

What does it take to be useful?

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Date: 17 May 2020

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[0 : 00] 2 Timothy 2, verse 14 And who correctly handles the word of truth.

Avoid godless chatter because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have departed from the truth.

They say that the resurrection has already taken place and they destroy the faith of some. Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription.

The Lord knows who are his. And everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness. In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay.

Some are for special purposes and some for common use. Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

[1 : 35] Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

Don't have anything to do with foolish or stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but must be kind to everyone.

Able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth.

And that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. Amen.

Okay. What is required for something to be useful? I suppose it depends what it is, doesn't it?

[2 : 34] For a knife to be useful, it needs to be sharp. For a pillow to be useful, it definitely must not be sharp. A useful book is one that either contains valuable information or perhaps an entertaining story.

What about being a useful person? What's required for a human being to be useful? Well, in these closing verses of chapter 2, that is one of the questions that Paul is answering.

As we dig in here to verses 20 to 26, we'll see that you can be useful to God. And then we'll examine what Paul says is required for that to be the case.

So, you can be useful to God. How? Well, flee from evil and pursue good. Remember here in chapter 2, Paul's instructing Timothy about how he ought to treat the false teachers in the church at Ephesus.

We looked in verses 14 to 19 a couple of weeks ago. We looked at the contrast between good words and bad words. And we concluded with the confident words of verse 19 that reassure Timothy that the Lord knows those who are his.

[3 : 43] And verses 20 and 21 seem to be kind of elaborating on that second inscription. So, Paul asks, what does it look like to turn away from wickedness?

And, well, says Paul, imagine a big house. So, in these first few verses, the conclusion is you can be useful to God. Notice I do not say you are useful to God, but you can be useful to God.

See, we have this house. And there are nice bowls. And there are ordinary boring bowls. Think wedding china on one hand. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, think about that stack of old takeaway tubs kicking around at the back of the cupboard with the lids that don't even fit properly.

When Paul talks here in verse 20 about clay vessels, don't be thinking about the nice Denby pottery or the Wedgwood china. That's not the kind of clay that we mean here.

Think unglazed, under-fired, thin, disposable. Think kind of thrown together. Think as often as not thrown out along with their contents. We tend to use plastic or paper plates or whatever for the same effect.

[4 : 58] Just chuck it out. No worries. And the phrase common use here in verse 20, that's perhaps a polite euphemism. We're talking about chamber pots and bowls for collecting rubbish.

Think about bin bags. These wood and clay pots for common use in Paul's analogy. They fill that same kind of function as a bin bag today. They have their place.

They're potentially useful. But that place is not on the table at a dinner party. So that's the kind of comparison that Paul's making here. In that big house, not everything is of equal value.

Not everything deserves to be placed on display. And in this metaphor, Paul's using the house to represent the church. And the church has in it some people who are useful, suited to honourable purposes, and some who are the very opposite.

He's back, probably, to thinking about Hymenaeus and Philetus from verse 17. These false teachers, these ringleaders of the false teaching in Ephesus. Now, people go off in all kinds of different directions here as to what point Paul is really making with this analogy of the house.

[6 : 06] But it seems to me that the wisest course is to let verse 21 guide our understanding of verse 20. In fact, Paul writes, Therefore, between these two verses.

It's not there in most of our English Bibles because it makes a really clunky, awkward sentence. But the fact that the therefore is there in what Paul wrote guides us and gives us a clue to understanding what it is that he means.

So Paul says, given that there are both categories of people in the church, there are the gold and silver and the wood and clay.

Given that both are there, well, which do you want to be? Presumably, you would like to be an article for special purposes, not one for common use.

Would you not rather be a crystal decanter than the paper bag that you use to line the compost caddy? We'll put that one down carefully.

[7 : 05] Verse 21 says, Well, actually, you get to choose. The analogy breaks down a little bit here because you can't turn a wooden bowl into a golden one. But when we're talking about people in the church, you can change from one to the other.

Now, Paul primarily here is exhausting Timothy. Timothy hasn't fallen away. Timothy is already surely one of these gold or silver articles. And Paul's exhausting him to continue along the same path.

But there's an implicit invitation to others here, isn't there? Verse 21 begins, Those who, it's an indefinite pronoun. It could reasonably be phrased, anyone who cleanses themselves from the latter and so on.

