

“Vessels of Honor”

2 Timothy 2:20-22

A Sermon  
Delivered by  
Chaplain Carey Cash

United States Naval Academy  
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Many of you remember where you were on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003. For me, it was a day I will never forget, as the battalion of Marines to which I was assigned as chaplain was positioned just a few kilometers south of the border of Iraq making ready to invade. A lot happened that day, and of course that night we were given the word to cross the line of departure into combat operations in what would become known as Operation Iraqi Freedom. One of the more remarkable events of that day that doesn't get much billing is the letter that General James Mattis distributed to every single Marine in 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division on the border. General Mattis was our Commanding General and he had written a letter giving us some final words of encouragement before we went into harm's way. On the afternoon of March 20<sup>th</sup> as we were all making preparations to invade, 7-ton trucks began making their way to all the units along the border, and 20,000 + Marines and sailors all got their very own copy of the General's letter. In that letter, General Mattis reminded us of some important things: the brutality & evil of the regime we were facing. He reminded us that our fight was not with the Iraqi people, but with those who chose to fight us. He told us to make sure we showed decency and used good judgment. He reminded us to engage our brains before our weapons; to share our courage with one another. He encouraged us to fight with a happy heart and a strong spirit. And then his closing words were these:

For the mission's sake, our country's sake, and the sake of the men who carried the division's colors in past battles – who fought for life and never lost their nerve – *carry out your mission and keep your honor clean*. Demonstrate to the world that there is no better friend, and no worse enemy than a U.S. Marine.

This morning in our scripture passage we too are given a letter that speaks of honor. The letter was originally addressed to a young man named Timothy. No Timothy was not standing at the threshold of war or about to cross a line of departure into harm's way; but he was in a fight...a fight for faithfulness and identity. He's drawing lines in the sand and making decisions about who he will be, who he will serve, what set of values will shape his life, what beat of what drum he will march to. Into this moment, he receives a letter from his

“Commanding Officer,” the Apostle Paul...and the letter reminds him, among other things, *to keep his honor clean*. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2:20-21, Paul writes:

Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

Honor, like integrity, and duty as we heard last week is one of those larger than life terms. And one with which we’re familiar in the military and especially in the Navy. Class of 2018, what are our Navy-Marine Corps - Core values? *Honor, courage and commitment*. Right here at the Naval Academy, Midshipmen live by what we call the honor concept that says as a Midshipmen we won’t lie, cheat, or steal, but rather speak the truth, demonstrate fairness and integrity in all we do, and respect what belongs to others. The highest Medal that’s bestowed on someone for an act of valor is called the Medal of Honor – of which there are 73 Naval Academy recipients. So honor is a big thing around here; and there are many ways people have defined it. At one level, it refers to someone’s reputation or sense of pride. We hear of someone’s honor being offended because a charge was made about their character or intentions. In centuries past, when one man offended the honor of another man’s name, they often settled it by means of a duel. “You take your pistol and I’ll take mine, we’ll walk ten paces from one another, and we’ll settle this.”

But there is more to honor than just a good reputation or sense of pride in one’s name. In fact when we look at the way the ancient world viewed honor, it gets down to what has been called, the “nobility of the soul.” I mean that quality or worth of someone’s character that is evident to others, even celebrated by others. An honorable man or woman is someone whose uprightness is known; which is to say there’s a public dimension to being a person of honor. Whereas character is defined as doing the right thing when *no one* is looking...honor is doing the right thing *because* others are looking. I don’t mean this in a superficial sense, that we do things just to impress other people. Rather, honor understands that others are looking upon our lives – our friends, classmates, shipmates, men and women who’ve gone before us, generations who will come after us, history that will judge us, and ultimately God who “searches the heart, and tests the mind to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.” (Jeremiah 17:10) Winston Churchill said that courage is the first of human virtues because it guarantees all the rest...However, “honor,” said Aristotle, “*is the prize of virtue*,” the summation of virtue. An honorable man or woman lives in such a way that others see their good works and because of it, are made better.

