

Introduction:

In **Numbers 16**, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram could not stand it that Moses and Aaron were singled out as the "Prince" of Israel and the High Priest respectively. They accused them of making their positions up and setting themselves over all Israel when all of them were just as holy as these two. Of course, most of us are aware that God actually showed who His choices for leader and priest were as He judged Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and their families and followers. Some were swallowed alive by the ground and others were consumed by God's heavenly fire. In **II Timothy 2:14-26**, Paul speaks to Timothy with that story in the background. (Note that the two statements in **II Timothy 2:18** come from the Septuagint of **Numbers 16:5, 26**. Admittedly, the second statement also seems to combine some other passages with **vs. 26**.) God explains that in every great house, there are some dishes for honorable situations and some for normal situations. Interestingly, in God's house today, everyone can be used for honor. After all, we are all priests and kings in the kingdom of our Lord. However, we must be cleansed. In **II Timothy 2:22**, Paul explains what we must do to be cleansed so we can be set apart as holy, useful to the Master, ready for every good work. In our previous lesson, we examined some things we must flee. We noted that youthful passions, desires, or lusts must be escaped. We examined the pride of position, pursuit of riches, and pleasure seeking that are signature desires of the immature. We must flee those. But then Paul says we must pursue some things. After all, nature abhors a vacuum. If all we do is get rid of some things, we won't be able to maintain that for long. Rather, we need to fill the place they had taken up with something else. As we run from youthful desires, we need to develop and pursue mature, godly desires. Let's examine those.

Discussion:

I. Pursue Righteousness

- A. In **Matthew 5:6**, Jesus says those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed because they will be satisfied. Contrast this with the immature desire for being rich. **Proverbs 23:4-5** explains when we set our eyes on wealth as the goal, it sprouts wings and flies off like an eagle. **Ecclesiastes 5:10-11** explains that the lover of money is never satisfied because the more money he gets the more money gets consumed. So, as we flee the immature desire for wealth, we must pursue righteousness.
- B. What is the number one way we can pursue righteousness? **II Timothy 3:14-17** explains. All Scripture has been breathed out by God so we can be trained in righteousness. Interestingly, just as honorable vessels are useful to the Master, ready for every good work (**II Timothy 2:21**), so is the man of God who is trained for righteousness equipped for every good work (**II Timothy 3:17**). If we want to be useful to our Master, we need to pursue His Word. We need to study, learn, apply. As Paul had already said in **II Timothy 2:15**, we must do our best to present ourselves as workers who rightly handle the Word of Truth.
- C. Of course, we must be careful how we pursue. Most of us, on hearing that we need to pursue righteousness want to get out God's law and prove how well we can righteously follow it. However, **Romans 9:30-10:4** should give us pause at this approach. The Jews pursued a law that they thought would lead them to the righteousness for which they hungered, but it didn't work. Let us not turn our New Covenant into this exact same approach. If we simply treat getting into God's Word as a delineation of rules by which we can prove our own righteousness, we will fail. Rather, the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness by law, but by faith actually received the righteousness they pursued. Paul again makes this point in **Philippians 3:8-11**. He knows that he will not be saved by righteousness that comes through law, but only by the righteousness that comes through faith. It is no wonder then, that in **II Timothy 2:22**, Paul says we should not only pursue righteousness, but we should also pursue faith.

II. Pursue Faith

- A. According to **Hebrews 11:1**, faith is the substance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. We are not talking about a blind faith here; that is, we are not talking about contradicting the evidence of what is seen. Rather, our faith is based on evidence. But it is simply believing things we didn't see ourselves. After all, we walk by faith, not by sight (**II Corinthians 5:7**).

- B. Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that, like pursuing righteousness, the number one place we must turn to pursue faith is the Word of God. **Romans 10:17** explains that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (ESV). From **Genesis** to **Revelation**, we have the testimony of God's promises. And again and again and again, we see God keeping His promises. We see God's promises to Abraham that all come true. We see God's promises to Jacob that all come true. We see God's promises to Israel that all come true. We see God's promises to David that all come true. We see His promises of blessing on the submissive and His promises of cursing on the rebellious. We see both come true. Sadly, in God's Word we do find things hard to believe that the skeptics and critics immediately dismiss and discount. But those who will linger long in the Word, discovering the accounts and connections between them will have their faith bolstered. And their faith will not simply be bolstered in the Bible as God's Word, but also in God's promises for them.
- C. Satan is consistently trying to attack our faith in God's promises. God's Word is the only way we will overcome these attacks. It is the shield of faith that wards off these attacks according to **Ephesians 6:16**. Being filled with His Word, knowing how He acts, seeing how He has worked in the lives of others throughout history, fills us with faith that He is still working in us.
- D. Paul explains the place of faith in **Galatians 5:5-6**. By faith we await the hope of righteousness. For in Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, but faith working through love. Therefore it isn't surprising that in **II Timothy 2:22**, Paul goes on to say we must pursue love.

