

## In Dark Days and Wild Times

2 Timothy 3:1-9

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on 8/28/2011

### Introduction

- ❖ I believe we're living in the last days. But what I mean may not be what you mean OR what you think someone means when he says we're living in the last days. I know talking about being in the last days conjures up a lot of images. Perhaps you're imagining a guy with a sandwich board that says "The End is Near". Or maybe a popular doomsday preacher who predicts the rapture / tribulation / judgment day / Christ's return is just around the corner.
- ❖ This past spring, everyone was looking towards May 21st. That's because Harold Camping, a self-proclaimed prophet, had predicted the rapture to occur that day. And as we're all aware, the day came and went as any other, and we woke up the next morning to May 22nd.
  - Now you would think a blown prophesy, on such a grand scale like that, would be enough to humble him. But instead, he doubled down and is now saying the rapture will take place on October 21st later this year, along with the end of the world.
- ❖ Now there is plenty wrong with his teaching, but there is one thing that Camping, and others like him, get right. And that's the idea that we are living in the last days. But here is their problem and here is where I differ: For guys like Camping, their view of the 'last days' is too narrow. They only associate it with the days right before Jesus' return.
  - So his idea of living in the last days is about you selling all your possessions and donating the proceeds to his ministry, so he can spread the message that the end is near. Of course that leaves you broke and destitute if his prediction is wrong again.
- ❖ But if you understood how the biblical authors use the phrase 'last days', you wouldn't fall for that error because you would know they were referring to the age that began with the coming of Christ and extends into our day.
  - For example, the OT prophet Joel spoke of how the Spirit of God will be poured out "*in the last days*". And then in Acts 2, Peter connects what happened at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the first disciples, with the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.
    - In other words, the 'last days' that Joel was talking about arrived with the coming of the Messiah and the inauguration of his Church.
- ❖ So while I agree with doomsday preachers that we're living in the last days, I would add that Christians have always been living in the last days. And so that has less to do with keeping an eye on the sky waiting for the clouds to break AND more to do with guarding the gospel and enduring in the faith as we live in what could be called 'dark days and wild times'.
  - If you understand this usage of the phrase, then you won't write off today's passage, thinking it only refers to future events and future people. You will recognize that it addresses our present-day context, teaching us how to live in the last days.

### Context

- ❖ But before we draw out lessons, let me first put our text in its context. If you recall, the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, a pastor in the church of Ephesus. And in the previous two chapters, he has already urged Timothy to not be ashamed of the Gospel (1:8),

to share in suffering for it (1:8), to guard it (1:14), to endure suffering for it (2:12), to avoid quarrels and irreverent babble that tries to debate it (2:14, 16), to flee youth passions to argue over it (2:22), to have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies (2:23), and to recognize that behind all false teaching lurks the devil himself (2:26).

- So now look at chapter 3:1 and notice how it begins: “*But understand this*”. Understand what? “*That in the last days there will come times of difficulty.*”

❖ That word ‘difficult’ was used in classical Greek to refer to dangerous and wild animals or to raging and wild seas. The word was used in Matthew 8:28 to describe the *fierceness* of two demon-possessed men.

- So when Paul says the last days will witness times of difficulty, he means the days we’re living in can be characterized as dangerous times, fierce times, wild times.
  - And what makes them so wild? Look in v2, “*For people...*” The difficulty is because of people. People are the problem. Paul particularly has in mind false teachers, men like Hymenaeus and Philetus, whom he already mentioned.

❖ Paul’s point to Timothy is that all the opposition to the Gospel that he’s been warning about in the previous two chapters is not a passing trend that will come and go nor is it only a future reality (during a future time of tribulation). Rather, it is a permanent characteristic of this present age.

- Because he was naturally timid, perhaps Timothy thought he could just lay low and weather the passing storm. But this is not a storm that just comes and goes. Evil people and their opposition to the truth will continue to persist, so Timothy will have to guard the Gospel and endure suffering to the end.
  - Friends, read this way, we come to realize that this text, even though it speaks of life in the last days, is totally relevant because it’s describing the present age we live in.

### Recognizing Evil People

❖ So since we’re living in the same dark days and wild times as Timothy, then just like him 1) **We should learn to recognize the chief characteristics of these evil people who oppose the truth.** If the source of trouble is certain people, then we should learn to identify them.

- So here in vv2-5, Paul is helping Timothy recognize who the opposition is coming from, specifically false teachers. Back in chapter 2, Paul identified them by the content of their teaching and how it swerves from the truth -- like teaching that the promise of a resurrection for all people had already occurred.

❖ But here in chapter 3, Paul is describing, not so much their teaching, but their character. And that is because false teaching is connected with false character. Bad doctrine and bad character are usually found in the same person. It is not because bad doctrine corrupts the soul. No, sin does that by itself.

