

2 Timothy 2:20-26

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Paul gives an analogy about the importance of living a clean life, to view one's self as belonging to a special purpose given by God. We are not plates made of wood or mud, we are like plates of gold and silver, meant for honorable use. Thus, Paul warns Timothy against lust, against idly talking about things that lead to arguments; rather he is to be loving and peaceful, patient and kind to the believers he teaches, gently correcting them and guiding them to truth.

Paul now expounds on the difference between faithful and unfaithful servants using an example of dishes. Paul notes *Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware.* The *gold and silver vessels* are used for special occasions. They are for *honor*. The fact that Paul specifies this is a *large house* tells us that the inhabitants are people of means. So they have dishes for honor, and dishes for every day.

The *vessels of wood and of earthenware* are for everyday use. If a guest comes to the house, to be served with *gold and silver vessels* would show *honor* to the guest. However, if a guest is served with *vessels of wood and of earthenware*, it would show them *dishonor*.

Paul now makes an analogy, with believers choosing what sort of vessel they want to be. Do they want to be a vessel that honors or dishonors their well-to-do Master? Will they desire to be a vessel of *gold and silver*, or a vessel of *wood and of earthenware*? Paul asserts that *Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.* The *these things* Paul desires *anyone* to cleanse themselves from refers back to the things Paul has exhorted Timothy to avoid:

- “not to wrangle about words” (2:14)
- “avoid worldly and empty chatter” (2:16)
- “Abstain from wickedness” (2:19)

Avoiding such things leads to *anyone* being *a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.* The Master with the “large house” in this illustration is God. God will fill up the vessels and serve them as He sees fit. If we are set apart, or *sanctified* by emptying ourselves of wickedness, God will fill them with goodness, and serve them to His people.

There are believers who are *useful to the Master*, and those who are not. The ones who are *useful* are like the faithful soldier, who does not entangle himself in daily affairs, and stays focused on the mission, in order to please his leader (2 Timothy 2:4). They are like the successful athlete, who follows the strict training regimen without cheating, and wins the prize (2 Timothy 2:5). They are like the hard-working farmer that keeps working until the harvest comes in, and is the first to get his share of the crops (2 Timothy 2:6).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul states that everyone who believes on Jesus is saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Each believers in Jesus is "...His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Jesus has already prepared good works for each believer. The question is "Will they walk in them, or not?"

Each believer who chooses to be a *vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work*, is prepared to walk in the works God planned for them. When we walk in the path Jesus created for us, we are *useful to the Master*. When we honor God with our service, He rewards us, as the military general, the Olympic judge, or the farm owner would reward their faithful servants. As he stated in 2 Timothy 2:12, the faithful servant who endures will get to share in Christ's reign.

Paul continues his admonition to Timothy, urging him to remain pure of wickedness, and remain faithful in his walk. He tells him *Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart*. Paul does want Timothy to endure in being faithful. A part of what is necessary to that end is to *flee from youthful lusts*. This of course tells us that Paul considered Timothy to be *youthful*. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy, "Let no one look down on your youthfulness" (1 Timothy 4:11). We don't know Timothy's age, but he was old enough to be a teacher in the church at Ephesus, and young enough to still be tempted by *youthful lusts*. Ephesus was a port city, so likely had plenty of temptations to appeal to *youthful lusts*.

Instead of pursuing things that would fulfill *youthful lusts*, Paul exhorts Timothy to *pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace*. Paul is saying all this to his most faithful disciple, who co-authored many epistles of scripture, and who teaches God's word in the church at Ephesus. That tells us that every believer needs this advice. We are continually presented with the choice of what to pursue. We can pursue *lusts* or *righteousness, faith, love and peace*.

Lusts are inwardly focused, and look to exploit others in order to satisfy our appetites. If we indulge these *lusts*, we become their slave. Unlike *lusts*, *righteousness, faith, love and peace* are externally focused, they are mission-driven. *Righteousness* is a person playing their role to serve the greater mission of the body (Romans 12). *Faith* has a focus on things we cannot see (Hebrews 11:1). *Love* here is "agape" in Greek, which is making value-based choices that serve the mission of serving God. Rather than being driven by appetites and urges, *agape love* sets those aside, and seeks the best for others. All these choices bring *peace*, both internally, in our souls, as well as externally, with others.

The last characteristic Paul desires for Timothy relates to who he spends time with. Paul wants Timothy to *pursue* spending time with *those who call on the Lord from a pure heart*. Rather than spending time hanging around with those who are appetite/lust focused, Paul admonishes Timothy to spend time with people that are God-focused. Their *heart* is *pure* in focusing on what really matters in life, which is to please God, and be *approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed*

Paul admonished Timothy to spend time with and “pursue” those who “call on the Lord from a pure heart.” Continuing his contrast between what is good to do and what is bad to do, Paul urges Timothy, *But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels*. Paul already mentioned “Hymenaeus and Philetus”, who were among those who had “gone astray from the truth saying that the resurrection has already taken place.” This was “worldly and empty chatter” that will “spread like gangrene.” Rather than engaging in *quarrels* with these types of folks, and entering with such *foolish and ignorant speculations*, Paul encourages Timothy to *be the Lord’s bond-servant*. The implication is that Paul wants Timothy to be an excellent, faithful *bond-servant*.

