

2 Timothy 3:1-17

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 June 2022

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 0 0] Our reading this morning is from 2 Timothy chapter 3. You'll find it on page 1196 in the Pew Bibles.

2 Timothy chapter 3. 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 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 Janice and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth.

[1 : 3 0] They are men of depraved minds who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. But they will not get very far because, as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone.

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings.

What kinds 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 worst, deceiving and being deceived.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

[2 : 4 6] All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servants of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Ruth, very much for reading.

And if you could keep your Bibles open at 2 Timothy chapter 3, that would be a great help. It's page 1196 of the church Bibles.

And if you find it helpful, there's an outline inside the notice sheet. If you're just visiting today, it's our practice as a church to work through books of the Bible as our regular diet, chapter by chapter.

And we're focusing this morning on, particularly on the first nine verses of this chapter. And we'll return to the second half of the chapter next week and spend more time in there.

[3 : 48] But let's pray and ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Those words from verse 16. All scripture is God-breathed. So we praise you, Heavenly Father, for the gift of your word, breathed out from you for our salvation and for our growth.

We praise you for the gift of your spirit this Pentecost Sunday. And we ask that your spirit will be with us this morning, that you'll give us ears open to your word to us, heads able to understand, and hearts willing to change and follow you.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. They reeled me in with God, friendship, and unconditional love.

They held me tight with guilt and fear. They cast me out when I questioned their doctrine. That was the summary of someone who shared their experience of having joined what was called the church and seemed in lots of ways to be a loving church community, but where over time they were controlled and manipulated and spiritually abused.

There's a lady who comes to our church, St. Silas, who gave me permission to share her own experience. As a young woman, she moved to a new city. And she was really encouraged in quite a lonely time when she met two other young women who she met on the street.

[5 : 21] And they invited her to join their small group Bible study in one of their homes. And everything seemed great about the small group and about the church they were part of.

Her experience of church growing up had been quite traditional and lifeless. And here were young people in the city she'd moved to with a passion for their faith, loving each other unconditionally, looking to build a deep sense of community, taking the Bible seriously with these inspiring talks from the charismatic church leader.

And they were really optimistic in their mission to reach others with the news about Jesus. And then over time, some alarm bells started to ring.

They were pushing and pushing for people to give more money. They were very direct in asking people whether they were tithing 10% of their income. And they'd have gift days on top where the pledge sheets were handed to people and you were asked directly about your giving.

Leaders were pushy about who should be in relationships and who you were allowed to date or go out with. Everyone had one discipler and your discipler could tell you where you should work and even what you should wear.

[6 : 40] When several people asked about the finances, they were shown the accounts, but then they were kind of singled out as divisive people and treated with suspicion.

You were not allowed to miss Sunday morning services. And then they moved their midweek meetings to a Friday night. And for the lady who comes to our church now, she realized that with Friday nights locked in and Sunday mornings locked in, she could no longer visit family on the weekends.

So she spoke to the church leadership about that problem, that difficulty. And she was told that it was evident that her family had control over her that needed to be broken, if that's how she felt.

And at that point, thankfully, she realized things are not what they seem here. And she left. She had the courage to get out. Now, one of the really alarming things about her account of what happened is that so much of what she experienced would have seemed justifiable with the Bible.

The zeal for community, for loving each other, for giving, for evangelism, for being at church and not missing it unless you had good reason. These are all things that you could justify with the Bible.

[7 : 56] And yet people were being manipulated with overbearing leadership, a kind of, we sometimes call it heavy shepherding. They were being coerced and controlled. So what do you do when something like that is what you've experienced of what's meant to be church?

How do you come back from that when so much of the language of church, of being a disciple, of love and community, has been tainted by someone misusing it to get control over you?

And when we hear of scandals involving respected church leaders, maybe people we've listened to and learned from, does the whole thing just start to look like a house of cards, like a sham?

Well, we're in this series as a church in this book, 2 Timothy. It was a letter sent by the early church leader, the Apostle Paul, to a co-worker, Timothy.

And he sets out for him what authentic Christian ministry should look like. Paul was the man Jesus appointed to take the message about him, God's forever king, to the nations.

[9 : 07] And now Paul is writing from prison where he's expecting that he will be executed for being a Christian. In chapter 2, verse 8, if you just look back, he says to Timothy, Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David.

This is my gospel for which I am suffering, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Now he's writing to Timothy, who he'd sent to Ephesus, this city where Paul had planted a church, as people had come to faith on his mission.

And now he's sent Timothy to be the pastor there. But things are very tough. He's got detractors. There's a stream of teaching in the church that criticizes Paul and Paul's gospel, and especially Paul's ministry that's put him in prison.

And he's got detractors. He's got deserters. Paul mentions in the letter that every church leader in that region deserted Paul. And so Timothy is discouraged.

And it may be that it's worse than that, that actually Timothy's own loyalty to Paul is in doubt. Is he in danger of giving up on Paul's gospel?

