

8th Sunday after Pentecost July 31, 2022

VESSELS USEFUL FOR THE MASTER

2 Timothy 2:19-26

Scripture Readings

1 Peter 5:1-11

Matthew 7:13-29

Hymns

466, 416, 409, 52

Hymns from The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) unless otherwise noted

+ *In the Name of Jesus Christ* +

Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife. And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.

Dearly Beloved Fellow Believers,

In our text, Paul speaks of useful vessels, useful containers. What is it that makes a container useful? Consider for example a container for water. It needs to be able to hold the water that is poured into it; it shouldn't have any holes or cracks that would allow the water to leak out. A useful container for water also should have a cover to keep out whatever would contaminate it or give it a bad taste. Most important of all, to be useful a container has to have room in it; it has to be able to accommodate what is poured into it. A container full of something else is clearly not useful for storing or carrying water.

These features of useful containers are helpful to keep in mind as we study these words of Paul to Timothy, for here Paul uses the picture of a vessel or container to describe disciples of Jesus Christ. It's a picture that Paul uses especially to describe ministers of the gospel, for these words were addressed to Timothy, a young pastor. But the picture of a container also applies to all believers, for all of us who know and believe the gospel are vessels, containers holding something very precious.

Our text helps us to value what God the Holy Spirit has given us. It teaches us the privilege and the responsibility that is ours because we have in our hearts the knowledge of Jesus Christ and the salvation and life that is in Him. It teaches us that God has a purpose in making us vessels for His Gospel. We are to glorify Him and be a blessing to others. Knowing this, we want to be the kind of vessel that Paul describes here: ***“a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master.”***

That we may be such vessels, we consider the characteristics of useful vessels that Paul outlines for us here.

THAT WE MAY BE VESSELS USEFUL FOR THE MASTER

Let us purify ourselves

Paul’s remarks here about useful vessels are part of an admonition to Timothy to be careful and faithful as he teaches God’s word. Timothy should be careful to avoid arguments over useless questions, what Paul calls ***“profane and vain babblings”*** (chap. 2:16), trying to answer questions that the Bible doesn’t answer. Where the Bible does not speak, discussions are not only useless but end in strife and division. Paul also gives an example of what he is talking about, an actual case involving two men whom Paul mentions by name: Hymenaeus and Philetus. They were spreading some error about the resurrection and overthrowing the faith of some (chap. 2:17,18).

But believers should not be shaken by such things, Paul says. Even if some stray from the truth of God’s word, ***“Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands.”*** Christ and the Gospel of forgiveness of sins and eternal life remain unchanged, they are the solid foundation on which we can stand. Paul speaks of this foundation as having a two-part inscription on it: the first part is ***“The Lord knows those who are His.”*** He knows who believes in Him and who doesn’t. He also knows us who believe in Him in this sense that recognizes us as His own and will acknowledge us as His own on the Day of Judgment.

The second part of the inscription on God’s solid foundation is ***“Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”*** This is the part that Paul goes on to talk about here. Those who call themselves by the name Christian are to depart from iniquity. To follow Christ is to live a life of repentance and striving against temptation and sin. Christ has nothing in common with iniquity. We can’t follow Christ and at the same time in our hearts hold onto old sins.

To make this point Paul uses the imagery of the Christian as a vessel, a container into which the Gospel has been poured. Vessels for such precious contents need to be purified if they are to be useful for the Master. We should not take for granted that we are useful vessels for Christ just because we are called Christians and are part of an assembly of Christians. All the people in a Christian congregation can be compared to the vessels in a large household. A large household has lots of vessels of various kinds. Some of them are made of gold and silver but others are made of common materials such as wood and clay. Some of the vessels are used for honor but others for dishonor. Some of them are fine pieces fit for serving food, but others are containers fit only for trash or dirty water. People who are Christians ***in name only*** are vessels for dishonor; they are filled, not with the Gospel but with sin and corruption, and they are certainly not useful for the Master. May it be our desire to be vessels for honor, useful to Christ for His work. By this we don’t

mean, of course, that we can be people who never do anything wrong. We are people who purify themselves by repentance and who strive for holiness, who gladly hear and learn God's word and rejoice in the Gospel of forgiveness and salvation.

