

## For Noble Purposes



TODAY MANY LOUDLY CLAIM there is no connection between character and performance. The argument has been particularly heated in reference to those in political life—where the analogy is often made between the head of state and an airline pilot. “Who would you rather have at the control of the plane?” it is asked. “A competent pilot with moral weaknesses, or an incompetent pilot with moral character?”

The problem with the analogy is that it is apples and oranges. Skillfully landing a plane is not an intrinsically moral task, but piloting the state is. Even granting the analogy, suppose the plane crashed in the Pacific, and you and the other survivors are in a lifeboat captained by the competent (but immoral) pilot, and there are insufficient rations to maintain life until rescue. Would you want *him* to make the decisions about who gets rations and who does not?

Admittedly, however, there are some jobs where a lack of moral character can be a plus, like jobs where winning is everything. Many would argue that in some sports the absence of a moral compass is a definite advantage. Similarly, there are segments of the financial world where a sensitive conscience is seen to be a detriment. Today the amoral entertainer will be more likely to rise to the top of the charts. So we have to understand that in many areas immorality has its professional advantage. It aids “competency,” *if* winning is everything. And this is where general culture is. As *Chicago Sun Times* columnist Sydney J. Harris put it: “Since most of us would rather be admired for what we *do*, rather than for what we *are*, we are normally willing to sacrifice character for conduct, and integrity for achievement.”

But when all is considered, the closer a job gets to the moral core of a person, the more important moral character becomes. Perhaps it does not make much difference to the performance of a pilot, or a surgeon, or an athlete, or a gardener (though this is all very debatable). But when it comes to the teaching profession, moral character comes to the fore. And more so in personal counseling.

And in matters of the heart, especially in regard to Christ and the church, it is everything. What we are is of utmost importance. A noble life must have for its core a noble heart. Honorable vessels are used for honorable purposes. This is what 2 Timothy 2:20–26 is all about. Paul here instructs Timothy on how to become an instrument for noble purposes, a vessel for honor.

### The Making of a Noble Instrument (vv. 20, 21)

*House vessels.* To illustrate his point, Paul set before Timothy the image of a house and its vessels and containers: “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” (v. 20). A large house would have buckets, jars, and cups made of wood and clay that would be used for dishonorable purposes such as disposal of garbage and human waste. It would also have vessels of silver and gold that were used for noble functions such as dining and entertaining.<sup>1</sup>

“A great house” is Paul’s metaphor for the church, the Christian community that Paul had earlier called “the household of God” (1 Timothy 3:15). We are to understand that the Christian community contains both “honorable” and “dishonorable” vessels—that is, both believers and false teachers—just as Israel had at the time of the rebellion of Korah (cf. v. 19). Jesus taught exactly the same thing when he described the mixed nature of the church in the story of the wheat and the tares or weeds (Matthew 13:24–30).

The Christian community is, and has always been, a mixed bag. In fact, that is the answer to those who avoid church because it contains hypocrites. Of course it does! Church is for hypocrites because it is there that they may become vessels of honor. St. Chrysostom had it right early on: “Let it not disturb thee that there are corrupt and wicked men. For in a great house there are such vessels.”<sup>2</sup>

*Cleansing the vessels.* Paul applies the picture in the next verse: “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” (v. 21). Cleansing your life will make you an honorable vessel with great usefulness. This is the exact opposite of the contemporary delusion that character is irrelevant! A holy inner life is essential to doing any good work in this life.

This calls for a conscious, willful cleansing—“If anyone cleanses himself.” But this is never, in Paul’s thinking, something we do apart from grace (cf. Ephesians 2:8–10; Romans 11:6). Paul’s advice elsewhere was, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12, 13). God does it. And then by his grace we will do it.

The self-cleansing here is from false teachers and their erroneous doctrines—and a returning to the pure gospel of Jesus Christ, who is descended from David and risen from the dead (cf. v. 8). The cleansed thus become golden vessels—“set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.” They have been, as Paul told the Ephesians, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Such people became golden, and their works match. Instead of being wood, hay, and straw, they are gold, silver, and precious stones (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:12). Far from their character being irrelevant, it is everything. What they are inside determines what they do.

