

2 Timothy 3:1-9 - Avoid these people

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is from 2 Timothy chapter 3. It's on page 1196. So if you aren't there yet, you can do that.

Starting in verse 1. But mark this, there will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud.

Abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Just as Janus and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose truth. They are men of depraved minds who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.

[1 : 26] But they will not get very far because, as is the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. Word of the Lord. Thank you. Thanks, David.

Let's pray and ask the Lord's help as we come to his word. Let's pray. Father, we do just want to recognise our need of you in these moments. We're very conscious that this isn't just like a teaching exercise where I'm trying to get information out of my brain into the brains of people in front of me.

But this is a spiritual exercise where we are seeking together to listen to what you say to us by your spirit, through your word. So we pray that you would relieve us of distractions, that you'd help us to listen well, help me to speak faithfully and clearly, and be at work for your glory and no one else's.

In Jesus' name. Amen. I'm going to hazard a guess. I don't know this, but I'm going to guess that the thing that stood out to you in that reading is the word gullible women in verse 6.

And you might be sat there thinking, what is he going to say about gullible women? And I promise you that we will get there. But I want you just to shelve that in your mind for a moment, because I want you to notice before anything else that the passage is organised around two fairly simple and straightforward instructions.

[2 : 54] The first one comes at the beginning, it is mark this. And the other one comes partway through at the end of verse 5, have nothing to do with such people. And all of the information in this passage is organised around those two to-dos for Timothy.

Mark this, have nothing to do with such people. And so my plan for our time together this morning is just to shape our time around those two instructions. Mark this, avoid this, and then see how that applies for us today.

So let's start with that first one. Mark this, or literally, or more literally, know this. Know this. The word that Paul uses here is the word for understand. And the point is that there is a danger to Timothy that he might be ignorant about what is going on.

Timothy, remember, is in Ephesus. He is working in the church there. Paul is his older mentor, dying in prison in Rome. And he is concerned that Timothy might be confused about the dynamic of ministry in the time in which they live.

And so he needs to know, he needs to be clued up, fully briefed. Because, as it turns out, it's going to be tough. Look down at verse 1. But mark this, there will be terrible times in the last days.

[4 : 09] Paul's point is that the last days, days which in Bible language are the days between the ascension of the Lord Jesus and his final return. In other words, today, these days, the days that Paul was living in and the days we are in now.

In those days, there will be terrible or fierce or troubled or grievous times. The dynamic of the passage is perhaps quite easy to understand.

Paul is warning Timothy. Think of like a seasoned mother speaking to a pregnant woman. There are terrible times ahead, she says, with a knowing look.

Or a GCSE student looking to one of the year eights going, there are terrible times ahead. And Paul seems to think, doesn't he, that there is a genuine danger of naivety for Timothy and for those in Christian ministry and for all of us in the Christian life.

Specifically, it seems a naivety which expects that everything will be a lot easier than it actually turns out to be. Maybe, you know, oh, if I do everything right, then everything will work out and everything will be straightforward.

[5 : 20] But Paul says, no, no, no, that's not what it's like. Paul says, I want you to know, good churches, faithful ministers, good ministry will always face difficulty and challenge, he says.

Now, we do need to be careful. Look down at the verse. It says that not all of the last days will be terrible. It's not the idea that church life is always a disaster or that ministry will never be fruitful or have a point to it.

That's not what Paul's saying. If he wasn't, you know, you might as well give up, mind you. Well, the point is that in the last days, you won't be able to avoid terrible times. You know, there will be exceptions, but still there are terrible times to come and you won't be able to avoid them.

These are, if you like, the days of terrible times, says Paul. In fact, according to next week's passage, if you glance down at verse 13, you are told it's going to go from bad to worse, not better to better.

Which means, I think, if anything, you and I have even more reason to listen to this than Timothy did. So just there, before we even get any further, just think about this for us as a church or for me as one of the pastors or for you as a community group leader or a Sunday school teacher, for you as a parent or an uncle or an aunt or a grandparent trying to teach children about Jesus.

[6 : 36] Whatever it is, don't be naive. Don't be naive. This is going to be tough. There might be seasons of blessing. We are praying for seasons of blessing. We are striving for them.

We desire them, don't we? But there will certainly be challenges. Terrible, chaotic, difficult, troubling times. And if you're ignorant of that, if you don't realize that that's the dynamic, then you're going to give up too easily.

Because the truth is that God, in his providence and in his wisdom, has set church up in such a way that good ministry will always face difficulty.

