



God is the Master Tuner who can bring our discordant hearts into harmony with his. God does this by his Spirit through his Word. God knows us better than we know ourselves, and he can help, whether our hearts need a fine tuning or a major adjustment. The hearts of those outside of Christ need more than a tuning. They require a transplant. Yet God can supply a new heart! The Gospel is good news for everyone! That's why we gather each Lord's Day – because "streams of mercy never ceasing call for songs of loudest praise."

We must remember that throughout today's sermon because the text is mostly negative. I introduced last week's sermon as an "encouraging topic." The title of the sermon was *How To Be Greatly Used by God*. Well, the title of today's sermon isn't so encouraging.

***DIFFICULT DAYS,
DARK-HEARTED PEOPLE***
2 Timothy 3:1-9

Beginning in verse one, the Holy Spirit says through the words of the apostle Paul,

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. ⁶ For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. ⁸ Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. ⁹ But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

- 2 Timothy 3:1-9

This past Thursday, June 6, was the 80th anniversary of D-Day, which marked a turning point against Nazi Germany during World War II. Thousands of soldiers gave their lives that day to help ensure a better future for all of us.

What got us into the war was the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. What appeared to be another beautiful day in paradise quickly turned into a hellish nightmare that claimed the lives of 2,403 Americans. Japanese Admiral Yamamoto, who planned the attack, reportedly wrote in his diary, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve." He was right. Sixteen million fighting Americans joined the Allied Forces, who fought courageously in every corner of the globe to deliver the world from tyranny.

When things seem to be going well, we tend to let down our guard. We become less alert and more vulnerable to the enemy's attack. But a "clear and present danger" jolts us into awareness and galvanizes us to take action.

That is the intended effect of 2 Timothy 3:1-9. Paul means to stir Timothy and the church to action by alerting them to a "clear and present danger." The action to which Paul calls them is not to attack certain people but to *avoid* them. In fact, the command "avoid such people" appears in the middle of the paragraph and is the central emphasis. You can see this by how the paragraph is structured as a chiasm.

- ⇒ A chiasm is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order, creating a "mirror" effect as the ideas are "reflected" back in a passage.
- ⇒ Often, a chiasm includes another idea in the middle of the sequence, for the sake of emphasis, before the preceding ideas are presented again in reverse order.¹

The chiastic structure of 2 Timothy 3:1-9 is shown in the format of the sermon outline:

The Prediction (v. 1)
The Problem (vv. 2-5a)
The Prescription (v. 5b)
The Perpetrators (vv. 6-8)
The Prediction (v. 9)

You can see the parallelism between the first two points and the last two, with the central point being the prescription in verse 5: "avoid such people." Everything in this text leads up to and flows from one primary command:

***Avoid church people who are
consumed with love of self.***

You may wonder how this command jives with the middle clause our church's motto, "Enjoy God's People." Well, this text shows that people who are "lovers of self" do not *enjoy* God's people. In fact, they would *destroy* God's people if it weren't for God's preserving grace. The Holy Spirit through Scripture helps us to *mark* and *avoid* such people.

The Prediction (v. 1)

"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty" (2 Tim. 3:1). The verb "understand" is a present imperative, which indicates an ongoing awareness of what's happening.

Paul says that "times of difficulties" will come "in the last days." Paul isn't talking about some point in the future prior to the Lord's return, though there will definitely be times of

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/chiasm-chiastic.html>.

difficulties then. Rather, Paul is alerting Timothy to present-day difficulties. Otherwise, why would Paul tell Timothy to “avoid such people” if such people don’t exist yet? Furthermore, the New Testament teaches that “the last days” began with the earthly ministry of Jesus and the apostles. The author of Hebrews begins his exhortation to the church by saying, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in *these last days* he has spoken to us by his Son...” (Heb. 1:1-2a, italics added). Just weeks after Jesus ascended back to heaven, the Holy Spirit came upon God’s people at Pentecost. Peter got up to preach and told the crowd, “What you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel: ‘In *the last days*,’ God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people’” (Acts 2:16-17a).

