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THE PERSON GOD USES

2 Timothy 2:20-22

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2 Timothy Lesson 13

The Person God Uses 2 Timothy 2:20-22

A man used to visit a tiny general store in the country. The proprietor has a clerk named Jake, who seemed to be the laziest man in the world. One day the man noticed that Jake was gone.

He asked the proprietor, "Where's Jake?" "Oh, he retired," was the answer. "Retired? Then what are you going to do to fill the vacancy?" The owner replied, "Jake didn't leave no vacancy."

That leads me to ask, "What kind of vacancy would there be in this church if you left?" It is God's clear intention that every one of His people be used in serving the Lord Jesus Christ. He has given gifts to each one to be used as good stewards. And yet for so many that name the name of Christ, their faith is like football—an occasional Sunday spectator sport. They are not serving Christ day by day. But if you truly know Christ, you can't be happy sitting on the bench or in the stands. You want to be in the game.

Our text reveals the kind of person God uses. You may think that God uses people who have impressive abilities and gifts. While spiritual gifts play a part, they are not the main feature in being used by God. As we saw in the national news recently, a man may be a gifted Christian leader and yet bring terrible disgrace to the name of Christ. Or you may think that God uses a person who has been to seminary and has a lot of training. While seminary has its place, I know of many men who graduated from seminary, but they're not even in the stadium, let alone in the game!

Or you may think that God uses a person who has a great knowledge of the Bible. While, as we saw last week, being careful students of the Bible is very important, it is not the main thing. You may be a renowned Bible scholar, and yet be detrimental to the cause of Jesus Christ.

The simple message of our text is that God uses cleansed people, who are defined by two characteristics:

God uses cleansed people who flee sin and pursue godliness.

Paul is telling Timothy how to deal with some difficult problems in the church of Ephesus, where he was ministering. In the verses just before, he has exhorted Timothy to use the Scriptures properly, not as Hymenaeus and Philetus, whose false teaching had led some astray. He reminds Timothy, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness" (2:19). Now he urges Timothy to be a cleansed man who flees sin and pursues godliness, summed up under four qualities: righteousness, faith, love and peace with the Lord's true people.

Paul uses the illustration of a large house that has different kinds of vessels. The gold and silver vessels are kept clean so that they may be used for honorable purposes, such as dinner parties. The wood and earthenware vessels are used for dishonorable purposes, perhaps in the kitchen or to carry out garbage or human waste. They often get broken and are cheaply replaced.

It would be easy to misapply Paul's point here. If you took his illustration to its logical conclusion, you could say that the dishonorable vessels serve a legitimate function and thus are just as necessary as the gold vessels. But that's *not* his point. Rather, the large house represents the professing or visible church. Some who associate with the church are truly born again. Others, such as the false teachers Hymenaeus and Philetus, are probably not born again. They are the vessels for dishonor. Paul is saying that no one should be a vessel for dishonor.

To put it another way, he is saying that God isn't going to use a garbage pail life to serve the pure gospel to a hungry world. Can you imagine being a guest at a wealthy home, where you're seated around a magnificent table? The kitchen door swings open and the cook comes out with a garbage pail and starts dishing the food out of the pail. Even so, God isn't going to use dirty lives to serve the good news of Christ to the world. Rather,

1. God uses cleansed people (2:20-21).

Note three things:

- A. You must choose the type of vessel you will be.

Clearly, Paul is presenting us with a choice: Do you want to be a gold or silver vessel, used for honor, or will you be a cheap clay pot, used for dishonor? Again, you may think, "Well, both are used

of God, aren't they?" The answer is, "Yes, but you don't want to be used as a vessel for dishonor!" It's interesting that Paul uses this illustration in Romans 9:21-23, although with a different emphasis:

"Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory...."

In that text, Paul is emphasizing God's sovereign right to do as He pleases with His creation. As the potter, He can do whatever He wants with the clay, and the clay has no right to challenge the potter. But in 2 Timothy 2:20-21, Paul's emphasis is on our responsibility to cleanse ourselves from the defilement of sin, especially the sin of false teaching, so that we will be vessels for honor.