Always. And that's not a sign that things are wrong. It's just a sign of the way things are. And if you and I are going to keep going, then like Timothy, you and I need to be made aware of it.

Perhaps you are only too aware of it this morning. I think most of us know what it's like to be through tough times. Perhaps you had expectations of church and it turned out to be worse.

[7 : 36] Maybe you had expectations of teaching your children about Jesus. And, well, it turns out they were never interested. You were excited about a talk that you were going to give to the youth club and it bombed.

No one listened. You thought getting married might make it easier to read the Bible together, but actually it's turned out that it's made it even more difficult. You thought that merging two churches together would solve all of our problems, but it's brought new ones and different ones instead.

But such is faithful ministry, right? Don't give up. Don't be naive, says Paul. Don't be able to understand. But there's more to this because in Paul's mind here is not so much a sort of a general difficulty of ministry, but rather a specific cause of terrible times.

And you'll notice that the cause of these terrible times is verse two. What? People. People. That's the problem. Specifically the problem of people's hearts. And then what follows are 19 descriptions of people problems.

19 inclinations of people's hearts in these last days. Now, I think Paul has got what you might call flow here, right? These are just tripping off his tongue. And there is some overlap, and there are some themes in these verses, like the attitude to oneself, or view of authority, or relationship difficulties.

[8 : 50] But I don't think really, as you look down at the list, it's not really that you're supposed to notice the organisation of the list. Rather, you're to notice this is overwhelming. This is just coming at me, and at me, and at me.

This is a big problem, not a niche one. That's what Paul is communicating. This is bad, really bad, he says. And the emphasis, if you remember, is not so much, Timothy, don't be like that.

It is that in part, and we will come to that a little bit. But really, the emphasis is, no, know that people are like this, Timothy. That in the last days, people will be like this. Spot this. Look out for it. Don't be naive.

Don't be blindly optimistic about people. Now, with that in mind, let's run through the list. And I apologise. I don't apologise to you. I warn you that this is going to be overwhelming, okay?

But look down at the verses, and let's follow them through. Firstly, you find that people will be lovers of themselves. Now, several of the words in this list are composite words of the word for love with another word, right?

[9 : 50] And here, firstly, it's a combination of the word love and the word self. And Paul says the trouble in these last days is going to be people's self-preoccupation. There will be an inappropriate obsession with people's own wellbeing.

The next word, the next composite word, is the composite of the word for love and money. We've got lovers of money. Similar idea. People, as well as being obsessed with themselves, will be obsessed with money.

Money will be a god to people. Everything will be about possessions and acquiring wealth. That will be a big source of trouble. Next, we find that going to be boastful. This really is spoken pride.

Proud is the next word which follows. That's primarily about the attitude of the heart, boasting outwardly, inwardly, really being self-obsessed. Having an over-inflated view of our own importance, of our own skill.

Always on about themselves and what they're doing and how they are and what people think of them. Next, we find they're abusive. Literally, the Greek word there is blasphemous. But it seems so much about what they say about God as blasphemy against God, but really blasphemy against others.

- [10 : 57] Saying what is not true in order to destroy someone. John Stott, who's written a commentary on these verses, says that this kind of abuse is the evil twin of pride. If you're going to have an over-inflated view of yourself, in order to kind of maintain that, you're going to have to consistently put other people down, abuse others, and puff yourself up.

Next comes disobedient to parents. It seems that turning over the authority structure in the family, uncontrollable children whose parents are helpless, is not a new problem. It's been going on for at least 2,000 years.

The next word is ungrateful. Ungrateful. These now are composite words again of the word anti and another word. So here is the word anti-thankfulness or anti-grace.

There is no sense in these people that they are indebted to anybody else. There's no sense for them that they owe anything to anybody else, that they have anything to be grateful for. I made it myself, they say. I've earned it all.

Next, it's anti-holiness. Unholy. Ungodly. No desire to follow God's law. No sense that obedience to God's commands is how we're intended to live our lives. The separation from evil is good.

- [12 : 11] They are unholy. Anti-holiness. Then they are without love. Heartless. Lacking in ordinary, normal human affection. Unmoved by the plight of others.

Without pity or kindness. They are unforgiving. Refusing to be reconciled to others. Unwilling to absorb the cost of other people's wrongdoing, which is so important, isn't it, in our world, where bad stuff happens all the time.

Then you find that they are slanderous. Slightly different to the word abusive. Here it's not so much bad words spoken to another person, but bad words spoken about another person.

The word is literally diabolos, from which we get the word devil or adversary. It's this malicious intent to bring others down. Saying stuff that will damage their reputation. Next we find lacking in self-control.

