

OpenTheo

Departing From Iniquity



Message For The Young - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg delivers a thought-provoking message about the importance of departing from iniquity and the foundational truth that Christians are not expected to walk in complete, flawless holiness all the time. He discusses the passage in 2 Timothy and the various interpretations of the term "vessels of dishonor." He also touches on the concept of being a living sacrifice and the tendency of humans to crawl off the altar, as well as the meaning of the word "shall" in the Ten Commandments. Throughout the message, Gregg emphasizes the need for continual cleansing and purification through the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

Today I'm going to be, I think rather predictably, continuing on an outline I've been working on the last several times I've preached. I've not preached on consecutive Sundays generally here, but I do teach here repeatedly and several, well, I guess it's a few months ago now. I began working through 2 Timothy, not exactly verse by verse, but in some respects, I've been working on a series of verses.

I've been working on a series of verses in some respects, thought by thought, and I originally entitled the message, which has become now a series of messages, and I don't know whether this will be the last of them or not. It depends on how quickly I go. A message for the youth, or for the young, because that's what Timothy was.

He was a young man, relatively. Certainly compared to Paul, he was a young man. And so because he was a young man and a genuine Christian, the lessons that Paul wrote to this young man in these chapters I thought would be particularly fitting for young men and women who are Christians today to hear.

Now, I realize that probably the majority of the people in this congregation are not what would be called youth. I don't mean that as an insult. It's simply an observation.

And therefore, some have thought, well, you know, must we narrow this so much? Each time I get up to speak, people have gotten used, for the past few weeks, a few times anyway, to the fact that I'm going to be addressing the young. Well, if you're not young,

or you don't see yourself as young, then instead of thinking of this as a message for the young, simply think of this as messages from 2 Timothy, lessons from 2 Timothy. That way it removes all prejudice as to whether it applies to us or not in our particular demographic category.

Okay, let's turn to 2 Timothy if we could. I began weeks ago telling you that I have 15 points. These are really just 15 different lessons from the book.

There are more, but these are the 15 that as I read through the book a few months ago with this particular message in mind, these were the ones that I felt impressed to draw from it. But there are only four or five remaining of the 15. We should probably not think that we'll get through them all this time.

We're going to be looking, first of all, at chapter 2. I'd like to read verses 19 through 21 to begin. 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. Now, I'll stop reading there for a moment, although the next verse contains the next point that I'll make, but I may dwell a little while on this one.

These verses I read I would place under the general heading of depart from lawlessness. The word iniquity is used here, and if you look up the word iniquity, you'll find that it simply means lawlessness. It is a person who is practicing iniquity is a person who is flouting the law, acting as if there's no law, rebelling against law.

And so this is what we're supposed to put away. Now, Paul begins the sentence that we read in verse 19. Nevertheless, the foundation of God stands sure.

It's an interesting expression, the foundation of God. Now, elsewhere in Scripture, we read of a foundation of the church. We're told in Ephesians chapter two that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.

In another passage, Paul speaks about the foundation of the church in first Corinthians three as Christ himself and says that no one can build any other foundation or lay any other foundation of the church than this. But I don't know that we read elsewhere of the foundation of God, and therefore I don't know exactly how Paul means it. And I'm not sure that if I never know exactly what he meant, that it will prevent me from getting the value of this verse that is there.

But I wonder whether this is another reference to the foundation of the church, to the

temple of God. It's God's foundation. It's God's building.

It's the foundation he has laid, and in that sense, it's God's foundation. And that may be what he means when he says the foundation of God. Obviously, he's using the imagery of a building, a building with a solid foundation and one that has a seal upon it or a stamp upon it.

You may remember that the priests, or I should say the chief priests, the high priest of Israel, wore on his forehead a gold plate that had a seal upon it, and it said upon it, holiness to the Lord. And I'm reminded of that by what Paul said the seal of God on his foundation is. Now, I don't know if this is to be viewed as a seal that was placed there after the foundation was laid, or if it's something carved into the stone or pressed into molten concrete or what.

But there's this, Paul says there's a foundation of God. And I suppose that if we would know God, if we would walk with God, if we would relate to God, we have to start at the basement. We need to start at the foundation.

This is one of the most basic things about a relationship with God. We can say that much about it because that's what the word foundation always speaks of. Whatever the building Paul envisages that has this foundation, we know this, the word foundation always speaks of the beginning, the ground floor.

Remember when the writer of Hebrews said in Hebrews chapter six, let us go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God and the doctrine of baptisms and the laying on of hands. The resurrection of the dead and everlasting judgment. He said that's the foundation.

That means that's the beginning. He says we need to go on to maturity from there. The foundation is always the first thing laid.

And so again, whether Paul is here referring to the foundation of the church or some other foundation of some other building that he envisages, he is certainly saying that this found this truth is foundational. It's as if it is stamped in bold letters on a foundation that God has laid of his building. And that is this.

