

Bible Studies for Life Series for October 22: We are most useful when firmly in his hands

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We are most useful when firmly in his hands

- 2 Timothy 2:14-26

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Whenever the subject of usefulness comes up, I remember Jesus' parable of the lost coin. The familiar story tells of a woman who has lost one-tenth of her income. She searches diligently for the lost coin, and when she finds it, she invites friends and family to come and celebrate—to celebrate a found coin, a renewed resource.

The coin represents something of value. The lost coin still has value, but it has lost its usefulness. No greater truth exists than God's love for us. To God, we are incredibly valuable, yet many in church today have lost their usefulness. This lesson bids all Christians to "take hold of usefulness."



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When we maintain genuine Pauline authorship of the pastorals, 2 Timothy represents the Apostle Paul's last known letter. Paul pens this letter at a time near the end of his life. In addition to its inclusion in the pastoral epistles, 2 Timothy also represents a prison epistle. Paul faces his final incarceration and impending death, and he betrays a somber mood in parts of the letter.

The final verses of the letter (4:9-22) reflect an interesting combination of optimism blended with irritation. Paul looks forward to a hoped for visit from Timothy, and the return of his cloak and some treasured books (4:9-13). By contrast, Paul writes harsh words about some individuals who have done him great harm (4:14-15).

The overall feel of the letter suggests a hopeful resignation on Paul's part to his earthly fate but an overwhelming confidence in God's provision and care for both Paul personally and for the church.

Paul begins 2 Timothy with the expected salutation and greeting. The address follows the typical format of sender to recipient: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus ... To Timothy, my dear son" (1:1-2); however, Paul modifies slightly his anticipated greeting and wish for grace and peace to include the element of mercy "... from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1:2).

The letter continues with a thanksgiving section where Paul presents himself as an example to Timothy. Paul provides personal details about his

own situation, and he reminds Timothy of the Christian tradition in which they both stand (1:13-14).

The focal passage, 2:14-26, comes in the midst of Paul's parenthesis or exhortation to Timothy which continues to 4:8. Some scholars suggest this section of 2 Timothy bears the marks of a testament—a last word near the end of Paul's life and ministry from the older Paul to the younger Timothy.

In this section, Paul takes up several of the themes we find in First Timothy—strength, endurance, hard work and struggle. Paul's initial admonition to "... be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (v. 1), echoes Paul's assertion "... Christ Jesus our Lord ... has given me strength ..." (1 Timothy 1:12). Paul encourages Timothy to pass on correct teaching, and to endure hardship (vv. 2-3).

Paul employs the familiar metaphors of soldier, athlete and farmer to encourage Timothy to endure and to work hard (vv. 4-7). Finally, just prior to the focal passage, Paul reminds Timothy of the gospel for which he is "... suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal" (v. 9). Paul's citation of a "trustworthy saying" emphasizes the importance of dying, living, and enduring with Christ (vv. 10-13).

The exhortation continues in the focal passages where Paul distinguishes between two types of workers—those approved by God and those not approved by God. The key difference between approved workers and ashamed workers centers on how these workers "handle the word of truth" (v. 15).

Paul again warns Timothy about "godless chatter" and incorrect teaching, here putting a face on the opposition by naming Hymenaeus and Philetus (vv. 16-18). These two "false teachers" lead people astray and "destroy the faith of some" (v. 18). The personal contrast with Timothy could not be clearer: While Timothy continues to take hold of usefulness, the teaching of

these “who have wandered away from the truth” takes hold of individuals like gangrene takes hold of an injured leg (v. 17).

After distinguishing between two types of workers, Paul continues his exhortation to Timothy by distinguishing two types of vessels—“some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble” (v. 20). Paul draws on imagery from the household, where some items are intended for open, public and noble purposes, while other items are intended for private and more base purposes.

Imagine your own house where there are certainly things that you proudly display and use openly—furniture, appliances and other furnishings; however, no doubt there are other items that you keep hidden—mops, buckets, cleaning supplies. To put it bluntly, Paul contrasts the usefulness of living room furniture with the usefulness of an outhouse seat. Paul admonishes Timothy to cultivate a usefulness that reflects instruments of noble purpose.

Paul completes his triad of contrasts by distinguishing between the wise and the foolish. Paul once again depicts the Christian life as one of pursuit: “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace” (v. 22). Paul describes the foolish life in no uncertain terms and exhorts Timothy to avoid “... foolish and stupid arguments” (v. 23). In contrast, Timothy must “be kind to everyone, able to teach, and not resentful” instructing those who oppose him “in the hope that God will grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (v. 25). Timothy must take hold of usefulness by choosing wisdom over foolishness.

As Christians, we have value to God, but we must choose to take hold of usefulness. We need to be workers who are approved, not ashamed. We need to be vessels that are noble, not ignoble. We need to be people who pursue wisdom not foolishness. We can be a valuable but useless resource like a lost coin sitting in the dark, dusty corner of life, or we can choose to

be a valuable and useful resource worthy of celebration.

Discussion questions

- If you were writing a letter to your child or someone younger that you have a close relationship with, what advice would you give them?
- Paul wrote these words to Timothy. Do they still hold value for the people who read them today? What can be learned from them? What will you try to put into play this week?



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