Literally self-indulgent. It's another twin of pride, isn't it? And self-importance. Why would I deny myself anything? I'm the most important person in the room.

- [13 : 11] If you want to know more about self-control, come this evening. David is talking about that for us tonight. Next we find brutal, fierce, savage towards others. There's no gentleness here.

Weaknesses of others are exploited ruthlessly as a means to bring them down. Next they're not loving the good. They are against good. It's dumb, but it's true, isn't it, that in the last days people will look at what is good and be hostile to it.

Don't we see that? Marriage, family, meekness, innocence, integrity. Goodness that's not treasured by our world, but hated. Number 15, if you were wondering where we're up to.

Treacherous, traitors. Friends who betray family and the truth of the gospel. People who will sell others out just for a quick win. They're willing to trash relationships because they're too weak to stand up for what's right.

Too interested in themselves. 16, they're rash. Go ahead without thinking about it. No consideration, no seeking of wisdom, no listening to the counsel of others. I'm just going to do it.

- [14 : 15] Just jumping forward with their own ideas. 17, we're nearly there. Conceited. An extreme pride. Literally here, I think it's sort of swollen with a self-inflated view of themselves.

And then, as we were saying earlier in the last two characteristics, the idolatry of all this comes through. They are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. It's just like the opening line in verse 2, isn't it? Lovers of self.

They're displacing the love of God with love for self-indulgence. It's a false religion, isn't it? It's making an idol of pleasure and self instead of worshipping the God who made us.

This is, if you like, it's kind of self-worship, isn't it? The idol behind all the idols really is me. It's what I want it to be like. Self-worship. Which brings you to the final trait in verse 5, which says that they have a form of godliness, but deny its power.

Let me say to you this morning, I think this is the big shock at the end of the list. Maybe you read the list and you think, well, what is it that Timothy's not to be naive about? You know, you hear that list and you go, Timothy's like, I've seen all of that.

[15 : 24] I've watched the news. I know that that's what this world is. I don't know what this is for. I've encountered that at work. I've seen that in people. But when you get to the end of the list, you realize, no, the thing that Timothy's not to be naive about is that these things are characteristics in the church.

These people are people who are in the church. These things are dressed up as godliness. We're following the Lord, they say. But they're not really. You know, the big house.

Oh, we're going to buy a big house. It's going to be for hospitality. No, it's not really. Oh, it's not slander. It's a prayer point. The love of money.

Oh, well, I was just, it's just, I'm working for the Lord. He wants me to work hard, earn well. The brutality was, I've just been honest with you. The rash decision.

I was following the spirit. But in reality, it's a fake godliness by people who are fake teachers and fake believers, giving the impression of serving the Lord, but are actually just in it for themselves.

[16 : 37] Using ministry, positioning in the church as a means of gaining influence or reputation or status or lifestyle. A way of commanding people's respect and leading them to follow themselves and not the Lord.

And so, says Paul, they deny, notice, the power of the gospel. How have they denied the power of the gospel? What is the power of the gospel? The power of the gospel.

This is why the gospel is good news for you this morning. If you're not a Christian, this is why the gospel is good news for you. The gospel alone has the power to liberate you from self-worship, to worship the God who made you.

And that is what life is for. And only the gospel has that power. But they are denying its power because they are using the gospel as a means of worshipping themselves.

So they've denied its power. It's all a bit overwhelming, isn't it, I think. You know, maybe you think, oh, Paul, he just, maybe he's just a bit dramatic here. But let me try and prove to you that he's not.

[17 : 35] Take a guy called Diotrefes. You've maybe not heard of him. You'll be forgiven for that. But 3 John in the Bible is all about him. He was an elder in a church, but turns out he was in it for himself.

We are told in 3 John he loved to be first. That's how he got described. Diotrefes loved to be first. And so he didn't welcome others in the church. In fact, he used his influence and his control and his status all for himself.

He threw people out of the church rather than have people there who would challenge him. He gets a New Testament letter written against him. What a claim to fame. What about Giovanni de Lorenzo de Medici, the cardinal of the church, age 13, because of the power of his family?

Age 37, in 1513, he became Pope Leo X. He loved art and luxury so much he is supposed to have said, since God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it.

And he extorted money from the poor to pay for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, telling the poor that as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.

[18 : 42] Martin Luther wrote his 95 thesis against him and sparked the Protestant Reformation. And countless others have followed, haven't they? Some are small-time operators. Some are big-time.

