

October 2, 2011 by Steve Brandon



Useful to the Master

2 Timothy 2:20-26

1. The Illustration (verses 20-21)
2. The Application (verses 22-26)
 - For life (verse 22)
 - For ministry (verses 23-25)

One of the primary tenets of all of the Scriptures is that God delights in using pure and holy people to accomplish His work. In other words, using the words of 2 Chronicles 16:9, "The eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His." This is why God chose David: he was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). This is why Moses gave judging responsibility to "able men who fear God, [who are] men of truth, [men] who hate dishonest gain" (Exodus 18:21). This is why the early church, in seeking those who can be in charge of serving tables for the widows, sought men who were "of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). This is why there are character qualifications for those seeking to be elders and deacons in the church (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). This is why God rejected Eli's sons and put them to death instead (1 Sam. 2:25)—they were unrighteous leaders, taking from the people and acting immorally (1 Sam. 2:22).

Over and over and over in the Bible, you hear God's word condemning those leaders who have acted wickedly. When Saul failed to completely destroy Amalek, Samuel told him, "Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king" (1 Sam. 15:23). When the shepherds of Israel failed in their shepherding task, the LORD told them, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? Behold, I am against the shepherds" (Ezekiel 34:2, 10). When Jesus confronted the Scribes and Pharisees of His day, He said, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:27-28).

This is why Paul told the Ephesian elders at Miletus, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). This is why Paul told Timothy, the pastor in Ephesus, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching" (1 Tim. 4:12, 16). Pay close attention to yourself. Be an example of godliness. For in this way, you will be useful to the master. Such is the message of our text this morning.

Paul had written this letter to Timothy, his loved child in the faith. He was facing discouragement (1:5-6). He was facing hardship (2:3). He was facing opposition (2:16-18). He was facing difficult times (3:1). He was facing the realities of persecution (3:12). Paul told him to "fan the flame" of God's work in his life (1:6). Paul told him to hold fast to the faithful word (1:13-14). Paul told him to endure the hard work necessary of all ministers of the gospel (2:3-7). Paul told him to oppose these who are resisting his ministry (2:14, 16-18). Paul told him to fight the fight of faith (4:7). As we find ourselves deep into chapter 2, Paul is reminding Timothy of how to do this. Do it in righteousness. "Timothy, don't engage in the wickedness of those around you. You are a man of God. A man of God is to walk in righteousness."

You can see this in the last phrase in verse 19, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness." That is, let all who profess to follow the Lord "abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22). God isn't into using unrighteous people for His work. He uses righteous people. For Timothy to be useful to the Master, he was to walk in righteousness. Indeed, this is the title of my message this morning: "Useful to the Master." I get the phrase right from verse 21. The whole text is about this one thing: being useful to the master. Here's how to do it. Paul begins with an illustration. Verse 20, ...

2 Timothy 2:20-26

Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.

My first point is this:

1. The Illustration (verses 20-21)

In verse 20, we see Paul giving an illustration to Timothy. He begins by picturing a large house, with lots of stuff. Furniture, utensils, tables, chairs, spoons, knives, ovens, storage containers, all made out of various materials. There are vessels of gold, vessels of silver, vessels of wood, and vessels of earthenware. Small houses in those days usually didn't have much of an assortment of different vessels, as they consisted of a room (or two).

Now, in this large house, these vessels were used for various things. Some helped prepare the food. Some helped store the food. Some helped wash the clothes. Some have places to sit. Some were purely cosmetic. You can divide their uses up into two categories. Some were for honorable use. Others were for dishonorable use.

These verses are just begging for an object lesson. So, I looked around my house for some gold and silver vessels. We don't have any. But, I did pick up an object which is close to the spirit of Paul's words. I picked up this crystal bowl.