Friends, we’re in the last days now! God calls us to wake up to the realities of living in a fallen world as we wait for the return of Jesus Christ. Until then there will be “times of difficulty” (2 Tim. 3:1). The Greek word for “difficulty” (*chalepoi*) can also be translated perilous or even violent. The only other occurrence of this word in the NT is in Matthew 8:28, where Jesus encountered two demon-possessed men. The text says, “They ... were so *violent* that no one could go through that area” (NLT). The famous Greek writer Plutarch used the term *chalepoi* to describe an ugly, infectious wound. Paul has already said that false teaching spreads like gangrene? In his previous letter to Timothy, Paul wrote in chapter 4, verse 1, “Now the Holy Spirit tells us clearly that in the last times some will turn away from the true faith; they will follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons” (NLT). The Spirit’s prediction is reiterated by Paul here in 2 Timothy 3:1. Paul is alerting the church to a “clear and present danger”!

The Problem (vv. 2-5a)

For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

- 2 Timothy 3:2-5a

Paul tells us right away in verse 2 why difficult times will come. Because of “people.” People are the problem! Not just people in general, but people who are “lovers of self.” Not just people in general who are “lovers of self” but people in the *church* who are lovers of self.

Remember the context. In the previous verses Paul compares the visible church to “a great house” with two kinds of vessels – those for honorable use, i.e., genuine believers who rightly handle God’s word and run from sin toward godliness, and vessels for dishonorable use, i.e., those who claim to be Christians but who have swerved from the truth and lead people into more and more ungodliness.

Paul is describing those dishonorable vessels in further detail here. Paul uses eighteen traits to describe such people. Their first and primary trait is that they are “lovers of self.” That’s the core corruption. That’s the sewer from which every other vile sin flows.

This misdirected love of self (narcissism), spawns additional misdirected loves, such as the love of money (materialism) and the love of pleasure (hedonism). Paul also notes in this descriptive list that “lovers of self” do not love good, nor do they love God. Do you see that? Paul doesn’t say that they are lovers of pleasure *more* than they are lovers of God but that they are “lovers of pleasure *rather* than lovers of God” (v. 4, italics mine).

- You cannot be a lover of *self* and a lover of God. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).
- You cannot be a lover of *money* and a lover of God. “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24 NIV).
- You cannot be a lover of *pleasure* and a lover of God. The author of Hebrews reminds us that Moses “chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:25 NIV).

Jesus reaffirmed in the New Testament what the Old Testament had already taught: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:37-39). John MacArthur notes,

the most frightening development within the contemporary church is the wide acceptance and enthusiastic proclamation of self-love, not only as being allowable but as being the basic virtue. ...

It is widely claimed that a person cannot love God and other people rightly unless and until he loves himself rightly, completely reversing what both the Old and New Testaments teach. ... Instead of taking the words “as yourself” as an assumption of self-love that is natural to sinful man, many interpreters not only take these words as a command but as the *first and greatest command!*²

The sinful manifestations of self-love are many. We’ve already pointed out that “lovers of self” are also “lovers of money ... lovers of pleasure,” not lovers of good, and not lovers of God. Let’s consider some of the other traits listed here in 2 Timothy 3:2-5:

- Lovers of self are “**proud.**” They’re braggarts. They claim a greatness they don’t possess. They exaggerate their abilities, their accomplishments, their reputation, and their importance. “They are always the heroes of their own stories.”³
- Lovers of self are “**arrogant.**” The Greek word literally means “to place above.” Hence the idea of superiority. A lover of self puts himself above other people – like the religious leaders mentioned by Jesus “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). In verse 4 Paul says that “lovers of self” are “**swollen with conceit.**” This phrase comes from the Greek term for “smoke.” Figuratively, it means to have a cloudy mindset.

² John MacArthur, Jr., *2 Timothy*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 108-109.

³ *Ibid.*, 112.

Those who love themselves can't see clearly. They have no real perception of themselves, God, or others. This impacts how they relate to God and others.

