

Vessels of Honor

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July 1992

"God is looking for vessels of honor whom He can use in His kingdom," the pastor told his congregation. "He wants each of us to be one of these vessels of honor." Doesn't that sound wonderful? Don't we all want to be vessels of honor mightily used by God Himself for His work? Oh, Yes!

But, let's listen to the rest of what our pastor says: "In order to become a vessel of honor, we face a very long, difficult molding process. That process involves heartache, brokenness, and absolute devotion to the Lord. It takes years and years to accomplish." How does being a vessel of honor sound now? I can see the "vessels of honor" line getting shorter and shorter.

Let's look at Paul's words to Timothy about vessels of honor:

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work. (II Tim 2:20-21 KJV)

The NIV states these verses this way:

In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. (NIV).

By nature we are vessels of dishonor. We are Adam's offspring. By nature we each seek our own way and will. During the process of training as infants, children, youth and adults, people often become set in their own stubborn ways. In the human, social sense we are opinionated, vocal, difficult to deal with, and very often unteachable. Such traits of the flesh invariably limit the usefulness of such a person to God.

Paul said, "If a man therefore **purge himself** from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour..." (v 21 KJV). The implication here is that we must be active in our own purging process. The Holy Spirit is always standing near to help us purge ourselves, but the initiative is ours. We must be willing subjects for the purging process.

This Purging and Molding Process Inevitably Includes the Cross

Becoming a vessel of honor involves a two fold process. First, we must embrace the cross, or die to flesh and the world. Second, we must be formed or molded into the image of Jesus.

I grew up in a remote part of the southern United States where proper medical care was often unavailable for weeks at a time. Occasionally someone's arm would be broken in an accident. As crude as it may seem today, often the arm would simply be placed in a splint awaiting the arrival of the doctor on his monthly tour. Bones begin the natural process of healing quickly. But for the arm to be fully useful, it must be straight and properly healed. When the doctor came, he often had to break the arm again in order to properly set it. That breaking was very painful and traumatic.

In God's molding process, He is looking for strong, straight, God-centered growth. In order for God to fully use a person, He must "rebreak" him from time to time and reform his growth in God's image. The breaking process can be devastating. Often the process deals not only with the person's will, it touches every area of one's life that is not fully submitted to God. These areas include financial, emotional, relational, professional, and so forth.

But the breaking and molding not only includes "big breaks." It is a daily process whereby the Holy Spirit continually tries to draw us into a closer communion with our Father and His beloved Son, Jesus. God doesn't just want us broken. He wants to be able to transform us into His image and His instruments. Our Father earnestly desires a full communion with each of us. He wants our constant companionship by the move of the Holy Spirit. He uses the Holy Spirit daily to try to get us to listen more, submit more, rest more, and simply exist in this relationship. This is the molding that each of us need.

Scriptural Examples of God's Breaking and Molding

This "breaking" or "molding" principle is clearly shown in the lives of many biblical characters.

1. The Apostle Paul

The Apostle Paul most certainly went through this process. He was a bright young Jewish leader zealous to do what he thought was God's will. But on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians he met the Lord in a dramatic way. Paul lost his eyesight as a result of that meeting with Jesus. Of course, Paul didn't know it would only last for three days. All he knew was that he was blind! Can you imagine what went through his mind for those three days? It must have been utter horror. Here he was: Saul of Tarsus, the star student of Gamaliel, excelling above his peers, the Hebrew of Hebrews, the Pharisee of Pharisees - blind. What was he to do? How was life going to treat a blind Paul?

Yes, God restored his eyesight. But God also promptly sent him into the far side of the desert for 14 years! (See Galatians 1 and 2). Yesterday he was somebody; today he is a nobody and is nowhere! He is no longer esteemed by the religious community. No one ever asks for his opinion on religious matters as they once did.

What a mighty fall for one who was among the most promising leaders of Judaism. For 14 years this continued. I believe that during those 14 years the Lord stripped Paul of his pride, ego, arrogance, material assets, and anything else that was displeasing to the Lord or hindered his ministry. But during this time as the Lord broke Paul, so also was the remolding process going on.