This teaching was for Timothy, but it is also for us. What we *are* is first, second, third, and fourth (first and last—everything). What we do will come from this—and it will be substantial.

## The Maintaining of an Instrument for Noble Purposes (v. 22)

Paul’s advice now naturally moves from the making of an honorable vessel to a double command regarding the maintenance of it: “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (v. 22).

*He flees.* A noble vessel is maintained by flight—“Flee youthful passions.” Often this is interpreted to mean flee *sensual* desires and is then tied in with the example of young Joseph fleeing hot-blooded Mrs. Potiphar as she clutched his robe (Genesis 39:11–18). Yes, running from sensuality is an essential survival tactic. Flee or fall!

But that is not the emphasis here because 1) the Greek simply reads, “Flee youthful desires,”<sup>3</sup> and 2) the following verses give no emphasis to sensuality but rather stress qualities that spring from a youthful temperament. Fee translates “youthful passions” as “headstrong passions of youth”<sup>4</sup>—the desires characteristic of youth.

Both the following context and ministerial experience indicate what these youthful desires are. *Impatience* is a chronic sin of youth. It is incomprehensible to the young pastor that the situation cannot be changed right now! Today’s impatience is fed by the media’s quick fix. After all, on television everything

gets resolved in the space of an hour (films take longer—two or three hours!). The problem is, real church isn't *Church, the Movie*.

What those in the ministry need to understand is that a church with any history at all is like a huge ship at sea—a freighter or ocean liner or battleship (an appropriate metaphor in some cases!). It takes seven miles to turn a great ship around. Young pastors who ignore this imperil themselves and their churches. Perfectly seaworthy churches have been swamped and sunk by impatient young leaders.

*Harshness* is another telltale sign of youthful passions. It may rarely show up in the pulpit or at board meetings. But it shows itself in conversations with confidants. It surfaces in figures of speech, nicknames for detractors, the cast of the eye, the set of the jaw, the tone of voice.

Likewise, *contentiousness*—the love of debate and winning—is a sin of youth. Here dogmatism flourishes, fed by an inability to comprehend or tolerate other points of view. The listening faculty is undeveloped. “Conversation” is punctuated with adversatives—“but . . . but . . . but.” The headstrong young cleric has forgotten that God has given him one mouth and two ears because he ought to listen twice as much as he speaks.

So the youthful proclivities go. And Paul makes no bones about it—“Flee youthful passions.” Run, and keep on running, Timothy. Do not get sucked into fruitless controversy by your detractors. Do not allow yourself to succumb to impatience and harshness. It is so important to remain a vessel for noble purposes.

*He pursues.* But the running isn't all in the negative. Timothy was also to chase after four virtues: “And pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (v. 22b).

He was to “pursue righteousness”—that is, “the right conduct of a man who pleases God and is pleasing to him.”<sup>5</sup> He must personally pursue ethical conduct that glorifies God.

He was also to “pursue . . . faith.” This faith is a combination of belief plus trust in God, and this simple trust must characterize his life. His congregation should see a man who trusts God implicitly and faithfully.

Timothy was also to “pursue . . . love”—namely, love for people. He was to love the saints, and when time and circumstances revealed that some of his “saints” were sinners, he was to go on loving them with all their faults and weaknesses.

He was also to “pursue . . . peace”—tranquillity and harmony with his people. This he was to do in the company of other believers<sup>6</sup>—“along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”

The picture created by Paul's contrasting commands of “flee” and “follow” (KJV) is dynamic. Timothy was to flee as fast as his feet would carry him away from the headstrong desires of youth (impatience, harshness, the love of debate). At the same time he was to sprint, arms stretched out, after righteous conduct, faith (trust), love for others, and peace.