This is the message that is there. The Lord knows those who are his and let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity. Now, those are two separate statements.

They're treated as such, at least in the punctuation of the Bible I'm using. It's two separate quotations as if there's two different statements. One is the Lord knows those were his, which is an interesting thought.

Why does Paul say that? Is it because maybe the Lord only knows who are his? It is

possible. We cannot always tell easily who is and who is not a Christian. I'm not saying Christians don't have distinctive characteristics.

They do. Being a Christian should show and it should be dramatically visible. But then Christians are not perfect either.

And Paul indicates in the 7th chapter of Romans that from time to time people who really love God, who really are God's people, have been known to do things that they don't really agree with them. It goes against their own grain. He says, I don't understand the things I'm doing.

He says, things I hate to do, I sometimes actually do those things to my great regret. Things I resolve to do, I sometimes neglect to do. I don't understand it.

He says, it's like there's two different laws in me. Now, there are many theories as to what Paul was talking about there. And some people think Paul was not talking about normative Christian experience and so forth because of their particular views of holiness.

But whatever people may think Paul was talking about or how much they may try to explain away that Paul may have been talking about normative Christian experience, regardless of theories about that, everyone I know can relate with what Paul said. We might say, well, true Christianity isn't like that. But I've met very few people who can claim to have true Christianity if that's not true Christianity.

Now, I don't want to argue about the meaning of the passage. All I can say is this, that my experience certainly has been this. I don't base my doctrine on my experience.

It's my particular exegesis of the passage that makes me think the way I do. But my experience confirms and it seems to me the experience of everyone I know confirms that Christians don't walk in complete, flawless holiness all the time. And they should.

They should. There's no excuse, really. Paul said, there's no temptation taken you but such as is common to man.

And God is faithful who will, with the temptation, provide a way of escape that you might be able to endure it. You don't have to fall in sin. But you do anyway, right? I do too.

Not anywhere near as often as I did when I was younger. And I hope, I hate to say it this way, but I hope that I do it more often now than I will as I grow. That is to say, sin is a disappearing factor in my walk with God.

But it still has not disappeared completely. And as such, it's possible for us to see another person with whom we are in fellowship, somebody who in many respects we believe to be a Christian, but we can't tell at the moment. Or we could just say we're not sure that the way they're acting right now really seems like the way a Christian should

act.

And we sometimes say, well, I thought that person was a Christian. And maybe they are. And maybe they aren't.

God knows. The Lord knows His own. And in the final analysis, we really have to, when it comes to judging other people, we need to leave the judgment with God who knows more than we do.

There are people who stumble terribly, and yet their heart is so pure toward God, and they're just weak brethren, that we could easily misjudge them. There are other people who are very morally and ethically strong, but they have no heart for God at all. But you'll never see them do anything scandalous.

And they may be regular in the church, and your opinion is that this person certainly is a Christian. But he may not be. God knows.

Now, you can know if you are. The Bible says that. The Bible says, by this we know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren.

We know that He dwells in us and we in Him because He has given us of His Spirit. He that says, I know Him and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. There are things by which we can know ourselves whether we are saved.

Do I love the brethren? Do I have the Holy Spirit? Do I keep His commandments? Those tests, I can answer those somewhat knowledgably about where I'm at. But it's hard for me to know for sure some of those inward realities about another person. Now, I'll tell you what I think, and other people take another view.

I have someone very close to me who takes just the opposite approach. My approach is always to think favorably of someone unless I know otherwise. If somebody professes to be a Christian, and I have no compelling evidence to the contrary, I just assume as a working hypothesis that that person really is a Christian.

I don't go around sniffing out sin and trying to see if I can find some way to prove that they're not. I know some Christians who take the opposite approach. I won't believe anyone is really a Christian until they've proven it to my satisfaction.

I don't know if anyone could prove it to my satisfaction if I took that approach. All I can say is the Lord knows His own. But the Lord knows I don't have to know, but I do have to know the next thing.

And that is for me to know that I am His own, I must depart from iniquity. I must give up the ways of lawlessness. That's what iniquity means, lawlessness.

The second statement, after the Lord knows those who are His, is let everyone who

names the name of Christ... Now notice it doesn't say everyone who really is Christ's, because that's the area that only God may know who really is and who really isn't. But anyone who names the name of Christ, that is a professing Christian. Anyone who is a professing Christian, if you want to have assurance yourself about your own salvation, depart from iniquity.

Now what does it mean to depart from iniquity? Well, as I said, iniquity means lawlessness. That would mean you cease to be lawless. That's interesting how many Christians are afraid of the concept of law.

They're afraid that if we say anything positive about the subject of law, that we will thereby encourage a legalistic approach to salvation and to the Christian life. And there is such an approach that people can fall into. And it's very possible we've all known people who've fallen into it.