[10 : 22] So this letter is so vital for us because it helps us understand what authentic Christian ministry should look like, as Paul urges Timothy to go on in the real deal.

And when we talk about ministry, we're not just thinking about the job of the full-time minister, because ministry is what every disciple of Jesus is called to in our own way. Serving Jesus by sharing his message with others and promoting that message with our words and lives.

Now, Paul, we've already seen in recent weeks, urges Timothy to be a guardian of the gospel. He's saying the message about Jesus has been entrusted to us as his followers to guard by sharing it.

And we guard it by making sure that what we pass on is the same as what Paul passed on. So in chapter 1, verse 14, he said, Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you.

And in the previous verse, what you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Christ Jesus. And then last week, for those who were here, chapter 2, verse 15, he says to Timothy, Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, and who correctly handles the word of truth.

[11 : 46] So Timothy has heard Paul share a message in front of witnesses, and he is to pass that on faithfully. And we have that message in our New Testaments as well, in the Bible, for us to see as our pattern and ensure that what we believe and pass on is the same as what Paul taught.

But now, Paul warns Timothy of the environment in which we're to be guardians of the gospel. He says in verse 1 of our passage today, So our first point this morning, scoundrels to prepare for.

Let's pick things up in verse 1 of chapter 3. He says, Now that phrase, the last days, is a Bible word, is Bible language for the times we live in now, between Jesus' resurrection and his return in glory.

Twice I've had Jehovah's Witnesses come to my door and read from this bit of the Bible, and their opening gambit has been, Do you think this describes the times we live in?

And they'll read verses 2 to 4. That might have happened to you, in your experience of Jehovah's Witnesses. And what they mean by that is they're saying, they're trying to appeal to you, saying, Do you think these things are true now?

[13 : 11] And they weren't true in previous generations, so that they can then say, Because this is called the last days, these are signs that the return of Jesus is about to happen.

Okay? But that's not what this passage is saying, because these things are typical of the last days generally, between Jesus rising from the dead and his return.

And we can tell that because Paul is writing to Timothy about the times he lives in then, and telling him what he has to do about it in his life. And these things will be true until Jesus appears in glory.

The last days, our times, are marked by terrible things. And Paul describes what people will be like in verses 2 to 4. And it's like a sandwich. So it starts and ends with disordered love, and then you move a step in either way in the verses, and you get selfish pride.

And then in the middle, around the end of verse 2 and verse 3, you get this list of what we could call kind of disqualities, or non-virtues.

[14 : 17] People not having the things that they should. So the disqualities start with being abusive. People will be disobedient to their parents.

They will be ungrateful. They will be unholy, without love, unforgiving, without self-control. And some of those things are very troubling, aren't they?

Abusive. We could think of tens of thousands of football fans all shouting at the referee abuse when they disagree with the decision.

Or maybe we think of the terribly, terribly damaging abuse that goes on in people's homes. And I think of a friend who was a huge help to me in my Christian life some years ago, who's older than me.

And then later in life, abuse that he experienced as a child has emerged that he'd managed to bury in his own psyche.

[15 : 17] And it's broken him that he was abused as a child. We see there in verse 3 that people will be brutal. Maybe we think of the way that people get treated by drug traffickers, people in addiction.

It says in verse 4, people will be treacherous. That is that you won't be able to trust people. You might put your trust in them and they will betray you. But then there are other marks here of the last days that I think you think could catch all of us.

Children being disobedient to their parents. People just not loving the good. Well, if we always loved what was good, then we'd never sin. We'd never do anything wrong.

People lacking self-control. Just losing control. Getting angry. People being ungrateful. Failing to remember that we should give God thanks for all his kindnesses to us.

So folks, these are behaviors that will mark the times we're in. And they're caused by pride. So in verse 2, he mentions being boastful and proud. And then verse 4, he talks about being conceited.

[16 : 33] It's when we have an inflated view of ourselves and what we've achieved that we feel we're justified. We get a sense of entitlement and think we just stop treating other people as we should.

And then at the heart of these things, the root of the behavior is the human heart and disordered love. So in verse 2, he starts the list by saying people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money.

And at the end of verse 4, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. But people sometimes think that sin, the Bible word for sin, is about wanting to do bad things.

As though, you know, we wake up in the morning and we think, today I just really want to be mean. I really want to harm people. Much more often, sin is about disordered love. It's not that we don't love enough.

It's that we love the wrong things. We were made to love God with all of our hearts and souls and strength and to love other people as we love ourselves. But what happens is our hearts turn in on ourselves.

[17 : 39] And so that we love that triad that Paul mentions there. We love money. We love pleasure. We love ourselves. And Paul says, be warned. This is what it will be like in the last days.

Without warnings like this, we might think, you know, things seem to be getting worse. How can there be a good God, the God of the Bible, and these things be going on in our world?

But this is a healthy dose of Bible realism. As Paul says here, don't be naive and think, you know, things can only get better. That's naive. There will be terrible times in the last days.