### III. Pursue Love

- A. The greatest commands are love. Love God. Love your neighbor (**Matthew 22:34-40**). More than that, the aim of our charge or the goal of our instruction is love that issues from a pure heart, a sincere faith, and a good conscience (**I Timothy 1:5**).
- B. We can do all kinds of amazing things, including speak in the languages of men and angels, but without love our words are empty as a clanging cymbal. We can know everything and have all faith, but absent love it is useless and we are nothing. We can sell everything we own and give it to the poor and then allow ourselves to be burned at the stake in Jesus's name, but if love isn't at the base of it, we will get nothing out of those actions (**I Corinthians 13:1-3**). We must pursue love.
- C. Don't be surprised. Like pursuing righteousness and faith, the key to pursuing love starts with God's Word. As **John 14:23-24** explains that loving Jesus means keeping His word. Then **I John 5:1-3** explains that loving the children of God means loving God and keeping His commandments. While love includes the feeling, it is not based on the feeling. It is based on the standard of God's Word.
- D. Sadly, due to the romanticism of the last few centuries we have conflated the ideas of love and being in love. We think love is the same the heart-pounding experience and feeling of infatuation. We think love is butterflies in our stomachs and feeling giddy when a person walks in the room. We think love is what happens when we are overwhelmed by our emotions to pursue another person. Often, being in love is actually the exact opposite of love. That is, being in love often (though not always) actually leads us to the selfishness of trying to capture that person in our lives at all costs rather than seeking their good. Love, however, is not a feeling, it is an ability. That is, it is a behavior and we must grow in our skill level. And we must grow in our ability to love no matter how we actually feel about the person to the point that we even grow to love our enemies (**Matthew 5:44**). **I Corinthians 13:4-7** helps us see the abilities and skills we must develop if we will pursue love: patience, kindness, humility, selflessness, gentleness, trust.
- E. As Paul explains in **Ephesians 4:1-3**, we are only walking in a manner worthy of our calling when we are bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Therefore, we are not surprised to find that Paul says we should not only pursue righteousness, faith, and love, but adds peace to that list as well in **II Timothy 2:22**.

### IV. Pursue Peace

- A. Even in our theme verse for the year, we see that part of pursuing holiness is pursuing peace with everyone (**Hebrews 12:14**). In **Romans 12:18**, Paul charges us saying, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (ESV). This is in direct contrast to the quarreling over foolish, ignorant controversies that Paul says we should flee in **II Timothy 2:23**.
- B. He goes on to describe what pursuing peace would look like by saying "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents in gentleness" (**II Timothy 2:24-25**, ESV). The immature pursue the pride of position and they do not care who they have to step on along the way to get it. But the mature and godly pursue peace with all.

- C. When we realize we are not walking in harmony with someone, especially one of our brothers or sisters in Christ, as Jesus directs in **Matthew 5:23-26** we must pursue reconciliation with them. Interestingly, I think we often miss the exact point Jesus is making here. We often relate “offering your gift at the altar” to our modern “worship assemblies.” We therefore say things like, “Before you go to church, you need to make sure you are at peace with everyone there.” That is not exactly what Jesus is saying. “Offering your gift at the altar” is not parallel to our modern assemblies of worship. Rather, offering the gift at the altar was the means of reconciling with God when they had committed sin. The parallel for us is when we go to God in prayer seeking His forgiveness. Jesus’s point for us is before we think we can reconcile with God over our sins, we have to pursue reconciliation with the people we sinned against. We must not think we can sin against others and simply seek peace with God about it. We must pursue peace with the ones we’ve sinned against.
- D. As we’ve pursued righteousness, faith, love, and peace we’ve moved through a process of focusing on our relationship with God to focusing on our relationship with God’s people. Therefore, we shouldn’t be surprised that in **II Timothy 2:22**, Paul adds the relational aspect to our pursuit.