The Bible is clear that as the Sovereign of the universe, God uses even evil people for His righteous purposes. He uses Satan and the demons, even though they are opposed to Him. In Moses' day, He raised up Pharaoh and used him to demonstrate God's power (Rom. 9:17). He used Judas in His plan of putting Jesus on the cross. Acts 4:27-28 explains, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur." As Proverbs 16:4 puts it, "The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil."

If you're thinking, "Then we're just robots or puppets," you're wrong! The Bible also clearly declares that each of us is a responsible moral agent. Although God ordained that Judas and Herod and Pilate would play roles in crucifying the Savior, each of those men are guilty sinners, responsible for their terrible sins. You will fall into error if you let go of either God's absolute sovereignty or man's full responsibility for his sins. Paul's point in our text is, you have a choice: Will you be a filthy vessel that God uses for dishonor? Or, will you be a clean vessel that God uses for honor? You are accountable for your choice!

B. Cleansing is your responsibility.

Note verse 21, “Therefore, if anyone cleanses *himself* from these things....” In the context, “these things” refers to the false teachings that were being spread. It’s worth noting that false teachings are not just mental mistakes—they are *sins* that need to be cleansed out of our lives!

When Paul says that a person needs to cleanse himself, he is not teaching that by our own efforts we can atone for our sins. If you could do anything in and of yourself to deal with your sin problem before God, then the death of Christ was pointless. But you can and must avail yourself of the means of cleansing that God has provided in Christ. That is *your* responsibility.

If you come into the house dirty after a day of working in the yard, you don’t lick yourself clean like a cat does! Rather, you make use of the soap and water to cleanse yourself. The soap and water are the means of cleansing. But you make use of them by applying them to your body.

God provided the blood of Jesus as the means of cleansing us from all our sins (1 John 1:7, 9). There is a sense in which we are completely clean the moment that we trust in Christ as Savior. But we walk in the world, where we get defiled. When we confess our sins, we apply the blood of Jesus to our dirty lives. To be a vessel for honor, you must walk in the light, confessing all known sin to God. Vessels of dishonor walk in the darkness and do not cleanse themselves from sin.

So, you must choose the type of vessel you will be. Cleansing yourself to become a vessel of honor is your responsibility.

C. Cleansed people are sanctified, useful to the Master, and prepared for every good work (2:21).

(1) Cleansed people are sanctified.

The word means, “set apart” unto God. It is used three ways in the Bible. There is *positional* sanctification. Through the death of Christ, believers have been sanctified once for all (1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11; Heb. 10:10). There is also *progressive* sanctification. As we grow in Christ, we are progressively conformed to His image (2 Cor. 3:18; 7:1; 1 Thess. 4:3-7). Finally, when we see Jesus, we will be like Him,

which is *ultimate* sanctification (1 John 3:1-3). In our text, Paul is talking about the process of progressive sanctification. We must be growing in the process of being separate from all doctrinal and moral evil, set apart as clean vessels for the Lord's use.

(2) Cleansed people are useful to the Master.

"Master" is the Greek word from which we get our word *despot*. It emphasizes Christ's absolute lordship. Paul's point here is that dirty vessels are not useful to the Master, except for purposes that you don't want to think about. Have you ever been in a restaurant and discovered a previous customer's dirty egg crusted on your fork or plate? You would rightly demand a clean fork or plate. The dirty one is not useful. In the same way, if our minds embrace false teaching and our lives are tainted by sin, we are not useful to our Master.

(3) Cleansed people are prepared for every good work.

Prepared has the idea of being willing and ready. The cleansed vessel is waiting for the Master to pull it off the shelf and put it to honorable use. Dirty vessels are not ready to be used.

Have you ever been angry when suddenly you have an opportunity to bear witness for Christ? You weren't prepared, were you? Or have you ever been grumbling about something when you encountered a brother or sister who needed a word of encouragement? You probably didn't even notice the need, let alone respond appropriately. But if you are cleansed, you're ready to serve the Lord in any good work that He sets before you.