I believe it was then that the Lord Jesus began to personally teach Paul. For Paul tells us in Galatians 1:11-12 that he taught his doctrine based on revelation from Jesus Himself. Yes, the remolding process seems to blend with the breaking. They seem to occur at the same time. By the time Paul emerged from the 14 years of obscurity he was a totally different man. He no longer portrayed the ugliness of man - he radiated the loveliness and graciousness of Jesus. Here was a man whom the Lord transformed by the process of breaking and remolding. Of course, this molding did not end there. Just as it was a life-long process for Paul, so will it be with each of us.

2. Other Scriptural Examples

Surely Moses went through this process when he initially tried to help the Israelites and was forced to flee Egypt. After 40 years God sent him back - this

time to succeed. Joseph went through this process when his brothers sold him into slavery and he ended up in prison in Egypt. In due time, that is, after much breaking and remolding, God exalted him to the position of prime minister over all Egypt.

There are many others in Scripture who apparently went through this breaking and molding process. For example, David was anointed king over Israel when he was a very young man. No doubt there were illusions of grandeur in his childish mind. But those illusions certainly were shattered during the years he spent fleeing from King Saul, fearing for his very life and living on the run as an outlaw. Peter certainly went through a painful breaking/molding process from his early days with Christ through his denial of, and restoration by Jesus.

There Are Degrees of Breaking

I believe the depth or degree of breaking depends on the degree of self-will a person has. Some people are so willing, even eager, to do the Lord's will. Others seem set on self-pursuit. Those who are compliant will experience much less trauma in the breaking and remolding process.

Often there is sin in the life of the person that God must deal with as part of the breaking and molding process. Usually the sin is not outward sin such as substance abuse, sexual sin, and so on. But rest assured, all who have the call of God as a vessel of honor will need to have the sin purged in the breaking process. The question is not, "Will he go through breaking?" but, "To what degree will the breaking be and how long will it take?"

Breaking Human Expectations

In our humanness, when God speaks to us, as a chosen vessel we immediately create in our imagination certain expectations. I call this the "expectation syndrome." Most often that expectation is wrong. For example, if God came to you and said,

"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;

All the peoples on the earth

will be blessed through you."
(God's word to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3 NIV).

What would you think? I would say, "Hallelujah! The blessings of God have finally come! My troubles are all over. I'll be rich. I'll be famous. I'll be powerful. God is going to give me everything I want! Hallelujah!" But look what happened when Abram obeyed God: verse ten says,

Now there was a famine in the land...

That certainly doesn't measure up to my "expectations," does it yours? Did God really lead Abram to a land of famine? Yes, He did. Could it be that Abram's "expectations" died there in the famine? Could this be the beginning of Abram's breaking and molding process? I think so. Could Abram have become bitterly disappointed and wanted to quit? Of course, Abram was human, wasn't he? But such thoughts are based on false expectations and must die if we are to become vessels God can use.

How God Breaks and Molds Today

God is still accomplishing His breaking and molding in much the same way He did ages ago, starting with Abram. First comes salvation, then the call of the Lord. Then, in order for the Lord to turn us into vessels of honor, those vessels set aside for noble purposes, all sin, pride, willfulness, and false expectations must be put to death.

There are endless ways God can accomplish His purposes. They are as varied as the person whom He calls. I will mention a few. God may:

- Place a person under overbearing superiors.
- Place a person in extreme economic hardship.
- Place a person in situations of social embarrassment.
- Allow a person to bear some physical or relational handicap.
- Allow a person to endure failures, be they professional, parenting, pastoring, and so forth.

Dangers Along the Way

Let us not forget that we are human. We hurt and bleed like everyone else when we are in this process. Thus, we must be alert to the enemy's strategy during these molding times.

Often, when the emotions are raw and all hope seems to evaporate, the enemy comes and says, "If God really loved you, why is this happening to you? If God called you, why...?" and so forth. Perhaps

Jeremiah heard, "God doesn't care about you, other-wise you wouldn't be down in this well." (See Jeremiah 38:6-7).