This was a wedding present that was given to my wife and I (nearly 20 years ago, can you believe it?). We don't use it very often. It usually just sits in the cabinet. I'm not sure if it's real crystal or not. But, it's pretty. And, it's precious. My 14 year-old son looked at it and said, "What is this?" I said, "It's a precious vessel." He said, "Oh. So precious that we never use it?" Anyway, this is the sort of vessel that Paul had in mind when he spoke of gold and silver vessels, the sort of vessel that's only used for special occasions.

Then, I looked around my house for a vessel of wood or of earthenware. Again, Paul's main idea here isn't the actual substance of the vessel, but the use of the vessel. I found my 4 year old's portable toilet seat. At our house, we call it, "the Froggy seat."

Now, in our house, we have both of these vessels. But, upon one of them, we place honor. And, upon the other, we don't place honor. Can you guess which one? Crystal bowls are kept clean. Crystal bowls are kept safe, up and away in the cabinets. We pull out the crystal bowls at special times, when people are coming over. We set them in front of others because of their beauty. The only way that you get rid of crystal bowls is when they break.

Froggy seats, on the other hand, are not so beautiful. We keep them hidden from view, in the bathroom. We even prefer not to be talking about Froggy seats. They get quite dirty and gross. We clean them with high-power cleaners and disinfectants. We will soon depart with the Froggy seat (when David is finished using it). Can you believe it? He's four years old and still using a Froggy seat. --- He's taking after his father.

We don't serve salad at the dinner table in the Froggy seat. Can you imagine coming over to our house for dinner and eating your salad out of this thing? Neither do we place David upon the crystal bowl when he needs to go to the bathroom. You understand this. Now, to understand the point of the parable, you need to understand that these vessels represent different sorts of people. Some are like crystal bowls, carrying themselves with honor. Some are like Froggy seats, carrying themselves with dishonor.

Here's the point: God doesn't want Froggy seats to be shepherding His church. Rather, God wants crystal bowls to shepherd His church. That's the point of verse 21, ...

2 Timothy 2:21

Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

It's at this point that you see the illustration breaking down. Whereas a Froggy seat will forever remain a Froggy seat; it will never be used at the dinner table. Such is not the case with God's people. God's people can be transformed from a Froggy seat into a crystal serving dish. Isn't that what verse 21 says?

2 Timothy 2:21

Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

All you need to do to be a vessel of honor is to "cleanse yourself." That is, "to abstain from wickedness" (verse 19). That's the idea of the next word in verse 21, "Sanctified." It means "holy." It means "being set apart." It means, "being devoted to God."

Now, we aren't talking here about being cleansed from your sin. That can only come through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul has already mentioned on a number of occasions the salvation that the gospel brings. "God ... has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (1:8-10). "For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory" (2:10). The gospel brings thorough cleansing that only God can bring.

But, notice here that Paul is telling Timothy to "cleanse himself" (verse 21). You can't cleanse yourself from your sins. But, you can cleanse your behavior. You can cleanse your actions. You can cleanse your attitudes. In the immediate context, we see that this includes not wrangling about words (2:14) and avoiding worldly and empty chatter" (2:16). Because, these types of activities lead to ruin (2:14) and they also spread and result in upsetting the faith of some (2:16-18).

You can't be useful to God if you are wrangling about words or if you are engaged in worldly and empty chatter, arguing about this or that, never building up, but always tearing down. But the cleansed vessel, who seeks to avoid the useless arguing or wasteful word, can be used of God. Or, as verse 21 says, he will be "useful to the Master, prepared for every good work."

I know that this was Paul's heart for Timothy. At this point in his life, he was discouraged. Paul desperately wanted to perk Timothy up, for him to succeed in the ministry and be useful to Jesus Christ. But, I don't believe that this is where the application ends. In fact, if anything, Paul is just beginning. Look at verse 22,

2 Timothy 2:22

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Verse 22 tells Timothy how to cleanse himself. It forms the head of my second point, ...

