

Useful or Useless?

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Introduction.

- A. As is the custom in this country, I suspect that three days ago, many of you made some New Year's resolutions, about losing weight or quitting a bad habit or something of that sort. I would like to suggest at least one more New Year's resolution that all of us need to make. We need to resolve to become regular workers in our service groups. Today marks their official kickoff, so if you've already signed up for a group, you'll be hearing from your group leader shortly. If you haven't signed up for one, you should.
- B. We all know that making New Year's resolutions is much easier than keeping them, but our service groups are one area where we must not allow our commitment to lapse. It's important to this church that our groups continue their work, and it's important to the Lord. To help us with that, I'm going to continue preaching "Service Outside the Box" sermons on a monthly basis, at least through September.
- C. This morning's sermon is going to be the first in that series, and it's based on an interesting contrast I noticed in some of Paul's later writings. On the one hand, look at 2 Timothy 2:21. On the other hand, look at Titus 1:15-16. When we put these two passages next to each other, it's evident that the Holy Spirit isn't pulling any punches. Few, if any, of us are so blunt that we would go up to another Christian and tell him, "You're useless," but that's exactly what the Scripture is doing here. It's dividing churchgoers into the worthwhile and the worthless. Furthermore, what determines whether we are useful or useless is not the talents we have been given or the abilities we possess. It is the moral choices that we make that determine whether God is able to work with us. The Scripture is quite clear about the consequences, too. As Matthew 13 says, only the wheat that bears fruit will be gathered into the barn. The tares that bear no fruit will be cast into the fire.
- D. All of us, then, need to be righteous, useful, fruitful people. Thankfully, regardless of what we're doing now, the Bible tells us how we can become useful. There are a number of flaws that mark the useless Christian, just as there are a number of virtues that adorn the useful Christian. We can choose which set of characteristics we want to possess. Let's look at those characteristics this morning to see what makes us useful or useless.

I. Things That Make Us Useless.

- A. Lest we end the sermon on a pretty impressive downer, we're going to start this morning by looking at things that make us useless, things that make us about as useful to God as a knife with no blade. The first of these is **WORLDLINESS**. Jesus discusses the consequences of worldliness in the parable of the soils in Matthew 13:22. In context, the seed sown among the thorns was choked out by the thorns, so that, even though it didn't actually die, it never bore fruit. The point is that the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of riches can have the same effect on our spiritual lives. They can keep us from being fruitful in our service to God.
- B. Sadly, despite the warning that our Lord gives us, this is something that happens every day to Christians. In fact, it happens every day to Christians in this congregation. If you have not yet signed up for our service groups, or served God in some other way, because of your work schedule or your busy life, it is happening to you. The thorns are choking out the word in your heart and preventing you from being fruitful.
- C. Now, as we've said before, this doesn't mean that work is bad. In fact, the Bible teaches that we are meant to work and provide for ourselves. However, if we reach the point where our jobs or other obligations are taking away the time in our lives that we would use to work in the kingdom, we've come to a test of our faith. Whom do we believe? Do we believe the constant whisper of the world that says we need to be the fastest rat in the rat race? Or do we believe Jesus, when He tells us that if we seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness first, then all these other things will be added to us? Do we put on a forced smile and take it when our bosses hand us yet another project, or do we say no because other things are more important? Admittedly, if we put the kingdom first, folks in the world aren't going to like it. But God will, and that's what matters.
- D. Another evil in our lives that can make us unfruitful is **CONTENTIOUSNESS**. Paul discusses an aspect of this in 2 Timothy 2:14. We can fall into this trap by getting so caught up in theological quarrels that don't matter that we don't ever have time to actually work. Thankfully, I don't see any members of the congregation who are prone to this version. In a broader sense, though, we can be unfruitful simply by being complainers.
- E. We've all seen Christians who are like this. They are problem bloodhounds. If there is anything in the church that isn't exactly right, they're sure to sniff it out and bring it before the elders in excruciating detail. However, when the time comes to propose a solution, or even to help with somebody else's solution, they're nowhere to be found. Friends, behavior like that is just plain worthless. I know that the elders here don't mind it when people come to them with concerns, but if we're concerned enough to complain, we ought to be concerned enough to volunteer to help fix it. If we aren't, we're not being helpful. We're being contentious.
- F. **SHORTSIGHTEDNESS** is yet another spiritual flaw that can make us useless in the kingdom. Jesus comments on this problem in Luke 14:28-30. In the same way, friends, there are plenty of Christians who

haven't counted the cost of their discipleship. They think that they can slide by by basically doing what they've always done, except that they go to church sometimes. Brethren, anybody who thinks that being a disciple of Jesus is easy hasn't considered the life of Jesus very much. If we are doing discipleship right, it is the center of our lives, and we need to commit the resources necessary to keep it as the center of our lives. This includes earmarking the reserves of time and energy and money that we need to invest to be continually fruitful in our work for God. If we don't do that, if we let our work for the Lord peter out, we're about as useful to Him as the shell of the half-finished tower is to the man who wants a roof over his head. Let's keep going instead.

