

2 Timothy 3

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In our daily existence, there are a lot of things we do just the same as the people of the world around us. We get up in the morning, we go to work, we come home, we watch TV or poke around on the Internet, we go to bed. We have houses, cars, and families just like they do. The list of similarities is nearly endless. These similarities are so pervasive, in fact, that they can easily lead us to forget the differences. We may lead a round of daily life that is similar to the people of the world, but we serve a different master than they do, and we are headed to a different destination.

Focusing on these core differences, instead of the surface similarities, is one of the greatest challenges we face as Christians. Most disciples who leave the Lord aren't yanked back into the world by a single event. Instead, they drift back into the world almost imperceptibly, as a thousand tiny events lead to spiritual disaster. Those Christians fade away because they have lost their focus. They have forgotten that they were supposed to be different, so they became the same.

As with every other spiritual problem, this is not a new one. Our brethren in the first century were exposed to the same temptation to conform, to live just like the evil people around them, to subvert Christianity itself so that its power vanished and its form became a tool of the devil. Many of them fell to the same temptation.

We know this because the apostle Paul warned them that it would happen. In the third chapter of 2 Timothy, he tackles exactly this problem. There's no doubt that being different from the world leads to problems for us today. Our worldly friends and neighbors don't like it when we're different from them. However, those problems were worse for Timothy and his contemporaries. Their distinctiveness led to persecution. Nonetheless, Paul warned him, it was his responsibility to avoid apostasy, to stay true to God and to His word. Let's see how this works in 2 Timothy 3.

The Godless and Their Effects

Paul begins the chapter with a discussion of **THE GODLESS** and what they will soon be like. This discussion appears in 2 Timothy 3:1-5. This is one of those laundry lists of evil in the Bible that makes us cringe, and it makes us cringe even harder when we realize just how applicable it is to our own time. Are love of self and love of money predominant characteristics of modern America? Absolutely! We are both a selfish nation and a greedy one. How about boasting, proud, and blasphemous? Humility isn't exactly part of our national character, and if I had a penny for every time I've heard someone use God's name as a cuss word, I'd be rich. Disobedient to parents? Teen rebellion is practically a rite of passage in our culture today. Unthankful? Never was a nation so rich in material goods and so poor in gratitude to God. Unholy, unloving, unforgiving? These things are in evidence everywhere around us. How about slanderers? There are millions in this country who would hear me preach against homosexuality from Scripture and accuse me of committing a hate crime. Without self-control? We live in the age of "if it feels good, do it". We could continue on through this list, but its punch line comes when Paul says that these people will be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. Which is it, friends? Which is more obvious in our country? That people love God and obey His will, or that they love pleasure and do their own will? According to the Holy Spirit, then, we live in perilous times.

If we don't grasp that, if we fail to recognize the danger that our wicked time puts us in, it's likely that we too will be drawn into that same wicked behavior. In this regard, particularly, we need to consider Paul's warning against those who have a form of godliness but forsake its power. We know what the power of God to salvation is—it's the gospel. There are all kinds of churches out there that are nominally Christian. They hold to a form of godliness. However, in their practice, they have left the word of God far behind. They listen to His will when they please, and they ignore it when they please. They might look like they're doing sort of the same thing on Sunday morning, but their focus is fundamentally different. When we encounter people like these, whether religious or not, who aren't truly interested in serving God, Paul's warning is plain. We have to turn away from them. Obviously, we can't go out of the world. That would be hiding our lights under a bushel. However, we have to recognize that when we interact with the world, it interacts with us. It changes us. It distorts our thinking. As a result, we must preserve not just our physical distance from it but our philosophical distance from it, which we can only do by renewing our relationship with God.

We can't consider the godless, though, without also considering **THEIR EFFECTS** even in the church. Paul outlines these in 2 Timothy 3:6-9. Here, Paul is addressing the religious variety of evil men, and he describes a pattern that is all too evident in our society today. There are plenty of false teachers who use godliness not just to get money, but to get women too. How many TV preachers have we seen through the years get brought down by extramarital affairs? How many more are committing immorality right now, but just haven't been caught yet? For that matter, let's be broad-minded in our definition of sexual sin. I remember reading a year or two ago about a megachurch pastor in Colorado who was blackmailed by the homosexual prostitute he was having an affair with. Men like that might preach a twisted version of the gospel that serves their own ends, but they will never save so much as a single soul.