2. The Application (verses 22-26)

In verse 22, we see the application for life. It's a call to purity. It's a call to shun evil and to seek righteousness. What was true of Timothy is equally true of all of you.

Look at verse 22, "Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart." In other words, Timothy was to join in the fight for sanctification with all in the congregation, all who were calling on the Lord with a pure heart. This has echoes of verse 19, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness."

Notice the two verbs in verse 22. They are most helpful when it comes to your Christian walk of sanctification. Flee and pursue. Or, as the King James has it, "flee and follow". Flee from youthful lusts. Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace. The word for "flee" is the word from which we get the word, "fugitive." It pictures a running away from something. The word for "pursue" is a word which has with it the idea of pursuing a prize with passion, like hunting. We should hunt down righteousness.

Paul used these same two words in 1 Timothy 6:11. After listing some common sins, Paul exhorted Timothy, "Flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness." Again, the King James uses the memorable words, "flee from" and "follow after."

Verses like these can be a great help to your Christian life. You can boil all of your living down to this. When you see sin, you are to flee from it. Flee from it like a scared kitty cat fleeing from a barking dog, like a fox being hunted at a foxhunt. When you see righteousness, you are to follow after it, like a tiger chasing a wildebeest over the African wilderness! Like an athlete training for the gold medal (Phil. 3:12,14). Like the FBI pursuing an escaped, dangerous convict.

Too often, people don't treat sin like this. Too often, people don't treat righteousness like this.

Again, an object lesson. Suppose that this chair represents sin. At some point, we see the sin, we think about the sin, we examine the sin. We think about it some more, then we gingerly walk closer to it, looking even more closely -- still keeping our distance. We begin to rationalize it in our minds. "It's not so bad. Other's do it. They are kind people." Then, we get to the very edge, where one step over the line is sin. Then, we just test it out, just a little bit. Then, we find out that we like it a bit. So, we engage more and more and more and more. Then, we fall into the sin. It begins to consume our lives. And wonder how we fell into this mess. It is as though, if the chair were sin, it is comfortable and nice. But, when we want to get out, we realized that we are stuck to it, and we cannot get out of it.

Too often, people do the opposite with the path of righteousness. Suppose that this chair represents righteousness. We see it from a distance. We know that it is the way that they ought to walk. We should go to church, we should read our Bibles, we should respond appropriately to others. So, we head that way slowly, almost begrudgingly. We don't really want to do it. But, something inside us tells us that we should. And then, halfway there, we stop and ask ourselves if this really is the thing that we want. It doesn't look so good to us up close as much as it should. And so, we don't delight in it as we should. We sort of sit down reluctantly, and do our duty.

How opposite the idea of this passage is this? We are told to "flee from youthful lusts" We are told to "follow after righteousness." Instead, what should happen in our lives? When we see sin, we should run away!

Lest you think that I'm exaggerating, consider the story of Joseph. We should be like Joseph, who was seduced by Potiphar's wife. When all the men were out of the house and she had the opportunity, she caught him by the garment and said, "Lie with me!" But Joseph "Left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside" (Gen. 39:12). Better to leave the garment inside and to face the trouble outside that will result than to succumb to temptation.

When it comes to battling sin, we have need to be actively engaged in fighting against it. "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11). We are at war! At war for our souls. We need to recognize the evil of our enemy!

A few weeks ago, our family found out that a distant relative was in the hospital with alcoholic pancreatitis. Doctors had put her in a drug-induced coma and had to tie her down to help her through the shakes as her body experienced the withdrawal symptoms. Now, we at our house have chosen to abstain from alcohol completely. Such a decision is beyond the Biblical mandate, which would permit the drinking of alcohol. Even Paul told Timothy, "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Tim. 5:23). But, in our day and age, we have felt that the best thing for our family is to abstain. We have talked with our children about it and have told them of the dangers of alcohol, and we are encouraging them not to start.