- G. Finally, though, perhaps the biggest problem that keeps us from being fruitful is **LOVELESSNESS**. Paul brings up an aspect of this in 1 Corinthians 13:1. Here's what Paul is saying: we can have all the gifts we want, but unless we employ those gifts with love, they are useless to God. This is especially true with our service groups because each one of them is about love. Our encouragement group is about love for absent Christians, our welcome group is about love for visitors, our compassion group is about love for our sick and shut-ins, our young people group is about love for our young folks, our prayer group is about love for everyone, and our work group is about love for our elderly. If we don't work to show our love in those ways or in some other, it is most likely true of us that we don't actually love anybody. We come to church, we talk a good game, but when it comes to giving of ourselves to somebody else, no, no, we don't care enough to do that. Lovelessness is guaranteed to make us spiritually useless. It's also guaranteed to make sure that we don't go to heaven.

II. Things That Make Us Useful.

- A. On the other side of the scale, there are a number of attributes we can develop that will help to make us useful. The first of these is **SPIRITUAL GROWTH**. So Peter tells us in 2 Peter 1:8. Now, as all of you regular Sunday night attendees know, we've been studying 2 Peter 1 in some detail. This is the punch line. If we work on developing our faith, virtue, knowledge, and so on, it will make us useful people in God's service. That makes perfect sense. Just think about the way it would work out in our service groups. If we develop more faith, we will work harder because we believe in God's promised help. If we develop more knowledge, we will have a clearer understanding of what God wants us to do. If we develop more perseverance, that will help us contribute usefully to our group as long as work remains to be done. If we develop more brotherly kindness, our increased love for one another will motivate us to help them. Friends, none of the virtues we develop are there for their own sake. Instead, they're tools in our spiritual tool box. They're meant to be put to work. No carpenter on earth is worth anything without his hammer and saw and nails. Similarly, we can't be useful without possessing these spiritual tools. As we have them, though, we can put them to work.
- B. Similarly, **DISCIPLINE** will help us to be more worthwhile to God. Paul explores this thought in 1 Timothy 4:7-8. We all know what discipline's like. We sometimes see people who are disciplined about physical things to an extent we find bizarre. Along these lines, I can't help but think of an older couple that lives in our neighborhood. Lauren and I like to walk for exercise, but as soon as the cold winter winds and the snow on the sidewalks start showing up, we head indoors to the mall to do our walking. It's like we're 70 or something. This other couple, though, that I see outside our front window regularly, does NOT retreat to the mall when winter comes. It can look like Christmas at the North Pole, and there they are, in their coats and hoods and boots and gloves, stomping along through the snow. They are disciplined.
- C. Paul says that such discipline, although it has some value, is not nearly as valuable as the spiritual discipline that makes us useful servants of God through all seasons. Life is full of things that we don't want to do at the moment but that we need to do. Discipline is what makes us do them. If we put that discipline to work in God's service, Paul promises us that we will see a bigger return on our investment there than anywhere else. Just imagine, folks, what we personally can be responsible for in our service groups. We can be that thoughtful card-writer who persuades an absent Christian to come back. We can be that friendly face that a visitor remembers that brings him back to our assembly. We can be that trusted older friend who guides one of our young people through the dangers of adolescence. Friends, those are the kinds of fruit that we can savor for the rest of our lives and through eternity. There is nothing else that we can do that could possibly be half as rewarding. Let's be disciplined, then, and invest ourselves now so we can reap the rewards later.
- D. Finally, though, the last thing that we need to be useful is **ACTION**. All through this, we've been making clear that participation in our groups is voluntary. Nobody's going to be forced to sign up for anything. However, even though these specific groups are voluntary, working usefully for the Lord is NOT voluntary. Notice the way Paul puts it in Titus 3:14. Paul doesn't say that Christians CAN learn to maintain good works. He doesn't even say that they SHOULD learn to maintain good works. He says that they MUST learn to maintain good works, because if they don't, they will be unfruitful, and God will treat them accordingly. We need to see our service groups in this light. It's not like the elders have come up with something extra for us to do as Christians. Instead, the requirement for us to work to meet the needs of others has always been there. Just like the Bible says "Repent and be baptized," so too it says "work." Our choice is whether we want to obey or disobey. Good intentions don't count. If-onlies don't count. Only action counts. It's up to us to act.

Conclusion. If you want to act to lay hold of your salvation, today is the best time to do it.