Thus Paul's point (2:20-21) is that God uses cleansed people. He goes on to show what this looks like in practice:

2. Cleansed people flee from sin and pursue godliness (2:22).

There are two commands, flee and pursue. We are to flee from youthful lusts and pursue what we may sum up as godliness, broken down under four qualities: righteousness, faith, love and peace with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart, that is, peace with other believers.

A. Cleansed people flee from sin.

“Now flee from youthful lusts....” We usually associate the term with sexual temptations, but as one older seminary professor told us, “Men, they aren’t just *youthful*!” You don’t outgrow sexual temptations. Where do you think we got the term, “dirty *old* man”? The word translated “lusts” may refer to any desires, although it usually refers to sinful desires. So while sexual temptation may be included in “youthful lusts,” it’s probably not the primary focus.

Rather, Paul was probably referring to wrong desires that younger men are more prone to than older men are. Calvin understood it as the propensity of younger men to lose their tempers and rush forward into a heated argument with more confidence and rashness than men of a riper age do (*Calvin’s Commentaries* [Baker], on 2 Tim. 2:22, p. 232). In the same vein, Gordon Fee (*New International Biblical Commentary* [Hendrickson Publishers, 1988], p. 263) says that Paul is speaking of “headstrong passions of youth, who sometimes love novelties, foolish discussions, and arguments that all too often lead to quarrels.” William Barclay related it to the faults of impatience, self-assertion, love of arguing, and love of novelty that stem from youthful idealism (*The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* [Westminster Press, revised ed., 1975], p. 180).

So Paul was telling Timothy that while it is right to defend the faith against serious errors and to stand firm on the central doctrines of Scripture, there is a right and a wrong way to go about it. He will go on (2:23-26) to explain the right way. Here, he is warning against the wrong way, which is to be arrogant about how much you know, impatiently to blast those in error, and to be quarrelsome and self-assertive. The fruits of the Spirit include patience, kindness, and gentleness, along with self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Youthful impetuosity is not on the list! Paul says to flee from these youthful temptations.

The Bible commands us to flee from some other sins. 1 Corinthians 6:18 says, “Flee immorality.” Don’t flirt with it. Don’t stand there and pray about what to do. Don’t get near it. If it comes knocking, run for your life!

1 Corinthians 10:14 says, “flee from idolatry.” You may be thinking, “Well, at least that one isn’t a problem for me! I’m never tempted to set up an idol.” Really? You’re never tempted to set up anything in the place that rightfully belongs to God alone? You

never allow watching TV or playing computer games to usurp the time that you should spend alone with God or serving Him? Run from anything that pulls you away from full devotion to God!

1 Timothy 6:11 (which is parallel to our text) tells us (in the context) to flee from the love of money. Are you tempted to gamble? Run! It's the love of money that feeds gambling. Do you look at the rich and think, "I want to live that way"? Run! Are you tempted to steal or cheat on your taxes or be greedy rather than generous? Run! Cleansed people flee from sin.

B. Cleansed people pursue godliness (righteousness, faith, love, and peace).

Fleeing and pursuing are opposites. It is not enough just to flee from sin. Also, you must pursue godly character qualities. The word "pursue" is the same word that is elsewhere translated "persecute." It means to go after it with a vengeance. Run hard after these four aspects of godliness:

(1) Cleansed people pursue righteousness.

This is a general term that refers to right behavior or conformity to the standards of God's Word. God's Word is not vague about how you should live. It doesn't offer helpful hints for happy living, if you feel like giving it a try. It gives us the commandments of God, which are for our good (Deut. 10:13; 1 John 5:3).

Years ago, an elder in my church in California told me that people like his wife, who grew up under austere, authoritarian religious fathers, could not relate to my preaching. When I asked why not, he said, "Because you preach obedience." I replied that whenever I preached obedience (which seems to be mentioned rather often in the Bible!), I tried to emphasize God's love and grace as the motivation to obey. But he insisted that people such as his wife, who grew up in these authoritarian homes, could not relate well to my emphasis on obedience. In fact, I've often been called "legalistic" because I teach that we must obey God.

