

Vessels Unto Honour

by Thomas Cook

To be a vessel unto honor, one must be sanctified, meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

Scripture: Isaiah 6:8, John 15:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 2 Timothy 2:20, James 1:4

Topics: "Sanctification", "Personal Holiness"

Description

Thomas Cook preaches about the distinction between two orders of Christians - those who live a harmless life but do not actively promote Christ's Kingdom, and those who are zealous for good works and strive to emulate Christ. He emphasizes the importance of being vessels unto honor in the Church of Christ, sanctified and prepared for the Master's use. Cook delves into the characteristics of being sanctified, meeting for the Master's use, and prepared for every good work, highlighting the necessity of personal holiness, fitness for God's service, and readiness for various forms of service.

Transcript

An ancient writer has wisely said, "There have been from the beginning two orders of Christians. The majority of the one order live a harmless life, doing many good works, abstaining from gross evils, and attending the ordinances of God, but waging no downright earnest warfare against the world, nor making any strenuous efforts for the promotion of Christ's Kingdom. These aim at no special spiritual excellence, but are content with the average attainments of their neighbors. The other class of Christians not only abstain from every form of vice, but they are zealous of every kind of good works. They attend all the ordinances of God. They use all diligence to attain the whole mind that was in Christ, and to walk in the very footsteps of their beloved Master. They unhesitatingly trample on every pleasure which disqualifies for the highest usefulness. They deny themselves not only indulgences expressly forbidden, but also those which by experience they have found to diminish their enjoyment of God. They take up their cross daily. At the morning's dawn they pray, 'Glorify Thyself in me this day, O blessed Jesus.' It is more than their meat and drink to do their Heavenly Father's will. They are not Quietists, ever lingering in secret places, delighting in the ecstasies of enraptured devotion; they go forth from the closet, as Moses came down from the mount of God, with faces radiant with the Divine glory, and visiting the degraded and the outcasts they prove by their lives the divineness of the Gospel."

Such Christians are vessels unto honor -- they are the aristocracy of nobility in the Church of Christ. They are precious and used for high purposes, and in this their honor consists. It was the custom in olden times that the King's servants in England were made nobles by their service. To be used by the King is the

greatest honor. Reputation and reward and other consequences of service are desirable, but nothing is greater and grander and more blessed than the Master's service itself. Dishonored vessels are those that are laid aside because not meet for the Master's use. Every man must settle for himself to which class he belongs.

That we may make no mistake in the matter, let us note some characteristics of those who are vessels unto honor.

In 2 Timothy ii. 20, 21, St. Paul mentions three. The vessel unto honor is sanctified "meet for the Master's use," "prepared unto every good work."

I. SANCTIFIED. -- "The words of the New Testament," says Archbishop Trench, "are eminently the rudiments of Christian theology, and he who will not begin with a patient study of these shall never make any considerable advance." Luther went so far as to say, "Divinity is the grammar of the Holy Ghost." The word "sanctified" one of our commonest expressions, but have we taken the trouble to inquire into the special significance of the term as it is used in the New Testament? Sometimes the word is translated "hallowed" and sometimes "holy," but the fundamental ideas are exactly the same, separation and purity. In the Old Testament the term meant to be set apart for sacred purposes. It was used of the firstlings of the Hebrew flocks and herds, as being animals taken out from the rest set apart for God, to be laid upon His altar. It was used of Jerusalem the Holy City, and of its Temple, of the Temple furniture and of the priests who officiated there. They were set apart from common uses and devoted to high, sacred and godly ones. But in the case of Aaron and his sons, who were set apart for the priest's office, more was required than that they should be separated and sacred persons. Before they entered upon their duties the ram of consecration was brought, its blood was applied to the extremities of their persons as signifying that the whole man needed to be purified. Then the anointing oil was put upon their bodies and garments, and for seven days these ceremonies were repeated. The plenteous ablutions, the sprinkling of the blood, and the prepared white garments were intended to symbolize the need there is of purity before any can be "meet for the Master's use." The Apostle had probably the services of the Temple in his mind when he mentioned as the first qualification for "a vessel unto honor" is that it be "sanctified."

The root thought of sanctification is separation. A man sanctifies himself when he separates himself from all that is evil and impure, and dedicates his whole heart and life to the doing of the will of God. In this sense it is a personal and definite act. He yields himself to God in a spirit of entire submission. The surrender of ourselves to God must be entire -- including body, soul, life, talents, reputation -- everything. These are to be used when, where, and as God demands, and only thus. It includes being, doing, and suffering. The soul in this state of abandonment cries:

Here I give my all to Thee,

Friends, and time, and earthly store;

Soul and body Thine to be,

Wholly Thine for evermore.

