

# FIT TO BE USED

by Ray C. Stedman

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I want to speak this morning to all who want to be used of God.

I would suspect that deep in every person's heart here there is a desire that God might use him. That is a normal and a proper desire. There is no thrill like the thrill of being used of God. There is nothing that remotely approaches, in terms of excitement, satisfaction and fulfillment, the consciousness that one has been the instrument in the hands of the Almighty to do some of his work -- to change the direction of someone's life, perhaps, to prevent an injury, to resolve an argument, to answer a challenge, to heal a weakness, to rebuke a ruler, or to turn a nation.

I have seen men of high achievement in the world tremble with a sense of awe as they realized that on a given occasion they were the instrument of God's working. I can tell you from personal experience that is something that is without compare in this life. It can happen anywhere, anytime. God works in wonderful ways, not always in very dramatic ways, but in ways we do not anticipate. It can happen to anybody. Being used of God is not confined to pastors, preachers or teachers. Anybody can be an instrument in God's hands.

In the passage we are looking at this morning from Second Timothy, Chapter 2, beginning with Verse 20, the Apostle Paul describes what it takes to be used of God.

**In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and earthenware, and some for noble use, some for ignoble. If any one purifies himself from what is ignoble, then he will be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work. {2 Tim 2:20-21 RSV}**

Most of the commentators take this reference to "a great house" to refer to the whole professing church. They see the church as the house of God, which is the term Paul used for this in his first letter to Timothy. But if we compare what other Scriptures say on this, we discover that Scripture itself forces us to extend this analogy not only to the church, but to the whole world. Every person in the world is a possible vessel for God to use, regardless of what his attitude to God may be.

Scripture reveals that God uses his enemies, even the devil, to accomplish his work. God's sovereignty, his majesty, is such that no matter who we may be or what we may be like, we can be used by him. In the story of the Exodus, in the Old Testament, we learn that not only was Moses the instrument of God but so was Pharaoh. In Romans 9, Paul says that Pharaoh was used of God to resist the departure from Egypt in order that the greatness of God might be manifest. The apostle says that God raised up Pharaoh, set him on his throne, and used him for his purposes. In fact, in the ninth chapter of Romans, the 21st through the 23rd verses, the apostle uses this very same figure about vessels of mercy contrasted with vessels of wrath. He says, "Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" {Rom 9:21 RSV}. So Scripture itself supports the idea that God can use anybody, believer or nonbeliever.

In Isaiah we are told that Nebuchadnezzar was the servant of God {Jer 27:6}, even though he was a Babylonian pagan. Cyrus the Persian king is called "God's anointed one," {Isa 45:1}. God speaks of him as "my shepherd" {Isa 44:28}, though he too was an unbeliever. If we understand life from the Biblical point of view, we must know that all people can be used of God. So it is not a question of whether you are going to be used of God or not. As this passage points out, the question is, How does God plan to use you? What is he going to do with you? To what purpose is he going to put you in his program? Will it be a noble purpose, or will it be, as this version says, an ignoble? Will it be for good or bad, blessing or judgment? We need to clearly understand this fact.

Recently I saw a sign on someone's desk that said, "It may be that my whole purpose in life is to serve as a warning to others." Everyone needs a bad example as well as a good one. That may be the purpose God will put us to.

The Scriptures do not teach that only the righteous people are used of God. No, God can use anyone. He used Hitler to accomplish certain purposes of judgment and correction. God uses the basest of men; we all are instruments of his work. God used Judas, placing him in the apostolic band. Jesus knew that he would betray him. Judas fulfilled the Scriptures and the predictions of the prophets on that night when he lifted up his heel against the Lord and betrayed him. So God can use anyone.

The great question, however, is to what end, for what purpose is he using you? Here the apostle is pointing out to Timothy that it is for one of two purposes. "In every house," he says, "there are vessels." That is true of all homes -- we have "vessels for honor," i.e., dishes we eat from, pots and pans we cook in, decorated vases, etc., are all vessels unto honor. They are not only useful but they are preserved, they are permanent, we want to keep them. But every house also has "vessels for dishonor" -- we have garbage cans, slop buckets, bedpans, trash barrels, wastebaskets, etc. We do not display them. They are useful, but they are not presentable. We may even intend to dispose of them, sometimes after only one use. Those are vessels of dishonor.

That is the way God sees humanity. If we want to understand life as it really is, we have to look at humanity in that way. God sees all of us as useful vessels, but some only for good purposes; others must be used to accomplish wicked things, judgmental things, hurtful things to others, because of the evil in human society.