#### V. Pursue Proper Relationships

- A. Paul tells us to pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, but not to do so alone. He tells us to pursue all of these things within the relationship of those who call on the Lord with a pure heart (**II Timothy 2:22**). This corresponds with the opening of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (see **I Corinthians 1:2**). Christ’s church is the group of those who call on the Lord. God has never expected Christians to be loners. He has expected us to band together in relationship with others who call on the Lord.
- B. Of course, the problem is there is no practical way to have a pragmatic relationship with the universal collection of all saints. So how is this pursuit with those who call on the Lord fulfilled? Through congregations. This is why when Saul came to Jerusalem in **Acts 9:26**, “he attempted to join the disciples.” In the context, this was more than merely hanging out with some of the disciples on occasion. Rather, it was trying to be a part of their group. Initially, they rejected him from this, but Barnabas brought him to the apostles and testified to his conversion and the apostles allowed his participation with that congregation. Additionally, this is why when Apollos was leaving Ephesus and going to Corinth, the Christians at Ephesus sent a letter to the disciples in Achaia to receive him in **Acts 18:27-28**.
- C. Misreading “membership” through modern Western eyes:
  1. I know today there are many who mock the idea of “membership” in a congregation. Others simply question its necessity. They question why they don’t see passages more clearly about “joining” a congregation or why there aren’t more of them. And this is a good question. But there is actually a good reason why we don’t see more specifically stated about it.
  2. The reason is the difference in the ancient culture. You see, every culture has things that go without saying. When they write, they don’t mention those things because it simply part of the air they breath. In fact, consider that. Do you ever read a book assuming people are holding their breath simply because the book never explicitly mentioned that the person was breathing in and out? Of course not. It goes without saying that every character in the book is breathing. Every culture has things that go without saying in that culture but when someone from another culture reads it, they make mistakes because it doesn’t go without saying in theirs. For instance, if a fish wrote a book, would he say a whole lot about water? Would he repeatedly mention that he was wet? Would he ever mention it? Probably not. That would go without saying. But imagine if a bird was reading the fish’s book. Do you think there might be problems? Of course. When the bird reads about the fish travelling from one place to another, the bird automatically envisions flying because that is what goes without saying for birds. If the bird tried to tell us that water didn’t matter to fish because the book didn’t mention it much or very explicitly, we’d tell the bird he was wrong, not knowing the culture of fish. That is similar to what is happening with this modern individualistic mindset that questions congregational membership.
  3. The problem is we read the New Testament through modern Western eyes and miss the ancient Eastern norm. Here in modern America, the individual reigns supreme. If you and I were writing a book and wanted an individual to become part of a group, we would have to specifically outline it, explain it, command it, and then define how it happens. Why? Because what goes without saying in our culture is our individualism, our privacy, our personal rights, our personal autonomy. We have to be told to join a group and how if we are going to do so.
  4. But that is not the perspective of these ancient Eastern cultures. The ancient norm was the group, the collective. This is why families and tribes were judged together in the Old Testament. This is also why we often see entire households converted at the same time in the New Testament. To be perfectly honest,

this is why congregational discipline was such a deterrent in the New Testament times. For them, becoming a Christian was not a choice to change a personal relationship with God, it was automatically a change of the collective of which they were a part. We miss the radical nature of passages like **Matthew 12:49-50** and **Luke 14:26** because we don't think collectively. We see Jesus say that those who obey God are His mother and brothers and think, "Oh, that's sweet. He's saying people who obey God are like family to Him." No, He's not saying that. He's saying He has aligned Himself with a different collective than the cultural norm based on bloodlines. In our individualistic culture, **Luke 14:26** becomes nothing more than a hyperbole demonstrating we should love Jesus more than our parents. But in their culture it was a radical explanation that if your cultural collective/group, your family, wouldn't follow Jesus together with you, you would have to abandon them for your new collective the church. They didn't have to talk about this explicitly any more than they talked about the air they were breathing. It was just part and parcel of life in that culture.

5. Why doesn't the Bible speak more explicitly than some of the passages we've seen about membership in a congregation, because it simply didn't have to. Membership in a group was the norm, it was expected, it was the air they were breathing, it went without saying. We think, "If you force me to be part of a group, I lose my identity, my autonomy, my individuality." They thought, "If you don't let me be part of the group, I lose my identity, my support, my family."
- D. Now, with this in mind, think of trying to be an individual Christian and not an actual participating part and member of a congregation in terms of **I Corinthians 12:14-26**. While this passage is mainly about the universal body, I think we have to recognize that, being written to a local group of Christians in a local place, the practical outworking of it is the local congregation. Perhaps you are an eye, you cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." Perhaps you are a head, you cannot say to the feet, "I have no need of you." And if you by yourself are an eye, where would be the hearing? And if you by yourself are an ear, where would be the sense of smell? The point? Part of our pursuit is being a member of the body, it is being a member of a local body. It is purposefully being in that congregational relationship with people who are calling on the Lord. But it is more than just being a member, it is actually using those relationships to aid in your pursuit of righteousness, faith, love, and peace. God has established congregations with shepherds, deacons, teachers, evangelists, brothers, and sisters because we can't pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace as well on our own as we can in the collective.
- E. In fact, one more passage really drives this home. Because our modern English does not distinguish between the singular second person (you) and the plural second person (you—which should be y'all), we miss a very important point in **I Corinthians 6:19**. If we "over" translated in order to demonstrate the reality of plural and singular in this verse, it would say, "Do you all not know that the body of you all is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you all, whom you all have from God, and you all are not you all's own?" Body and temple are singular but "you" in every case is plural. That is, the collective congregation in Corinth is the body and the temple of the Holy Spirit, not the individual members of the Corinthian church. This seems strange to us because we think individually, but they thought collectively and this made perfect sense to them. It went without saying. The question is do you want to be part of a temple of the Holy Spirit or do you want to be all on your own?

#### Conclusion:

Korah, Dathan, and Abiram could not handle not being as honored as Moses and Aaron. So they rebelled. I wonder what would have happened for them and in what major ways God would have used them if they had simply fled the immature desires of pride of position, pursuit of wealth, and pleasure seeking and instead pursued righteousness, faith, love, and peace along with the congregation of Israel? We'll never know what honor they might have experienced because they chose a different path. The great thing about our great house is we are a nation of kings and priests. Each of us has the opportunity to be Aaron and Moses, but that will only happen God's way because He knows those who are His. He gets to decide who will be vessels for honor. You can be the plastic plate in the house of the Lord or you can be the fine china. What will you flee? What will you pursue?