Some just ruin their small group at church. Some ruin their marriage. Some ruin the eldership of the church. Some ruin the whole church. Some ruin whole denominations. Some are famous.

They use ministry to get rich, to gain influence, and to build a brand. They twist the truth. They try to guarantee ends that they can never promise. People like Benny Hinn, or Mark Griscoll, or David Oyedepo, or Joseph Prince, or Joel Osteen.

Some of them you'll never have heard of, often in small churches where church is no longer a place to lay down their ambition and their pride, but to fuel it and to facilitate a lifestyle they wouldn't otherwise have been able to have.

And our big danger is that that happens and you're unaware of it. We're naive. And either we unwittingly get sucked in and fall in line with them, or we despairingly give up.

[19 : 46] Now, there is more to say on it, and we're going to come back to it at the end. But let's notice the second instruction before we do. It's there at the end of verse 5. Have nothing to do with such people. We're going to use the word avoid. Avoid. Now, we'll deal with this more quickly.

There's not a long list of offenses here. Instead, this is Paul's weapon for Timothy in the context of these terrible times of false teaching. And his recommendation, his advice, or his instruction, really, is avoid.

Not just as in swerve or ignore, but rather actively and proactively avoid them. Have nothing to do with these people. Don't share a platform with them. Don't invite them to speak in your church.

Don't align yourself with them. Don't listen to them. Boot them out. Don't appoint them as leaders. Remove them from positions of influence. And to cement his instruction of avoid, Paul goes into detail with Timothy about their method.

This is their method, says Paul. Look down at verse 6. They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires.

[20 : 49] We've arrived there. These false teachers prey on gullible women. Not because all women are gullible. That's not Paul's point here.

Paul actually has women teaching theology in his mission team, right? Paul is pro-women. He's not anti-women. Paul's target here is not the women, but the false teachers.

Saying that they are deliberately targeting people who don't know, who are already compromised in sin, who are already weighed down by evil desires. People interested in the latest desires, but no concern for the truth.

They are their target audience. This is like that sort of comment that we make. This is like taking candy from a child, right? It's easy to do it. The person who does that, they are abusing the vulnerability of the child.

It's like an online scam where they try and phone the weak and the vulnerable, and they select them. Or a drug dealer who is selling to an addict, knowing that that person will pay anything to get the latest hit.

[21 : 54] The vulnerable who, in a sense, are sort of asking for it. And that's what's going on here. Here, these false teachers in the church make their way to the people who they think are most likely who are already compromised.

Or already weak. And of course, that's still how it works today, isn't it? I think that the obscenity of the prosperity gospel preacher is not just how much money they make, but it's that they take it from the poorest and the most vulnerable, isn't it?

Targeting their promises of, you know, abundant life, fulfillment, everything you could ever want. Targeting those promises to people who are desperate, who will listen because they are lonely, they're unemployed, they're homeless, they're desperate, whatever it is.

Promising them the worldly treasure that they long for so much and they have no right to promise to them. They're like Jean and Jambra in verse 8, who are probably the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses by copying the plagues with their magic arts.

These false teachers oppose Paul and Timothy. But like Jean and Jambra's were found out eventually, so will these men be, who according to verse 9, their true colors will show themselves eventually.

[23 : 17] This is fascinating, isn't it? Do you see what's happening here? The false teachers are, if you like, they're building a false world. So the world of the false teachers has them at the center.

And you know that's not the real world, right? Because the real world has God at the center, not the false teacher. And so what happens over time is that that world crumbles because it's unreal. And so it's really important that Timothy's not ignorant of the false teacher, but also he's not to be over-invested in it or in trying to sort it out himself, because it will sort itself out eventually, because that world is a false world.

Time will demonstrate the folly of these people, because the world has, well, their fake world doesn't exist, and reality has a habit of biting. And so in time, people will see through these people.

You know, Jean and Jean, their snakes got eaten by Aaron's snakes. People were able to see. So here's what's going on then. God has allowed false teaching and false teachers in the church.

He has allowed people in the church to be lovers of pleasure and not lovers of him. And you and I need to be aware of that, not naive, not willing to follow anyone who comes and says, hey, follow this way. We also need to understand, don't we, that God has set limits for that false teaching.

[24 : 33] It will only go so far before it unravels. I wonder, as we finish, if you could think with me, just why? Right? Why might that be the case? Why would the Lord not make the last days easy?

Look down at chapter 3, verse 1. Why does chapter 3, verse 1 not say this, but mark this, Timothy? There will be awesome blessing in the last days. Why does it not say that? That's what people tell you, right?

