



Pursue Purity and Peace

SERIES: *A Life That Counts: Studies in 2 Timothy*

When I became a Christian at the age of 17, I immediately felt two strong emotions. The first emotion was just this sense that I was loved; that no matter what happened to me nothing could change the fact that God loved me. The second emotion was a passion to serve him; I had this sense that He wanted to use me and there was nothing I wanted more than to see that happen in my life.

I don't think I'm unique in this. As I talk to people and watch people who have entered into a relationship with Jesus Christ, it's clear that the desire to be an instrument used by God is an instinct he places in each of his children. Like a baby is wired to suck, it's part of our spiritual DNA.

We see this in Saul of Tarsus who would come to be known as Paul the Apostle. Right after Paul became a Christian God sent him into the city of Damascus, to the house of a man named Judas. While Paul was on his way there, the Lord told another man named Ananais to go to there as well because Saul of Tarsus would be waiting for him there. Ananais had heard about Saul, and so he said to the Lord, "I know all about this guy. He's done a lot of harm to your people. And he's come here to throw us in jail. Now you want me to go meet him?" But the Lord said to Ananais, "**Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.**" (Acts 9:15). From the very start God desired to use Saul, and he desires to use us. It's part of our hardwiring as believers.

But sometimes this desire can be short circuited. We can be distracted by other things. We can be ensnared by some sin that makes us spiritually anemic. We can even make our own ministry an idol so that what

we call serving God is really serving ourselves.

I think of Samson. While he was still in his mother's womb, the angel of the lord told her that God would use him in a special way, to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. Samson's future was bright, and God did use him, but not like he could have. The story of Samson is a sad story of potential that is wasted on pursuits that are petty. Like Esau, we can start out with a wonderful birthright but end up with a pot of porridge.

That was true for Timothy as well. When Paul wrote to him, Timothy was still a young man. The last half of the story of his life had yet to be written. Timothy started well. On one occasion Paul said of him, "I have no else I can trust. No one else who is really interested in serving God." But now Timothy's desire was barely flickering. Paul writes him and tells him to fan the flame; to rekindle the gift of God which was in him.

But how would he do that? How do we do that? What will we have to do to be used by God? In 2 Timothy 2:20-26 Paul is answering that question and he gives us some mental pictures to help us with what it takes to keep the flame of serving Christ burning strong.

1. The vessel for honor must have a pure heart (vv. 20-22).

He says in v. 20 that the church is like a large house, and "**in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor.**"

When we read this we think on the one hand of our everyday dishes and on the other of the fine china we only bring out for special occasions. There is the mismatched forks and knives we use to eat beans and weenies, and then there is the fine silver we bring out for Christmas dinner. Maybe the church is like that. Some saints are more like the beat up everyday stuff, while others are special and used for more honorable purposes. Both are needed, but they have different functions.

But most scholars agree that Paul is not talking about two kinds of dish ware. When he talks about vessels of gold and silver, he's probably talking about what wealthy families would use to dine and entertain. But when he talks about wood and clay vessels he's talking about buckets and jars that were used to dispose of garbage and human waste. That's why he says, "...some honor and some to dishonor."

Timothy was leading a church that was a mixed bag. It was like a large house with all kinds of people inside. It had many sincere followers of Christ within, but it also had some people who were teaching lies. Up in v. 17 he identified two of these men, Hymenaeus and Philetus. It was men like this that Paul had in mind when he spoke of vessels of dishonor. The church has always been a mixed bag. When someone tells you that they stay away from the church because it's full of hypocrites there is some truth in that. Jesus said in the kingdom of God there will be some wheat and there will be some weeds. You can't help that. But just because there are some weeds doesn't mean you give up on farming. And just because there are some vessels of dishonor doesn't mean you leave home.

