

# How to become Useful to the Master

2 Timothy 2:20-23

*In God's great mission for the world He delights to employ those who are serious about holiness.*

LTS: 1 Pet. 1:13-23

Intro:

One of the things I love about Calvary Bible Church is that so many of you are serious about your faith. I mean, you really love Jesus and hate sin and are striving for faithfulness to Christ and you want to see your lost family and friends come to know the Savior as you know him. You're pretty sure the Lord hasn't called you to be the next Billy Graham or Elizabeth Elliot, but you're just hoping that in the end your life will somehow count for the glory of God.

If you're that kind of person then you have probably wondered, Can God really use me? Can God do something with my insignificant life that will have lasting value? After all, I'm just a... mail man, a bus driver, a stay-at-home mom, a computer programmer, or a common bookkeeper.

Truth be told, I've asked that question many times over the years. I realize that I'm just your average, ordinary, everyday, largely unknown pastor of a church that you pretty much have to get lost in the neighborhood to stumble upon. Can God really use me?

When you read the text before us this morning you kind of get the sense that maybe Timothy had asked the same kind of question. After all, he was NO apostle Paul. Sure, he was called to preach and teach, but he lived in a world that was becoming progressively hostile to the gospel and he had a propensity for becoming timid in face of conflict. Moreover, he apparently had some issues with his physical health.

Beyond that, we have no record of him ever performing a miracle. God never used him to write an inspired epistle to the churches. Let's face it! Timothy was just your average, ordinary, everyday, apostle's helper. And frankly, most of his ministry required him to be separated from his celebrity mentor. He didn't even have a wife, as far as I can tell. Can God use such a man as this? Can God use a man like you; a woman like you; a teenager, college student, or single mother like you?

Now, I know that you know the answer that question: Of course he can! The Bible is full of nobodies through whom God unexpectedly accomplished his will in the world. And he can use you to accomplish much for His glory and your own joy. But the real question is this: What qualifies a Christian man or woman to be useful to the Master? That's a good question, isn't it?

Let's begin our search for the answer to that question by reading the text before us (2 Tim. 2:20-23). And for the sake of refreshing on the context, let's read the larger section beginning in v. 8

Read 2 Tim. 2:8-23

It's always important that we read a text in its context, so we don't miss the point of what the author is saying. In this case, Paul is writing a letter to his younger protégé, Timothy, encouraging him and instructing him on how to be a faithful pastor and leader in the church that God is growing in the world. He writes this letter from prison and he knows time is short. His execution is scheduled to happen sooner rather than later, so Paul is taking his last shot at preparing Timothy to pick up the mantle when his is gone.

This explains why (in chapter 1) Paul exhorts Timothy to NOT "be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord," and not to shrink back from suffering for the gospel. It's why he exhorts Timothy to do his best (15) to present himself to God as "a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Along the way Paul reminds Timothy of certain men who claimed to be ministers of Christ but who proved to be unfaithful when the going got tough; men like (1:15) Phygelus and Hermogenes who turned their backs on Paul when he needed them most. And men like Hymenaeus and Philetus (2:17) who ended up swerving from the truth and upsetting the faith of some by teaching that the resurrection had already taken place and they had somehow missed it.

Then, Paul makes a profound statement (v. 19), that "God's firm foundation stands." In other words, Jesus is still building his church as he has promised. And the foundation stone of his church has two important inscriptions etched into it; namely,

1. "The Lord knows who are his." This reflects back on v. 10, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect."
2. "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."
  - a. The people whom God has drawn to himself should be marked by

one dominant characteristic; namely, progressive sanctification or Holiness.

- b. That is, by the grace of God they are striving to lay aside the sinful habits and desires of their former life and are putting on the character of Christ.

The following paragraph in the text, then, picks up on this theme of the Christian's grace-empowered pursuit of holiness. And this is what we will consider in the time we have remaining.

This section breaks down very naturally into three themes. They are:

- I. The Illustration of Household Vessels (20)
- II. The Definition of Useful Vessels (21)
- III. The Exhortation to Become Such Vessels (22-23)

Let's begin in verse 20 where Paul offers...

## **I. The Illustration of Household Vessels (20)**

Read v. 20

1. Now, we know from v. 19 that Paul is speaking about the church that Jesus is building. So, when we read in v. 20 about a Great House, we understand that he is still speaking about the church.

2. The church is like a large house. It's not like a typical 1<sup>st</sup> Century home that may have only one or two rooms and very little in the way of containers, tools and appliances. No, this house is like the home of a king. It's large and well furnished. It has all the latest appliances. And when it comes to containers, pitchers, bowls, platters, pots, pans, plates and cups there seems to be no end.

3. Some of these "vessels" (as Paul calls them) are made of gold or silver, while others are made of wood or clay. Some of these vessels are fit for honorable use and others for dishonorable use.

