

TO MY SON

An Expositional Study of II Timothy

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CHAPTER NINE -

THE VESSELS OF THE HOUSE

II Timothy 2:20-21

20 But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.

21 If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

OUR apostle sometimes speaks of Christians as members of the Household, as in Ephesians 2:19, "**Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of GOD.**" In our present passage, however, he thinks of us as vessels of the Household. He was, we remember, a vessel himself; for, in sending Ananias to him, in Acts 9:15, the living Lord had said, "**He is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My Name, . . .**" As you might take down a jug from the dresser, and fill it with water to bear to some thirsty person, so the Lord had taken up Paul, and filled him, that he might bear His Name, which is Water of Life, to parched and weary souls. We, too, are such vessels - each in our way, and our sphere, and our degree; and it is about these vessels of the House that this writer speaks to Timothy. To begin with. let us see here

THEIR SITUATION - AND ITS PRIVILEGE

Have you noticed how often the Bible is at pains to emphasise what is the attractive environment of them that believe? For example, in Isaiah 5:1, "**A vineyard in a very fruitful hill**": GOD's people set amidst spiritual surroundings conducive to the production of a wondrous harvest. They failed, and only "**brought forth wild grapes**"; but that was not the fault of their situation.

Or again, in Psalm 1:3. "**He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water.**" A tree must have water, and it is fascinating to see how some kinds - the alder, for instance - If planted away from it, will instinctively push out their roots in the direction of the water, however far off, seeming, with their tendrils, to be feeling for it, till they find it. And truly by this waterside, near which "**the trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord**", as Isaiah 61:3 calls us, are set, there is found all the moisture that will ensure that they shall be fruitful, and that their leaf shall not wither. Then, in Psalm 16:6, "**The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.**" How many have reason to be eternally, and daily, grateful for such - a godly

home, a live church, a keen circle, an inspiring friend.

Look at it another way. In Colossians 1:2, we read that Paul writes "**to the saints and faithful brethren . . . which are at Colosse**"; and, knowing something of the wickedness of the place, we realise how all but impossible it would be to be a "**saint**" for long in such a place, and how surprising it would be if "**brethren**" should remain "**faithful**" for any length of time.

Ah, but we have left out what is, indeed, the very secret of blessed continuance in any environment - the words "**in CHRIST**."

It is because of their inner environment " . . . **in CHRIST**," that they are able to stand up to their outer environment "**at Colosse**."

Take an illustration. Suppose yourself to be shipwrecked, alone and doomed, and desirous of sending a message home. You have paper and pencil, and you manage to write a few words; and then you throw it into the sea, hoping (but how stupidly!) that it can live in the water, and become washed up on to some beach, whence it shall eventually reach your friends. Why, the writing will quickly be undecipherable, and the paper become pulp!

Oh, but I forgot to mention that, before throwing the message into the sea, you put it into a bottle and sealed it up. So now, whatever its outer circumstances may be, the bottle will preserve it. Thus it is that "**in CHRIST**" they are safe, even "**at Colosse**." From every point of view, what a satisfactory situation the believer finds himself in.

One more illustration is here in our passage: He is "**in a great house**" - the Church, "**the foundation**" which verse 19 spoke of.

"**Great**" - in its spaciousness, embracing believers of all climes and countries, "**a great multitude which no man could number**" (Revelation 7:9), you and I amongst them.

"**Great**" - in its wealth, being capable of satisfying the needs of every resident within it, even as it is the beneficiary of "**the God of [every kind of] grace**", I Peter 5:10.

"**Great**" - in its history, having a glorious past, and destined for a glorious future. "**Great**" - in its fellowship, enjoying within its embrace so many who have had such rich experience of GOD, which they are so ready, and so happy, to pass on to their fellow inhabitants.

"**Great**" - in its Lord, above all: the Master of the House being our "**Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace**," Whom Isaiah 9:6 speaks of. Well is it for the House that "**the government shall be upon His shoulder**."

To be the humblest Vessel in such a House is the highest privilege. that life affords.

But we do not forget that all privilege carries responsibility with it. Therefore we stress now that in that "**great House**" we are expected to be of use. To each of us is allotted a task - not the same task for all, but some task for each. The vessels were not intended to be just beautiful, but useful.