We are not entirely the Lord's unless we have settled once for all that in will, in affection, in purpose, in honest use of capacities and resources and all things, we will be His for ever. Such a dedication is not sanctification, but it is one element in it, the human element, and it prepares the way for what remains. We

have now come to the Divine aspect of the work. In order that our sanctification may be complete, God has to effect that cleansing, that thorough renovation of our moral nature, which is promised in the New Testament Covenant, and for which provision has been made in Christ. Dedication is our duty, cleansing is God's work, and He will accomplish His work directly we perform our duty. It was for this St. Paul offered that sublime prayer on behalf of the Thessalonians: "But may the God of Peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit, soul and body, be preserved, entire without blame in the coming of the Lord Jesus." (Ellicott.)

To be sanctified wholly is to be delivered from whatever is contrary to God in the soul, and to be hallowed in every faculty, propensity and power. Then the Apostle uses another peculiar term, which is found only once in the New Testament, in the Epistle by St. James i. 4, "That ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." The word "blameless" is the same exactly as that translated "perfect and entire," and then immediately expounded "wanting nothing." The reference is again to the sacrifices under the old dispensation. A lamb to be perfect needed to have all its parts and members, and nothing else -- no excrescence. It might be larger or smaller, younger or older, fatter or leaner than another lamb, but if it had all its members without any defect, and no excrescence, it was perfect according to the Law. And the Christian who possesses all the graces of the Spirit, none lacking, and without their opposites in any degree, may be preserved entire or complete, without blame, unto the coming of the Lord Jesus. The God of Peace "Himself" will do it. The word "Himself" is added to emphasize the fact that it is God's work to cleanse the soul from sin, and not ours. Eternal discouragement would overwhelm us if it depended on human effort. But all the difficulties vanish when God undertakes. It will help us amazingly to keep the truth before our minds that the God of Peace who has begun the work of grace in our hearts will Himself complete the cleansing. There need be no long interval between our surrender and this putting forth of the Divine power in the removal of our inward pollution. When our all is on the Altar, nothing else is required, but that we trust Him to do what He is able and willing to do. He will cleanse and keep clean those who trust Him fully. The phraseology of the Apostle's prayer implies that the work of cleansing is an instantaneous one. The verb "sanctify" is in the aorist tense, which denotes a single momentary act. Sanctification is not intended to make us meet for the next world only, but to fit us for God's service in this present life, and to enable us to glorify Him to the fullest extent possible, according to the opportunities and responsibilities of today. A little girl was reading the Beatitudes, when she was stopped and asked, "If you could choose, which of these would you prefer to have?" "I would rather be pure in heart," she replied. On being asked the reason, she said, "Because if I could obtain that I should possess all the rest." The child was right. When we are sanctified, we are meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

2. MEET FOR THE MASTER'S USE. -- Meetness signifies fitness. To be "meet" is to be just the thing -- exactly adapted for the purpose. You want to convey a pure spring of water to your dwelling. You find upon your premises pipes which would serve as channels through which to conduct it, but you examine them and say, "they are not fit for use, they are corroded with rust and covered with dirt." Because they are not "meet" for use they are laid aside.

We are channels through which Divine grace is conveyed to men's souls. But if the channel is choked by pride, by low and sinister aims, by selfishness and earthliness, and by other hidden evils, how can we be used by the Master? When these are taken away, what a full tide of heavenly life might pour along and carry blessing to all around.

McCheyne wrote to a brother minister: "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. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hands of God. It is not so much great talents that God blesses, as likeness to Jesus."

Does not all experience teach that holiness and usefulness are linked together. There may be exceptions, but this is the rule -- whom God sanctifies for His work, He honors with success. It is not intellect, however brilliant; it is not genius, however wonderful; it is not eloquence, however captivating, that accomplishes the most good in the world. Simple goodness, holiness of life, and entire consecration, will furnish a power with which no human skill can compare. There may be showy public outward activity, without holiness, but there is little satisfactory result. We may work for God when God does not work with us. No man is fit for the Master's use, in the highest sense, except on condition that he is consecrated and pure. This explains why many professing Christians are not used in Christ's service, except on the poorest outward business, some kind of secular work tacked on to spiritual work. That is all they are fit for. As Dr. Maclaren says, "You cannot make men-of-war's masts out of crooked sticks."

Personal holiness is the first tribute we owe to the Spirit for the Master's use; and we cannot offer him acceptable service until this is paid. A Roman historian tells of one who sent a present of a diadem to Caesar, while he was yet rebelling against him. Caesar returned it, with the admonitory reply, "First yield obedience, and then make presents." The spirit and truth of this message is addressed to every Christian. In vain we sing

Bring forth the royal diadem, And crown Him Lord of all,

while we exempt anything, no matter how trifling, from the dominion of Christ. But when we are entirely set apart for God's service and will, and cleansed from the defilement of sin, we are always ready for use.