So what we to do? Paul says in v. 21, **"If a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work."** Obviously you want to separate the good stuff that you eat off from that

other stuff. You want to keep the dishes clean. That way they can be set apart, useful to the master of the house, prepared to be picked up and used. The greatest honor a person can have is to be set apart, useful to the Master, ready for him to pick you up and use you for his purposes, But for that to happen you have to cleanse yourself from certain things. What "things" is he talking about? He's talking about teachers like Hymenaeus and Philetus, who deny what is basic and fundamental to the gospel. Most of all, he's talking about purifying ourselves from their error and their evil; to purge their falsehood from our hearts and lives.

In v. 22 he tells us how to do that. He says, **"Flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."** For years Christians have quoted this verse as a way to deal with the strong sex drive that goes along with being a young man. You have to flee from the temptation, we say. Like Joseph running away from Potipher's wife, you have to get out of there! It sounds good and it's true, but that's not what Paul is talking about. The word "lust" is a word for strong desire of any kind. From the context, it's clear Paul is talking the headstrong desires of youth. He's talking more about youthful self-assertion than about youthful self-indulgence. There is a kind of arrogance, impatience and harshness that goes along with the young. There is an argumentative spirit. Flee those things. The word Paul uses for "flee" is the word we get our word "fugitive" from. We're to be on the run from these things, avoiding capture.

When I came to CPC 17 years ago, I had just come out of the cemetery (I mean seminary). I think for the most part seminary is a good thing. But it takes a few years to thaw out from the experience. Most guys right out of seminary know too much for their own good. I used to love to debate issues. I used to love to prove that my theology was better than yours. I used to love to preach on the most difficult passages just so I could show I knew my stuff. One day Jeff Farrar approached me and asked, "Why do you always preach on the hardest and most obscure parts of the

Bible? Why don't you just keep it simple?" Now I can see that the answer to his question is that I was young and I was proud and I liked showing how clever I was with the Scripture.

Paul says that's the kind of youthful desire to flee from. But we're not just to run *from* something, we're to run *to* something else. We're to pursue purity, which he defines as righteousness, faith, love, peace. Righteousness is godly conduct. Faith is simple trust in God. Love is sacrificial caring for people, even people who are hard to care for. And peace is harmony with all those who call on the Lord. It boils down to purity. If you want to be used of God, you have to have a pure heart.

2. The Lord's bondservant must have a peaceful spirit (vv. 23-26).

But that's not all. You also have to have a peaceful spirit. Look at vv. 23-26.

"But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, 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."

Now Paul moves to a new image. The vessel in the house becomes a bondservant or a slave in the house. The Lord's bondservant should stay away from speculations and controversies that by their very nature produce quarrels. He says they're foolish and they're stupid. Avoid them. Shun them. Refuse to discuss them.

Instead, we're to have a peaceful spirit. He uses a number of words to describe this spirit. A peaceful spirit is "kind to all." The word means gentle or mild like a nursing mother with her infant. A peaceful spirit is "able to teach."

The idea here is to be able to calmly explain the truth without losing your composure. A peaceful spirit is also "patient when wronged." The idea is to bear evil without resentment. To put up with people who are unfair and critical and hard to get along with. Finally, a peaceful spirit won't necessarily agree with everyone, but "with gentleness correct those in opposition." This word for gentle means meek. Meekness is not weakness, but rather strength under control. With the correction comes a humble and gentle manner.

Unfortunately, Christians don't always exhibit this kind of spirit. I heard a story about a truck driver who stopped at the old Cloud 9 Restaurant on Highway 17 for something to eat. He ordered a steak sandwich, a cup of coffee, and a piece of pie. Just as the order arrived, two Hells Angels drove up on their motorcycles and parked them outside the door. The counter was crowded, and the only seats available were on either side of the truck driver. They sat down and were annoyed because he didn't move over. One reached over and took the truck driver's steak sandwich and began to eat it. The truck driver looked at him, but didn't say a word. Then the other one took his pie and began to eat that. Still no comment. He smiled at the two men, rose from his seat, paid his bill, and got in his truck. One Angel said to the other, "That's a remarkable man. He must be a Christian. That's the way Christians act." The other one said, "Well, if he is, he's certainly a good one." About that time the first Angel turned around and looked out the window and saw the man driving his truck away. He said, "He may be a good Christian, but he's a terrible truck driver. He just ran over our motorcycles."