- But bad doctrine cannot help a soul corrupted by sin. False teaching cannot reform false character because it cuts you off from any real power to change. That is why both false teaching and false character are found in the same person.
  
- ❖ Now in vv2-4, you can count 18 traits describing these false teachers and a nineteenth added in v5. And if you were to group similar traits together, you would notice a symmetric pattern (a chiasm) where the first and last items relate, the second and second to last items relate, so on and so forth, and in the middle is sometimes a key point. So let's go through vv2-4, and hopefully I can help you see the chiasm and then draw out some observations.
  
- ❖ Notice first how the first and last traits are related. “[2] *For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money ... [4] lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.*” Notice how the first and last traits encapsulate the fundamental problem with these people. They are ultimately lovers of self (money or pleasure which serve the self) rather than lovers of God.
  - The first characteristic of these people is that **a) Their love is misdirected**. Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself (Mk. 12:30-31).
    - So the priority is to love God first, love others second, and love yourself third. But these people have reversed the order. They put love for self first and love for God last. And anytime you do that, your love for others, in the middle, is going to suffer. And that is what we see played out in the rest of the list.
  
- ❖ The next set of related traits is “[2] *proud, arrogant, abusive ... [4] treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit.*” The second characteristic is that **b) Their pride is misplaced**.
  - The words ‘*proud*’ and ‘*arrogant*’ are fairly synonymous, but the word for ‘proud’ is translated elsewhere in Scripture as ‘boastful’, so the emphasis here may be on prideful speech. So instead of using their speech to boast in the Lord, their misplaced pride leads them to boast in themselves.
    - And that relates to the word ‘*abusive*’, which is used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to blasphemous speech. The connection is that those with misplaced pride tend to look down on others and speak abusively of them.
  
- ❖ Pride and arrogance will also translate into ‘*treacherous*’ and ‘*reckless*’ treatment of others. The word for ‘treacherous’ was used to describe Judas, and ‘reckless’ means to be rash, not thinking about how your actions affect others because you’re so wrapped up in yourself.
  - These people are described as ‘*swollen in conceit*’. That is an idiom for being crazy or demented. The idea is that such a person is so arrogant as to be practically demented. They’re insanely arrogant, which explains why they could care less for how they treat or speak towards others.
  
- ❖ The third characteristic of these evil people who oppose the truth is that **c) Their relationships are depraved**. What is interesting about this next set of traits is that, in the original language, they all start with the letter *alpha*.

- Now in Greek, an alpha-prefix (a-) is used to negate a word, like in the English word ‘apathy’ (a lack of feeling or passion). So all these traits describe the lack of qualities you would naturally expect in people.
  - They are “*disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless* (or unloving), *unappeasable*, [skip *slanderous*] ... *without self-control, brutal, not loving good.*”
  
- ❖ Now ‘*disobedient to their parents*’ might seem like it comes out of left field in a list of such evil and ungodly traits. But if you think about it, disobedience towards your parents is really the first indicator of a rebellious heart, which will affect all your other relationships. Perhaps that is why Paul puts it first in this group.
  
- ❖ Now rebellious people are typically ‘*ungrateful*’ people, especially for all their parents have done for them. And they are also ‘*unholy*’, which in this sense means impious or disrespectful. So Paul is describing people who lack gratitude and lack respect for others.
  - And they are also ‘*heartless*’ (or unloving). It’s the negation of a word that means ‘to cherish affectionately’, which was used for close associates or family. In other words, the natural affection one has for family, for parents, is just not there.
    - These people are also ‘*unappeasable*’, which is fitting to describe broken relationships. They’re unwilling to fix them.
  
- ❖ Now the items after the word ‘slanderous’ are more general in scope but still describe depraved relationships. These people are ‘*without self-control*’. Literally, they have no lordship over themselves. They are ‘*brutal*’ or savage in the way they treat others. And they are ‘*not loving good*’, that is, the public good. Because their love is misdirected inwards, they care not for God nor the good of others.
  - So in the last days there will be wild and difficult times, for people will be turned in upon themselves. Their love and pride will be turned towards the self, which means their relationship with the other will be a mess, starting with family.
  
- ❖ Now in the middle of this chiasm is the word ‘*slanderous*’. It stands out because it doesn’t start with an alpha-prefix like all the other words around it. The Greek is *diabolos*. Sound familiar? It’s where we get the word diabolical, which means ‘of the devil’. That’s why I have in your notes that the fourth characteristic is that **d) Their behavior is diabolical.**
  - I think Paul’s point is that evil people in the last days will be devil-like. The devil is the great accuser, who tries to slander Christians in the courtroom of God. So these opponents of the truth are acting like the devil. They’re being slanderous.
  