Well, it's a foreign enough thing that when my 8 year old daughter found out about our distant relative, she kept saying, "She drank alcohol! She drank alcohol! Carissa, did you know that she drank alcohol!? SR, did you know that she drank alcohol!?" She didn't use "beer" or "wine" in her statements. It was "alcohol! She drank alcohol!" It wasn't a judgmental thing. Rather, it was that she was shocked. I don't think that she has ever seen anybody drink alcohol before. Nor did she understand the extent of the problem -- how much our relative had drunk. I had to explain to her how many people drink alcohol and it's not a problem for them. Our relative's problem is that she drank a lot of alcohol.

But, here's my point: when it comes to sin, we ought to have a similar abhorrence to the acts of sin. We ought to see it and be aghast! We

ought to see it and flee from it. Do you hate sin like this?

Too often, people here read “youthful lusts” as “sexual lusts.” Now, I think that it includes sexual sin. And certainly, sexual sin is sin that we all ought to run from. It never delivers what it promises. The devastation caused by sexual sin is huge. The scars it leaves will never go away. And when it comes to sexual sin, you ought to run away as fast as you can. I would bet that there are those in this room who would do well to heed this advice.

But, I don't think that “sexual lust” is the only sin Paul is thinking of. There are plenty of “dirty old men” who have a sexual lust problem. I think that Paul was referring to any sort of sinful behavior that is especially associated with the youth. After all, Timothy was a young man. “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:12).

One big temptation for Timothy, I am sure, was the temptation to argue everybody about everything. This certainly fits the context. We have seen it in verse 14, “not to wrangle about words.” We have seen it in verse 16, “avoid worldly and empty chatter.” We will see it again in verse 23, “refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.” I know that this was one of my youthful lusts. Coming out of seminary as a young man (of age 25), I knew what was right. I was equipped and ready to argue with anybody who would say different.

There are a host of other youthful lusts that may have been in Paul's mind. Perhaps Paul also had in mind the pride that often comes with young men, thinking themselves to be hot stuff, not living long enough to see their own weakness. Perhaps Paul also had in mind the impatience of young men. Young men expect others to keep up with them in their strength. They haven't lived long enough to experience their own inabilities.

Perhaps Paul had in mind the self-assertion of young men. Young men think themselves always to be right. They haven't lived long enough to question their own wisdom.

I'm sure that there are a host of other youthful lusts that were ready to entrap Timothy. He was to flee from them. He was to “pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” These terms that Paul uses to describe our pursuit -- “righteousness, faith, love and peace” -- well sum up our heart and passion as believers in Christ. Righteousness refers to what is fair and just. Faith refers to trusting in the Lord. Love refers to seeking the welfare of others. Peace refers to harmony and good will among people. The Bible leaves no doubt: these are the sorts of qualities that we all ought to seek. There is much overlap in these sorts of things.

We are called to pursue righteousness. When you see a wrong done, you ought to make an effort to make it right. In our neighborhood, just a few doors down from us, we have an abandoned house that was foreclosed. Apparently, there has been some vandalism at the house. This past week, there were some brown letters written on the garage door of this abandoned house, “K K K.” When I saw that, something boiled up in me, as those letters represent the racial hatred in our culture. I took some soap and water over to the house, but found out that it was spray paint, which couldn't be removed. I had some meetings to go to that day, but when I returned, someone (I don't know who) had already painted over the letters. That's the sort of thing that we ought to pursue: righteousness.

We are called to pursue faith, pursuing an active trust in the Lord for all things. When we arise in the morning, we should pursue the Lord by faith. When faced with a decision to make, we should trust the Lord to guide us. When dealing with a difficulty with our children, we should seek the Lord. When faced with a trial in our lives, we should trust God's good hand in the trial. When we sin, we should turn to the Lord, confessing our sin and believing that the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient to forgive us our sin. When our faith is weak, we should pray, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). When we lay our heads on our pillows at night, we should commend ourselves to the Lord. That's how we pursue faith.