This invitation is not only open to those who are currently golden bowls. It's open to those who right now are wooden clay bowls too, to become a golden bowl.

It's not only open to those currently teaching truth in the church. It's open to those who right now what they're doing is leading people astray. The invitation isn't only open to those whose lives look clean and healthy, those who are walking in paths of righteousness.

[8 : 13] No, it's open to those whose lives are a mess, who are mired in the muck. It's open to people who love Jesus. And it's open to people who just now hate him. Or people who have no idea who Jesus is.

This invitation is open to regular churchgoers. And it's open to you if you have just tuned in for 30 seconds as you scroll through Facebook. Anyone can become one of these instruments for special purposes, says Paul.

Why do I say that so confidently? Well, look down to verse 25. Opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil who has taken them captive to do his will.

So Timothy is dealing with false teachers in the church. He's facing a situation where people are telling lies about God, where people are leading others astray. Verse 18 says, Hymenaeus and Phileas, they're destroying the faith of other people.

There could hardly be anything worse than telling lies about God. But Paul's attitude to these two is not write them off. His attitude is call them back. Don't get angry, Timothy.

[9 : 24] Don't become sarcastic and full of vitriol in your dealings with them. Now, yes, Timothy will need to be robust. He's not supposed to roll over and let them win.

We're going to see in chapter 3, Paul is clear about the profound danger of false teaching. But in all his dealings with them, Timothy's goal has to be to win these people back, to welcome them into a knowledge of the truth, to help them come to their senses, to assist them to escape the devil's trap.

Why? Well, because those people too could be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the master, prepared to do any good work.

What honour could be greater than to be an instrument in the hands of Jesus Christ, to be at his disposal for the furtherance of his purposes, available whenever he wants you for his service?

What could be a greater honour than that? To be such a person is a great honour, and it is possible for everyone. I can be useful to God.

[10 : 34] You can be useful to God. Now, given that that's true, given that anyone can be useful to God, we must ask ourselves what is required for that to be the case.

How can you be useful to God? Verse 21 says that it's those who cleanse themselves, which I think is another way of phrasing that, turning away from wickedness from back in verse 19.

And the following verses then give several examples of what that looks like, to turn away from wickedness, to cleanse yourself. So first up, flee evil. Verse 21, flee the evil desires of youth.

I wonder, I wonder what manner of ills, evil desires of youth conjures in your mind. There's a commentator by the name of William Hendrickson, and he suggests that the yearnings here could be kind of divided into three categories.

First category, you have kind of a yearning for pleasure, an inordinate craving for the satisfaction of physical appetites, what you might call a lust for food and drink or uncontrolled sexual desire.

[11 : 43] And I guess that last might be where our minds instinctively turn when we talk about the evil desires of youth. But that's not the whole picture that Paul has in mind here. Secondly, Hendrickson points to power, to the ungoverned passion to be number one, to be dominant at any cost.

And this results in envy and quarrelsomeness and so on that Timothy is warned about in the following verses. And then thirdly, possessions, the uncontrolled yearning for things, and the glory that goes along with having those things.

Now, we should be clear that none of these desires are unique to the young, are they? I think it's fair to say many of them are rather stronger in youth, perhaps, prior to the moderation of not only age, but especially we trust to the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit.

There are perhaps other besetting sins of older age that Paul isn't principally concerned here. Why? Well, because he's writing to a real person. He's writing to Timothy, to a man whose foibles and failings Paul knows all too well.

So, in any case, all three of these categories, all three of these inordinate, disordered desires, all three of these should rightly be avoided by us all to whatever extent we find these excesses within ourselves.

[13 : 09] But Paul doesn't leave it at this kind of abstract general level, does he? I think perhaps he's primarily focused on the tendency of a younger man to be somewhat impatient with those who stand in the way.

There's an impetuosity with youth, isn't there? There's a willingness to do what's right, or at least what you think is right, to do that regardless of the cost, an inclination to steamroller ahead no matter what or who stands in the way.

I know that tendency is there for me, as a younger man, at least as church ministers and elders go. I know it's there. I feel that frustration sometimes in presbytery meetings and so on, you know, when you think, could you not just get on and do it my way?

And in some situations it would be very easy, it would be very tempting to just steamroller on through. And that is one reason why I'm very glad to have older and wiser men on the Kirk Session with me here at Covenant Church.