At this point someone is sure to raise the question Paul raises in Romans 9, where, in dealing with this subject, he says, "You will say to me then, 'Then why does he yet find fault?'" {cf, Rom 9:19 RSV}. That is, if God uses everybody to serve his purposes, why does he then turn around and blame people for doing what he himself used them to accomplish?

Many nonbelievers will raise that question about the sovereign justice of God. Paul answers that in Romans 9. I am not going to deal with it fully this morning, except to point out that in this passage in Second Timothy it is clear that the analogy between a house and vessels breaks down when it is applied to human beings. In our homes pots and pans have no choice as to what they are going to be used for -- that is entirely up to the householder -- but in Scripture it is very clear that, when this is applied to human beings, a choice is involved. We see that in Verse 21: "If any one purifies himself from what is ignoble, then he will be a vessel for noble use." We have no choice of whether we are going to be used of God or not; the choice we have is what God is going to use us for. That is up to us; it is put in our hands. I grant you we are not dealing with the whole question of the sovereignty of God here. Paul is not dealing with the way God brings about his purposes in man, but he is facing us with a clear responsibility to make a choice in the question of how God is going to use us, whether it will be for a good purpose or not.

Choice determines the way God uses us. "If a man purifies himself" -- that means man has something to do with it; he has to purify himself. God will never set man's will aside and use him for a good purpose without his being willing to be used. One of the most remarkable things about the Scriptures is how they preserve for us what we regard as our highest dignity, which is the right to exercise our own will. God does not force us to be used of him; it must always be a willing choice on our part. But we have to do something about it. He does not use us, willy-nilly, against our wills, for good things. He will do that for evil, for ignoble purposes, but not for good; there the choice is up to us.

When it says, "he must purify himself," that does not mean that we have the power to deal with our own sins, to cleanse our own lives. We do not have that power. But it does mean that we are responsible to use the cleansing that has been provided. If you have been working on your car or in the yard and your hands are dirty, you go into the bathroom to clean yourself up with soap and water -- you deliberately choose to use the soap and water provided -- when you have done so you say, "I've cleansed myself." It was not you that did the cleansing (it was the soap and water), but you used that which was provided.

That is what this is teaching us. We have a responsibility to use the redemption that has been provided in Jesus

Christ, to lay hold of his provision for the forgiveness of sin. Scripture tells us our sins are not forgiven unless we are willing to confess them: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," (1 Jn 1:9 {KJV}). You can go into a bathroom with dirty hands and there is soap and water there, but if you refuse to use them you will come out just as dirty as you went in. You cannot blame the bathroom for that. You are to blame.

You can come to church and hear the truth of the Word of God, but if you do not apply it to yourself it does you no good. You cannot blame God because he did not give you all the good things he promises to those who come to him, if you have not come to him. Even as a Christian you cannot expect to have active in your life the tremendous provisions that God promises; you cannot expect to be used of God in beautiful and wonderful ways unless you are willing to purify yourself and use the instruments he has provided.

Notice that not only is the choice up to you, but, according to this verse, the separation from evil, the cleansing, precedes the consecration. It is never the other way around. Everybody wants to be used of God if he is a Christian at all, but you cannot be used of God for good purposes unless you are willing to say "No" first. That is the point this makes. You must say "No" to the wrong before God will say "Yes" to the right. In other words, you have to reject the philosophy of those who are urging you to live for yourself. You have to refuse the blandishments they offer you to be part of the crowd. You have to restrict their companionship. You may even have to cut off your friendships to a considerable degree -- not that the Christian must ever retire from the world, but we have to recognize that there must be a turning away from that which is ignoble. That is what Paul says to Timothy. You cannot go on living like you have always done and expect God to use you. He cannot, he will not, until there is a cleansing.

Now notice the result: "If any one purifies himself ... he will be," Paul says, "a vessel unto honor, consecrated and useful, ready for any good work." He will be "consecrated." That is a word that has a permanence about it: One is permanently set aside in God's mind for useful purposes, for thrilling, exciting, adventurous discoveries of being used by God. Furthermore, he is useful, profitable, and effective. God uses him in ways that accomplish something.

Finally, he is "ready for any good work." He becomes adaptable; God can use him in many different ways. Life becomes a tremendous adventure as you discover the innovative ways in which God can use you. All this hangs on your willingness to turn away from the wrongful attitudes, philosophies and actions of life.

This is the proper interpretation, and it is proved by the way Paul specifically applies this to Timothy.

In Verse 22 he says,

**So shun youthful passions ... {2 Tim 2:22a RSV}**

This is the way you turn away from wrong things: "Shun youthful passions." The word is *flee*, run away, get away from them.