- “Lovers of self” are “**abusive.**” The Greek term is blasphemós, from which we get the word “blasphemy,” which is to speak falsely about God and/or others. “Lovers of self” abuse others verbally by slandering them. In verse 3 Paul says that “lovers of self” are “**slandorous, without self-control.**” The term for “slandorous” is *diabolos*, from which we get the word “diabolical.” It means “accuser” and is used 34 times in the New Testament as a title for Satan. “Lovers of self” are tools of Satan because they don't control their tongues, which are “set on fire by hell” (James 3:6).
- “Lovers of self” are “**disobedient to parents.**” They despise authority. This shows how sin is part of our very nature and that children, too, are sinners who stand in need of God's redeeming, transformative grace.
- “Lovers of self” are “**ungrateful.**” Because they think they deserve all the good things they get in life, they don't thank God or anyone else for them. They despise the very idea of grace – goodness that is undeserved. That is at the very heart of the gospel (Romans 3:24-25; Titus 3:5; Eph. 2:8-9).
- “Lovers of self” are “**unholy.**” Instead of running from sin toward godliness, they live to gratify their own sinful passions and desires.
- “Lovers of self” are “**heartless**” and “**unappeasable.**” They're so consumed with self that they even lack proper, natural affection for family and friends. When offended, they refuse to forgive and are downright ruthless. Paul goes so far as to say they're “**brutal**” – a word that speaks of savagery, like that of wild animals, whose nature is to attack their prey and tear them in pieces. Paul says they're “**treacherous, reckless.**” They'll betray family members and friends, stopping at nothing to get what they want. They don't consider the how others are affected because they're completely consumed with self.

All the while “having the appearance of godliness” (v. 5a). This reminds me of what Shakespeare's Hamlet wrote down in his notebook: “That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.”⁴ In one of his sermons, Jesus called the religious leaders of his day “hypocrites,” “fools,” “blind,” and a “brood of snakes” (Matt. 23), but his most frequent term for them was “hypocrites” (7x). He said, “on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness” (Matt. 23:28 NIV).

The Pharisees and scribes had all the religious garb, all the religious lingo. They could quote Scripture and sound super spiritual. They “[had] the appearance of godliness but den[ied] its power” (2 Tim. 3:5a). Why? Because they rejected Jesus! Like many people today, they practiced *churchianity*, not *Christianity*. Apart from Christ and the gospel, people are practicing dead religion. Tony Merida writes, “No Christ, no power. People can go to church their whole life, have their office in a church, even move their bedroom into the church; but if they do not have Christ, they do not possess spiritual life.”⁵

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 105-110.

⁵ Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, edited by David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 187.

By the time I was done going through this list in my own personal study, I felt like I had been in a sewer, breathing in its noxious fumes. My stomach felt queasy and my eyes welled up with tears thinking of how awful it would be if our church were like this. I think that's exactly how the Holy Spirit wants us to feel, sickened by the very thought of it.

How do we protect ourselves and our church from such poison? How do we inoculate ourselves from such spiritual infection? What's the prescription?

The Prescription (v. 5b)

The prescription is simple: "Avoid such people." The verb appears in the middle voice, which means the subject of verb is acting on itself for its own benefit. So this command could be translated, "*Turn yourself away* from such people." No matter how charismatic, appealing, knowledgeable, winsome, and "nice" they may seem on the surface, steer clear of people who contradict the truth of Scripture by what they teach and/or by how they live. In fact, there are three basic guidelines for judging whether a Christian is the real deal or a spiritual fraud: his creed, his character, his converts.⁶

His creed: What exactly does he teach? As is the case with counterfeit money, you don't have to understand every detail of what is false. You just have to know enough to see that it's not the genuine article, that it doesn't line up with the truth of Scripture. As one pastor put it, "Whether a counterfeit is a well-done fraud or a shoddy fake, it's equally worthless."⁷ So, avoid counterfeiters.

His character: Beware of people who don't practice what they preach. Of course, nobody is perfect, but genuine Christians make it their aim to please God. They are truly sorry when they sin. They long to be more like Christ. Genuine faith is always accompanied by good works. Whereas "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17 NIV).

His converts: What are his followers like? The apostle Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Now, even Jesus had a Judas, and Paul had a Demas. But these are the exceptions. They were not true followers. But Jesus' true disciples and Paul's closest companions (Timothy, Titus, Luke, Onesiphorus, and others) loved the Lord and lived accordingly. But lovers of self will produce their own kind.

"Turn yourself away from such people." Avoid them. That's how you protect yourself and the church from their noxious influence.

The Perpetrators (vv. 6-8)

In verses 6-8, Paul reinforces why it's so important to "avoid such people" (v. 5b):

⁶ Adapted from MacArthur, 118-119.

⁷ Ibid., 118.

For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions,⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.⁸ Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.