That's an old story. Unfortunately, because of some things that have happened in the last 20 or 30 years, I don't think Christians are known for being peaceful today. We're known more for being angry. A writer from *Sojourners Magazine* makes this observation, "When people on the streets are asked,

What is a Christian?...on nearly every occasion words come back such as antiabortion, antigay, antifeminist, anti-welfare, anti-this, anti-that. And words like harsh, self-righteous, intolerant, or mean-spirited. Yet another poll of people, asked what they think Jesus was like, almost universally returns with words like compassionate, nonviolent peacemaker, and reconciler. How do we explain the contradictions here? Either the popular conception of Jesus is mistaken, or we in the church have been following the wrong agenda."

It's true. Jesus spoke the truth but he wasn't combative. Jesus described himself as "**gentle and humble in heart**" (Mt. 11:29). When he came into Jerusalem for the last time of his earthly life, we're told he came "**meek, and mounted on a donkey**" (Mt. 21:5). Isaiah describes the Messiah, who he calls "the servant of God," as one who was so meek that he wouldn't raise his voice, and so sensitive that he would deal gently with people whose courage and faith were like a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick. When people rose up against him, he gave them his back to smite and his face to those who spat on him. He was like a silent unresisting sheep that is led to slaughter (Is. 42:2; 50:4, 6; 53:7).

One of the things that will help us operate with a peaceful spirit is to remember that it's God who grants repentance. That's what Paul says in v. 25. It's God who grants repentance and God who brings a person to their senses. It's not up to us. If we try to force it and lose our composure that's going to get in the way.

It also helps to remember that these people aren't the enemy; they're the victims of the enemy. Paul says they're being held captive by him to do his will. If we understood that, we would shout less at them. We would pray more for them. And rather than being mad at them, we would have compassion on them.

CONCLUSION

If you want to be used of God, you must have both a pure heart and a peaceful spirit.

Ray Stedman tells the story of the time when he and a colleague attended a meeting of the Gay Student Union at Stanford. Two prominent gay speakers were featured. One was a woman who was a professor at San Francisco State University, the other a young man, who had been ordained to the ministry. They were speaking on the subject, "Homosexuality in the Church." There were about a hundred students there and they listened for about an hour to these two speakers. The woman was very vitriolic. She denounced the church. She said that it had to be destroyed; it was the enemy of human liberty and freedom.

The young man was milder in his approach. He told of his own desire to find a place within the church, but of how he had been mistreated because of misunderstanding on the part of others. Ray noticed one thing in particular as he spoke. He referred several times to Jesus and his ministry with people. He talked about how compassionate he was towards the woman at the well. Whenever this young man spoke of Jesus, it was with great respect and obvious admiration.

After an hour or so of this, Ray felt that it was time to say something to the group. So he identified himself, and said, "I can agree with much that has been said about the church, but I don't think you have come to grips with the real issue - the stance of Christianity toward homosexuality. The nearest you came was when this young man spoke of Jesus and his stance toward the woman at the well.

You were right that Jesus did not castigate her or denounce her or turn his back on her. Nevertheless he did speak to her about her condition - having lived with five husbands, and now living with a man who was not her husband. He then offered her release, relief. I think this is the true Christian position. Homosexuality is very injurious; it destroys people. Jesus understands that, but he doesn't want to denounce people or drive them away; he wants to offer to them a way out."

Ray later reflected on that meeting with these words, "As I looked at that roomful of young people, I did not see a room full of lesbians and faggots, though they were calling themselves those names. I saw some hungry, mixed-up, stunted, fragmented, and hurting young people, wanting somehow to find the secret of life, thinking they had found it, but on a wrong track, and destroying themselves in the process... The stance of the church toward those who are involved in wrongful and evil things is never to be one of denunciation. It is never to be one of stigmatizing and of rejecting. It is to be one of open-armed acceptance, but with an honest evaluation of what is going on, and the offer of the way of release.

That's what we're being called to in this passage - a pure heart and a peaceful spirit. That's the kind of person God will use.

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