evil desires [AV ‘lusts’] of youth.”

Timothy, I’m convinced, was a man mature beyond his years. Paul valued him perhaps as his greatest associate. But he was still relatively young (mid to late 30's?). And apparently he still displayed certain characteristics that often plague the young man. He’s prone to be impatient and intolerant; attracted by the love of argument and self-assertion. Add to that the tendency to show partiality, and the everpresent danger of sexual infidelity.

So Paul told him in frank terms, *flee*. Shun. Get away from.

Flee “*youthful lusts*.” What are they? William Hendriksen suggests three youthful lusts: pleasure, power, and possessions.

1. *Pleasure*--the inordinate craving for the satisfaction of the physical appetites; Includes sex, food, sensual living; “If it feels good, do it, and worry about the consequences later.”

2. *Power*--the ungoverned passion to be number one; to be dominant; to be in the spotlight in every crowd

3. *Possessions*--uncontrolled yearning for material possessions and for the glory that goes along with them

Those are youthful lusts. And we must choose to flee them.

Can we do it? Yes, and here’s how. Look back at verse 1, “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” We can flee, but only by the power of Christ in us.

The Lord Jesus was tempted by these three temptations in the wilderness in Matthew 4, and He triumphed over each...

1. The temptation of *Pleasure* (refused to turn stone into bread)²
2. The temptation of *Power* (refused to cast Himself from Temple).³
3. The temptation of *Possessions* (refused to receive the kingdoms of the

world from Satan--Matt 4:8-10).

So if I am to be used by God, I must, by the power of the One who defeated them, choose to FLEE these desires.

But fleeing is only half of the task. When we avoid, we must also fill.

C. To be useful, we must pursue (22b). “Flee the evil desires of youth, *and pursue* righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.”

Pursue. Follow, says the AV. It’s a strong word, the exact opposite of “flee.” In other contexts it means to persecute.

What must I pursue if I am to be used of God? Four things.

1. Righteousness--giving both God and men their due
2. Faith--loyalty and reliability; comes from trusting in God
3. Love--the determination that I will seek the highest good of others
4. Peace--proper relationships with God and men

I must both flee and follow.⁴ I have a double duty. I must run away from spiritual danger. I must run after spiritual good. In the language of Ephesians 4, I must put off the old man, and put on the new. In Luke 9, I must deny myself, and follow Christ. In Galatians 5, I must crucify the flesh, and walk in the Spirit.

You say, “I want that, but tell me how. How can I be this kind of person?”

Paul gives a very practical bit of counsel at the end of verse 22. “...along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” There’s who you need to spend time with. If I want to be a pure vessel, I need to spend time with perfect people? No. With people who themselves call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

So again, who do you spend time with? Are your friends godly people?

D. To be useful, we must avoid (23). “Don’t have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels.”

More about this next time, but if we want to be used of God, we must choose to stay out of certain conversations! And silence them if we can. Why? Because you know they produce quarrels (AV ‘gender strifes’).

So the question again. How can I be a useful vessel for my Master? The answer. I must recognize three realities: one, the conditions (19)—there must be a personal relationship with the Lord and personal holiness; two, the confusion (20)—there are two kinds of vessels in the church just like in your house; so three, there’s a commitment that’s needed (21-23). To be useful we must be clean, we must flee, we must pursue, and we must avoid.

Take Inventory: Am I a useful vessel for the Master?

Keep three things in mind as we finish our time together.

1. *What the Lord desires, He makes possible.* Through Christ.
2. *What the Lord desires, He deserves.* Because of Christ.
3. *What the Lord desires, He will bless abundantly.* To the glory of Christ.

² Matt 4:1-4 "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds ...God."

³ Matt 4:5

⁴ See also: 1 Timothy 6:11 "But thou...flee...follow."