

“Useful to the Master”

Does this little story sound familiar? “Our church was saddened to learn this week of the death of one of our most valued members, *Someone Else*. *Someone*’s passing creates a vacancy that will be difficult to fill. *Else* has been with us for many years and for every one of those years, *Someone* did far more than a normal person’s share of the work. Whenever there was a job to do, a class to teach, or a meeting to attend, one name was on everyone’s list, “Let *Someone Else* do it.” Whenever leadership was mentioned, this wonderful person was looked to for inspiration as well as results, “*Someone Else* can work with that group.” It was common knowledge that *Someone Else* was among the most liberal givers in our church. Whenever there was a financial need, everyone just assumed *Someone Else* would make up the difference. *Someone Else* was a wonderful person, sometimes appearing superhuman. Were the truth known, everybody expected too much of *Someone Else*. Now *Someone Else* is gone! We wonder what we are going to do. *Someone Else* left a wonderful example to follow, but who is going to follow it? Who is going to do the things *Someone Else* did? When you are asked to help this year, remember—we can’t depend on *Someone Else* anymore.” (Author Unknown)

There have been many Elders, Deacons, Preachers, and Church Members that could easily have been named “Someone Else.” I count myself blessed to work with a group of Christians who neither think of nor utilize me in this way. But this cautionary “obituary” and its lesson is still needed. Please note 2Timothy 2:21 in this connection, “*Therefore, if a man cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.*” This is not the most well-known or often-quoted verse from this chapter. That distinction belongs to v.15, “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.*” This verse we’ve heard or read hundreds of times. It should be noted that the context clearly indicates that *Timothy* specifically, and *preachers* generally are the intended targets of these instructions, cf.vv.1,3-10,14-18,22-26. But v.2 seems to extend the value of these admonitions to the *recipients* of Timothy’s efforts- “*faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.*” Thus, v.15 and v.21 (as well as most of the other verses in the chapter) are not exclusively for *preachers*, but would also include *faithful* and *approved workmen* who by *diligence* have prepared themselves to *handle accurately the word of truth*.

Now, with these things in mind, please consider a somewhat personal question: **Are you “useful to the Master” in the ways these verses describe?** It seems to be somewhat easy to fall into the trap of working so hard on *cleansing* and *preparing* ourselves, that we never really become *useful* in the way these verses (read again vv.2,15,21) describe. Put another way, and in keeping with the metaphor of a “soldier” from v.4, we spend so much time *training with* and *sharpening* our sword that we never really get around to using it. Preparation is good, needed, and even essential, but a sword that is never drawn and utilized for its intended purpose is worthless. Therefore, a *soldier* that is constantly *training* and *sharpening* his sword but never actually wields it is anything but “*useful to the Master*”!

Of course, all of this is meant in *spiritual* terms. Our sword is “*the word of God*” (Ephesians 6:17), which we are to wield in *parting asunder* and *laying bare* the innermost *thoughts* and *intentions of the heart* (Hebrew 4:12), in a *spiritual battle* to *capture the minds* of our fellowman and bring them to the *knowledge of God* (cf. 2Corinthians 10:3-6), that they too might become *useful to the Master* (2Timothy 2:2,21).

In my experience, most congregations of the Lord's people are filled with members who are *diligently* dedicated to *preparing, cleansing, and sanctifying* themselves to be *vessels of honor* in the Lord's service, but sadly spend all their time and effort *sharpening* their *swords* without actually ever using them in ways that are *useful to the Master*. We constantly *study* and *train* ourselves to *handle accurately* the (s)word of *truth*, but never actually wield it. Our bible classes are brimming with vastly knowledgeable commentary and insights that are indicative highly sharpened swords that are unfortunately sheathed as we exit the building, only to brought out again next week that others may marvel at their brilliant shine and tantalizing sharpness. Surely such soldiers and their weapons become merely ceremonial rather than being "*useful to the Master*." We can and must do better. Don't leave *teaching others* and the important work of *evangelism* to "Someone Else" - you're supposed to be *sword-wielding soldier* in the Lord's army! (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)