



Today as we continue our study of 2 Timothy, we'll be covering and encouraging topic:

How To Be Greatly Used By God
2 Timothy 2:20-26
(p. 935, pew Bible)

The thought of being useless is discouraging, isn't it? The other day I came across a list of responses to the question, "What's a good way to finish the line, 'You're as useless as...?'" Some of the answers were well-crafted putdowns! Here's a few of them:

You're as useless as ...

- A woodpecker with rubber lips
- An ejector seat in a helicopter
- An inflatable dartboard
- A snooze button on a smoke alarm

Who wants to be useless? In one sense, nobody is, at least not entirely. Scripture says, "The LORD has made everything for his purpose, even the wicked for the day of disaster" (Prov. 16:4). Everybody is of *some* use to God, even if it's to show that God is sovereign and just and will punish sin. You can be used by God in a minimal, negative sense, or in a positive, maximal sense. Paul talks about this in 2 Timothy 2:20-26.

²⁰ Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. ²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

²² So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. ²³ Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.

²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

- 2 Timothy 2:20-26

In this passage, Paul begins with a *picture* in verse 20, followed by a *promise* in v. 21, which leads to several *practicalities* in verses 22-26. Do you want to be greatly used by God? Someone set apart by God, equipped and empowered by God to make a real difference in this world? Then listen to and act on what the Lord tells us through this text.

The Picture (v. 20)

The picture presented in verse 20 is that of a “great house” filled with all sorts of items used for various purposes – some of them noble, some of them not.

For instance, in our kitchen we have a fridge, stove, plates, forks, spoons, knives, and many different cooking utensils. All used for noble purposes to varying degrees. But our kitchen also has a trash can and garbage disposal. They serve a necessary purpose but not a noble one. In our bathroom we have a tub and shower, hair dryer and curling iron, medicine cabinets and mirrors, towel racks and toothbrushes. But we also have toilet, plunger, waste basket, and dirty laundry hamper. In our living room we have sofas, an easy chair, end tables and lamps, but we also have a soggy tennis ball and rawhide bone that our dog has been chewing on. We have a big house filled with all sorts of utensils, containers and other furnishings that are used either for noble or ignoble purposes.

The same was true in ancient times. In a large, well-furnished house there were items made of gold and silver that were used for decoration or serving a fancy meal or some other noble purpose. But there were also wood and clay vessels that were unattractive, even dirty and vile because they were used for garbage and human excrement. To put them on display would be disgusting. At a certain point these containers were disposed right along with their vile contents.

Why this picture of a “great house” filled with precious vessels for honorable use and inferior vessels for dishonorable use? To impress upon us by way of illustration, what the visible church is like. In the previous verses, Paul draws a sharp contrast between faithful teachers who rightly handle the word of truth, and false teachers who swerve from the truth, whose talk spreads like gangrene. Paul ends that paragraph by saying, “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity’” (2 Tim. 2:19). In this context, “God’s firm foundation” is the true church. In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul refers to the church as “a pillar and support of the truth.” That’s the *true* church.

But the *visible* church is bigger than the true church. A worship assembly, such as this one, includes believers and unbelievers, those who belong to the Lord and those who don’t belong to the Lord, those who embrace God’s truth and those who reject God’s truth, those who are godly and those who are ungodly.

The visible church “is, and has always been, a mixed bag. In fact, that is the answer to those who avoid church because it contains hypocrites. Of course it does! Church is for hypocrites because it is there that they may become vessels of honor.”¹

That’s the *good news* that Paul presents as he transitions from the *picture* in verse 20 to the *promise* in verse 21.

¹ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1-2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*. Preaching the Word, edited by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 234.

The Promise (v. 21)

“Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Tim. 2:21).

Here is a great promise for “anyone” who chooses to believe it and act on it. Cleansing your life will make you an honorable vessel that is of great use to God. The Greek word for “cleanse” is an intensified form of *kathairó* (from which we get the word “catharsis”). It means “to clean out thoroughly.”

Now, our salvation involves a cleansing that only God can give. Titus 3:5 says, “He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.”

In 2 Timothy 2, we’re told how to make the most of that life – how to be greatly used by God. The promise in verse 21 is for “anyone,” but it’s conditional “if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable [lit., “these things”].” What are the dishonorable things that Paul is referring to? False teachers and their impure doctrine which produces quarrels, upsets people’s faith, and leads them into more and more ungodliness.

I’m not going to use a fork that’s next to the trash can. I’m not going to use a toothbrush that’s on the toilet. And God’s not going to use you if you’re associating with those in the church who deny the gospel of Christ by what they say or by how they live.

But the promise of 2 Timothy 2:21 is stated positively. “If you keep yourself pure, you will be a special utensil for honorable use. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work” (NLT).

The Greek term for “master” is *despótēs*, from which we get the word despot, a ruler with absolute power, typically one who exercises it in a cruel or oppressive way. But such is not the case with God. He is our loving and benevolent Lord. But he is nonetheless our sovereign Master, and that’s what’s being emphasized in verse 21.

One of the biggest impediments to being greatly used by God is caring too much about what people think and too little about what God thinks. In his book, *When People Are Big and God is Small*, Ed Welch calls people our “our idol of choice.” He says,

They are worshiped because we perceive that they have power to give us something. We think they can bless us. ...

What is the result of this people-idolatry? As in all idolatry, the idol we choose to worship soon owns us. The object we fear overcomes us. Although insignificant in itself, the idol becomes huge and rules us. It tells us how to think, what to feel, and how to act. ... The whole strategy backfires, We never expect that using people to meet our desires leaves us enslaved to them.²

² Edward T. Welch, *When People Are Big: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 44-46.