I could even say I have, in earlier years, I know I have fallen into it. And it is possible to become a legalist, and people who have been legalists and have escaped that usually are very gun-shy about law of any kind. They might even be afraid of the word obedience, if they hear it preached very much, because obedience sounds a little bit like the same thing as law.

And yet, we're not at liberty to swing like a pendulum from a bad experience in legalism to an even worse experience in antinomianism. We're not allowed to say, well, because this approach to law is definitely an unhealthy one. It must be necessary for us to have no law.

And that is an approach that I've known some people to take. That is iniquity. That is lawlessness.

There is no room for lawlessness in the Christian life. Now, the balance between grace and law or faith and law or whatever is one that people have often had a hard time with. But let me show you Paul's own approach to it.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul certainly was, if any man who wrote in the New Testament, liberated from legalism. And that, remarkably, from a very deep legalism of his upbringing, because Paul had been a Pharisee and a son of a Pharisee. And from judging what Jesus said in his encounters with the Pharisees, it seems that you'd not find more compulsive legalists in the first century than that of the Pharisees.

And that's what Paul came out of. It's remarkable that the other disciples who never were Pharisees and probably never were very legalistic, judging from their early lives, were not the ones that became eminent in preaching against legalism, like Paul did. Paul actually knew legalism from the inside.

He knew how empty it was. He knew how fruitless it was. And he distanced himself from

it a great deal.

But Paul was balanced. He did not say, okay, therefore, no law. If you look at 1 Corinthians 9, Paul talks about his approach to evangelism.

And he says in verse 19 and following, For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win the Jews. To those who are under the law, that would be basically the same category, the Jews.

As under the law, it means I become like one under the law when I'm reaching these peoples, so that I might win those who are under the law. To those who are without law, and that would be the Gentiles, who don't have the law of God, he says, I become as one without law. But then he says this, not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ, that I might win those who are without the law.

Now, he says there's two totally different cultural and religious groups that he associates with, trying to reach them both, the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews have their whole system of laws. The Gentiles, well, they have laws of sorts, but they don't have the religious laws that the Jews had.

And Paul said, I'm really free from all men. I don't have to keep any of the religious laws. But when I'm reaching out to people who are under the law, the Jews, I have no problem restricting my behavior within the bounds that their law would judge me by.

And if they would judge me negatively, it might impair my witness to them. It might cause them to disregard my status as one who has a message from God for them. And so, I'll just live under those laws.

If they don't believe I should eat pork, while I have no personal qualms about it, I won't eat pork around them. That's fine. No problem.

I don't have to eat pork. I will become all things to all men as much as I can. Now, but he says, when I'm with Gentiles, I don't have to live under that same restriction.

When I'm with Gentiles in their home, they can serve pork, and they can eat it, and I can eat it, and we can have a great time, and no reference has to be made at all to the laws of the Jews and so forth. Because I'm not under those laws. However, he says, before you think I take this too far, you need to understand, I'm not without law toward God.

It may seem to some that I am, because when I'm with the Gentiles, I ignore the Jewish laws. That is, if they're ignoring them, I can ignore them with them. The Jewish laws do not have to influence me in any way when I'm with these people who don't care.

But that doesn't mean that I'm at liberty to do just anything a Gentile might do. I can eat

pork. But if they want to bring some prostitutes over for the evening, I cannot participate there, because I'm not without law to God.

I'm still under the law to Christ. And while I don't have any obligation to keep the Jewish ceremonial laws, I still am under obligation to obey the king and the laws of my king. And that is Jesus Christ.

Now, that is Paul's attitude about law. We don't commend ourselves to God by law. Certainly, the ceremonial things the Jews had, nor, for that matter, the ceremonial things that Christians have.

There are many Christian ceremonies, and some of them good, some of them edified. Some of them, much can be said in their favor. But they don't commend a man to God.

The keeping of special days and, you know, religious rituals and so forth. Those things can elevate the mind to God. Those things can be helpful.

But they don't comprise the basis of our approach to God or our acceptance to God. That's a matter of a completed thing that was done before we were born. Jesus fulfilled all the requirements of righteousness on our behalf.

And our salvation is had by being found in Him, not having a righteousness of our own. And so, our keeping of the law doesn't contribute anything to our actually becoming Christians or necessarily staying Christians. But here's the deal.

If we are Christians, we have a new heart. And that new heart is devoted to Jesus Christ as our Lord and as our King. And if you have a heart that's devoted to a King, you desire to obey His laws.

And, by the way, He requires us to as well. He requires us to keep His law. Jesus says, why do you call me Lord? Lord, you don't do the things that I say.

Now, we are not at liberty to become lawless Christians just because that seems to us the most logical reaction to legalistic Christians. We are to be Christians who are obedient to Jesus Christ. And that's the whole definition of what we're about.

All we're here for, our only consideration in any choice that we make is, Did Jesus Christ, does what I'm about to do, what I'm contemplating, what I'm doing, does that agree with what Jesus Christ taught or what His apostles under His authorization taught? And if the answer is no, then we realize that we are transgressors. And that's an occasion for us to repent. And we need to repent of the disobedience.