- A. For example, some vessels are used for cooking and serving food and drink. They are vessels that bring into the house what is to be eaten. These are "honorable vessels."

B. Other vessels, however are used to take things out of the house. They are containers used for garbage and excrement. They are dishonorable vessels. Such vessels were also disposable.

- When I was in Israel a couple months ago, I walked on the beach of the Mediterranean and was astounded to see among the shells, thousands upon thousands of broken pottery pieces.
- Every one of them were fragments of disposable vessels that were broken and throw away after use.

4. The word “vessel” is used in the N.T. to mean bodies or people. The idea here is that the church is made up of many people. All of them profess to be followers of Christ. All of them are in the great house called the church, but NOT all of them are fit for honorable use by the Master of the house.

A. Phygelus and Hermogenes (for example) proved themselves to be dishonorable.

B. Hymenaeus and Philetus likewise, though they believed in Christ were dishonorable.

5. Now, let’s be clear: Paul is not speaking of the intrinsic worth of persons. As bearers of God’s image all humans are loved and valued by God. Paul is NOT equating value with usefulness. Rather, he is equating honor with usefulness. That is, some members of God’s household are honored by God more highly than others because of their usefulness as instruments in the Redeemer’s hands.

6. The word honorable in this context has to do with respect, status, and dignity. For example:

A. Phil 2:29 Epaphroditus was to be held in honor because he had been faithful to his calling even when it almost cost him his life.

B. 1 Tim 5:17 The elder who rules well is worthy of double honor.

7. So every “vessel” in the great house of the church is valued by God, but some are especially useful. That is, they are worthy of more honor than others (just as fine china is more worthy of honor than Tupperware).

8. So, this is Paul’s illustration of household vessels. But it leaves us with the question, What is it that qualifies a Christian man or woman especially useful and honorable in the eyes of the Master? That brings us to the second point. Paul’s illustration of household vessels moves us to...

## **II. Paul’s Definition of Useful Vessels (21)**

Read v. 21

1. Notice with me in this verse that Paul is speaking about people who are worthy of honorable use to the Master of the house. They are ready for “every good work.”

- A. If the master needs someone to serve, this person is ready.
- B. If he needs someone to lead, they’re ready.
- C. When someone needs to be rebuked or corrected, he is ready
- D. When he needs someone to be an example of godliness and integrity, she is ready
- E. When the gospel needs to be shared, he is ready
- F. When someone needs to stand for the truth, he’s ready
- G. When it’s time to pray, she’s ready
- H. When it’s time to lay down one’s life, this kind of person is ready...  
ALWAYS ready for every good work.

2. This, beloved, is a picture of the one who is “a vessel for honorable use.” On the other hand, vessels of dishonor are those who are in the great house of the Master but are hardly ever spiritually ready to do what the Lord needs done. And still others in the house live in such a manner that actually undermines the mission of the Master. Such is the case with the false teachers and other unfaithful men in the church whom Paul has mentioned.

3. There may be vessels in the Christian community who are unfaithful, unprepared, or undermining to the Master’s mission, but their actions prove them to be dishonorable and unfit to participate in the labor of the Lord.

3. The all-important question, then, is what makes one qualified as a vessel of honor, useful to the Master? Notice with me: it’s NOT

- A. His giftedness
- B. Her reputation
- C. Her natural talents or good looks
- D. It’s not his money or expertise in managing people
- E. The one qualification that defines the vessel of honor is his Purity.

4. Notice what Paul says (21): “If anyone cleanses himself...” Someone will say, “I thought only God can cleanse a sinner.” Well, it’s true that only God can justify a sinner. Only God can transform the heart of a sinner. Only God can savingly forgive a sinner. If we are talking about the cleansing that brings salvation, Yes, that is a

monergistic work of God. He does it by Himself. But Paul isn't speaking of salvation. He's talking about sanctification. More specifically, he's speaking about progressive sanctification which by design requires the believer's spirit-filled, grace-empowered participation in his own progress toward Christ-likeness. Consider the following verses:

- A. To the Corinthians Paul wrote (2 Cor. 7:1), "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.
- B. In his letter to Titus Paul said (Tit. 2:11-12) "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, <sup>12</sup> training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age..."
- C. The apostle John wrote (1 John 3:3) "And everyone who has this hope purifies himself as he is pure."
- D. The apostle Peter declared (1 Pet. 1;14-16) "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, <sup>15</sup> but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, <sup>16</sup> since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

5. I take these passages to mean that being a Christian is NOT simply about "once-saved-always-saved." It's also about loving Jesus Christ by striving in the Spirit's power to become more like Him in all holiness and purity in the midst of a wicked and sinful world.

6. This is what Paul means when he speaks of vessels in the Master's house who are Honorable. They are set apart as holy and therefore useful to the Master, ready for every good work.