Let us be mindful of our humble station

To be a vessel useful to the Master is to occupy a humble place. A vessel for honor, even one made of gold or silver, is still a vessel for the Master of the house to use as He wishes. The picture is a humbling one. A vessel doesn't really do anything, it just holds what is poured into it. By itself it is empty. It is useful only if something of value is poured into it.

By ourselves we are only empty vessels. In fact, we aren't even that! Without Christ we are vessels filled with sin and corruption. It is Christ who has cleansed us and the Holy Spirit who has filled us with God's grace, with faith and good works.

This knowledge keeps us humble before God and before other people. This was certainly true of the apostle Paul. He spoke of himself and his fellow workers in the Gospel as "**earthen vessels**," containers made of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7). They carried in themselves the treasure of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word of life. But they themselves were mortal, fragile, weak. This served a divine purpose: people would be able to see that the power of the Gospel was God's power.

Here in our text Paul reminds Timothy that he is God's vessel. Paul teaches him to conduct himself humbly as he went about the work of the ministry. He should remember at all times that he was "**a servant of the Lord**," not a master but a servant. As a humble servant he should be "**gentle to all, able to teach, patient**." A Christian pastor should work to advance the congregation not by harshness but by gentleness, by patient teaching.

We notice here that Paul tells Timothy to be gentle and patient even when dealing with "**those who are in opposition**." Timothy should remember that these were precious, blood-bought souls who had been led astray by the devil. His purpose should not be to be rid of them but to lead them back into the truth. He should correct them but do so "**in humility**."

What Paul says to Timothy surely applies to all believers. We are to remember our humble state, that we are the Lord's vessels. This will help us to be gentle and patient in our dealings with others, whether it is people at work, our children, parents, siblings, or fellow believers in a Christian congregation.

Let us value the fellowship of believers

There is something else that Paul mentions here that can help us in being and remaining vessels useful for the Master. It's something that could easily escape our notice. It's something that is often neglected, not thought to be very important. It is the practice of fellowship with fellow believers.

Notice what Paul says here to Timothy. He is to “*flee youthful lusts.*” He is to be careful not to be carried away by those desires that are a special problem of the young. This is not just sexual desire—though that is certainly included here. Youthful lusts also include the desire for material things, exciting experiences, and the company of exciting young people. It is tempting to young people who are full of life and energy to want to do it all. They have such an exciting array of activities and experiences before them that Bible study and worship may seem rather tame and kind of dull by comparison. Bible Study often involves sitting quietly when they want to be physically active. It involves getting up and going to church after Saturday night, the night of the week that they like to stay up late and have fun with their friends. It involves associating with middle-aged and elderly people when they may prefer the company of young people like themselves. But Paul encourages Timothy, “*pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace.*” Spend some energy pursuing these things which are lasting and truly worth having.

What Paul says to Timothy here is instruction for all of us to take to heart, regardless of our age. All of us do well to “*pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace*” and to do so “*with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*” These are our fellow believers, the people in our church, for Paul’s language here is a reference to the gathering of the congregation for worship. The expression “to call on the Lord” in the Bible doesn’t just refer to private prayer but to public worship. Our fellow believers are a diverse collection of imperfect people. What makes them special to us is that they are believers who call on the Lord. We should be glad to be in their company. We can draw strength and comfort from one another as we sing hymns together, hear the Word of God together, speak the Creed together, and in the conversations that we have after the service.

As we strengthen and encourage one another and grow together in the Word we serve our purpose as vessels useful for the Master. The faith, the knowledge that God has poured into us is not just for ourselves, but it is also to be dispensed, to be shared. Unlike water in a vessel, what we have from God is not depleted as it is dispensed, rather it grows.

May God who has made us vessels for His use continue to fill us with His grace that we may be ever more useful to Him and a blessing to many. Amen.

—**Pastor Em. John Klatt**

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