

Hands Together through Study I Timothy 2:15



It is so easy to base our approach to life simply on our own opinions, impressions, and emotions. In a conversation I recently had concerning our purpose in life, a comment was made that I couldn't address immediately because of the weight of its implications. The comment went something like this: "We are not just made to be vessels by which God works, because we are also individual people with our own opinions and minds. God didn't make us to be robots."

For a split second it seemed like a reasonable enough statement, but as I turned it over in my mind I realized that what this person said is based on the idea that being a "vessel" of God means we are limited and bound, shackled so to speak, and slave-like. If we operate with this motion then it is as though we believe that God is dictatorial in nature, a tyrant that sits on a throne passively dishing out commands without consideration in the least of our own experience.

Many of us would never confess to thinking that God is this way, but if we take a strong look at our hearts and find even a hint of resentment there this means that we may, be it subconsciously, believe this to be true about God. If this is the case, we face the danger of either becoming robotic in our actions because we feel we can't operate in any other capacity than "just as vessels", or we turn from God altogether and go in search of "true freedom".

I am very disturbed by this notion of what it means to be a vessel of God – mainly because I have to confess that I am guilty of switching on the auto pilot mode at times in resignation, namely when I have been too lazy to turn to God's Word to learn more about who he really is and what his will really is for my life. Truth be told, despite the absolute folly of it, this notion of what it means to be a "vessel", at least at first glance, is not an unreasonable deduction to make considering our innate desire for freedom. It is not easy to swallow God's will when it is phrased so piercingly with words such as "lose your life for me" or "walk through the narrow road" or "die to yourself".

And so it is with so many other ideas that are set before us in God's Word. We are constantly challenged in our humanity to submit to these commands that seem so foreign and parochial from our standpoint, because naturally we want to be in control of our lives and make our own choices. But when God is in the picture, when we decide to curl up with God's Word for a while in the morning or in the evening, or better yet, at every given opportunity (as he desires for us to do), and when we filter the daily commentary and editorials we hear in the news, the talk shows, the office lounge, the playground or at the coffee shop- with what God has to say about it, all our impressions are kept in check – in the same way a best friend corrects us when we make a wrong assumption or walk in halfway through a conversation – and we experience true freedom, the freedom that comes only from a living and dynamic walk with God, one that sweeps us off our feet and brings us to our knees all at once.

The truth is God's will is for us to have relationships that are intimate, relationships in which we are free to be ourselves and enjoy each other without limitation. If I were to summarize the cause of the majority of life's struggles in one word it would have to be: relationships. If we take an honest look at the roots of many, if not most, of our frustrations, I think it's fair to say that they are the result of feeling misunderstood, unappreciated, unrecognized, underestimated, lonely, rejected, and other dejected feelings caused by some type of inadequacy in our relationships. This is because we are social creatures. God created us to love and to be loved.

I propose to you that 2 Timothy 2:15 has everything to do with relationships. *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth* (NIV). In ***The Pastoral Epistles of Paul***, a commentary written by Charles R. Erdman, the writer reflects on the importance of having God's mind in order to have discernment, in particular when it comes to spotting false teachers in the church. Regarding verse 20 Erdman says: *“Some vessels (in a house) are put to distasteful and unpleasant uses, and others are vessels of honor, which are associated with dignity and delight. Thus some men [and women] in a professing church can be used as warnings and examples of the perils of apostasy; but, on the other hand, a man [or woman] who will keep himself [or herself] uncontaminated by false teachings and by error, will be like a vessel of gold or silver.* Erdman's interpretation is basically that we will be known by our fruit.

As Christians we have the awesome privilege and responsibility of being ambassadors of Christ to those around us (2 Corinthians 5:20). “False teachers” do nothing more than cause division and discord in the church and even in the greater communities of the city, country and world. When there is no accountability, when we get lazy in our walks with Christ and resort to our own emotions, impressions and opinions to guide us through our days, we easily distort the truth with our actions and become “distasteful and unpleasant” vessels lacking “dignity and delight”. We become agents of discord instead of agents of truth. This is true because when we operate in this manner we never see the entire picture – only what is visible from our own limited perspective.

2 Timothy 2 describes the many damaging actions of a person who is an agent of discord: this person *quarrels about words* (vs. 14), *indulges in godless chatter* (vs. 16), his or her *words spread like gangrene* (vs. 17), and he or she *destroys the faith of some* (vs. 18). In other words, when we are constantly engaged in arguments, insistent on getting our points across to the point of becoming belligerent, or when we find pleasure in badmouthing others, maybe even to the point of starting rumors or igniting bad feelings in other people toward those we badmouth, we need to stop and ask ourselves: are we spending enough time in God's Word?

So many hearts have been broken by wrong impressions and assumptions. When left unchecked, these lead to uncontrolled emotions that fester in the heart, so that our opinions become biased, one-sided, unjustified, and even foolish. If we are left to our own devices we can cause a lot of heartache and pain in our communities, because our wrong opinions, our wrong attitudes, our wrong impressions and wrong assumptions can easily *spread like gangrene* and even *destroy the faith of some*.

Instead we need to be united in sharing the truth, holding each other accountable, and being vessels of honor and dignity in the church and the community. How do we do this when we live in an imperfect world with imperfect people? It is definitely not something that just happens on its own, nor is it a personality thing. In order to become a vessel of truth we need to love God. God is available along with all his resources. We simply need to reach for him – every day, and to do this we need to spend time meditating on God's Word.