But we can't just say, well, I'm saved by grace, therefore I can become lawless. And from time to time you'll hear people say, well, such and such a sin that I'm involved in, it's not the unforgivable sin. Well, that's maybe true.

Maybe it isn't the unforgivable sin. When I'm tempted to sin, I never ask myself, is this the unforgivable sin? Now, I'm tempted to sin, I'll tell you this. I am tempted and I have not always succeeded in avoiding temptation or overcoming it.

I'd like to be able to testify otherwise, but it's not so. But I'll tell you this, whenever temptation comes to me, it has never been one of the considerations in my mind. Would God forgive me if I committed this sin? Is this unforgivable? You see, the reason is because that's not the way we as Christians think.

It's not, can I break this law and get away with it? That's not a Christian attitude. The Christian attitude is, I have named the name of Christ, it is incumbent on me to depart from iniquity. It is incumbent on me to depart from lawlessness.

I am under law to Christ. And as such, He is my Lord, He is my King, His word is my command. And, you know, He might forgive me if I break His law and if I genuinely repent, good chance.

I mean, well, if I do genuinely repent, I'm quite sure He will forgive. I do not believe there's any sin that if a person can genuinely repent of it, that God won't forgive. God is simply overabundant in grace to the point that if you can genuinely repent, God will genuinely forgive.

The problem is, you say, well, what's the unforgivable sin? I'm convinced that anyone who's committed the unforgivable sin, whatever that may be, has a new state of heart that is incapable of repentance because God has to inspire repentance. You can't repent without God. God has to convict.

God has to draw you to repentance. God has to give you repentance, the Bible says. And if God is not interested in forgiving you, He's not going to bother to draw you to repentance either.

If you can repent, it means you have not committed anything that God is committed to holding against you regardless. And yet, while I believe that every sin, every act of disobedience that I can truly repent of, I can be forgiven of, that is not really part of the description of my Christian mind. The Christian mind is not how much disobedience can I get away with.

The Christian mind is how much can I avoid continuing to offend God as I did in the years before I knew Him. Some people think that God is real light on sin with Christians because, hey, we're His kids. You know, my children's disobedience bothers me more than my neighbor's children's disobedience does.

The fact that I'm God's kid doesn't make Him, you know, feel, you know, less serious about sin. Can we imagine that something like sin, something that was so offensive to God, that He took so severe a remedy as to send His Son to be tortured and to die and to

go to Hades and so forth for us, that something that is so offensive to God is that once you become a Christian, it ceases to be offensive to Him? If you were getting married, let's say you're a man marrying a woman and the woman has had a sexually sinful past, but you are quite convinced she's repented, so you marry her. And then you find out that she continues to have a sexually impure life after you're married.

Now, do you think you'd be bothered more about the sins committed before you married her or the sins committed after you married her? I can answer that because I once had a wife like that. Before I married her, I knew that she'd had, well, a lot of experience. She told me she'd been a non-Christian for so long and then she'd professed to become a Christian.

So I was willing to not worry. Her sins of her past, it was not that big an issue to me. I could have wished she hadn't done them, but that was past, that was then, this was now, I thought.

Then we got married and the sins of her past continued into her present. Now, those ones really bothered me. The ones before she and I were committed to each other, those I didn't like, but I could overlook that.

In fact, I was even able to overlook the ones she committed once we were married. But the fact is, they bothered me much more. I cannot believe that a person who loves Jesus Christ would sit contemplating a sin and say, well, I can get away with this because I'm a child of God.

It won't offend Him much, He'll just forgive me. When in fact, the sins committed by His people certainly must be more offensive to Him even than those committed by those who are not His people. That's why the Bible says judgment must begin at the house of God, right? That's why Paul says, who am I to judge those who are outside the church? But do you not judge those who are inside, he said? Those are outside God judges.

That's His business. But we are to be concerned about the purity of those who name the name of Christ. Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity, Paul says.

That's foundational. God knows who are His. Sometimes it's hard to tell for us because someone who might really be His might be kind of slipping and sliding a little bit.

And somebody who isn't slipping and sliding at all might not really be Christian at all. God knows, but this is one thing that helps a great deal to establish, at least in our own case. Have we departed from iniquity? Have we renounced lawlessness in order to embrace the law of Jesus Christ in our lives? That is what Paul is telling Timothy here.

And he illustrates it in a rather, actually one of my favorite ways. This passage has always been one of my... Well, people always ask me what my favorite verse of the Bible

is. They might as well ask me which of my kids is my favorite.

I can't answer that. But this has always been one of my very favorite passages. Those verses 20, we're talking about 1 Timothy 2, 20 and 21.

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from the latter... Now, I must confess, I've always wondered what the latter means. Or in King James it says, from these.