Their gospel, in fact, has two main effects. First of all, they oppose the truth. They teach a very soothing, reassuring religion that tells people that they're fine just the way they are, and that they don't need to obey the gospel and live a righteous life to be saved. Then, when we come in and try to teach people like that, we have to clear away all the false doctrine before we can present what is sound. Sometimes, that task is impossible, and we have the false teachers to thank for the problem. Second, as the verse says, the folly of these evil men will become evident to all. Sooner or later, their sin will find them out. That's good in a sense, because it discredits them, but it's also bad, because it brings disgrace to the name of Christ. How many people out there are so fed up with the hypocrisy and scandal present in so many churches that they reject organized religion altogether? For the devil, these false teachers are a win-win. Either they persuade people to listen to them instead of the truth, or they repel people, so that they won't listen to the truth either.

Persecution and the Word

That's the way the world does religion, both 2000 years ago and today. It hasn't changed a whole lot. However, genuine Christianity hasn't changed either, and whatever the time period, it involves **PERSECUTION**. Consider with me 2 Timothy 3:10-13. This passage is the logical opposite of the laundry list of evil we looked at earlier. Instead of following the course of the world and ending up with all of the world's sins, we are to follow the teaching and example of Jesus and His apostles. If we do that, we will end up with their virtues. Instead of an aimless search for pleasure, we will have purpose in our lives. In place of arrogance, we will have faith in the power of God. Instead of self-love, we will exhibit longsuffering. We may live in the same kinds of houses and work the same kinds of jobs as the world, but despite the outward similarity, on the inside, we will be completely different. We will be disciples of Jesus.

It might seem that such a righteous way of life would earn us the respect and love of all those who are around us, but as Paul says here, that's not the way it worked out for him. Everywhere he went, he desired to do good and serve God, and everywhere he went, his teaching of the truth stirred up persecution. God had rescued him from all of those persecutions in the past, but by this point, Paul knew quite well that he was never going to breathe free air again.

We might think that Paul is a special case in that, that maybe only apostles who are really loud about their faith can expect to be persecuted. Paul would disagree. He warns us solemnly that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. In other words, if we are truly committed to serving God and imitating His Son, we're going to pay a price for that in our interactions with the world. We might not get a mob with pitchforks and torches showing up outside our front door, but it is going to cost us. Maybe we'll get caught up in conflict with our teachers at school because we persist in standing for the truth. Maybe a prospective employer won't hire us because we insisted on having Sundays off or otherwise emphasized our faith. Maybe the people at work won't eat with us because they think we're a Jesus freak. Somewhere, though, we are going to pay the price, and that price is the inevitable consequence of being different. On the other hand, if we aren't paying that price, if we get along with everybody in the world just fine, we need to ask ourselves why that is. Is the world tolerant of our differences, or do those differences not really exist? We need to remember that standing out may cost us here, but it is also the only way that we can ever hope to make it to heaven.

In this quest through earthly suffering for heavenly reward, Paul points Timothy and us to **THE WORD**. This final discussion of the chapter is found in 2 Timothy 3:14-17. Our response to persecution cannot be to turn aside from God's will. Instead, it must be to return to the word. The Bible will constantly remind us of the danger of being conformed to the world, and it will constantly call us on to the reward of heaven. We also learn here to study the entire Bible, not just the New Testament. Some Christians today fuss about studying the Old Testament too much, but when Paul talks about the sacred writing that Timothy knew from childhood, he has to be talking about the Old Testament. When Timothy was a child, the law of Christ hadn't even been written down yet. What he had, though, the Law of Moses alone, was still able to make him wise for salvation. Obviously, the Law couldn't teach that salvation, but it could put the gospel in its historical and spiritual context, and we need the Old Testament today for just the same reason.

However, it's not just the Old Testament that we need, and that's the point that Paul makes in the last two verses of this chapter, probably the most well known in the entire book. As we saw earlier, by this point in time, the first-century church had already begun to recognize the writings of the apostles as Scripture, so when Paul says "all Scripture", he means to include both Old and New Testaments. This Scripture isn't the invention of man; instead, it comes to us from the mind of God, and it is capable of producing a spiritual turnaround in us. Its doctrine reproves us, that is to say, warns us when we're going in the wrong direction. It corrects us, points us in the right direction. Then, it instructs us in righteousness, so that we continue going in the right direction. That's what God designed it to do.

The effects of the correction and instruction of the word are profound. The word spiritually completes us. It equips us for every good work. I've certainly said it before, but it bears repeating: This clearly teaches that the Bible is the only revelation from God that we need. If there is a good work, the Bible equips us to do it. If the Bible does not equip us to do it, it is not a good work. Times have changed since Paul wrote these words, but the word and God's will have not. If we rely on the word and on the word alone, we can be certain of pleasing Him.