

## “Fit for the Master’s Use”

2 Timothy 2:20–26

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### Introduction

What is holiness? There is God’s “apartness from all that is created, a holiness of majestic transcendence,” and “God’s separation from all that is ethically unclean, a holiness of moral purity”<sup>1</sup> that we are to attempt today. Briefly put, holiness is “the simple idea of separation or apartness.”<sup>2</sup>

“I have had a deep conviction for many years that practical holiness and entire self-consecration to God are not sufficiently attended to by modern Christians in this country. Politics, or controversy, or party spirit, or worldliness, have eaten out the heart of lively piety in too many of us. The subject of personal godliness has fallen sadly into the background.”<sup>3</sup>

J.C. Ryle spoke these words almost 140 years ago (1879). We could apply his words on holiness to God’s people today. Today’s conference is “a call to holiness.”

Today is also conference with speakers who are not big men, but “little men with a big God,” to borrow the words of Robert Ketcham.<sup>4</sup> We are younger men, and our names may be unfamiliar to some of you. So you can trust that anything of value is all in the message and not in us as the messengers, especially as we speak in our unglorified states about an infinitely holy God. As Moses said, “The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away” (Ps 90:10).<sup>5</sup> Personally, I am half of seventy, the others not much older, and our task today is nonetheless to “Strive... for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). Our call to holiness is “from a rising generation.”

And, I hope that those who listen and have as many years ahead of you as behind, Lord willing, that when we are done addressing the topic of holiness, we could say of you and echo the words of Paul: “what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2).

Finally, in carrying out our task today, I hope that in teaching what we have been taught, we show our own teachers honor and fulfill the words of Moses in Lev 19:32: “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.” So also we remember Heb 13:7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

So, I have nothing new to say. I say what I’ve heard said, and I believe these things with my whole heart, soul, and might as they are what God Himself said through men by the Holy Spirit long ago.

For my hour to begin the day, let’s hear from one of these men and see what he as an older man taught a younger man of holiness during the days of the early church. Please turn with me to 2 Timothy 2:20–26. We will look especially at 2:20–21 and briefly at 2:22–26.

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<sup>1</sup> Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 246.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Holiness* (1879; reprint, Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1999), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Bauder, *One in Hope and Doctrine* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2014), 259, citing the *Baptist Bulletin*, May 1938, 3–4.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the ESV. Quotations from the primary text are underlined.

## 1. Cleansed for Honorable Use (2:20–21)

### a. The Picture (2:20)

i. In this passage, Paul calls Timothy to holiness and being cleansed for honorable use by giving him a picture. 2 Tim 2:20 speaks of a great house with different kinds of vessels and describes the nature of those vessels.<sup>6</sup> 2 Tim 2:21 briefly continues this pictured with a mention of the Master of the house as well. Before giving our attention to the vessels, I believe it is helpful to look first at their Master.

1. Christ is the Master of the house (cf. 2 Pet 2:1 “the Master who bought them”; Jude 4 “our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ”), which means that He is the head of the church (cf. Eph 1:22; 1 Tim 3:15).
2. In considering how He speaks through Paul of the vessels in His House, we must remember that He is holy.
  - a. After quoting Isa 6:10, John said Isaiah “saw *His* glory” (John 12:41), i.e., the glory of the Son of God (cf. John 12:37, “Jesus”), who Isaiah saw in Isa 6:1 (“the Lord sitting upon a throne”) and heard described by the seraphim in this way, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isa 6:3). (How can we speak of the holiness of God without mentioning Isaiah 6?)
  - b. And let’s not forget that He “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Moreover, “For our sake he [the Father] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21)
  - c. As John saw Him most recently, His hair is white (Rev 1:14), showing His wisdom, yes, but purity and holiness, too—His eyes of fire see all things, good and bad alike (Rev 1:14), and His feet like burning bronze purify and burn away chaff as He walks in the midst of the lampstands which are the churches of God (Rev 1:15).

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<sup>6</sup> Other passages speak of vessels for other reasons: (1) Jer 18:1–11 – Just as a potter can rework spoiled clay into another vessel (Jer 18:1–3), so also can God relent of destroying or building up a nation, based upon its repentance or evil towards Him (Jer 18:4–11). (2) Rom 9:20–23 – Just as molded clay has no right to question the potter who shapes it for one purpose or another (Rom 9:20–21), so also God is sovereign to endure and punish those who reject Him and show His glory in mercy to others (Rom 9:22–23). (3) 2 Cor 4:7 – We are but jars of clay, showing that the power of the treasured gospel that we bear is all of God and not us. But 2 Tim 2:20 does not immediately bring up notions of blessing or judgment (cf. Jer 18), the sovereignty of God in salvation (cf. Rom 9), or the power of God in using the weak to spread the gospel (cf. 2 Cor 4).