We are called to pursue love. Love will bear all things. Love will believe all things. Love will hope all things. Love will endure all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Love will give itself to others. When you see your neighbor in need, love helps the neighbor with their need (Luke 10). When someone wrongs you, love will be patient with them. When someone hurts you, love will be kind to them. When you wrong a friend, love will seek the reconciliation of the friendship. When you hear of difficulties in the lives of others, love will pray. That's how we pursue love.

We are called to pursue peace. That is, peace among all. Hebrews 12:14 tells us to, “Pursue peace with all men.” And Romans 12:18 says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” 1 Thessalonians 5:13 instructs, “Live in peace with one another.” Such is the character of all Christians. Such is the character of all of “those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22).

Of all people, we ought to be peace-loving people. That's precisely the contrast that Paul brings in verse 23, “But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels.”

At this point, Paul changes focus on his application. Verse 22 is directed toward all of us, for life. But, beginning in verse 23, we see the application directed particularly “for ministry.” Again, we see the same theme cropping up again -- not arguing about words, and quarrelling and bickering and fighting and arguing, especially as it relates to “foolish and ignorant speculations.” These are things that we plain don't know about.

A good example of this is the return of Christ. All Christians believe that Jesus will return to this earth. All Christians believe that Jesus will judge the world. And there is much that we know about the details. But, there is much that we don't know, as well. So, let's not quarrel about the speculations involved in what we don't know. Let's think much about the return of Christ. Let's think much about our hope in Him. But, let us not take an assumption and build a doctrine upon it, and quarrel with those who disagree.

Another example of this surrounds the lapsarian controversy. There are theological discussions regarding the order in which God decreed the state of this world. God decreed that He would create. God decreed that He would permit the fall. God decreed that He would provide a way of salvation. God decreed that He would choose some to receive this salvation. The whole theological discussion revolves around the order

of these things. Did God choose His elect before He permitted the fall? Did God permit the fall, and then choose His elect? Did God decree the way of salvation before He chose His elect? Did God choose His elect before He decreed the way of salvation? Theologians go around and around on these things.

Here's my take. Such matters are worthy of our consideration. But, much of it brings to it a degree of speculation. Who knows the mind of God, and whether or not there were logical steps in His thinking before the creation of the world? Did God even think progressively with logical steps before time began? So, let's not quarrel with each other on such matters.

Now, that's not to say that there aren't times in which we ought to correct others. On the contrary, verse 25 says that the Lord's bond-servant must be about "correcting those who are in opposition." Recently, there have been those who have been in opposition. Rob Bell, pastor of megachurch, Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, recently wrote a book on hell, called "Love Wins," which put forth a universalistic view of salvation, and places his theology outside of orthodoxy. The evangelical world has taken him to task on it. Two books have come out to deal head on with the issue, Francis Chan's, "Erasing Hell" and Mark Galli's, "God Wins." Both of these books refute Bell's book.

There are rising debates about the Trinity, which you may come to hear about in future days. There will always be debates about God and sin and salvation and Jesus. It's just the world we live in. And those in error need to be corrected. However, there is a way in which this correction ought to be done. Look back at verse 24, ...

2 Timothy 2:24-25

The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition.

One of the hallmarks of a good servant of the Lord is that he isn't quarrelsome. That is, he isn't involved in every dispute about everything. There are bigger fish to fry, than getting in every discussion, trying to win the argument.

What a word for us today, who have instant global access to all of the controversies surrounding us in the evangelical world today. Blogs and twitter and facebook and email and webpages all create a culture where we might quarrel all day long. And quarrel people do. And it's out there for the world to see and read and be turned away from the Lord. When we encounter those who are in opposition, there is a way that we should address the error.

But, when there is opposition, and when correction is to be done, let us remember this counsel that we find in verses 24 and 25. First, Let's be kind. Too often Christians come across as harsh, unloving, and mean spirited. After all, we know the truth. The world needs to know. But, it needs to hear the truth in a kind way.