Such divinely ordered flight and pursuit would insure the maintenance of his life as a vessel for honor. Christ would be pleased to fill him with his grace and to serve it to the church through Timothy. Here is wisdom: Fleeing is as important as pursuing. Our no is as important as our yes. And when we say no to unprofitable desires, we can then say yes to the best things. What should you flee? And what should you be running after?

## The Ministry of a Noble Instrument (vv. 23–26)

Paul has given instructions about the *making* of an honorable vessel (vv. 20, 21), then the *maintenance* of an honorable vessel (v. 22), and now he instructs about the *ministry* of an honorable vessel (cf. “a vessel for honorable use,” v. 21).

*Not quarrelsome.* God's instrument must not quarrel: “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome” (vv.

23, 24a). The false teachers' arguments were literally moronic and ignorant, and it was tempting to use their foolishness against them because it was so thoroughly silly. Timothy could certainly show his stuff—his Biblical fidelity, his chic reasoned argument in contrast to their drivel. But Paul warned him to refrain “because you know they [“ignorant controversies”] breed quarrels.” I have been in such conversations, and I knew I was right, but I was sick of every word after I said it. But I kept on arguing anyway. My argumentative chic was totally uncool. The Lord's servant must not do this.

*But pastoral.* Rather than quarrel, God's vessel lives out four positive injunctions. First, he is “kind to everyone” (v. 24). Yes, we must be firm or forceful, but we must also be “kind to everyone,” even our enemies. In brief, we should be Christlike. Paul himself ministered like this, as he reminded the Thessalonians: “We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

Second, Timothy was to be “able to teach” (v. 24)—skillful in teaching, fulfilling the major concern of the Pastoral Epistles (cf. 1 Timothy 3:2 and multiple other references). The fourth injunction complements this: “correcting his opponents with gentleness” (v. 25a). No clever put-downs of the false teachers were allowed, but only gentle correction—what Paul described in Ephesians 4:15 as “speaking the truth in love.” The loud, foolish heretics got more than they deserved—gentle correction! This is divine wisdom for all of Christ's servants.

Third, the Lord's instrument “patiently [endures] evil.” He must not be resentful. William Barclay remarks, “There may be greater sins than touchiness, but there is none which does greater damage in the Christian church.”<sup>7</sup> Many of us are quick to take offense and slow to forgive. The great Samuel Johnson once made a sarcastic remark about an acquaintance that was repeated by a hearer to the man, but without the accompanying remark that “he was a very good man.” His biographer Boswell writes that the man

could never forgive this hasty contemptuous expression. It rankled in his mind; and though I informed him of all that Johnson said, and that he would be very glad to meet him amicably, he positively declined repeated offers which I made, and once went off abruptly from a house where he and I were engaged to dine, because he was told that Dr. Johnson was to be there. I have no sympathetic feeling with such persevering resentment.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed God's Word has no such sympathy either, because God's honored servants must bear evil without being resentful.<sup>9</sup> There are few things more beautiful than a forbearing spirit in God's servants, and this is so good for the church.

There is power in a life that refuses to quarrel and is gentle with detractors—the power of Christlikeness. This is why Paul would sometimes say, “I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:1).

The final sentence expresses the noble hope of a noble instrument for his enemies: “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (vv. 25, 26). This is the noblest hope that could ever be.

Christians, the character of your pilot or your surgeon or your mechanic may be irrelevant to his or her occupational competency. But in spiritual matters, the character of God's servant is everything. The *making* of his vessel requires a radical cleansing, so it can be used for honorable purposes. The *maintenance* of his instrument involves intense flight and intense following—flight from youthful passions, impatience, quarrelsomeness, and harshness and the pursuit of profound virtues. The *ministry* of his vessel must not be quarrelsome but pastoral—kind to all, teaching, enduring evil, gently correcting. The hope of such a servant is the eternal blessing of his enemies.

Glorious has been the train of such servants. May this be the standard for all who would aspire to lead Christ's church.