As the *Lord’s faithful bond-servant*, Timothy is to be *kind to all*. That would even include those who are unproductive and engage in *foolish and ignorant speculations*. Apparently the way for Timothy, or any faithful *bond-servant* to be *kind* to them is not to engage with them and accommodate their *foolish and ignorant speculations*. Perhaps to engage with them would be rewarding them for unproductive behavior. They might be speculating to draw attention to themselves, so best to not give them any attention. Better for them to ignore their speculations, and perhaps look for an opening to share the truth.

That is what Timothy is not to do, to engage in *quarrels*. What Timothy is to do is to continue to find “faithful men” to train in the things he learned from Paul. “Faithful men” who will in turn teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). Timothy is to focus on a high multiplication ministry, by spending his time and attention on the faithful, not the foolish. In addition to being *kind to all*, any *bond-servant* should be *able to teach*. This does not necessarily mean that to be a faithful *bond-servant* requires having teaching as a primary ministry, as appears to have been the case with Timothy. But it does mean that any faithful *bond-servant* needs to have sufficient command of the scriptures, and of how to do life constructively, to be *able to teach* others.

Further, anyone who wants to be useful, fruitful to the Lord as a faithful *bond-servant*, should be *patient when wronged*. Being *patient when wronged* requires one to avoid reacting. It means taking stock of all aspects of a situation, including putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. It requires thinking about the greater mission, and allowing God to be the judge, rather than “me.” It requires faith, faith that God will bring all things to justice.

It is worth noting that Paul allows that the person is actually *wronged*. He is not saying “you have no basis for offense.” He says to rise above the offense, and choose a perspective that this is an opportunity to advance the mission of serving others, including the one who offended.

To go along with this basic approach to life, Paul adds that *The Lord’s bond-servant must* not only avoid being *quarrelsome*, not only *be kind to all*, including those who offend, not only be *able to teach*, and be *patient when wronged*. In addition to this, *the Lord’s bond-servant* is to be about the business of *correcting those who are in opposition*. The preceding descriptors could be interpreted to say that the way to make peace is through compromise and avoidance. But that’s not what Paul has in mind. Paul’s ideal for *the Lord’s bondservant* is for them to be insistently cooperative in advancing the mission of the gospel. This is done fearlessly and selflessly, advancing what is true, and real.

All this is to be done without making the focus on “Me”. The focus is on the mission of leading people into *the knowledge of the truth*. Sometimes that means avoid, as in the case of those engaging in (likely self-promotional) “foolish and ignorant speculations.” But whenever possible, the goal is to look for opportunities to lead people into *the knowledge of the truth*. Completely missing in any of Paul’s instructions is any notion of worrying about “What others think about me.” The proper perspective is that God is watching, and the only thing that really matters is whether we please Him, for it is from Him we can gain any real and lasting reward.

There is a particular approach *the Lord’s bond-servant* should take when *correcting those who are in opposition*. That is to approach them in *gentleness*. The adjective form of the Greek word translated *gentleness* is used to describe Moses in the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and is translated “humble” which tells us much about what Paul has in mind here: “Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3).

There was certainly nothing timid or passive about the Moses that led Israel out of Egypt, and through the wilderness. If we think of *gentleness*, or humility as “seeing reality as it is” or “the capacity to see and act upon what is true” then we gain a good idea of what Paul has in mind by using the word translated *gentleness*.

- Moses had the humility to know his role in serving the mission, and he played that role faithfully, and persistently.
 - - The mission was to lead God’s people to become self-governing, under the rule of law given by God. To know the truth of God, and come to love and care for one another, rather than exploit one another, as was the custom among surrounding cultures (strong exploits the weak). In doing this, they would become a priestly nation, showing the world a better way.
 - Moses’s role in this mission was to be the leader, which meant to serve the mission regardless of the consequences.
 - One episode that makes clear Moses’s humility, (as defined by “seeing reality as it actually is”), and playing his role accordingly, is when God was ready to destroy all of the Israelites except for Moses, and start over in building a nation from Moses’s seed, in order to fulfill His promise to Abraham (Exodus 10:32-14).
 - In this episode, Moses stuck to his role, and interceded for the people in prayer. The same people who opposed him and resisted his leadership. He kept this mission first, setting aside self.
 - Moses pointed out to God that the mission to be an example to the surrounding cultures would be impaired if they saw the people die. They would conclude that God had failed. Again, mission first. God agreed, and forgave.

This view of what Paul has in mind by instructing *gentleness* or humility is validated by the result Paul hopes Timothy will have by *correcting those who are in opposition* (while maintaining an attitude of *gentleness*, or humility). The hoped for result of engaging in this corrective action, with humility, is that *perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth*. The goal is not emotional reconciliation. The goal is not absence of

conflict, or “having them like me.” The goal is *leading* those who are misled *to the knowledge of the truth*.