Think of Jesus. He spoke some very, very difficult things. But, He did so with an air of kindness. Now, not everything was so peaceful. He took a whip to the temple and overturned all of the tables in the temple. Such was right for the occasion. But, it was an exception to the rule. In general, Jesus was very kind in His words. That's why sinners loved Him. They were drawn to Him.

Second, Let's be able in our teaching. Too often Christians come across in a confusing way. They have so many facts and so many reasons against something, that they fail to persuade. But, let us persuade clearly to the best of our ability.

Third, Let's be patient. Too often Christians demand instant change right now. But, it takes time to change people. Rare is the case where you will be able to show someone their error, that they change their mind with one discussion, right then and there. Normally, it will take some time. Normally, it will be a process for someone to think through their errors. Normally, it will take some repentance, which is hard. It is hard to admit your errors.

Often, change will take place over years, of hearing the truth, of seeing your example, of thinking through the implications. Let's be OK with time.

So, let's put forth the truth kindly, clearly, patiently, and gently. Fourth, Let's be gentle. This is very close to what Paul was talking about when he said that we need to be "kind." Using similar words helps to give a feel for the attitude.

I haven't seen a study on this, but it would be interesting. It would be interesting to survey those who come to Christ and see what (humanly speaking) drew them to Jesus. Was it the loving, kind, patient and gentle neighbor who brought the gospel to them that ultimately drew them? Was it the constant example of the patient and gentle parents who shared the gospel and lived before them that ultimately drew them? Was it the gentle preacher who relentlessly pointed people to Christ that ultimately drew them? Or, was it the yelling preacher on the street that caused them to bow their knee to Jesus? Or, was it the harsh parent, who always pointed out their sin, that cause them to come to Jesus? Or, was it the hell-fire and brimstone preacher, who scarred them into coming into the kingdom? My guess is that God, most often, uses the kind and gentle and patient messenger to accomplish His purposes.

After all, that's what this passage is about, isn't it? Being useful to the master (verse 21). That's where the passage is going in verse 25, The aim is repentance. You do things God's way (with kindness and patience and gentleness), so that, ...

2 Timothy 2:25-26

... perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.

Notice, once again, it's ultimately not the human means that is going to bring anybody to Christ. God is the one who grants repentance (Acts

11:18). But, I would contend that He uses means. And the means are a kind, patient, and gentle messenger. Don't you want to be useful to the master? Then, let's avoid quarrels. Let's be kind to all. Let's be patient when wronged. Let's be gentle. Perhaps we may persuade people to come out of the darkness and into the light.

I want to close my message this morning by sharing with you some emails that model this very clearly. In recent days, I have been involved in a situation with some other pastors in our community. On pastor wrote, ...

Brothers,

Today I had brought to my attention some rather distressing news. It seems that the Rockford Public Library is hosting and promoting a "Psychic Teen Awareness Workshop with Mark Dorsett" on Saturday, December 13 at the Main Library in Rockford. According to the website and brochures available at the various branches, teenagers 13 through 17 years of age are invited to "Join Spirit Communicator, Mark Dorsett as he teaches an introductory workshop to help teens to connect more with their own intuition and 'higher Guidance' . Mark will also provide instruction on communicating with loved ones in spirit with a special emphasis on spiritual ways of protecting their energy."

I realize that not all of you men are directly within the city of Rockford. However, I know that many of our folks live in the city, those who live in the environs may well have tax dollars go the Library system, and all of us should be outraged. I wondered if, perhaps, you would want to band together in a letter calling for the cancellation of this nonsense. In a private conversation with an attorney affiliated with Elim the head of the Library has already said they want to "steer clear of religious matters." Yet, they freely advertise this sham as providing "a special emphasis on spiritual ways of protecting their energy."

Any ideas, advice, thoughts?

After some back and forth among us, another pastor friend of mine, Bob Bixby, wrote a letter to the library. Bob writes, ...