Another dimension to honor is shame. In fact, it has been said that honor and shame are really two sides of the same coin. You see, shame is the realization that we’ve let our honor down. The foundational story of

shame is the story of Adam and Eve. Up until the point they sinned, we're told that they were naked and not ashamed. It's hard to imagine a world like that. In fact don't imagine it ☺ But when they sinned and broke faith with God's commands in their life, we're told in Genesis 3:7 "The eyes of both of them were opened, they realized they were naked and felt shame; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves." From this point on, shame enters the world as a covering of sorts, a reminder that actually protects us and keeps us from doing dishonorable things. Shame helps us come to terms with the consequences of our behavior and learn from them. We've all had moments of shame.

My first dose of shame came when I was a Kindergartener at Keen Mill Elementary School in Northern VA, some 38 years ago. Our project that day in class was simple - to color a picture of a dog and stay inside the lines. Well, after a few minutes of this, I looked over at the boy next to me, and his dog looked much better than mine. His picture had bright colors, all inside the lines; and then there was my dog...woeful, his colors bleeding all over the page and outside the lines. It was a sad sight. And so when my classmate got up to go to the bathroom, I just traded pictures and put my name on it. My teacher was Mrs. Shoemaker and I'll never forget her. Because when she realized what I had done, she didn't castigate me, but quietly took me outside to the hallway, knelt down to my level and showed me the two pictures...and I felt ashamed. The thing I remember the most about her is that there was not a trace of harshness or rebuke in her voice, but in the most gentle way, she let the pictures speak for themselves. I said I was sorry and gave the doggy back.

Shame opens our eyes to the consequences of what we've done; and it hurts, but it heals, because it can actually restrain us from doing dishonorable things in the future. It's important to point this out because we live in a world that really has abandoned shame as a motivating factor for upright living. And of course the reason is that very few people are willing to say there are actually shameful acts anymore. It's a terrible state to be in and we shouldn't avoid this fact. As Romans 1 describes, we're living at a time when people not only do shameful acts, but "give hearty approval to them." I remember years ago preparing for a deployment to Okinawa when at a brief before all these young Marines and Sailors, a prominent member of the command, reminded all these young men, many of whom were married, "to get ready for a fun deployment because what happens in Okinawa, stays in Okinawa." And then he handed the mic to me. At first I didn't know what to say, but then I thought about it for a moment, and a phrase began to present itself to me. I said, "with all respect to the previous presenter, I want to encourage all of you to live by that motto to which you've already pledged your lives - be Semper fidelis." And then I quoted a proverb on adultery ☺ The world we live in will challenge your honor at its very core. Class of 2018, Bancroft Hall for all its esteem and history will challenge your honor at its very core. If you don't know who you are, and whose you are, others with less than noble intentions will define you.

In our Scripture passage, the Apostle Paul gives some very clear guidance about how we can be vessels of honor. In verse 22 (and I paraphrase), he says, “Flee youthful passions, pursue righteousness...and surround yourself with those who call upon the Lord.” We might call these: three steps to keeping our honor clean.

First, we’re told to “flee youthful passions.” Now maybe this is a problem for you. If we’re taught anything in the military it’s not to flee but to charge. Class of 2018, I’ve been out there on those Brave-heart runs. What does Major Antonelli say, “First wave, attack!” Also we’re taught that passion is a good thing. We certainly want our leaders to be passionate. So what is Paul getting at here as it relates to honor? Paul is saying flee, run from, having nothing to do with those youthful and naïve notions about life and human nature that will cause you to stumble. It would be natural to assume that when Paul talks about youthful passions, he’s talking about lust or passions of the flesh. At some level, this is true, but he’s really talking about the youthful and idealistic way of thinking that assumes we’ve got it covered; that with just a little effort we can be honorable people and get through this thing called the Naval Academy or life or whatever, unscathed. I remember when I was in college, participating at a Bible study one night and we were sharing prayer requests. As we got around the room to one of our guys, he asked us to please pray for him that God would protect him from all those immoral influences when he went to the clubs and bars. I don’t remember what exactly was said, but I think I remember the leader leaning forward and saying, “I have a better idea, how about not going to those places.”