Remember such vessels of honor are set aside for mighty works. They are "high visibility" Christians in the spirit realm and they are targeted by the enemy for discouragement and destruction. They are at the top of the enemy's hit list.

Do All Christians Go Through Breaking and Molding?

Based on my observations over the years, I believe the answer to this question is, "No." Only those who are willing to "purge themselves" go through this process. Only those who want above all else to be vessels of honor for the Master's use will allow themselves to go all the way through to the end of this process. I am reminded of the parable of the sower. (See Mark 4). Here Jesus tells us of the four human responses to the Word (seed): 1) some fell along the path, 2) some fell in rocky places, 3) some fell among the thorns, and 4) some fell on good soil.

The first two Jesus mentioned fell away, but the third group, the ones who fell among thorns, clearly represent Christians who are genuinely born again but who are more concerned with the things of this world than the things of God. Jesus described them as those who have, "...the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things..." He went on to say that these desires "come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful." Only the fourth group prospered. Only the fourth group persisted, sent roots down and bore fruit...some thirty, some sixty and some a hundredfold!

The Purpose of Molding

The Lord takes no pleasure in breaking us, but He does take great pleasure in molding us into the image of Jesus. We cannot be truly used by Jesus as long as our own image still radiates "flesh" or the world.

Let us review the attributes of those who have allowed themselves to be molded as Paul described them in II Timothy 2:21:

If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. (II Tim 2:20-21 NIV).

Thus, Paul said those who are purged become: 1) an instrument for noble purposes, 2) made holy, 3) useful to the Master, and 4) prepared to do any good work.

1. Instrument for Noble Purposes

God reserves His purged, chosen ones for noble use. I don't necessarily mean "nobility" in man's eyes, but in God's eyes. Such noble purposes have to do with God's invisible kingdom. God has great plans and purposes that He reserves for these instruments. He can take such people and send them into very difficult situations and know that they will do God's will every time.

2. Made Holy

To be made holy encompasses one who is not only separated from sin, but one who is dedicated to God as holy.

But how is one "made holy"? The writer of Hebrews answers that question for us: "...but God disciplines us for our good, **that we may share in His holiness.**" (Heb 12:10 NIV emphasis added). We become holy through the disciplining process of the Holy Spirit. The writer goes on to say, "...without holiness no one will see the Lord." (Verse 14).

Holiness is both a prerequisite and a byproduct of being one in spirit with the Lord. In this light, our breaking and molding may be viewed as God's discipline **that we may share in His holiness.**

3. Useful to the Master

It is interesting to watch a master craftsman using tools. He uses each tool for specific purposes. He

is very careful to keep his tools clean, sharp and orderly. Certain tools are used only for one thing. He never touches them until that particular need arises... then he reaches for that special tool. It is useful to him as no other tool could be. He easily accomplishes his task with the right tool in good working order.

As a good craftsman enjoys using tools that are well designed and sharp, so the Lord takes pleasure in using His "vessels of honor." Such vessels are useful to Him. He may at any time reach for that vessel, that tool, and it stands always ready to be used.

4. Prepared To Do Any Good Work

I know of one such vessel whom the Lord awakened very early in the morning and instructed to be on a plane to a foreign country that day. He readily obeyed. Enroute he asked the Lord why he had such short notice. The Lord told him that the person He first spoke to was not responsive. Sadly that other person was entangled with other "things." He was not willing or prepared to go. We need to be willing and prepared to do anything at anytime for the Lord.

As the breaking and molding is completed, there is a new gentleness. There is a new Christ centeredness evident in the one in whom this process has been accomplished. He moves in a new power and authority. Jesus now has a vessel of honor fit for use in His kingdom. Such vessels are a joy to behold.

Lord, grant us all a willingness to purge ourselves, under the hand of the Holy Spirit so that we, too, will be vessels of honor, made holy, useful to you, and prepared to do any good work.

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