- ❖ Read in light of chapter 2:26, which speaks of these false teachers being captured by the devil to do his will, I think Paul is suggesting that these captives are starting to become like their captor. They’re getting Stockholm Syndrome. They’re cozying up to their captor, not realizing how much he’s pulling their strings.

- ❖ Let's keep reading into v5 where we have one last characteristic: "*having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.*" Now this is where the passage gets uncomfortable. This whole time going through vv2-4, we may have been nodding our heads, saying "Amen, Yes Lord, such evil people do exist *out there*. I've seen them. I know some of them. They're in my office/class."
  - But Paul drops a bomb in v5, basically saying, "Yes and they exist *in here* among the religious." The final characteristic of these people is **5) Their godliness is a facade.**
    - Godliness is fundamentally an attitude in life that puts God first, that makes him central. So a godly person is a God-focused, God-centered person. But the people Paul is describing only have the appearance of godliness because deep down they're actually radically self-focused, self-centered.
  
- ❖ Friends, this is most troubling. Recognizing evil and evil people is not as obvious as we might think because it is so easy to put on a veneer of religiosity but remain ungodly on the inside. It's so easy to practice religion. It's so easy to have the appearance of godliness but deny its power.
  - The power Paul is talking about is the power of the Gospel to change you from the inside out, the power to break our bondage to sin and self-centeredness, the power to produce true godliness and God-centeredness.
  
- ❖ I realize that, contextually, Paul is describing the false teachers of his day (in the last days), but from a broader perspective, because we're still in those days, he could be describing any one of us. So look at this text like you would a mirror. *Do you see yourself in it?*
  - Have you taken God's greatest commandment and turned it on its head? Have you placed love for self first in your heart and love for God last? Do you have the appearance of godliness but under the surface lies a godless self-centeredness? Perhaps you have yet to experience the power of the Gospel. Perhaps you are being described by Paul.
  
- ❖ Remember, bad character goes hand in hand with bad doctrine. So just as these traits of false teachers were the result of their false teaching, perhaps the condition of your heart is the result of bad teaching that you've embraced.
  - I'm going to go out on a limb to suggest that maybe some of you have only been taught religion and not Gospel. You were taught that if you love God, you will do certain things to please him. You'll go to church, you'll read the bible, you'll do a quiet time, you'll follow the ten commandments, etc.
    - And when you do these things, you feel good about you AND you feel that God feels good about you. And when you don't do them, you feel bad about you AND you feel that God feels bad about you. And since you like feeling good about you, you do your best to keep doing them.

- ❖ But that's just religion. That's just the appearance of godliness. That's actually works-based godliness, which only serves to feed our self-centeredness.
  - Friends, the only solution to self-centeredness is the Gospel. The only way to reverse a heart that has been turned in upon itself is to remove it altogether and replace it with a new heart through a new birth. That is what we're promised in the Gospel, that those who receive Jesus will receive hearts of flesh to replace their hearts of stone.
    - And now with a heart that has been reoriented towards God, I still strive to do the things that please him, but now I do them -- not because they make me feel good about me -- but because I have a new heart that desires the things that please God because they bring God the greatest glory.
      - That's Christianity. That has power to produce true godliness. Not just an appearance, not just a veneer. The real thing.
- ❖ Friends, I realize it's far more comfortable to just talk about the people Paul was originally describing. But since we are still in the same last days, he could very well be talking about us. So I hope these verses have you thinking, wondering about who this list describes and whether or not it could actually be you.

### Avoiding Such Evil People

- ❖ Now, according to our text, once we've learned to recognize evil persons who oppose the truth, there is one primary response. **2) We are to avoid them.** Let's read the end of v5 to 7.
  - *“Avoid such people. <sup>6</sup> For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, <sup>7</sup> always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.*
- ❖ Avoid such people. It's a radical step but it's necessary. It won't do to simply chat with them hoping to come to an understanding, to a middle ground. No, these guys are dangerous to the life of the church and Paul explains how in vv6-7.
  - It appears they were concentrating their deception on women in their homes when they were alone without their husbands. Much like how the serpent sought out Eve when she was alone without her husband. Like I said, their behavior is diabolical.
- ❖ Now Paul describes their target as “weak women”. Literally, ‘little women’, which is a pejorative term meaning foolish or childish women. We can see their weakness came in two forms. One, they were morally weak, *“burdened with sins and led astray by various passions”*. So these teachers were manipulating their feelings of guilt to their advantage.
  - Second, they were intellectually weak. These women were immature in their faith, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14). *“Always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.”* They never come to understand and trust in the Gospel because that's not what they're being taught.
    - So these false teachers, by their false teaching, were preventing these women from experiencing the freedom from sin that Jesus brings and the settled assurance we find in the Gospel.