Perhaps you have at some time attended a great banquet at the City of London's old Guildhall. In which case you may have got a view of the City's "plate" - exquisitely beautiful, immensely valuable, but serving no useful purpose at the feast, bringing no nourishment or refreshment to any; there to be looked at and admired, not to be, in any practical way, employed. That is not the kind of vessel that we are meant to be; rather are we to be the earnest offerers of Frances Ridley Havergal's familiar prayer -

"Oh, use me, Lord, use even me.
Just as Thou wilt, and when, and where."

Such, then, is the fine situation of these Vessels, with the privilege they enjoy, and the responsibility they incur. Now look at

THEIR CLASSIFICATION - AND ITS CHALLENGE

A twofold classification is here brought to our notice; and, first, what I shall call

(a) A division of personal worth - "**gold and silver; wood and earth.**"

(i) We are reminded of the words in I Corinthians 3:12 about building upon the One Foundation "**gold, silver, precious stones; wood, hay, stubble.**" There it is speaking of different kinds of work; here, in our passage, it is different kinds of worker.

(ii) "**Gold and silver**" - that will be the rich ware of platter and goblet for the dining table; "**wood and earth**" - that will be the earthenware dish, and the wooden pail, for the kitchen and scullery. These latter must be contented with their menial tasks; you can't bring them into dining room use. There are some of us Christians whom GOD cannot employ in higher service - our poor character, our humdrum quality, preclude us from better engagement, unless some means be found of changing us completely.

(iii) What a step-up it would be if we became as silver vessels: yet even this is only second-best. In I Kings 10:21 we are told that "**all King Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house . . . were of pure gold: none were of silver; it was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon**" - good in its way. good up to a point, but second-best. Let me not, then, urge myself, or you, to strive after that; but, instead, as I Corinthians 12:31 says, "**Covet earnestly the best. . .**" - that is not silver, but gold.

I am sure we may say that GOD would have us all to be gold. Yes, but

(iv) Can this delightful improvement be effected: can "**wood**" ever hope to be other, or better? Well, look at some interesting and impressive words in Isaiah 9:17, "**For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass . . .**" Oh, blessed transmutation: that poor wood may move, through brass, and through iron, to silver, and even to gold itself. Notice it says "**I will**" do this: it is beyond our doing.

We have just to bring our wooden old selves to His hands, and ask Him to make us golden, and He will assuredly find a way of doing it. Let us, then, face up to the challenge which all this

brings: which of these is my true character? Am I satisfied to remain on that lower level? Shall I be prepared, at any cost, to hand myself over to Him, for His transforming touch and process? To His very earliest disciples He said (Matthew 4:19),

"Follow Me, and I will make you . . ." - they could not do it themselves. What was the secret of Moses' magnificent life? You will find it in 1 Samuel 12:6, **"The Lord . . . made Moses."**

First He made him safe; then He made him humble; next He made him willing; and so He made him successful.

Well might we make the prodigal's prayer our own,

"Make me . . ." (Luke 15:19) - Yes, one of His hired servants, a fisher of men, a veritable Moses, a vessel of gold.

We have here, also,

(b) A division of spiritual contrast - **"some to honour, and some to dishonour."** I am going here to break away from the customary exposition of these words - with every deference and without being in the least dogmatic. It is generally supposed that the honour mentioned is that of the vessel; but I am proposing to you that it is, more truly, the honour of the Master. Certainly, the former is not altogether absent, for **"them that honour Me, I will honour"**, as 1 Samuel 2:30 tells us; but the main thing is, not ours, but His glory.

(i) Some of the vessels are thus **"to honour"** - they are so clean, so bright, so beautiful, so useful, so valuable that they reflect glory upon Him to Whom they are so proud to belong. It was so with this very man who writes the words, for, after describing the revolutionary change that had been wrought by the Living CHRIST in his whole character and conduct, he adds, **"And they glorified GOD in me,"** Galatians 1:24. It was the Master, not the vessel, that had the honour. I have often thought what a soul-satisfying epitaph Paul's words would make; if only one could deserve them, what a glorious summing-up of one's life there would be.

(ii) Some of the vessels, however, are **"to dishonour"** - a cracked plate, a dirty cup: yes, a certain shame to themselves; who would want to use any such? But, what a dishonour to their owner! If, perchance, they find their way to his table. And talking about that dirty vessel, don't forget that it is not only the outward uncleanness that is so reprehensible. Remember the Lord'S own words to the woeful scribes and Pharisees, in Matthew 23:25, **"Ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within . . .!"** May we all be **"clean every whit,"** John 13:10. I suppose **"every whit"** means every bit.

Anything less than this is bound, in some measure, to bring discredit upon Him. Instead of being cracked or unclean vessels, let us seek to be both whole and wholesome, that we may take our places on the good side of this division.