Paul is not exactly clear what these or the latter are that one has to cleanse himself from in order to meet the conditions that this verse is suggesting. But, grammatically, it would either be you have to cleanse yourself from those vessels of dishonor, or, perhaps going back to the previous verse, from the iniquity. Let him that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

And anyone who cleanses himself from that. I think that's the more likely thing, although it doesn't much matter. It's what the rest of the verse says that's most instructive to me.

He says, therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, that means made holy, and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. I don't know if that does anything for you. To my mind, if that doesn't turn you on, you don't have any switches.

Because when I was a youth, I read, wow, it is possible for me to do that which will guarantee that I will be a vessel useful to God, prepared for every good use. Now, that was important to me because I had already, before that time, I had been raised in a Christian home and I knew Christianity pretty well. And I knew there were Christians that really were doing great things for God and there were Christians that didn't seem to do a great deal for God.

In fact, there were some that only the Lord knew of. They were His, that I grew up with. And possibly one could have said that about me during some of those years too.

But when I got serious about God, when I got serious about serving God, this verse was just such an exciting verse to me. Because I knew that I could either labor fruitlessly and maybe not even acceptably to God or I could labor for God and be a tool that He could use. And that He'd be delighted to use, one that He had prepared.

I thought, well, how do you get there from here? Well, it says, in a great house there's many vessels. And Paul just speaks of two categories. Well, he says there are vessels of gold and silver.

That's one category. But there's also vessels of wood and clay. Now, there's nothing wrong with vessels of wood and clay.

They're just cheap compared to vessels of gold and silver. And when he says some are for honor and some are for dishonor, I think what Paul's saying, he's talking about a natural household. He's using this as an analogy.

In any big house, people have their fine china and they've got their ordinary corral. I mean, when you've got the governor coming to dinner, well, then you bring out the good china. When the dog needs food, you can pull out a corral bowl.

It doesn't matter. Or plastic Tupperware or whatever. You've got in your house different kinds of vessels for different uses.

Some are clearly for, you know, the red carpet treatment. And some are just for ordinary use. Some for honor and some for dishonor.

Now, I don't suppose that any of us should complain if at the end of our lives God says, you were a vessel of mine, I used you, but I didn't use you for the really big honorable works. You know, I just used you to get a few people saved, raise your kids for God. And, you know, you weren't Billy Graham, right? You weren't preaching to millions.

I don't think I should really complain. To me, that's a great mercy of God if he uses me for any works. If he feeds his dogs from me, that is fine.

I will not say that's what he's doing, lest it reflect on this congregation. But I truly want to be used as honorably as possible for God. And I don't know that that's because of pride or ego.

Maybe there's some of that in there. Who doesn't want to be doing great things? And who knows how much pride may be involved in that. But from my earliest youth, I just thought, if I'm going to do anything, if I'm going to make any kind of mark, how about a big mark? If I'm going to devote so many hours of my life, however many there are, how about if I devote them to something that really makes a difference? I only have so many anyway.

By the end of this sermon, another one will be gone. And, you know, they're getting fewer and fewer. Now, young people don't sense that like older people do.

But there's a limited number. And I thought, I want to make a mark. I want to be the kind of person that God can... Here's what I want.

I don't care if God uses me to feed the dog. But if He uses me to feed the dog, I want Him not to do it because that's all I was good for. If I can be a vessel of gold or silver and He wants to use that to feed the dog, that's fine with me.

I'm not requiring any honor from Him. But I do not want to be disqualified from whatever the best work is God would like me to do. And so Paul said that it's possible for a person,

and youths are in the position to get on this early.

Older people can do this too, but they've wasted a lot of time if they haven't done it yet. But it's possible for a person to be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. To be like a vessel of gold or silver.

Now, that requires what? That requires that I've got to be serious about it. For one thing, I've got to cleanse myself from the latter. Now, there's a very non-evangelical sounding expression, cleanse yourself.

I thought there's nothing we could do to cleanse ourselves. I thought that only Jesus cleanses us. Well, that's of course true in many respects.

But some people would be offended. If we went beyond that and said, and we are called to cleanse ourselves. Look at 1 Peter 1. 1 Peter 1, verse 22.

Peter says, since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth. Now, the King James and the New King James say through the Spirit. I like that.

I'm glad that's there. It's not in the Alexandrian text. And if you have any translation other than the King James or the New King James, it won't say through the Spirit.

Which means because the manuscripts differ, there is dispute as to whether that line was an original part of what Peter wrote or not. But whether he wrote that or not, he certainly must have meant it. Because you don't purify yourself without the Spirit.

I mean, that's the Spirit's work within you. It can't be done without God. So, whether your Bible has that line through the Spirit or leaves it out, it has to be at least implied.

But it says, since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit, in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart. Now, you have purified your souls in obeying the truth. Now, granted, this is not done without the Spirit.