- ❖ For this reason, Timothy is to have no association with these people. Now this, of course, should not be interpreted to mean Timothy is to avoid all evil people in this world since then he would have to go out of the world (1 Cor. 5:10). Besides, Jesus himself was described as a “*friend of sinners and tax-collectors*”. So Paul does *not* mean we are never to engage people we disagree with in discussion.
  - This command to “avoid such people” must be understood in the context of a church that is being infiltrated by false teachers who are leading people astray. And this command was given to their pastor who is charged with guarding the gospel and protecting his sheep.
    - In such circumstances, you don’t entertain these people. You don’t engage them in dialogue. You don’t allow them to get a foothold of influence in the church. You avoid them.
  
- ❖ I realize that evangelical Christians are often criticized for being too exclusive, for only sharing fellowship with those like us. Now if a congregation were to exclude people for not looking like us, dressing like us, talking like us, etc. Then shame on us.
  
- ❖ But if you were to refrain from extending the hand of Christian fellowship to a person who says he loves Jesus and loves the Bible and yet denies the Trinity -- like a Jehovah’s Witness -- you would be in line with Paul’s command in v5. That person doesn’t share the same Gospel, even though he shares the appearance of godliness.
  - I’m sure he would make a wonderful neighbor and a great friend. But we must not stand side by side and give the impression that we share the same faith. That’s because if anyone were to sit under his teaching, though they learn and learn, they won’t arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Because they’re not being taught the truth.
  
- ❖ Harold Camping would be another good example. It was appropriate for Christians and Christian groups to distance themselves from Camping and his teaching, as most did. Besides trying to predict the rapture, he propagates a number of false teachings, chief among them is the belief that all churches have become apostate and only his disciples will be raptured.
  - He’s the kind of teacher and that’s the kind of teaching a pastor would want his people to avoid. It doesn’t mean you should not reach out to him or one of his followers if God ever gave you the chance. It means you avoid getting into quarrels about words with them. You don’t invite them into your small group to discuss and debate these things. That does no good but only ruins the hearers (2:14). In that sense, you should just avoid them.

### **Not Losing Sleep Over Them**

- ❖ So at this point, having been told that times of difficulty with such difficult people will persist throughout the last days, and having been reminded of the inroads that certain false teachers were making, especially among certain women in the church, Timothy might be feeling pretty discouraged. These appear to be really dark days, really wild times.

- But in vv8-9, Paul shines a glimmer of hope into this dark situation. He is fully aware of the situation, but nevertheless he basically says **3) To not lose any sleep over their opposition.** On one hand, they should concern us. But on the other hand, we don't have to worry because we know God's truth will always be vindicated.
  
- ❖ Read vv8-9 again. *"<sup>8</sup> Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. <sup>9</sup> But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men."*
  - According to Jewish tradition, these were the names of the two chief magicians in Pharaoh's court during the days of Moses. If you recall, when Moses first confronted Pharaoh and asked him to let God's people go. He validated his message from the Lord with signs, and initially Jannes and Jambres were able to match Moses, miracle for miracle, using their magic arts.
    - But eventually the two men were unable to repeat all the miracles God performed through Moses, and they were exposed as frauds. They had the appearance of godliness but in the end they knew not the power of God.
  
- ❖ Paul is drawing a parallel between these men who opposed Moses (ultimately Moses' message) to the men who opposed the truth (the Gospel message) in Paul's day. Yes, they appear to be gaining influence. Yes, their teaching is spreading like gangrene and threatens to eat away at the life of the church. Yes, they themselves may go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.
  
- ❖ But no, don't lose any sleep over them. They will not succeed in destroying God's church, his firm foundation. They will not get very far in their efforts. Why? For their folly will be exposed. Just as Jannes and Jambres lacked any real power, so these false teachers have no power to produce true godliness in their own lives or the lives of their followers.
  
- ❖ Friends, we certainly are living in dark days and wild times, and I think we can sometimes get worried about the false teaching and false teachers that are seemingly abound.
  - But we have to remember that we serve a sovereign God whose truth will always win. Errors may spread and be popular for a time but they won't get very far. In the end, false teaching will be exposed for what it is and God's truth will be vindicated
  
- ❖ But even though we have this hope and assurance, our particular calling is to guard the good deposit entrusted to us. Our responsibility is to follow the pattern of sound words we were taught and to pass it on to faithful others who can teach others.
  - And our job is to learn how to identify opponents of the truth by the content of their teaching and the conduct of their lives. May we carry out these tasks for his glory and the good of his Church.