That's what Christian organizations put on their social media accounts in order to generate enthusiasm. Awesome blessings are coming. But Paul doesn't seem to think we need warning about blessing.

He seems to think we need warning about a surprising dynamic of false teaching in the church. Why? Well, at one level, we need to say we don't know why God has allowed it to be this way, why God in his wisdom has organized it like that.

He doesn't owe us an explanation. But I think this is to borrow from next week's passage, really. The reality is that the darkness of this false teaching in the church makes the light of gospel preaching even more clear.

[25 : 40] Look down at verse 10. You, however, know all about my teaching, says Paul, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecution, sufferings.

What kind of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, the persecutions I endured, yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Here's the point. This is how we know the truth in the dark world, because the light of the truth is the opposite of the darkness of false teaching.

Yet Paul is calling Timothy to genuine light-giving ministry. Of course, he's calling him away from these temptations for self-worship and self-love and idolatry. But he is calling him to a genuine ministry that lays itself down, that, like Paul, knows about suffering, that endures.

So that in a world of self-interested charlatans, Christians should look out for pastors with private jets and smooth suits and bright lights. They should be warned about them.

[26 : 52] And in the darkness of those things, you should look out for a pastor who has tears in his eyes, who's weeping over his weakness and his brokenness, and the brokenness and the weakness in your life, who walks with a limp from the suffering of ministry, who's wounded for standing up for the truth, willing to suffer for your good, not wanting to make you suffer for their good.

Let me try and illustrate how this works. My understanding is that the gas that would come out of the gas pipe in your house is naturally odourless, right?

It doesn't smell. But because gas is really dangerous, it can kill you, right? It can blow up your house. It can asphyxiate you. Because of that, the gas companies add an acrid smell to it.

So if you leave your hob on, you know within a few seconds, because the room smells, doesn't it? Smells like rotten eggs. You know, when I was a student at university, we had one of those eye-level grills.

You know those eye-level grills on a gas cooker? And my friend, who was a little absent-minded, turned it on, and then turned around and started talking to the rest of us in the room. Lit a match, turned back, and we were all going, no!

[28 : 17] Like that, and lit it, and it, pfft! Had no eyebrows for a few months, right? They add that smell so that you don't do that, so that you know.

And if you like, that's what's happening in 2 Timothy chapter 3. Paul is warning Timothy by adding an acrid smell to the false teaching.

What is the smell of the false teacher? Self-worship. That's it. Self-love. Money. Love.

Pride. And Paul is saying, when you smell that, when you begin to smell this person is in it for themselves, this person is really rich and is making everyone else really poor, promising them stuff that you have no right to promise.

When you smell that, turn the telly off. Close YouTube. Block the Instagram account. Leave the church. Because the fresh air is about God and his glory, not the glory of the preacher.

[29 : 18] You see, let's end with this. Look back at that list. Notice that the Son of God, the one who left the glories of heaven for the filth of a Roman cross, to give his life in our place, to face our punishment, to save us from our sin.

Notice that he is the opposite of all of those things. Yeah? He gave himself out of love for others and did not save himself out of self-love.

He wasn't a lover of money or a lover of luxury. He left the glories of heaven for a stable. He left the adulation of the angels for the jives of a cross.

He's not boastful or proud. He's meek and gentle. He's not slanderous or abusive. He himself is slandered and abused. He's not unholy.

He is holiness himself. He's not rash and impulsive, but wise, fulfilling the eternal plan of the Father. He is a lover of God, his Father, even in the absence of pleasure, not with a hollow form of godliness that has no power, but full of the Spirit and full of power, the only one able to liberate us from this tyranny of sin.

[30 : 40] You know, he stands out from the rotten egg smell of the world, light in the darkness, as through his suffering you and I might receive life. That in a world of liars and charlatans who prey on the weak and the vulnerable, when we are tempted to go there ourselves, Jesus is our only hope.

He alone is the one with the power to rescue and to liberate. So mark this. It's going to be difficult. There are going to be terrible times ahead. Avoid the fakery and cling to Jesus, who has the power to liberate and bring us home.

Let me pray as we close. O loving Heavenly Father, please forgive us for the naivety about the temptations that we face in our own lives.

Forgive us, we pray, for a naivety which is listened to those who shouldn't even be listened to. Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for his power in the gospel to liberate us from sin, not just our own, but the sin and evil in this world to bring us home to be with him.

We thank you that Christ alone is our hope in life and death. We trust in him and we ask, please, Lord, keep us, watch over us in his name.

[32 : 15] Amen. Amen. Amen.