Nothing of any value is ever done without the Spirit. But, taking the presence of the Spirit in your life as a given, the question is, well, is there anything for me to do? Yes. Purify your soul by obeying the truth.

Cleanse yourself from iniquity. Like I said, some people just, they'd hate the suggestion of purifying yourself and cleanse yourself. These are Paul's words, Peter's words.

I didn't make these up. Paul is telling us here that we are in the position to make a decision of whether we will be vessels that God can use for honorable purposes or whether we will not be possible to be used for honorable purposes. Now, this almost sounds like it's in conflict with something else Paul said about vessels.

Do you remember that? Over in Romans chapter 9? You might want to look there

because, certainly, Romans chapter 9 is a much disputed chapter. There are several issues that Paul raises and develops in this chapter. Among those that are controversial are the nature of unconditional election, the status of Israel in New Testament, economy and so forth.

Those issues are raised, and I think Paul answers them pretty well, though it's not all that he has to say on it. We need the whole Scripture to fully get it. But in the process of discussing God's election, in Romans 9, he says in verse 21, Does not the potter have power over the clay? From the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? Same terminology that we have over in 2 Timothy 2. A vessel for dishonor, a vessel for honor.

God's like a potter. The potter has the right to make what he wants, to make whatever vessels he wants. And then he says, What if God, wanting to show his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had prepared beforehand for glory? Now, the passage is a key passage on the whole subject of God's election and all, but there are some things about it that make it somewhat difficult to interpret, and therefore people have different opinions.

But one thing I observed is that Paul initially speaks of vessels of honor and vessels of dishonor. These are the categories. Then when he goes on, he changes the categories.

He says vessels of wrath prepared for destruction and vessels of mercy prepared for glory. Now, are these categories the same as honor and dishonor? It could be. It could be.

And that raises questions as to what Paul means by vessels of dishonor over in 2 Timothy. Because if here Paul is speaking about vessels of dishonor as vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, then certainly vessels of dishonor are not saved people. And, you know, as I said, that raises interesting questions.

I cannot answer them right here because I don't, I mean, it would take much consideration to do so, but it raises questions as to when Paul uses the same expression, vessels of dishonor, over in 2 Timothy 2.20. Is he talking about non-Christians there, too? I'll have to say that although Paul uses the same expression, I have questions in my mind about that. Because Paul says a person can cleanse himself and make himself a vessel of honor. But I guess that could be true of conversion, too.

I mean, we do make a decision in the matter. Paul, over in Romans 9, talks about God's work in it. God's a potter.

God makes a vessel a certain way, fits it, prepares it. But Paul says, using very similar terminology, in fact identical to a certain degree over in 2 Timothy, you know, you have

something to say about which of these categories you fall into. This is either a contradiction or a mystery.

Since both passages are written by the same author, and the man was more than average intelligence, I do not think that it was a contradiction. I don't think Paul changed his theology between the time he wrote Romans and the time he wrote 2 Timothy either. I suspect that there's two sides of this issue that Paul wants us to be aware of.

Just like he said, the Lord knows who are his. But we can have an idea of who is probably his by the fact that those who, name the name of Christ, depart from iniquity. There's a human side.

We can do something about being categorized as those who are his. But really, in the final analysis, God knows and God is sovereign and so forth. Now, it's in that context that Paul talks about this vessel thing.

Some people have concluded that God's the potter. He's made some people for destruction. He's made some people for salvation.

What can I do? It's all destined. It's all fated. It's all something that's just in God's hands and we might as well just grin and bear it.

You know, what's the point of trying to resist sin? What's the point of trying to really follow God? Maybe I'm really predestined to go to hell. Never can tell. Only God knows.

Well, that's not Paul's approach. Paul's approach is you can do a great deal to know and to determine. You can depart from iniquity.

You can cleanse yourself from such. You can make yourself, as Paul said, a vessel for honor. Not without God, obviously.

But if you do these things, God is the one who works it in you. Now, this is what I find very encouraging and essential to this whole concept. That is this.

If you're a young person or an old person, it may be that you think, well, you know, this business of trying to depart from lawlessness, I've tried that. Some of you might say I've been trying it for decades and I still have problems. I still have besetting sins.

There are still things that just, I just don't think I'm ever going to change. It's all very idealistic for Paul to talk about departing from lawlessness and cleansing myself of these things. But hey, I've tried that.

I can't do it. It's not happening. And here's where what Paul says over in Romans 9, I think, needs to be brought in.

He's the potter. You're the clay. How does clay change? I mean, I think we recognize if

we need to depart from iniquity, if we need to be made vessels of honor from whatever it is we are now, we've got to change.

And that change is not just a matter of resolving. Everyone's made New Year's resolutions. They know what resolving does for you.

Sometimes it helps. You might get over one or two bad habits by making a resolution, though I think bad habits are an awful lot like gophers. You close up one hole and they pop up another one.