But obedience to God's Word is *not* legalism! Paul commands us, "Pursue righteousness!" Go after it with everything you've got! David exclaimed (Ps. 40:8), "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart." Hebrews 10:7 puts those words in

Jesus' mouth. If you're growing to be like Jesus, you're growing in the delight of pursuing righteousness from the heart.

(2) Cleansed people pursue faith.

The Greek word here may mean, "faithfulness." We should be pursuing faithfulness, which is all too rare! It means that you are trustworthy or reliable. When someone gives you a job, you can be counted on to do it.

But the word also means "faith." We are to pursue faith. Faith is related to your concept of God. Is He mighty? Does He hear the prayers of His people and act on their behalf? Do you trust Him to do far more than you are able to do in your strength?

Many years ago, there was a learned Hebrew professor at Princeton Seminary named Robert Dick Wilson. He could read, as I remember, more than 30 Semitic languages! One time about twelve years after Donald Grey Barnhouse had graduated, he went back to the seminary to preach to the students. Dr. Wilson sat down near the front. After the message, he went forward and shook Barnhouse's hand. He said, "When my boys come back, I come to see if they are big-godders or little-godders, and then I know what their ministry will be."

Barnhouse asked him to explain and he replied, "Well, some men have a little god and they are always in trouble with him. He can't do any miracles. He can't take care of the inspiration and transmission of the Scripture to us. He doesn't intervene on behalf of His people. They have a little god and I call them little-godders. Then there are those who have a great God. He speaks and it is done. He commands and it stands fast. He knows how to show Himself strong on behalf of them that fear Him." He went on to tell Barnhouse that he could see that he had a great God and that God would bless his ministry (Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Let Me Illustrate* [Revell, 1967], pp. 132-133). Pursue faith!

(3) Cleansed people pursue love.

You say, "Well, I'm just a naturally loving person!" No, you're naturally selfish! That's why Paul commands, "Pursue love!" That requires getting your focus off of yourself and onto others, so that you can treat them as you would want to be treated. It means giving your time to listen to someone who is hurting. It means be-

friending someone who is lonely. Sometimes it means having the courage to talk to a brother (or sister) who is in sin with the aim of restoring him to the Lord. It means being patient, kind, considerate, and not easily provoked (see the complete list, 1 Cor. 13:4-7). Pursuing love means investing constant effort to love others.

- (4) Cleansed people pursue peace with all who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Peace usually doesn't just happen. You have to pursue it deliberately, sometimes with much effort. It is debatable whether the comma should be inserted after "peace." With the comma, the sentence means that you should join with other believers in the common pursuit of peace. Without the comma, the idea is that the peace that you should pursue should be with other believers, here described as those "who call on the Lord from a pure heart." "Pure" is related to the verb "cleanses" (2:21), and thus refers to a heart that has been cleansed from sin. The implication of the command is that even though Christians all call upon the name of the Lord out of hearts that have been cleansed from sin, they still will have conflicts and misunderstandings with each other. Thus they need to pursue peace with one another.

The world's way of dealing with misunderstandings or conflict is to nurse hurt feelings, to spread gossip, and to stand up for your rights. God's way is to go directly to the one who offended and seek to be reconciled. Jesus said that this is so important that even if you are worshiping, leave your worship and first be reconciled to your brother (or sister; Matt. 5:23-24). Recognizing that it is difficult, Paul said (Rom. 12:18), "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." Pursue peace!

Conclusion

It's a great honor for an athlete to be put into the starting line-up of a big game. But even greater than the honor of being used by the coach is to be used by God. To be in His starting line-up, you don't have to have great talents. You have to be a cleansed person who constantly flees from sin and pursues godliness.

Application Questions

1. How do we maintain the proper balance between God's sovereignty and our responsibility? Are there checks to warn us if we are out of balance in either direction?
2. If God totally forgives all our sin the moment we trust in Christ, why do we need to confess our sins to be forgiven?
3. If there are sins that younger people are more prone to, are there other particular sins that those who are older should be on guard against?
4. How much time and effort should we invest in seeking peace with a fellow Christian? Is there a time to move on, even if reconciliation has not taken place? Support biblically.

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