Likewise, J. Gresham Machen wrote,

there are those who are concerned with the question of their standing before men, but never with the question of their standing before God; there are those who are interested in what “people say,” but not in the question of what God says. Such men, however, are not those who move the world; they are apt to go with the current; they are apt to do as others do; they are not the heroes who change the destinies of the race.³

But you can be different. You can be greatly used by God to make a real difference in this world. This promise is for anyone who keeps himself clean for the Master’s use.

***God uses clean instruments
who run from sin toward godliness.***

This is God’s guarantee for anyone who is willing to do what it takes to be greatly used by God. This leads us to the third point of text: *the practicalities*.

The Practicalities (vv. 22-26)

In verses 22-23, Paul says, “So, flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.”

There is no neutrality in life. You’re always heading in one direction or another. To be greatly used by God, you must run *from sin toward* godliness.

Paul starts with the negative command: “Flee youthful passions.” The Greek word for “flee” is *phuegō*, from which we get the word “fugitive.” It means to seek safety by flight. Furthermore, this verb is a present imperative, which indicates that it is to be a constant, persistent activity. This meaning of *phuegō* is reflected in the term “fugitive,” which refers to a person who is continually on the run in order to escape capture. The faithful Christian is continually on the run from “youthful passions.”

Typically we associate “youthful passions” with sexual temptation, and this term would definitely include that. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4 says, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God” (vv. 3-5). The other day I met with a young couple in their twenties who are dating and are relatively new to our church. They wanted to make themselves accountable to me for the sake of keeping their relationship pure. This was our second meeting, and in the course of conversation they shared with me that someone had paid for a cruise to the Bahamas but then couldn’t go and offered to let them go instead – a cabin for two worth \$2400 and it wouldn’t have cost this couple a dime. They

³ J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979, 163. Cited in Dane C. Ortlund, *Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 100.

were tempted to go but turned down the offer, knowing what would happen if they went. One of them said to me, “Twenty-four hundred dollars isn’t worth sinning against God.” Then the other quickly added, “No amount of money is worth sinning against God.”

I said, “Do you know I’m preaching on this Sunday? When I read 2 Timothy 2:22, they were amazed at God’s timing. I then asked if I could share with you what they told me, and they graciously gave me permission to do so. This couple is on the run – they are fleeing *from sin toward* godliness.

While “youthful passions” include sexual temptation, they encompass additional sins as well. Given the context of Paul’s instructions to Timothy, “youthful passions” would also include the tendency to quarrel, “the love of debating and winning,”⁴ the impulse to get involved in foolish arguments that “lead people into more and more ungodliness” (2:16). These sinful passions can characterize older Christians too, but younger believers are especially prone to them. No matter what our age, we’re to run away from such sins, remembering that God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we would listen twice as much as we speak. James wrote in his epistle,

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

- James 1:19-21 NLT

For this reason, Paul says, “Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22). It’s not enough to say “no” to sin, we must say “yes” to God! We must pursue the things that please him. This, too, is a present active imperative.

The faithful Christian is always on the run – *from sin toward* godliness. I was talking to my wife Ruthie about this yesterday, the fact that the faithful Christian is always on the run, and Ruthie said, “That sounds so exhausting.” And it would be if we tried to run in our own strength. But remember what Paul said in the very first verse of this chapter: “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1). Then again in the middle of the chapter, verse 8: “Remember Jesus Christ.” That’s the key! Isaiah declared, “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary...” (Isa. 40:31 NIV). The gospel is “not jumper cables to get the Christian life started but an engine to keep the Christian life going.” That’s why Paul was able to testify in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me” (EHV).

Running is the hardest when you first start because your body isn’t conditioned for it. But the more you run, the easier it gets. The same is true spiritually as we train ourselves for godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). By the power of the Holy Spirit, we build up our spiritual wind and are able to sprint consistently in the right direction.

⁴ Hughes and Chapell, 236.

This is essential if we're going to be greatly used by God. We know this because of the "must" in verse 24:

²⁴ And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

- 2 Timothy 2:24-26

In commenting on these verses, Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell rightly state, "There is power in a life that refuses to quarrel and is gentle with detractors – the power of Christ-likeness."⁵ Jesus described himself as being "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). That's why Paul could write to his opponents, "I, Paul, appeal to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ..." (2 Cor. 10:1 NLT).

Gentleness does not mean timidity. It is strength under control. Timothy was called to correct his opponents, but to do so gently.

The goal of such an attitude and such an approach is the opponents' salvation.⁶

When I was in Bible college, Sumner Wemp came for a week of special chapel meetings and paid a visit to our Pastoral Theology class, which consisted of ministerial students between the ages of 19-21. This veteran pastor, who later became Vice President for Spiritual Affairs at Liberty University, gave wise words of counsel to us whippersnappers. The thing I remembered most was written in his book, *The Guide to Practical Pastoring*. He said, "If the gospel is an offense, praise God. But if I'm an offense, that's sin."⁷

Whenever we're correcting our opponents, we must remember that "the Lord's servant is not out to win arguments but to win souls."⁸ Faithful teachers want to see people turn from falsehood to truth, from sin to Christ, and be liberated from "the snare of the devil." How amazing that God would use the likes of us to lead people to salvation in Christ. That's the greatest work going on in the world today.

Jesus was the ultimate *honorable vessel* who was set apart to rescue sinners. He was the ultimate *Lord's servant* who patiently endured evil and gave his life as a ransom for many. Not only is Jesus our perfect model, but he also gives us the power to run *from* sin *toward* godliness so that we can be clean instruments who are greatly used by God to reach a world that desperately needs Jesus Christ.

⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁶ Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, edited by David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 180.

⁷ Sumner Wemp, *The Guide to Practical Pastoring* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982). I believe my quote is accurate, but I could not find my copy of the book to verify the precise wording or page number.

⁸ Ibid.