

# "Empty Vessels."

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A good deal has been said and written, especially in poetry, about the need of our being empty vessels, ready for the use of the Master. The thought is, that our being kept empty is the qualification for immediate use, that when in that condition the Lord can take us up, fill us, and send us forth on any service to which He calls. Is this a scriptural thought?

We will consider, first of all, the scriptures in which the term vessels or vessel is found. In 2 Cor. 4 the apostle says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." (v. 7.) There is little doubt that this passage contains an allusion to Gideon and his men. We read that "he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers." (Judges 7: 16.) The pitchers had been empty, it will be observed, but Gideon put the lights — the brands or torches - inside. This will help us to understand the meaning of the treasure in the earthen vessels of which St. Paul speaks. It is evidently, from the context, the knowledge of the glory of God, that glory which, displayed in the face of the glorified Christ, God had caused to shine in our hearts. But this once received, by the operation of sovereign power and grace (for it was the God who had commanded the light to shine out of darkness who hath shined in our hearts), does not come and go, but remains as an abiding possession. The condition of its display is another thing, involving the constantly bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus (v. 10); but the treasure remains in the vessel.

In 2 Timothy 2 the term vessels is also found. "In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and 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, prepared unto every good work." (vv. 20, 21.) The question here, as will be readily seen, is not of empty or full vessels, but entirely one of association. To be a vessel ready to the Master's hand, "a man" must be in separation from the vessels of dishonour, thus affirming the principle of defilement through our associations and consequent disqualification for service. Only as purged from the vessels of dishonour can one become a vessel unto honour, one which the Master will delight to take up and employ. But passing on to the next chapter, we learn that if the man of God is to be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works, he must be well instructed from the Scriptures. (See vv. 14-17.) With this agrees the exhortation in Colossians — "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another," etc. In other words, the vessel must be filled, and not there and then for the immediate service, but it must be in that state habitually; the word must *dwell* in the vessel, and then it will flow out in teaching as the Master may require.

If we now refer to the truth involved more generally, the same result will be obtained. When our Lord was speaking to the woman of Samaria, He said, "Whosoever shall drink of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well" (fountain) "of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4: 14.) Here again the water

once received — a symbol doubtless of life in the power of the Holy Ghost — remains as a permanent possession. Hence if we turn to John 7 we discover that the water is not only received, but that it also flows out: "He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water." (v. 38.) The vessel is thus filled, and filled in the first place for its own eternal satisfaction, and then it overflows in blessing to others. It is freely conceded that there must be the constant reception, but even so the vessel is never to be empty. Nay, the well or fountain is within, because it is connected with the gift of the indwelling Spirit; for John expressly says, "This spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive." (v. 39.) Possessing therefore the Holy Ghost, the normal state of the believer is to be filled even to overflowing with His power — power of life — so that "rivers of living water" might flow out for the refreshment and blessing of those around. There could not, in this view of the case, be an empty vessel, and it is equally clear that to be prepared for service is to be full to overflowing. Even more might be said. Living in the power of the Holy Ghost, as so possessed, these streams of living water would ever be flowing forth as from a perennial fountain. On the other hand, if these streams should, through the grieving of the Holy Spirit of God, not be flowing out, and the vessel in a sense become empty, such an one would not, it is needless to say, be in a condition for the Master's use.

If we now refer to another class of scriptures the same conclusion will be reached. Two will suffice: "Let your loins be girded about, *and your lights burning*," etc. (Luke 12: 35.) "Among whom ye shine as lights in the world." (Phil. 2: 15.) Now the "lights" in these and other scriptures always signify Christ — Christ as shining out, in the power of the Holy Ghost, through the life of the believer. When in this scene Christ was the light of the world; and, in His absence, believers occupy this same place; but they only answer to it in so far as Christ is practically expressed in their walk and ways. There is therefore a correspondency between these scriptures and that already considered, which tells us that "we have this treasure in earthen vessels." For Christ must be possessed before He can be expressed; the light must be within before it can shine forth in the midst of the darkness by which we are surrounded. An empty vessel would thus be one without Christ, and it is not the way of our Lord to take up such, and kindle the light, and send him forth to shine in special missions of service. No; the more the vessel is filled with Christ — and the condition of being filled is to be constantly occupied with beholding the glory that radiates from His unveiled face at the right hand of God — the brighter will be the illumination that will stream forth, and the more distinctly will it be ready to the Master's hand for disposal at His will. It was the foolish virgins, and not the wise, who had the empty vessels; they had no oil in them, significant of the fact that they were not born again, and consequently had not the indwelling Spirit. The wise had failed in not trimming their lamps; but inasmuch as their vessels were not empty they were aroused in time to meet the Bridegroom, and went by His grace its with Him to the marriage. The others — the foolish virgins with the empty vessels — were shut out for ever.

The question may then be put, Is it possible for the Christian to be an empty vessel? One of two things will always follow. Either he will be filled with Christ, or with himself and the things which centre in himself. Thus, if not filled with Christ, he is always in danger. It was so with the Jewish nation. The unclean spirit of idolatry had gone out, but finding no rest, in the language of our blessed Lord, the unclean spirit saith, "I will return to my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with

himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first." (Matt. 12: 43-45.) If now that nation had received Christ, He would have filled up the void, and they would have been secure from this awful intrusion of wicked spirits. In like manner, unless the believer is filled with Christ, he is ever exposed to be occupied and possessed with what is opposed to Christ. An empty vessel he should not, and indeed cannot, be.

It is quite true that, if the Lord sends any of His own on special service, everything — power, wisdom, grace, and the message, if this be the kind of service — must all be received from Him. Nothing of our own, nothing that springs from self, can be used for Him. But the point is, that the believer will not be in a condition to be employed unless he is already filled. And the more filled he is, the more Christ practically possesses his soul, the more consciously dependent he will be, and the more certain therefore, when the privilege of any service is conferred, to look up to receive all he needs for it from the Lord. So in the primitive church, it was when they were all filled with the Holy Ghost that they spake the word of God with boldness. (See Acts 4: 31; also Acts 2: 4, etc.) It is therefore, we again repeat, not empty, but filled vessels, that the Lord requires for His sovereign disposal in service. E. D.