- 2 Timothy 3:6-8

Here Paul describes a subset of the larger group described in verses 2-5. Some “lovers of self” are like snakes who slither into households⁸ and prey on weak women, just as the serpent seduced Eve in Eden. Paul is not suggesting that all women are weak but rather those who are “weighed down with sins.” This indicates that “they are weak in truth and weak in virtue, and they feel the heavy weight of their sin and the guilt it brings.”⁹ Because they’re not grounded in the truth, they’re vulnerable targets for the enemy.

In verse 8, Paul compares these false teachers to Pharaoh’s magicians who opposed Moses.¹⁰ The Lord had told Moses that when Pharaoh demanded a miracle to prove that Moses was from God, Moses was to throw down his brother Aaron’s staff in front of Pharaoh and it would become a snake. That’s exactly what happened. But then Pharaoh’s magicians did the same thing. In the same way, false teachers may seem legit because they use the same language of the gospel, but with different meanings.¹¹ Their doctrine is defective, and they are “disqualified regarding the faith” (v. 8).

The word “disqualified” (*adokimos*) can also be translated as “rejected.” This term was used for metals that didn’t pass the test of purity and were discarded. The word was also used of counterfeits of various sorts, and that’s what Paul is talking about here. He’s talking about people in the church who claim to be Christians but aren’t.

Paul uses this same word for “disqualified,” *adokimos*, in 2 Corinthians 13:5, where he says, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test [*adokimos*]!”

In a few moments, we will be partaking of the Lord’s Supper. When giving instructions regarding this ordinance, Paul says, “Let a person examine himself” (1 Cor. 11:28). We need to examine ourselves first, to see whether we’re in the faith, whether we’re truly trusting in Christ alone for salvation, believing that he died for our sins and rose again so that we could be forgiven, reconciled to God, and receive the gift of eternal life.

Once we’ve examined ourselves as to whether we’ve truly trusted Christ, then we should examine ourselves to make sure that we’re walking in fellowship with Christ, confessing any known sins and walking in the light as he is in the light. That’s how we enjoy genuine fellowship with God and one another. But “lovers of self” never know such fellowship, because they’re outsiders who only pretend to be insiders.

⁸ Literally, “*the* households.” Paul may be referring to homes where the church met.

⁹ MacArthur, 119.

¹⁰ Their names do not appear in Exodus or anywhere else in Scripture, but they do appear in the Jewish Targums (the translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic).

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1-2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*. Preaching the Word, edited by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 246.

And while genuine believers, the true church, must always understand that there will be spiritual fakes in the visible church, we need not feel afraid or unsettled as God's people.

Why? Because of the prediction that Paul makes in the final verse of this section.

The Prediction (v. 9)

“But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men” (2 Timothy 3:9). What two men? Jannes and Jambres, the two sorcerers who opposed Moses. They worked their magic, but they were no match for Moses' God. That's why Aaron's staff ate up their staffs.

Moses' God is our God. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-4). He will build his church, and all the powers of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

Conclusion

This past week I've been reading Kevin DeYoung's book on *The Lord's Prayer*. In ch. 3, Kevin refers to Andrew Roberts' biography on Winston Churchill. Here's what Roberts says about the commitments Churchill embraced as a young man in his early twenties:

[Churchill] took the firm and irrevocable decision to dedicate his life to the defense of the British Empire against all its enemies, at home and abroad. Time and again throughout his political career, he would put his allegiance to his ideal of the Empire before his own best interests.¹²

DeYoung then draws a line of application to our own lives, saying,

If Winston Churchill, and so many other men and women like him of that age, could make that sort of commitment to the British Empire with all its evils and imperfections, how much more should we as Christians be committed to a vastly more gracious, more significant, and more eternal kingdom? What if it was said about you long after you were dead and gone that you took the firm and irrevocable decision to dedicate your life to the proclamation of the kingdom of God and its advancement against all its enemies, at home and abroad, and that time and again, you put your allegiance to God and his will above your own best interests? And ultimately, of course, the two don't diverge. Your best interests – my best interests – are in God's kingdom. Seek first that kingdom, and all these things will be added unto you (see Matt. 6:33).¹³

¹² Andrew Roberts: *Churchill: Walking With Destiny* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 39-40. Cited in Kevin DeYoung, *The Lord's Prayer: Learning from Jesus on What, Why, and How to Pray* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 38.

¹³ DeYoung, 38.