Of course having the *knowledge of the truth* does not mean the people being corrected will change their minds, and follow what is true, instead of what is false. It might even harden them. But Paul recognizes human freedom throughout his writings. Paul is adamant that each person chooses for themselves. Timothy’s job is not to “get the people to do what’s right.” Timothy can’t make choices for other people. Timothy’s job as a teacher is to lead people to *the knowledge of the truth*. Once they know *the truth*, then they can decide whether to change their mind, and believe what is true, or refuse and continue to believe perspectives that are untrue.

The word translated *repentance* in the phrase *perhaps God may grant them repentance* means “to change your mind.” Timothy’s assigned goal is not to coerce, it is to teach, and lead people to *the knowledge of the truth*. Whether or not they come to *repentance*, by deciding to adopt a perspective that is true, depends on God. Paul wants Timothy to present the truth, in humility, to provide an opportunity, that *God may grant them repentance*.

This shows a biblical paradox; it is normal for any truth to be paradoxical, because God is truth, and God is (from our finite, human perspective) paradoxical. In this case, Paul is clear that it is a choice made by the person, whether or not to *come to their senses*. They will decide this. At the same time, it is *God* who grants *repentance*. God is sovereign over all, and all things bend to His will. But simultaneously, humans have a choice that is real, and genuine. This is elevated by Solomon in Ecclesiastes.

Solomon calls using human reason and experience to sort out eternal truths “hebel” which means “vaporous.” It can be translated “vanity” because trying to grasp a handful of fog is useless. Solomon’s answer is to have faith in God, our creator. The paradoxical, fundamental truths of reality are beyond the human intellectual capacity to fathom, but we can know what is true through God’s help, and through faith. Paul has the same basic attitude. In Romans 11:33-34, he speaks of the “depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God” and says His ways are “unsearchable” and “unfathomable.” But they can also be known, because God reveals them to us. The question is, “Will we listen? Will we believe the word of truth, or the words of the world?”

In verse 15 of this chapter, Paul gave Timothy an admonition to be a man who is “accurately handling the word of truth.” This is vital, in order for Timothy to be an agent to bring the “knowledge of the truth” to “those in opposition” that they might have the opportunity to see what is true, and make a decision to change their perspective.

The result of shifting perspective from one that is false, to one that is true is that we *escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will*. The devil can hold any believer *captive* such that the believer does *his will* rather than God’s through getting them to embrace perspectives that are untrue. Paul gave numerous examples in this chapter of true perspectives, which infer the false alternative. A few are listed below:

- A true perspective is that suffering hardship as a soldier of Jesus, engaging in conflict to advance truth (with humility) in order to please Him, is what is in our true self-interest. (2 Timothy 2:4).
 - An opposing, false perspective is that believers ought to seek and retain comfortable circumstances, and avoid conflict.
- A true perspective is that it is in our true self-interest to deliberately buffet our bodies like an elite athlete, and work diligently to advance the truth of the gospel, and live its tenants, in order to win the greatest prize of life (2 Timothy 2:5).
 - An opposing, false perspective is that believers ought to seek and retain comfort, and avoid strenuous effort in advancing what is true through the way we live and speak.
- A true perspective is that our true self-interest is served by being like a hard-working farmer, who continues to work all the way until the harvest, in order to receive a reward.
 - An opposing, false perspective is that believers are entitled to gain a reward, so are not required to strive.

Each of these perspectives lead us to gain the greatest prize of life, which is to reign with Christ. This is what we were made for, as Psalm 8 describes. Accordingly, to gain this is to gain the deepest possible fulfillment. And if we choose to adopt the false perspective, we adopt a *snare of the devil*. We are like a rabbit, caught in a *snare*. We can't do what we were made to do. We are *held captive*, because we chose to be shaped by a perspective that is untrue. As a result, we end up doing *his will*.

Satan is a liar and murderer (John 8:44). His will is for us to believe his lies, which leads us to death. Death is separation. Satan cannot separate believers from being the child of their Father. Believers are children of God, and will never be rejected by their Heavenly Father; nothing can separate a child of God from the love of God. God's children have God as an inheritance regardless of their actions (Romans 8:39; Romans 8:17a).

However, by deceiving us to believe perspectives that are not true, Satan can separate us from our greatest self-interest. Our true self-interest is fighting like a soldier for what is true, in humility and service, as "the Lord's bond-servant." Paul has adopted a mindset that is true, and eternal.

We might note that Paul had several supernatural encounters that allowed him to actually know some of these things about heaven because he had been there, rather than only knowing them by faith. He had a personal encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). But Paul also appears to have gone to heaven and seen things there that he was not allowed to speak of (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). So it might be that his urgent tone to Timothy is because he really knows how enormous our choices are, and desperately desires to lead us to understand, for our own benefit.

Of course, due to his increased knowledge, his accountability might have been greater. But for those of us who do not see but believe, there can be even greater reward (John 20:29).

Biblical Text

²⁰ Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. ²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these *things*, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. ²² Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. ²³ But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. ²⁴ The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, ²⁵ with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.