And you may get over one bad habit and probably there's something else you're not paying attention to that's a bad one. You can't change yourself, but that doesn't mean you can do nothing. What does clay have to do in order to be changed? When you look at a lump of clay, I used to for a while, about a year and a half, I made my living driving a little delivery truck of stoneware pottery.

And I used to deliver it to nurseries and department stores and stuff and sell it there. I didn't make pottery. I don't know a thing about making pottery.

Well, I know a thing about it. I've just never done it. I've watched it done because I used to pick up the inventory that I was delivering at the potter's house.

And there were several potters there. And I always loved to watch potters. Some of you, I'm sure, have made pots.

Probably a lot of you have. It's not an uncommon thing to do. A lot of people do it, but I just never did it.

But I love to watch it. It's fascinating to me because it's hard to read the mind of the potter. He'll take this big square chunk.

I mean, to make a pot that's about yea big and yea wide, he takes this big brick of clay. It doesn't have any resemblance to a pot at all. It doesn't have any of the features.

It's not the right shape. It's not hollow. It's not the same size it's going to be.

Nothing about it, when you look at it, would give you the impression that that is going to be a pot that looks just so. Because there's nothing inherent in it that speaks of that potential. But the potter takes this thing.

He gets it wet. He works with his hands and he kneads it like a bread maker kneads dough. Apparently, he finds some stuff in there that's a little hard, throws that out, keeps working on it.

Softens the whole thing up a lot. And sometimes I notice this, that when that was on the wheel and he's working on it, it seemed to me a very long time, relatively. In terms of

the whole process at time, these professional potters were able to make a pot from a brick of clay, I'd say, I'm guessing it took them two minutes, maybe.

But it seems like at least a minute and a half of that, the thing was still a blob. You know that? After a guy had been working on the wheel for about a minute or so, it didn't look like it used to, but it didn't look like it's supposed to either. It didn't have corners anymore, but it wasn't a pot either of any description.

It was a blob. And I remember thinking, well, this is going to take this guy a long time to make this into one of these pots. And I'd watch him because I'd be waiting for him to come out of the kiln.

I'd watch these guys make new ones. And it never ceased to amaze me. Once that potter got it in his head to do it, he could take that blob that he'd been working with for about a minute and a half, and in less than 30 seconds, he would have that thing formed into a complete pot with maybe a few little things to still smooth out.

But it was essentially from blob to pot was less than 30 seconds easily. But from brick to blob took a lot longer time. And I remember as I watched that, you know, in Jeremiah chapter 18, God told Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house, and God was going to tell him some stuff there.

And what God showed Jeremiah was, well, it had a different application from what I got there, but I felt like God showed me something as I watched these potters work. Because I, of course, couldn't help but remember, being a Bible teacher and a pottery deliverer, that there's verses about pottery and about potters and so forth. And as I watched it, I thought, well, that's like, you know, potters like God, and this clay is like, well, like me.

And if that clay was mindful of its own condition, then after about a minute and a half on the wheel, which is about probably about three quarters of a lifetime of that process, that clay would have absolutely nothing to encourage it that it was ever going to be a vessel for any kind of honorable use. These vessels, when they were done and when they were painted and glazed and all, they were just beautiful. But the thing would have no way of knowing if it would ever be a vessel, even though it had been on the wheel a long time, because it didn't look any more like a vessel than it did before.

It looked different than it had been, but not what it knew or what it would know it was supposed to be. But what I learned from watching this was that the potter has his own agenda. There's something in his mind.

He's got a vision for what that's going to be, and he knows what it takes to get it from here to there. He knows what he's got to work with in the beginning. He messes with it a bit.

He softens it up. He finds hard things and gets them out, and he might even have a start

once and it doesn't come out just right. He blobs it again and then does it again.

If the clay is suitable, the potter will have that pot just about as quickly as the potter wants there to be a pot. And I, as a viewer, or the clay itself, if it was conscious of its own condition, would have no hint when that rapid process was going to begin or end, because it just seemed like an interminably long time, the guy was just messing with the clay and hadn't made anything. Well, I learned something from that, because in my own life at that time, I was very frustrated with my own sanctification.

I had some recent failures that were very disheartening, and I was thinking, maybe I'm never going to get there. Maybe it's never going to happen. I'd been saved when I was doing this probably 20 years, and serving God probably 10 of those years, something like that.

And you get along ways, you think you're doing pretty good, you think you're a pretty good Christian, and then you surprise yourself. And then you think, well, I'm not any closer to being a vessel for honor than I was when I started out 10 years ago. I haven't made any improvements at all.

And that's not entirely true, of course, because after 10 years, I'm not the same person I was, but I'm just not as near to completion as I had hoped I was. And for me to depart from iniquity, and to become a vessel for honor, and to cleanse myself, and to be just what God can use as best I can ever be, is not going to be something I can do. It requires a great deal of work, but it's not my work.

It's not the clay's work. The clay has got to undergo a great deal of work upon it to turn it into a pot, but the clay doesn't have to do any of the work. But the clay does have something it has to do.