- d. But let us go further. Consider the Father and Spirit, who with the Son make up the Holy Trinity. With a reference for every description, the Father, whose name is holy (Ps 30:4; Isa 57:15) dwells in His holy heaven (Ps 20:6), which is His holy habitation (Ps 63:15). There He sits on His holy throne (Ps 47:8) and works salvation with His holy arm (Ps 98:1). In the OT, the nation Israel was to be holy (Exod 19:6; Lev 20:6) as He is holy (Lev 11:44). Israel had Moses, Joshua, and judges who were empowered by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Sam 16:13; Ps 51:11), who in turn empowered kings who were anointed with holy oil (Ps 89:20) and ruled from Zion, God's holy hill (Ps 2:6). Israel also had priests who were holy to their God (Lev 21:6–8) and served in a holy temple (Ps 5:7). Their high priest was obviously to be holy and also anointed with holy oil (Num 35:25). Wearing holy garments, he alone met with God once a year in the Holy of Holies (Lev 16:3–4). Israel lived in the holy land (Ps 78:54) according to the holy promise that God made to Abraham long ago (Ps 105:42; cf. Gen 12:1–3, 7). Though Israel is away from God in our present age, He will pour out His Holy Spirit upon the nation at the end of our age (Ezek 36:26–27) and the nation will be known as a holy people again (Dan 12:7). Until then, as God intended and intends for Israel to be, so also are we to be holy as He is holy (1 Pet 1:16), offer spiritual sacrifices as His holy priesthood (1 Pet 2:5), and be as a holy nation (1 Pet 2:9). We are to have honored Christ the Lord in our hearts as holy (1 Pet 3:15). Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 6:19), and we are collectively as Christians the holy temple of God (1 Cor 3:17).
3. With a survey such as this—seeing that the Master of the House is holy, as is His Father and the Spirit—it is no surprise that He would be as God has always been—utterly concerned that those who are His people would be as He is and thus set apart as holy, useful in His house, and ready for every good work!
- ii. Towards that end, we look at the vessels in the house and which are holy and which are not—ἀλλά (but) contrasts gold/silver with wood/clay and corresponds to honorable and dishonorable. Thus, 2 Tim 2:20 contrasts...
1. Vessels for honorable use (gold and silver) – these vessels are put on display and used for things such as public meals.
- with...
2. Vessels for dishonorable use (wood and clay) – these vessels were made of cheap, disposable material and used for common tasks such as private meals, or worse, tasks like disposing of garbage or even excrement, being thrown away with their content.

## b. The Point (2:21)

- i. Therefore brings us to a conditional statement (if) that seems to function as an implicit command (“cleanse yourself”), giving 3 promising statements about the one who obeys the command, all of which seem to be the thrust of 2:20–26.
- ii. If anyone cleanses himself from what, or better, from these (KJV; τούτων is plural in 2:21), i.e., these dishonorable vessels and thus false teachers (cf. 2 Tim 2:17–18, “Hymenaeus and Philetus”), such a one will be (here are 3 descriptions)...
  1. Set apart as holy – purified from uncleanness, set apart for a special task
  2. Useful to the master of the house – Like Mark in 2 Tim 4:11 (“very useful to me for ministry”) and Onesimus in Phm 11 (“useful to you and to me”), the Master can use us.
  3. Ready for every good work – prepared by cleansing, ready for maintaining, growing, and cleaning and doing whatever the Master needs.
- iii. The cleansing here is not washing a particular vessel but rather separating it from the vessels that are unclean. Our company is found instead with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart (2 Tim 2:22).
- iv. My generation, I believe, in churches that have a heritage of practicing ecclesiastical separation, can be tempted to take this kind of cleansing for granted—of course (I would hope) we will not be shelved with vessels of dishonor, i.e., with those who, like Hymanaeus and Philetus who denied the resurrection and thus a fundamental of the faith (2 Tim 2:17–18), deny any fundamental of the faith and are thus unbelievers. This kind of separation is “Separation over matters of **high-handed sin** and **heresy** [that] carries with it an absolute censure, meaning that the perpetrator is excluded from the body and regarded as an *unbeliever*, irrespective of his claims to the contrary” (emphases original).<sup>7</sup> We could add to 2 Tim 2:20–21 passages such as Matt 18:17–18, 1 Cor 5:1–11, Rom 16:17–18, Gal 1:6–9, 2 John 9–10, Jude 3–4, and 2 Cor 6:14–17.<sup>8</sup> In terms of 2 Tim 2:20–21, a heretic or flagrant sinner may claim to be in the house, but we will not honor that claim in light of his heresy or sin, and we will separate ourselves and our churches from him, and from his church or ministry if it willingly claims him as a Christian.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Snoeberger, “Evangelical Theology: Class Notes” (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 76.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 76–77

