

# The Bible Student

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## "THE VESSELS"

*Who are the "vessels unto dishonour" in 2 Timothy 2: 20?  
and what is the force of the word these in verse 21 following?*

[The above question often puzzles younger students of the Bible and it is of first importance that a correct understanding of its meaning should be arrived at. Unfortunately some teachers have given a wrong interpretation and thereby brought about division among the people of God where God has made no division. We commend the exegesis given by Mr. F. F. Bruce below, which offers the only correct reading of text and context, and is corroborated by other scholarly (and "safe") authorities. The para is taken from a recent issue of *The Witness* (Glasgow), with acknowledgements.—Ed. "B.S."]

The force of these two verses is brought out well by the paraphrastic version in *The Twentieth Century New Testament*: "Now in a large house there are not only articles of gold and silver, but also others of wood or earthenware, some for more honourable and some for less honourable purposes. If, then, a man has escaped from the pollution of such things as I have mentioned, he will be like an article devoted to the more honourable purposes and set apart for them—an article serviceable to its owner and ready for any good use."

To take a modern and homely example, there are the vessels which are brought out to adorn the dinner table when a distinguished guest is being entertained, while in the kitchen there are vessels of another kind, useful and necessary, but not for public display. It is lack of honour, and not positive disgrace, that is implied in the phrase "vessels unto dishonour."

In the spiritual sense, in the Divine household, we wish to be vessels on which the Master of the house confers honour, to which He delights to draw attention—not so much now, as when the day of reward comes. How may a Christian become such a vessel? "By cleansing himself from *these*," says Paul. What are "these"? Not the unhonoured vessels (a vessel is not cleansed from another *vessel*), but those things which stain and defile—those things against which Paul has been uttering warnings in verse 14 and following; in a word, all aspects of that iniquity from which those who name the name of Christ should depart. The short "parable" of verse 20 is introduced for the sake of one detail—the vessels unto honour. Paul does not enlarge upon those unto dishonour, although a natural inference would be that they represent Christians not fully cleansed from the things which stain and defile, whom therefore the Master can use, if at all, only for less honourable purposes. But Paul is not concerned to tell us how to be "vessels unto dishonour;" he exhorts us rather to be "vessels unto honour," and tells us how we may be such.

There is no thought of ecclesiastical division in this Scripture, although J. N. Darby read his watchword, "Separation from evil God's principle of unity," into it—one of the rare occasions where his normally accurate if inelegant *New Translation* goes quite astray. The true thought is rather expressed by Bishop Moule, who, in his commentary on the passage, breaks into prayer: "Enable us . . . so to cleanse ourselves from complicity with evil within and without that we, when Thou requirest us for Thy

purposes, may be found by Thee *handy* to Thy touch, in the place and in the condition in which Thou canst take us up and employ us in whatever way, on the moment, for Thyself." A servant thus cleansed and thus employed is indeed a "vessel unto honour," publicly owned by his Lord, destined to hear His "Well done."

F. F. BRUCE.

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