Everybody who reads this immediately thinks of strong sexual urges. That is what the words "youthful passions" raise in our minds. It does include that. Youth is the time when sexual drives are the strongest. In a sex-oriented society like ours, these passions can become very powerful, very compelling, driving us, occupying our minds, touching almost everything we do. We oftentimes find ourselves in the grip of tremendous forces that urge us on to do things that the world is telling us are perfectly all right; no harmful results will ensue, we are told. Yet these are things which Scripture tells us are wrong, hurtful, destructive and evil in the sight of God. So this verse does include that.

Perhaps Timothy was troubled that way, although I doubt that is really what the apostle has in mind. By this time, Timothy was in his early or mid-thirties. He had traveled with Paul for sixteen years or more, and he had a great deal of experience in learning how to handle the sexual drives within him. No, in this context the apostle is referring to something more than sex.

Dr. Charles Erdman has captured it in his commentary. He says:

We may conclude from what precedes and what follows that he refers not so much to bodily appetites as to the temptations of a young pastor to pride, to conceit, to dogmatism, to contentiousness and to the display of his own wisdom, either in exploiting false theories or in defending the faith.

In other words, "Timothy, cool down, shut up, and back off." That is what this is talking about.

The congregation at Ephesus was about to erupt with controversy. False teachers were spreading lies there and some people were ready to follow them. Timothy was tempted to come on strong, to blast away and be dogmatic and assertive and turn this into an argument. Paul is warning about that.

It is not wrong for Timothy to defend the faith and stand up for the truth of Scripture. Paul has urged him to do that before, and he himself is a model of that kind of defense of the truth. But what he warns against is the pride that takes a position, refuses to listen to anyone else, and assertively concludes that everyone else must be wholly in the wrong if they disagree. Pride keeps pressing and getting involved in shouting matches. Timothy has to say "No" to the philosophy that was as prevalent in that day as it is in ours, which says, "Stand up for your rights. Claim all your privileges. Get your share of the glory." Timothy is to purify himself from that which is ignoble in order that he might be put to noble use.

That is the first step. You never start with wanting to be used of God; you have to start with refusing to be used by the wrong. If you want God to make you an effective instrument of his working in this world throughout your life, that is where you have to start. You have to say "No" to those assertive, dogmatic, prideful, conceited positions that are exploited all around us today -- and which are often applauded by Christian groups -- if you want God to use you.

Then, once you have done that, the positive is possible. Paul says,

**Aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, {2 Tim 2:22b RSV}**

The word is *pursue* it, go after it, go for it. What is wonderful about those four things is that every one of them is presented in the Scriptures as a gift from God. Only God can give us those things. But what is interesting is that, though God wants to give them, you will not get them unless you pursue them. You have to claim them; you have to go after them. You have to assert yourself along these lines. Receiving those things must be the result of your deliberate choice that you do the things that make for righteousness, faith, love and peace.

Righteousness means right behavior. There are times when every Christian is called upon to choose between what he knows to be wrong and what he knows to be right. You have to say "No" to what is wrong, and "Yes" to what is right. If you have not learned to say "No," if you drift along with whatever the crowd is doing, you will never be an instrument used by God for noble purposes. You have to say "No" to unbelief and "Yes" to faith.

I know a lot of people who struggle with little faith, the reason oftentimes being because they have never sought those things that awaken faith. The Scriptures tell us that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God," {cf, Rom 10:17 KJV}. The more you are aware of what God says the more your faith is aroused, awakened and stirred up to lay hold of what God says. Those who never have time for the Scriptures, who never read the Word of God, who never listen to it unfolded for them and are never stirred up to lay hold of what God wants to give them will never have it forced upon them. God is not going to drop it on them until they are ready to lay hold of it, to ask for it, to seek it.

We must deliberately choose love. We often are exposed to the choice of how we are going to react toward someone who, perhaps, has irritated us, who has done something that makes us upset or angry. Our flesh tells us, "Tell him off. Hit back. Get even. Let him know how you feel. Make him squirm." But, if you want to be used of God, you cannot give way to that. You have to say "No" to that. Instead, you deliberately give a soft answer that will turn away wrath, or apologize for having given offense, for, even though your stance was right, you said it in a way that was wrong. Or you must reach out and see him not as your rival, someone who

is trying to take something away from you, but as one who is feeling upset and troubled himself, and in need of help and encouragement. So love reaches out.