- v. Perhaps the more pressing question for my generation today, and what those who have gone before us might like to ask, is—**how will you maintain the purity of the church with those who will not separate themselves from unbelievers?** In answering this question, some prefer to speak of “secondary separation” or perhaps “familial separation.” I will quote my friend—there is another kind of separation, that being “Separation over ‘**indifferentism**,’” which “involves the passive failure to obey the biblical command to separate from heresy (e.g., Rom 16:17; Phil 3:17–19; and 2 John 10)” (emphases original).<sup>9</sup> I personally prefer to describe the concept of separating from any believer, church, or ministry who does not separate from unbelief as *a direct censure* towards a disobedient brother or brothers.
- vi. And then, of course, there is separation for other things—one more quote—“Separation over matters of **non-essential doctrine, ministerial philosophy and priorities, church practice, and ministerial competence**, while carrying the idea of censure, do not carry with them the idea of *absolute* censure (i.e., they do not demand that the violator be regarded as an unbeliever)” (emphases original).<sup>10</sup> E.g., Acts 15:36–41 and 2 Thess 3:6–15.
- vii. So, in looking at 2 Tim 2:20–21, we separate (1) from unbelief—and beyond 2 Tim 2:20–21 in Scripture—(2) from those who embrace unbelief or fail to separate therefrom, and (3) from others over significant matters if necessary as well. In short, we separate from those who, as best we can discern, disbelieve, disobey, or disagree over significant issues.
- viii. What does this cleansing and separation look like? McCune gives a general picture—it can involve “Sometimes a church, or pastor’s fellowship, or a missionary organization, or a church association, or a Christian school.... The group itself may have a strong fundamentalist (and even separatist) statement of faith and practice, but overlooks or refuses to deal with its problems. If, after the passing of reasonable time, and appropriate biblical confrontation, it is apparent that the organization is unable or unwilling to put its house in order, then the Bible believing separatist has no recourse but to withdraw. Nevertheless, the hope is for the erring organization to be restored, and that in the interim others will take a similar stand against compromise and will also withdraw as a testimony to the truth of ecclesiastical separation and of the original position of the organization’s founders.”<sup>11</sup>
- ix. I hope that I and others never have to go through this kind of thing, but would be willing to do so if necessary.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Rolland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2004), 148.

## 2. Commands for Honorable Use (2:22–26)

False doctrine always finds faithless living as its ungodly companion. Paul gives four commands that relate to who should or should not be our company and what is and is not fitting for those who are set apart as holy, useful to the master, and ready for every good work.

- a. First, **flee youthful passions** (2:22a). While these passions could be sexual in nature, the idea here seems to involve temperament. Just as James roots quarrels and fights in our passions (James 4:1), so also Paul immediately warns Timothy against joining controversies and being quarrelsome (2 Tim 2:23–24).
- b. Second, **pursue what is fitting** for a slave in the Master’s house (2:22b).
  - i. We pursue righteousness (what is right), faith (what makes for proper belief and practice) love (compassionately carrying out the interests of others and not ourselves), and peace (what makes for harmony and unity between us and God and one another).
  - ii. We engage in this pursuit with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart (2:24). Remember, “Bad company ruins good morals” (1 Cor 15:33), and, “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent” (Prov 1:10). “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm” (Prov 13:20).
- c. Third, **ignore controversies**, or, have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels (2 Tim 2:23). As Paul says elsewhere, “myths and endless genealogies... promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim 1:4); “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths” (1 Tim 4:7); “he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth” (1 Tim 6:4–5); “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9).
- d. Fourth, there are many things that **you** and I as the Lord’s slave (δοῦλος) **must and must not be**: not quarrelsome (2:24a), kind to everyone (2:24b), able to teach (2:24c), and patiently enduring evil (2:24d), correcting with gentleness as necessary so that even a heretic might come to a repentant knowledge of the truth (2 Tim 2:25–26).

## Conclusion

Cleanse yourselves from the people and things that would defile you before the Master. Set yourself apart for Him, be useful for Him, and be ready for every good work. Toward that end, hear a good quote from Charles Haddon Spurgeon who in turn quotes Robert Murray M'Cheyne:

“We are, in a certain sense, our own tools, and therefore must keep ourselves in order...It will be in vain for me to stock my library, or organize societies, or project schemes, if I neglect the culture of myself; for books, and agencies, and systems, are only remotely the instruments of my holy calling; my own spirit, soul, and body, are my nearest machinery for sacred service; my spiritual faculties, and my inner life, are my battle ax and weapons of war. [Robert Murray] M'Cheyne, writing to a ministerial friend, who was traveling with a view to perfecting himself in the German tongue, used language identical with our own...

“I know you will apply hard to German, but do not forget the culture of the inner man — I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his saber clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, his instrument — I trust, a chosen vessel unto him to bear his name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.”<sup>12</sup>

May God help us all to be holy ministers who lead His people to be holy as He is holy. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (1875; reprint; Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 7–8.