And they help me to avoid this sinful tendency in our life together as a church. I think this is particularly what Paul's focused on, this willingness to do whatever it takes to win the argument, to use your superior learning or your ability to shout loudest or the position you're in, to use whatever it takes to win.

[14 : 33] Paul says no. Paul says no. No, your attitude to your opponents, verse 25, must not be shoving them out of your way, must not be going in both guns blazing. No, verse 25, opponents must be gently instructed in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth.

Those who wish to be useful to the master must share his attitude, an attitude marked by humility, Philippians 2, marked by not desiring any to perish, 2 Peter 3, marked by love for your enemies.

That is the attitude of those who wish to be useful to the master. I think perhaps this aggressive, combative nature is particularly what Paul has in view here, speaking about the evil desires of youth.

This must be avoided. In fact, more than avoid it, you must flee from such desires and tendencies. This isn't just a passive attitude, is it?

Okay, if I happen to notice some evil desires, well, I'll hang tight then. No, no. James encourages us to withstand the devil, that he will flee from us. Yes, but it's very clear that that does not mean go and court danger.

[15 : 49] No, we pray, lead us not into temptation. John Stott says we need to recognize sin as something that is dangerous to our souls, not something to come to terms with, not something to negotiate with, not something to linger in the presence of, like Lot did in Sodom in Genesis 19.

No, don't take Lot as your model. Far better, take Joseph as your model. Joseph, who when Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce him, and she grabbed hold of his cloak, and Joseph ran out of the house as fast as he could, leaving her holding an empty coat.

Flee from these evil desires. A few times now, I've had the dubious pleasure of taking a youth group session on the subject of sex.

And the question that everyone wants to ask is, so what can we do then? The answer? Okay, imagine there's a big tall cliff, and imagine bits keep falling off the edge of that cliff, and imagine that at the bottom of the cliff, there's a lava flow from the volcano that just erupted.

Stop asking how close you can stand to the edge! Flee from the evil desires of youth. That implies to an inclination to push the boundaries when it comes to sex, and it applies to every other sinful desire as well.

[17 : 09] The question is not, how much can I get away with daydreaming about winning the lottery, and how I'd splash out with all that money that I've won. No, no, flee from covetousness.

It's not, can I get away with just raising my voice a little bit, and pushing forcefully, you know, not really angry, not saying we have to do it my way, just, you know, making sure it's very apparent that it would be a bad idea if we did something else.

That perhaps people might not like it if I were to get angry. Stop pushing the boundaries. Flee from sin. Be killing sin, or it will be killing you, said John Owen.

Let no man pretend to fear sin that does not fear temptation also. These two are too closely united to be separated. He does not truly hate the fruit who delights in the root.

So, you can be useful to God, therefore, flee evil desires. But that's not all, is it?

[18 : 13] Having told Timothy to run away from unrighteousness, Paul is not done. There's a positive dimension here too, and it's every bit as enthusiastic. Not just flee from one thing, but pursue another.

Run towards it with vigour. Hasten on. Press on towards the goal. I wonder if you've ever tried really hard not to think about green elephants.

Do not think about a green elephant. Just don't. Just put it out of your mind. It's kind of in the way, isn't it? They have a tendency, don't they?

Not only to dominate the room, but to dominate your thoughts. The only way to escape temptation is to focus not only on avoiding thinking about the green elephant, but on actively pursuing the good, on filling your mind with something else instead.

Paul says not only flee the evil desires of youth, he also says pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

[19 : 16] Let me spend just a couple of moments on each of these four in turn. Righteousness. Now this, as with every other Christian virtue, this is produced by the transforming work of Jesus Christ, isn't it?

It is by his cleansing power that we're pronounced righteous, pronounced free from the guilt of sin and reprieved from the sentence of death. It is also by his power that we become more and more righteous in a visible, external sense.

Later on in chapter 3, Paul's going to say that scripture, that God's word, the Bible, that it is useful for training in righteousness. In other words, says Paul, if you want to pursue righteousness, well, there's an objective standard here for you as to what that looks like.

There's a training manual here for you to how that is attained. And there's a powerful God working within you, enabling you to understand and to attain.

A God to whom you are welcome to pray every minute of every day. Brothers and sisters, pursue righteousness. Secondly, faith.