You have to deliberately seek for peace. Sometimes you must initiate reconciliation. If somebody is angry at you, although you are not to blame, you just cannot keep that within you and let it fester away, upsetting you and creating frustration in your heart. According to the Scriptures, you have to go to that person and let him know what the trouble is. Initiate a reconciliation. Sit down with him and say, "I don't know what has happened, but something has come between us. It's not right and I don't like it, so let's sit down and talk it out. Tell me how you feel and what it is that is troubling you." Seek peace. Aim at it. Pursue it. That is what the apostle says.

And third, surround yourselves with those who encourage you along this line.

**[Seek] peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart. {2 Tim 2:22c  
RSV}**

Those with pure hearts are not sinless saints; they are not holy Joes who have never done anything wrong; they are not the kind of people who look down their noses at everyone else who gets into trouble. No, the word is not "pure," but "cleansed," past tense; those with a cleansed heart; those who have already known what it is to be where you are. They do not put you down, they encourage you. They say, "I know how you feel. I've been there too, but God picked me up. I know what it means to lay hold of his great, forgiving love." So one of the necessities of being used of God is that you keep company with those who are aiming in the same direction.

On Tuesday last, Steve Zeisler and I spent the day at Vacaville Penitentiary. I had not been up there before. It was a most remarkable experience to see our Christian friends from there working in that prison as salt in the midst of a corrupt society. It was a rainy day and no one was out in the yard. Everyone was in the halls, so it was like going into a high school that had just been let out for lunch. In the midst of that overcrowded prison, a Christian group is maintaining a testimony which is keeping that prison away from violence, acting as salt to preserve it in the midst of a very explosive situation.

In the chapel, I sat right next to a man who had been a murderer -- a murderer several times. He had been one of the toughest, fiercest convicts in the prison system. He had stabbed several people while he was in prison, and he was a member of the gang that tried to rule the prison, a vicious loner who would not hesitate to take a human life. Yet God had reached him. Now he is the most gentle-spirited, gracious fellow, a teacher of the other prisoners, instructing them in the truth of God.

I met with others who had been rapists, murderers and child abusers, men whose lives were changed, who were now listening to, and rejoicing in, the Scriptures.

I asked Herb Sokol, the leader of the group, what it was that most disappointed him in his work. Without hesitating he said, "It is those who are so dramatically changed here, but who lose all they have gained when they get out. I asked why that happened. "Because they go back to the same old crowd," he said.

We are not made to live all alone. We are made to live with others; we need the support of others. Those who surround themselves with a non-Christian view of life and with friends who still remain that way are almost certain to go back at last into that way of thinking and that way of living. So if we want to be used of God, the apostle urges us to seek the companionship of those of like mind. This does not mean that we are to avoid contact with non-Christians, to have nothing to do with those who are not of the same faith as ourselves; that is another mistake, another extreme. But it is equally bad if we do not seek out the fellowship of those of like mind with ourselves. Here the apostle is dealing practically with how you can be an instrument in God's hands to vitally and mightily affect the world around you.

I want to close with this quotation from John Stott in his book on Second Timothy. He says:

This double duty of Christians -- negative and positive -- is the consistent, reiterated teaching of Scripture.

Thus, we are to deny ourselves and to follow Christ. We are to put off what belongs to our old life and to put on what belongs to our new life. We are to put to death our earthly members and to set our minds on heavenly things. We are to crucify the flesh and to walk in the Spirit. It is the ruthless rejection of the one, in combination with the relentless pursuit of the other, which Scripture enjoins upon us as the secret of holiness. [Holiness is wholeness; being what we were intended to be -- useful instruments in God's hands.] Only so can we hope to be fit for the Master's use. If the promise is to be inherited ('he will be a vessel for noble use'), the condition must be fulfilled ('if anyone purifies himself from what is ignoble').

That is a very practical admonition from the Apostle Paul. Timothy had a great opportunity in Ephesus. The church there was under tremendous pressure. The whole world was about to explode in flames, and Timothy was himself under great pressure to conform, to go along and not say anything. Paul advises him, "Timothy, if you want to be an instrument of God, if you want to be used of God in that situation, begin by saying "No" to all the wrong things in your life, and then say "Yes" to the things God wants to do with you. He will then pick you up and use you in ways you would never dream of."

We do not have to plan how God is going to use us. All we have to do is be usable by means of this process.

I hope this will help us as we face the possibilities and the challenge of our world today.

### **Prayer**

Lord, we wait upon you now. We know we live in a day like Timothy did, a day of tremendous pressure, a day of great possibility. Many of us are under pressure ourselves, facing choices we need to make. Grant us now in this hour the strength to say "No" to the things we must, and to say "Yes" to the things that we should, that you may find us usable in your hand, a vessel fit for the Master's use. We pray in his name, Amen.

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