I have been a Christian for most of my life. I can honestly say that I have loved Christ since I was a child. I remember one particular circumstance, which I believe to have been my conversion experience. I was about five years old. My family gathered together in my parent's bedroom to watch an Easter movie. Being so little, I didn't understand that what I saw on the screen was a reenactment of what had happened more than 2,000 years ago. I asked my parents, “Is this happening in Heaven right now?” I remember crying, broken-hearted, when I saw Christ being beaten and forced to drag a heavy beam across Jerusalem, only to be nailed to it on

Golgotha. I wanted to do something about it, to get my father to stop those evil soldiers. I don't think I had ever experienced sadness in my young existence to the extent that I experienced it that day. I believe it was from that moment on that Christ's cause became my cause. Even though I was very young I was filled with indignation whenever I saw injustice, brutality, and hatred. I wanted to be a warrior for the cause of the innocent, and often got myself into trouble when I reacted out of what I believed at the time to be righteous anger.

This must be why God says the kingdom belongs to the little ones (Matthew 19:14). Children are tender and passionate. They embrace those who love them. It is only when doubt and fear is implanted in their lives that children begin to form suspicions and become skeptical and even apathetic. Children allow God to love them without any prejudice whatsoever. We are the ones that get in the way of that innocence when we fail to demonstrate God's love to the youngest generations because we are too preoccupied with ourselves to teach them God's truth. This is another reason why it is so important to meditate on God's Word and build our houses on the rock (Matthew 7:24).

I feel privileged to have known Christ's love for so long; however, this doesn't mean that I have been a vessel of truth all of my life. I struggle every day to stay near to God. There were years during which I strayed very far from him, so I can say I sympathize with the prodigal son as well. The funny thing is that I always end up coming back to him, apologetically and ashamed, with dirty and torn clothing and an empty and noxious stomach, only to fall into his open embrace once again and feast desperately from his banquet.

God is a kind and loving gentleman. He doesn't impose himself on us. He loves us enough to set us free. He freed us from the chains of sin, and also gives us the freedom to make our own decisions and hold our own opinions; however, when we have truly experienced God's freedom and been injected with his passion for the cause of his children there's really nothing left for us other than Christ. As Paul said, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21)

As I reflect back across the years I can think of so many vessels of truth that God has put in my path to guide me down the narrow road – often to guide me back to the narrow road! My parents, devoted teachers, friends, and ministers that encouraged my faith with their seasoned speech and acts of love. My elementary and Sunday school teachers taught me Bible stories; the volunteers and leaders at the college ministry that brought me back to God spent countless hours patiently pointing out the answers to my questions in the Bible. My parents taught me how to pray and read the Bible every day and led my family in frequent devotions. Sadly, I can also think of vessels of discord, Christians who were into themselves more than God's truth, and who sent mixed messages and often left me confused.

We need to do our best to present ourselves to God as those approved – our acts need to pass the test of fire! Not only because they will be commended and rewarded by Almighty God, but also because as ambassadors for Christ, our lives need to reflect his love so that others can taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). In this way our family in heaven will grow. I want to get to heaven and enjoy my big, happy family! I want to enjoy perfect intimacy with the people I meet on earth, people that I love and admire and with whom I still often have misunderstandings and disagreements, despite my love for them.

I thought a recent trip to Cali, Colombia was going to be for vacation, but it turned out to be a lot more than that. My mother was diagnosed with cancer last year. This has probably been the most difficult year of her life, and my family's as well, as she has endured three operations and an intense and painful radiation treatment to save her vocal chords, and more importantly,

her life. The battle continues as my mother still has not regained her voice and a strange growth was spotted on her larynx, which may or may not be cancerous.

In the midst of this painful setback, a group of loving and godly women from the Cauca Valley Presbytery in Cali, Colombia prepared a special event for my mother. On a sunny and breezy day, these lovely ladies from different churches in the region met together to celebrate my mother's life and ministry. That day left a mark on my life that has forever changed me. I was moved by their gesture and impacted by my mother's legacy. More than forty years later my mother's name is recognized in churches across Colombia, so much so that there were many women present of my own generation that had never met my mom but had heard about her and wanted to meet her.

I felt that I was in the midst of royalty, because I too had heard numerous stories about these faithful women and had finally had the chance to meet them. I had the honor of meeting the women who embraced my mother when she was just twenty years old and new to the Christian faith. She had been the youngest mother in the church and since she was married and had a baby, the youth group, which in most Latin churches is comprised of both teenagers and young adults, did not admit her as a member. It was then that the women's association took Athala under their wings. It was through these women that her faith grew. She flourished with them because they shared Christ in love and truth.

I was in a room full of queens – in a royal banquet of sorts. These women have been faithful vessels of God's truth for decades and their lives have and will continue to impact future generations – including the life of my daughter who was with me.

We studied the famous passage found in Proverbs 31 about the woman of noble character. One verse in particular stuck out to me: *Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised* (vs. 30). I cherish the living example found in the lives of these women, especially my mother's. I want my life to have that kind of impact on future generations.

I still have my prodigal daughter days. Those are wasted days. They only become valuable once I come back home, because I always return to God with an even greater appreciation of his unconditional embrace. I am reminded that freedom is only found in truth, and the truth is that God loves us so much he died for us.

When we tune out the noise in our heads for a moment and take the time to listen to what God has to say to us, we are then able to enjoy true intimacy with him and gain his perspective on things. When we come together to study God's Word, we can overcome every human barrier. As people who correctly handle the word of truth we can leave a legacy that will transcend time and enlarge our family – the family with which we will enjoy perfect intimacy in heaven.

Iris Straube was born in Cali, Colombia and lives in Miami, Florida. She is married to Edgar Straube and they have a beautiful one-year-old girl named Maia Isabella. Iris is a part-time English teacher, and full-time homemaker. She serves in the youth ministry alongside her husband at her church, Iglesia PC El Camino.