[20 : 30] Faith is a foundational position, isn't it? Faith is a kind of bedrock attitude that you build upon a fundamental outlook of trust in God and in his word.

The Bible is useful for training in righteousness when it's read from a position of faith. Without that, it's frankly more useful for the foolish arguments that Timothy's told to avoid in verse 23.

Faith is a willingness to take God at his word. But notice also that faith is something to be pursued. People sometimes say, oh, I wish I had your faith.

As if it were something kind of mystical and theoretical imparted to you. Well, folks, the reality is you can have my faith. Pursue faith.

Cultivate faith. Third, love. Now, this could be love for God, which we absolutely should pursue. But mostly when Paul talks about love in these kind of contexts, he means love for one another.

[21 : 34] He means love for our fellow human beings. And aren't there ample opportunities at the moment to demonstrate that kind of love of our neighbors as ourselves?

Ample opportunities to count others more important than ourselves, to put their interests first. It's interesting, isn't it? We started from verse 21 asking what does it look like to cleanse yourself in order to be useful to the master?

What does it look like to be made holy? And this is part of the answer, that you pursue love. But here, in the midst of cleansing yourself, in the act of making yourself usable, surely you are also being useful.

In pursuing love of others, you are already being useful to the master. Finally, peace. This ties closely to the following verses, to that gentle attitude towards opponents that Paul is commending.

This peace, this tranquility, this harmony and stability enables Christians to live at peace, to constantly pursue what makes for peace, as Romans 14 encourages us.

[22 : 46] We could have a whole sermon, of course, on each of these four, but that is just a little taste of what Paul is encouraging Timothy and all of us to pursue.

So, you can be useful to God. How? By fleeing from evil and by pursuing good. Now, as we draw to a close, let me take you again to verses 25 and 26.

We've touched on them already, but this is so important. You can be useful to the master, useful to God. If you've ever felt like the church doesn't want anything to do with you, well, sadly, that might be true because we don't always do as we should.

It might be true that the church doesn't want anything to do with you, but I can assure you it is not true that God doesn't want anything to do with you because Timothy's desire, Paul's desire, is that those who are opposed to God, even those who have preached lies, his desire is that they will come to restoration.

Timothy is supposed to hope for that. And when the church is following in the way of its master, it is the church's desire too. So, if any of you have felt excluded or unwelcome at Covenant Church or at any other church, well, I'm really sorry about that.

[24 : 12] I'm sorry that that happened because it should be our desire that you will come to your senses, that you will escape the devil's traps, says verse 26. Now, I'm not saying it will necessarily be easy to make this change, to come back.

I'm not saying it will necessarily be easy for the church because it might be that you have wounded people in the church. I doubt, frankly, that the Orthodox gang in Ephesus would have been all that enthusiastic at first, at Hymenaeus and Philetus coming and showing their faces again, being welcomed back.

People have been hurt in the church in Ephesus by their false teachings. Maybe people have been hurt in the church by what you have done. Hergiveness may not be easy for the church, but it must be her goal.

The other side of that is, it may not be easy for you either. Because notice these opponents, verse 25, they do need to be instructed.

This isn't a blanket, come back, whatever the situation. This isn't, oh, it doesn't matter what you believe. No, no, these opponents need to be instructed.

[25 : 28] In fact, more than that, not just instructed, they need to repent. They need to admit that the way they were following was not the truth. They need to come to their senses.

They need to see that they've been captured, not by God, but by the devil. That they need to flee from him. That they need to repent. Maybe that is what you need to do as well.

Maybe that is the realization that you need to come to. Maybe that's what it will look like for you to be restored into the fellowship of the church. To be a useful vessel, a useful person in the service of the master.

Maybe it's that repentance that is required. But oh, what a welcome awaits them when they do. When they overcome that difficulty.

What joy there will be in heaven when a sinner repents. What celebration when the devil's captives are liberated. What a party there is to be had here in Derval, in New Mills, and in heaven itself as well.

[26 : 32] What a party there is to be had when you are granted repentance and come to a knowledge of the truth. Folks, if you are wandering far from God this morning, that is my prayer for you.

For all of us, we can be useful to God as we flee from sinful desires and as we pursue righteousness. May that be true of each one of us today and always.

Amen.