It has to be clay. And it has to be supple. And it has to be committed into the hands of the potter.

If the clay is a little too dry, it's going to take longer, if it can be done at all. A good potter knows how to add water and slip and so forth to try to rescue clay that would seem too hard for me. But they know what they're doing.

I don't. But the clay does have to be supple. It has to be soft.

It has to be moist. It has to be malleable. And it has to be in the hands of the potter.

Now, clay doesn't have anything to say about whether it's malleable or whether it's in the hands of the potter, because clay isn't intelligent. But God made us intelligent enough to determine whether we will commit ourselves into the hands of God and be malleable to Him. If so, then all the work that needs to be done to make me into a vessel for honor, well, I don't have to do any of that work.

God has to do it. But I have to not be resistant. I have to be malleable, and I have to keep myself in the hands of the potter.

Now, some of you might say, oh, Steve, that's not quite correct. Jesus said no one can pluck you out of my Father's hands. Well, I won't argue with you.

All I can say is there is a tendency to try to escape the wheel, to try to escape the pressure, maybe to get a little dizzy. And just as I think Wes said last week, was it you who preached last week, Wes? It was, wasn't it? I think Wes said this, that the problem with the living sacrifice is its tendency to crawl off the altar. That is a possibility.

And although no one can pluck you out of the potter's hands, you're not ordinary clay. You are stuff that still has some will and still can slow the process down, I believe. And so how do I become a vessel for honor, suited for good work, useful to God? Well, I need to do the part that God tells me to do.

And once He tells me to do it, it is possible for me to do it now. What God tells me to do, God's Word is not ordinary words. You know, if they passed a law in Idaho that everybody had to upgrade their houses so that there were no leaks in their roofs.

Well, some of us might not have the money to do that. It might be a law that was impossible for some of us to keep. It would just condemn us.

But God's words and God's commands are different. They aren't just rules imposed. They are the living Word of God coming to be implanted with a living dynamic that works in us so that if God says do it, you can.

By the power of His Word. Remember what it says about the Jews of Moses' day that the Gospel was preached to them as well as to us, but the Word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. Now, they received the Word, but they didn't receive it with faith and it didn't profit them.

It is possible for the Word of God to come powerless to you if you don't believe it and you don't submit to it and where God says depart from this lawlessness if you don't depart from it. But if God does say depart from lawlessness, it can be done by faith. You trust His Word and His command is like a promise.

I always thought it was interesting how in the Ten Commandments the way God worded it was thou shalt not do this, thou shalt not do that, you shall do this. I thought, well, what does shall mean? Does shall mean you will or you must? In the Bible it's used both ways in different places. Thou shalt not murder.

Does that mean I must not murder? Or does it mean I will not murder? Well, arguably both. It certainly means I must not, but with God's command, His commands are like promises because what He commands us to do, there is an inherent promise that He will

enable us to do. He will do it in us if we will submit to the command, if we will not resist, if we will be committed into His hands as clay.

But we cannot be there as long as we are being lawless. You see, lawless means not under the control of the lawgiver. Rebelling against the authority of the one who makes the laws.

Well, if it's lawless, it means it's not really under the control of the potter. It's as we submit ourselves to God, submit ourselves to His law, His commands, as we trust in Him, as we make it our aim to be useful to God, vessels of honor, then He does the work. If we decide that He's not doing it fast enough and He can't pull this off and we're going to pull back, do it our way, well, then it's going to take longer.

So, this is the message from this passage in 2 Timothy that I wanted to give today. Actually, there were other points I thought I might get off to, but I won't. I'll just leave it this way.

There's still points to come. We are commanded and privileged to be able to depart from a lawless, meaningless, aimless existence, subject only to our own whims and lusts and desires, and we are able to come under the governance of God. And He calls us to do that.

He calls us to put away our own sets of laws that we have made for ourselves, the religious laws some religious institution may have made for us, even in some cases, secular political laws, which are not agreeable with Him. But His laws, the command of Jesus Christ, Jesus said, if you continue in My words, then you are My disciples indeed. And if you make it your aim to have no other goal in life than to be obedient to Jesus Christ, then He will do the work.

He'll do the work and it will be done in His time. It might not be as quick as you think, but He's got His hands on the blob and when He gets a mind to do it, He can shape it rather amazingly rapidly. However, once He's done that, you need to be careful not to get too up at Him.

Because in Jeremiah 18, the potter who represented God actually was working with a pot, and he made a pot, but it was marred on the wheel. And then he had to throw it away and start over with a new one. So it's never at the point where we can feel like, well, I can relax my guard now.

This life is going to be full of warfare and tests and trials and temptations and so forth. We can never let down the guard until we go to heaven. But we've got to keep our, I almost said nose to the grindstone, maybe I should say our tails to the wheel.

But that's what we're going to be left with today from this message.