In our hospitals, the instruments used in operations are constantly kept in antiseptics, that they may not carry the slightest contagion to the open wound. We cannot touch the open and festering wounds which sin has caused, without injury to ourselves and other, unless we are, moment by moment, realizing that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

While it is true that the efficiency of an instrument depends upon him who uses it, and that in Christian work "the excellency of the power" is of God, and not of us, it is also true that the adaptation of the instrument has something to do with the result. The clearness and elegance of writing depends in part upon the pen used. Even the touch of genius could not transform the marble into a thing of beauty without proper tools. There is a sense in which the poet was right who said:-

Not God Himself can do best work, Without best men to help Him.

This is neither irreverence nor heresy. God works through human instrumentalities, and if the instruments are not "meet" or fit for His use, there will be a blank or a blur where there ought to have been something beautiful. It is a wonderful thing that God should offer man the glory and honor of sharing in His work, but that He does so is beyond all doubt.

Christ is the True Vine, and we are the branches. But a vine does not bear fruit, except through the branches. This is why He says, "Every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth," or cleanseth it, "that it may bring forth more fruit." To hear "much fruit," the branch of the vine must be quite sound, and without rottenness, free from mildew and blight, and fully cleansed from the parasites which would destroy its

beauty and verdure.

We do not wish to be understood as saying that Christians cannot be useful in any degree unless they are fully consecrated. Every true Christian is of some service to the Master, but for His highest purposes it is the cleansed vessel that is used. Here, for instance, is a machine, well designed, and able to accomplish a given result. But some of its parts are out of place; some of the wheels are clogged; and there is friction between the parts. It is doing something, but if it were in complete order, how much more would it accomplish! Here is a fruit tree, well shaped and planted in a good soil. It bears some fruit, but it is untrimmed, and useless shoots are drawing away its life. Worms are at the root or concealed in the bark. Let the tree be put into good condition, and how its branches bend under the burden of luscious fruit. Not only does it bear more fruit, but the quality is better. So with the Christian; he is useful with a little light, a little grace, a little power, but we well know that if the grace were all transforming and sanctifying, his usefulness would be vastly increased.

The Lord has need of us. There is no more spiritual and mysterious truth than that Christ our Head is actually and entirely dependent upon the members of His body for the accomplishment of His purposes of mercy towards a perishing world. Partnership in His saving work is the crown and highest glory to which any Christian can aspire. Would we be prepared for the maximum of possible service and blessing? Surely this is the ambition of every child of God. The answer is, "If a man purge himself he shall be a vessel unto honour." If we have failed in the past, it is not because of lack of talent or human ability. It is not rather because our hearts have not been cleansed from sin?

3. PREPARED UNTO EVERY GOOD WORK. -- This last characteristic means readiness for all sorts of service. The teaching is that holiness is the source of every kind of human excellence. It sets to work all our powers and in the best possible directions. It means the sanctification of hands, feet, brain, temper, pocket, the whole man inwardly and outwardly. The desire and aim then is to make a "good work" of whatever is given us to do, and to do it in the best and most perfect way, according to our light and knowledge; let it be the painting of a picture, the sweeping of a room, the managing of a business, or the preaching of a sermon. The meanest service is ennobled by its lofty motive when we work under the inspiration of the Cross. In estimating the value of Christian work we often think too much of our efforts and too little of our spirit and life, but character is really of more importance than our activities. "Words have a weight," says Thomas Carlyle, when there is a man behind them," and when behind our efforts there is the fragrance of a holy and consistent life our labor cannot be in vain. "Holy living is the rhetoric that tells best in this age of facts." The measure of our holiness is the measure of our power. By this means and this only are we "prepared unto every good work."

Let us note the word "every" because we shall be many-sided when our hearts are cleansed from all sin. We are in danger of limiting our conceptions of duty to some particular sphere, repeating one note instead of a full chord; but the world is wide, and human need is great, and the best servants are the servants of all work. They are always on the alert for opportunities to do good, and ready, even if the call comes suddenly, as it often does. It is not with them as with many who are not living with their loins girt, and who often let their opportunity pass before they have pulled themselves together. It is a grand thing to be "prepared unto every good work" -- always ready. Chrysostom interprets the words to mean "ready for every emergency which would add to the glory of God, ready even for death, if needs be, or any other painful witness."

After the Seraphim had laid the live coal upon the lips of Isaiah, and had said, "Lo! this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged," he heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah's glad and immediate response was, "Here am I, send me." In the same spirit we shall leap forward to fill positions of duty, honor, and danger, when our hearts are purified from self and sin.

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