Dear Mr. Novak,

I left a message on your voicemail because I prefer to discuss potentially divisive issues in person so that tone can be heard, something that is too easily missed in email communication. I hope you understand that I am not looking for a fight, but my own conviction about culture, religion, freedoms, and philosophy compel me to -- at the very least -- try to enter the discussion with what I think to be a reasonable question: If the Rockford Public library wishes to steer clear of religion, why do they promote a supernaturalist like Mark Dorsett?

My understanding is that the library will be hosting Dorsett on December 13. Personally, I would have no problem with this if the library also allowed me, a Calvinistic Protestant after the tradition of our American forefathers, also speak and offer guidance to young teenagers. However, I suspect that the library would be embattled with hostile opposition if a traditional Christian were to be promoted by the system. I can tolerate, albeit sadly, the fact that we are no longer welcome in the public discourse. However, many of us are increasingly vexed by the seemingly duplicitous behavior of American public officials that shut us out of the public sector on the premise of separation of religion from state, but then give place to other forms of religion, aberrant or alternative.

Religion is religion. Mark Dorsett literally promotes connecting with the spirits of deceased loved ones. How is that any more sensible than the fact that we Christians believe in a resurrected and living Lord and that we can communicate with Him through prayer? We only make that claim about one person. Dorsett with his privatized brand of religion claims that he can connect you and me and anyone else to the spirits of our relatives. Religion is the belief in the supernatural and the appeal to a higher being. Whether Allah, Jesus, or the guidance of dead grandpapa, it's religion. Your promotional that I saw actually said "higher Guidance" (capital G). That's religion.

Though I pastor a small church (200+), I am very well connected in the city and with many pastors of larger churches. I know for certain that this story will not go away quietly because many are getting weary of traditional religion getting the shaft. I prefer to discuss, debate, and "argue" peaceably and quietly. Perhaps, I totally miss the point. Perhaps, there is a rationale that has escaped me. Perhaps I need to see your/the library's perspective. Perhaps it would help if you understood ours. Presently, however, I only write for myself.

Respectfully,

Bob Bixby

As a result of the letter, Bob, then, had an opportunity to meet with the board of the library. Here was his report about the meeting.

[Our meeting] was cordial and transparent. The letter you saw was distributed to the Board of Directors and the actually discussed it at their meeting. They made a decision per the letter to cancel two programs that they felt were "preachy" with the paranormal. However, they told me frankly that the paranormal things are by far the most popular things that they do (a sad commentary on our city). Apparently, they have been getting some calls and had largely dismissed them but were persuaded by the viability of my argument that Dorsett's spiritism is, in fact, a religion. If they allow one religion they would need to become an open forum for other religions, something that they are disinclined to do.

I had opportunity to explain that the Christian view of the spirit world is that it is real and the only Spirit with whom we communicate is God. The intrigue in mediums is a rebellious alternative to the provided mediator, the man Christ Jesus. And He is the only mediator. In other words, mediator or medium. The board decided on a compromise. They would not have paranormal programs that were "instructional" but they may have some that are "informational" like the very popular haunted house tour that is done each year. I personally have no power [and] so little leverage, but I did acknowledge the extremely fine distinction and told them I appreciated their effort to come our way a little bit. The fact that two programs were cancelled was far more than I expected. In the end, I don't know how much was accomplished except that it was a great witnessing opportunity because my whole reason to object was essentially for the sake of the Gospel.

I did learn that we ought to encourage our people to vocalize their objections in kind, forthright ways. We shouldn't be belligerent and unreasonable in our demands, recognizing the sad reality that we are the minority among people who prefer the profane and the demonic.

Bob

Bob was a great example of how to persuade those who are in opposition to our ministries. He was kind and clear and patient and gentle. Let's trust the Lord to turn those, who are in the clutches of the devil into followers of Christ.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on October 2, 2011 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