There are two dangers to consider if we’re to keep our honor clean: one is the flesh, yes. But the bigger danger that we need to run from is the idea that we are above it; that we got it covered; that we won’t fall; that we can place ourselves in less than noble paths and not be affected. No commanding officer who’s ever been relieved of command for immoral behavior woke up and decided to end their career that day. It began months, even years earlier, when he they began to think himself impervious to the dangers of being in inappropriate places, or flirting with sin. 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:12 is very clear on this: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” Flee the youthful idea that sin cannot touch you or wreak havoc in your life.

The second step we can take to keep our honor clean is very simply to “pursue righteousness.” I love this phrase, “pursue righteousness,” because in some translations it comes through as “aim for righteousness.” Class of 2018, you’ve done some aiming lately on the firing range. In fact you now have some ribbons to show for it. Do you remember what your instructors taught you about aiming? You wait until you’re at the bottom of your breath, when you’re perfectly still, and then squeeze the trigger. Paul is telling us to aim at righteousness in this way. In other words, in the midst of all the stress and chaos that life throws at you, be still and breathe...focus. The Scripture says, “Be still and know that I am God.” In the King James version, it’s, “Cease striving and know that I am God.” Recall God’s promises throughout your day; speak to your soul God’s truth; say to yourself, you can “do all things through Christ who strengthen you.” So often the world’s message is,

“don’t just stand there, do something!” So often God says, “don’t just do something stand there – stand still and behold the salvation of your God.” Take aim at righteousness.

Finally, we are taught to surround ourselves with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. In other words, honorable living comes from being in relationship with other believers. Midshipmen, you have classmates that not only share your love of country; not only share your desire to be a naval or Marine Corps officer; not only share your desire to beat Army for a 13<sup>th</sup> year in a row ☺ ...but who share your faith. There are Midshipmen of every class, faculty & staff at every level of leadership, congregants here and on the Yard, who love God and desire to follow him. These relationships serve a protective and healing purpose in your life. And we need each other not only to help us live honorably, but to help us know God’s forgiveness when we stumble and fall; when we do things dishonorably. And we will at times.

Last week Chaplain Gore mentioned Admiral Stockdale as a shining example of doing one’s duty even in the midst of harrowing circumstances. As you know, he, along with many other men spent several years of their lives as POWs in Vietnam; and they learned to communicate information by a code they developed tapped out on the walls of their cells. What many people don’t know about the story is that they also had a code for mercy when one of them broke and divulged information. And most all of them broke at some point. The code was based on the stated Christian principles of Compassion, rehabilitation, and forgiveness. And the way it worked is when one of the men would break down, the other men would soon begin to tap the words on the wall, “Come back, it’s OK, you’re forgiven, you can get your honor back...”

There will be days when you will stumble and fall and even do dishonorable things. It’s here in the Body of Christ where we hear those words tapped on the walls of our lives, “In Christ it’s going to be OK, you can come back, you’re forgiven, for in Christ you’re a new creation, the old has passed away.” When it comes down to it, this is really where honor begins and what it’s all about...the recognition that we’ve all missed the mark at times, we’ve all stumbled, we’ve all failed to be our best, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) But the good news is that God is in the business of restoring our honor. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners.” Today, be still, aim at righteousness, and trust in the mercy and love of Jesus that he showed us on the cross. Hear him tapping the words to you, “It’s OK, you’re forgiven, come back, I will restore your honor.”

For his grace is sufficient for you and his power is made perfect in weakness; and in him, you and I can again be made “vessels of honor, useful to the Master, ready for every good work.” They that have ears to hear let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.