Do you recall the story of the old vessels of the Temple: a most fascinating and most instructive story, in its spiritual applications. We might call it A Tale in Three Chapters

(i) Chapter I - I shall call, Dedicated. "**Solomon brought in the things which David his father had dedicated, even the silver and the gold and the vessels,**" I Kings 7:5 1: It was a great moment; as was that when you, too, were dedicated to the Lord, when you brought yourself - all you are, all you have - and gave yourself over into His hand, and prayed Him to take you and make you all that He would have you to be. That day of dedication will always be one of the red-letter days in your life, a day which - If you have loyally stood to it - has always stood out in your memory as one of your chief joys, for "**when the burnt-offering began, the song of the Lord began also,**" II Chronicles 29:27.

But, alas, a sad change comes over the story.

(ii) Chapter II - I shall call, Desecrated. First, in captivity, "**all the vessels of the house of God [Nebuchadnezzar] brought to Babylon**" II Chronicles 36:18. when, in shame, "**they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God, and the king, and the princes, and his wives, and his concubines drank wine in them**", Daniel 5:3. These vessels so happily dedicated to His service are now so terribly desecrated by His enemies. All too often has that happened in the spiritual history of believers - once so blessed, now so wretched; once so used of GOD, now so brought into the bondage of sin, and brought down into utter shame.

I think of one, as I write - oh, and another and: no, I mustn't go on thinking; it is all too sad. Rather would one turn humbly and prayerfully to the inspired injunction, "**Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall**", I Corinthians 10:12. Well, thank GOD this isn't the end of the story. The prodigal son, because he is a son, will one day find his way home again. The promise stands, "**I will heal their backsliding**", Hosea 14:4.

(iii) Chapter III - I shall call Delivered. "**All the vessels of gold and silver did Sheshbazzar bring up . . . from Babylon to Jerusalem,**" Ezra 1:11. There they are, back in the old place, ready at hand for all the old service - their sad wanderings over, their glad homecoming complete. If any of us is conscious of having strayed from all the keenness of that glorious dedication, and all the happiness of those early days of service, may we turn back to Him, that we may hereafter be as vessels of gold, bringing honour to His Name.

As we go back now to our passage, we feel how natural it is that this Father should write thus to his son. Like every father worth the name, he desires the very best for his boy. He would have him the very best kind of Vessel; he would have him become the very utmost use to others; and he would have him bring highest Honour to the Master. Timothy is a bishop, a leader of others, a man of high position and responsibility in the church - but even he needs the word of warning and exhortation.

There is an old saying that "The corruption of the best is the worst", so Satan is ever cunningly plotting to get the best, and unfortunately he sometimes succeeds. But whether among the bigger fish, or among the lesser fry, we all need give heed. Yet you will observe that, in our portion, the apostle is concerned to stress the possibility of improvement in our level of Christian experience and Christian service.

We may be but wood or earth, we may be dishonouring to the Master, but these things need not

be, this need not be the last word. There is always the tendency downwards; but whenever we find ourselves "**beginning to sink**" (Matthew 14:30), there is always the everready Hand stretched forth to answer our prayer, and meet our need. So Paul lays his emphasis not on the Vessel's descent to the lower levels, but on their ascent to the higher, and so in his verse 21 he deals with

THEIR ELEVATION - AND ITS SECRET

Look first at (a) The exaltation itself- "**he shall be a vessel unto honour**"; he had been very different, but that shall all be changed. Note the implications of this sublime alteration.

(i) "**Sanctified**" - that is to say, yielded. For the root idea of the word is not holiness, but set apart, or even dedicated; and, only in a secondary sense, holiness - holy, because that is the natural outcome of being set apart. Put aside, then, for Him, is the thought; but can He do anything with the said vessel? That brings us to

(ii) "**Meet for the Master's use**" - for the word translated "**meet**" means "*usable*." That cracked plate we talked about, or that dirty cup, would not be meet for His use; it would be quite unusable for such a Master. There is a whole lot that He will have to do to us before He can make us really usable to Himself. Up to a point He can use anybody, in any condition: GOD has often used utterly godless men to work out His purposes in the world. We see that in the Bible, as well as in the history of the Christian Church; but He can never use us to the full, never use us as He wills, until, and unless, we are made usable. Then

(iii) "**Prepared unto every good work**." A preacher accustomed to address large congregations may refuse an invitation to speak to a handful; yet this latter may be a most excellent piece of work. You see, he would be prepared unto every great work, but not unto every good work - for good work is sometimes only small work.