- A. Have you ever wondered why God doesn't use you to accomplish very much for His glory and your joy in this world?
- B. Perhaps the first question you should ask is, Am I serious about personal purity? Beloved, I understand that in this generation it is more difficult to maintain a heart of purity than perhaps any other generation in history. But as followers of Christ our chief aim should be to please him, to fellowship with him, to live for him, to glorify him, and to enjoy Him. But these will never be true of you in the absence of a pure heart. So how do we maintain a pure heart? We've seen...

I. The Illustration of Household Vessels (20)

II. The Definition of Useful Vessels (21)

Now finally,

### III. The Exhortation to Become Such Vessels (22-23)

Read 22-23

1. Now that we know that the definition of a “useful” vessel is a clean or holy vessel, and that the Christian must take responsibility for maintaining his own purity, the question is How? What does Paul advise us to do to pursue the kind of holiness that defines “Useful” vessels who are honorable in God’s sight and ready for every good work. Paul answers in v. 22-23.

2. This, beloved, is where all the action happens. Do you need some action points at the end of this sermon? Then look for the verbs.

3. The first verb is “Flee.” Paul says, “Flee youthful lusts.” The word for “Flee” is *Pheuge*, which comes into the English as Fugative. To “Flee” means to seek safety by means of flight (e.g. Wild Turkeys)

- A. To flee means to avoid, shun, or run away from. This is what Joseph did when Pottifer’s wife attempted to seduce him. He didn’t stand around and discuss the issue. He didn’t try to discern how much pleasure he could enjoy without crossing the line. No! He ran for his life!
- B. Youthful lusts are simply strong sinful desires that are normally attributed to the young. But Strong sinful desires are common in the old and young alike. And they can find their expression in any number of directions: sexual lust, material enjoyment, coveting other’s possessions, control, anger, success. All of these desires (and many more!) can infiltrate your life and turn your heart away from devotion to Christ.
- C. Paul is telling Timothy that if he wants to be an honorable vessel useful to the Master, ready for every good work, he has to identify the secret lust - any dominating desire of the heart and flee from it!
- D. Listen, Jesus said, “If your right hand offends you, cut it off. If your right eye offends you, gouge it out.” What does He mean? He means that sometimes you have to engage in radical amputation. NOT physical amputation of body parts, but the kind of amputation that cuts off any attitude, desire, or behavior that keeps you from being pure, holy, and fit for the Master’s use.
  - a. Do you struggle with sexual lust? Then why haven’t you invested in the kind of internet router that can block undesirable

content.

- b. Do you struggle with materialism? Then why haven't you cut up the credit cards?
  - c. What enslaving desire tends to dominate you and keep you from being fit for the master's use? Flee from it! Cut it off!
- E. And by the way, the word "Flee" is a present, Active, Imperative. That means, Flee and keep on fleeing! It is a strong command.

4. The second Verb is Pursue.

- A. There is a sense in which your whole life can be summed up in three things:
  - a. What you're running from
  - b. What you're running to
  - c. And who you're running with.
- B. You see the Christian life is not merely about running away from something, it's also about running to something; Namely (22), righteous, faith, love and peace. Four positive virtues. Or four fruits of the Spirit.
  - a. Righteousness has to do with obedience. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep my commandments."
  - b. Faith is about trusting the promises of God rather than your desires. It means trusting in God's character and word.
  - c. Love is agape, which typically means love to God and love toward others. Love is about self-sacrifice rather than self-gratification.
  - d. Peace is about pursuing and maintaining harmonious relationships.
- C. And notice that we are not called to do this alone. Rather, we are to do it "along with those who call on the name of the Lord from a pure heart."
  - a. Is sin keeping you from becoming a "vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the Master"? Then ask someone in the body to help you.
  - b. Let's be honest: We are sinners all. None of us is perfect. All of us are broken, and temptation to sin is common to man. But we can help one another. Indeed, we are commanded to help one another.



- c. The author of Hebrews said (3:12-13) “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
- D. Listen, my friend, Christians don’t merely go to church. We are the church! We are members with Christ and therefore members of one another. We need each other!
5. This is especially true when you consider the fact that holiness/purity of heart is NOT a state that one finally attains but a battle that one engages in every day.

J.C. Ryle in his classic book *Holiness*, writes,

“True holiness is much more than tears and sighs... A holy violence, a conflict, a warfare, a fight, a soldier’s life, a wrestling are all spoken of as Characteristic of the true Christian.” <sup>1</sup>

Do you want your life to count for God? Do you want to be used of Him to advance his mission in the world? Do you want Him to view you as a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the Master of the house, and ready for every good work? Then take temptation seriously. Take sin seriously. Take your “youthful lusts” seriously. Flee from them. Pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace.

In God’s great mission for the world He delights to employ those who are serious about holiness.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Water, *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2000), 478