Philip, the evangelist, has been a vessel of life to multitudes of thirsty souls in the course of the great revival at Samaria, in Acts 8; but when he is required to leave all that, and to bear the Water to one needy soul, an "**eunuch**," passing through the desert, he is just as ready and eager. For him, big work, or small work, may be alike good work; and he is "**prepared**" for it either way.

Our Master Himself is so ready to spend, and be spent, for the crowds of inquiring folk at Sychar, in John 4; but He has already given Himself unsparingly to bring "**living Water**" to one poor, sinful, famishing woman.

Both the Lord and His disciple were "**prepared unto every good work**" - whether it be big, or little; whether it be alone, or in the limelight. Yes, the vessel that is to be "**unto honour**" must be prepared to be the pitcher for quenching a multitude, or just the "**cup of cold water**" for one little one, that Matthew 10:42 speaks about.

In the spiritual significance and application of all this, it is true to say that the vessel which is to be "**unto honour**" must learn to surrender completely its own volition - set apart, usable, ready for anything that comes within the Master's will; anything, anywhere, any time, any cost! "**I say**

to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it," Matthew 8:9.

Such is the ideal relationship between Master and vessel; such is the actual relationship to Him of those who have been transmuted into "**gold**," those who have been exalted to the "**honour**" class.

So much, then, for the exaltation itself; and now for

(b) The explanation thereof - "**if a man therefore purge himself from these.**" Here is the principle of separation: a not very popular subject, but one that is fundamental to all deeper usefulness.

The "**sanctified**" that we spoke of just now was a separation to - GOD; but part and parcel of that is this "**purge**", which is a separation from - all that is not of GOD. Whatever you or I may think of the matter, I suggest there can be no question that those whom GOD has most used in blessing other people are those in whom this "**separation from**" is an active principle.

There are those who do not, in this sense of the word, - purge themselves from anything - they do everything, go everywhere, exactly as people of the world do. It would not be right to say that GOD doesn't use such Christians; but it is indubitably true that He doesn't use them to the full, and as He uses those who are completely separated "all-out" for Him.

Such a separation does not mean that a Christian has got to be stand-offish, and aloof, and a bad "mixer." Was ever a man more friendly to all and sundry than "**the Man Christ Jesus**"? Yet Hebrews 7:26 describes Him as "**separate from sinners**," He Himself, in the course of His prayer for us, said, "**These are in the world . . . they are not of the world**" (John 17:11, 16) - in it, but not of it. Friendly, but free - seems the right attitude; and when we say "friendly" we mean no more than that, for we are not to make a friend of the world: that would, according to James 4:4, be clear enmity against GOD. Not friends, but friendly; and, with all our friendliness, free of all in them, and in their life and behaviour which is not of GOD.

It isn't only Sin that we are to purge ourselves from. That is, of course, a quite obvious duty - "**wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing**", says II Corinthians 6:17, adding the positive blessed consequence of such a clean-cut severance: "**and I will receive you.**"

There is also to be a separation from, a purging from, everything that ministers to self. Recall that advice to runners in the Christian race, in Hebrews 12:1, "**Let us lay aside every weight . . .**"

We have usually "looked upon those" weights" as the things in life which, while not in themselves actually wrong, are yet hindrances in running the race; but I am not too sure of this interpretation. The word for "**weight**" is a medical word, and refers to superfluous flesh; and I am inclined to think that this is a Training Rule, as if to say "Let us lay aside every ounce of superfluous flesh." That would be most germane to the context, for it is just what an athlete would attempt in his training to do.

If I am right in my exegesis here, when we are exhorted to see that Self be reduced to its minimum - Self being, perhaps, the Christian's biggest problem, and greatest hindrance.

One final thought we glean from our passage: It is from "these" that we are expected to purge ourselves. What does that little pronoun refer to? It seems evident that it is the "**wood and earth**", and the "**dishonour**," to which the word point. That is, the second-rate things and people. Let a man decide not to have his company amongst "the lower classes" of Christians; let him beware of those who are content with anything less than the best, or they will sooner or later drag him down to their poor level.

If a man, therefore, by a deliberate, specific, and complete act (such is the force of the Greek verb) cut himself clean from the life, the company, the habits, the outlook, the behaviour, of the second-rate, he is well on the way to becoming himself in the first-class, as represented by our word "**honour**." Be this our aim, and, by the Spirit, our attainment.

~ end of chapter 9 ~