So that's our first point. Scoundrels to prepare for. But then there's a twist. Because we could read verses 1 to 4 and think he's just describing the world out there.

And the church will be much better than that. But then we get to verse 5 and realize he's talking about people in the visible church. So our second point is that there will be false ministries to avoid.

[18 : 45] So we hear in verse 5 about these people's spirituality. He says, having a form of godliness but denying its power. So these people, they talk about God.

They talk about Jesus and the Bible. They persuade people. And maybe they end up senior in the church. Respected. Acclaimed. Bishops. Moderators.

Mega church pastors. But their ministry lacks the genuine power of God. The power of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 1 verse 8, Paul talked to Timothy about the Spirit's power.

And how he is at work in the life of a believer to give us power, love and self-control. So that we can be guardians of the gospel. As we, in the face of difficulty, keep faithful to the gospel in the Bible.

And we're self-controlled and we're loving. The Holy Spirit takes the unimpressive message of Christ crucified. Spoken in weakness by unimpressive people.

[19 : 49] And his power is at work. So that people believe it. And they're saved forever. They're given life from God. These people, on the other hand, they have a form of godliness. They appear godly.

But the power of the Holy Spirit is not at work. And I think the church in Ephesus, as this letter is read out to them, are meant to be shocked here.

That there would be people in leadership in their own church and in churches around them that Paul could say of them that verses 2 to 4 are true of those leaders.

That under the surface of their ministry, that people are following, they love self, they love pleasure, they love money. It's not always going to be obvious to us who fits that description in our times.

If it was obvious, it wouldn't be dangerous. We're not in danger if someone has a really obviously false ministry. Next, we hear about their ministry strategy.

[20 : 52] And essentially, it's that they gain control over people who are vulnerable. So in verse 6, he says, they are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women.

And then he talks there about these particular women. And you can see here that what's going on is there is a specific target for what Paul's saying that must have been going on in the church in Ephesus.

Paul's certainly not saying here something that's generally true of women. He's very positive elsewhere about women. He had women as co-workers. He mentions in chapter 4, Priscilla, his co-worker there.

But we can see here, and also in his earlier letter, 1 Timothy chapter 5, that there was this specific problem going on in the church in Ephesus of a group of women who were going around house to house and it looks as though they'd fallen for the ministry of these false leaders.

You know, they were recommending the podcasts and passing on the books of these false teachers and becoming an instrument to share this harmful message.

[22 : 03] And the point for us, really, is that the false teachers gain control over people who are vulnerable. And in the last few years for us here as a church, stories have been emerging in recent years of people who have been harmed by overbearing manipulative leadership, by respected leaders in established churches.

And one of the things that we're learning from that is that any of us can be vulnerable. Any of us can be in a situation where because of circumstances in our lives, we can be at risk of harm, of being manipulated.

So these people, they sound spiritual, they look the part, and they might gain a following. And they might look good for a while. So I think that's what's going on in verse 8.

If you just have a look at verse 8, he mentions Janus and Jambres. He says, just as Janus and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth.

Now, Janus and Jambres are not mentioned in the Bible, but they're the names traditionally given to Pharaoh's magicians. This was the time of the Exodus, kind of 2,000 years before Paul's writing this, as God rescued his people out of Egypt, out of slavery, and there was this showdown between the Lord and Pharaoh who had enslaved the Israelites.

[23 : 31] And the Lord, because Pharaoh wouldn't let the people go and asked, who is the Lord? The Lord sent plagues to show his power and to judge Pharaoh. But when he sent the first plague, turning the River Nile into blood, Janus and Jambres were able to match it somehow.

And then they managed to match the second plague, the frogs. But by the third one, the gnats, they couldn't do it. So for a while, they appeared to have power. And then they had to admit that Moses had the power of God behind him.

And so it can be in the church today with counterfeit ministries that the false teacher might go on quite well for a while.

And, you know, you go to their conferences they're speaking at and you recommend them to friends. Or it's more local and you're glad to have them lead a Bible study in your home group or run the youth group that your son goes to or something like that.

But it's only after time that you realize they're opposing the truth. And folks, the really dumb thing for us to do is to think that it could never happen here at St. Silas.

[24 : 44] Most of us don't worry about this, do we? Most of us don't wake up in the night worried that there's a false teacher who will take over our church. Because we think to ourselves, if I heard a false teacher, I'd spot them.

They'd be easy to spot. But this church here in Ephesus, Luke records for us in Acts chapter 20, Paul saying farewell to the elders of the church when he'd never see them again.

And he says to them that for three years he never stopped warning them night and day with tears that after he leaves, false teachers would come from outwith the church and from within their own number.

and the flock would come to harm within the church. And Paul is willing to call out some of the false teachers even in this letter. In chapter 1 he talks about Phygelus and Homogenes.

In chapter 2 he talks about Hymenaeus and Philetus. In chapter 4 he talks about Demas who's deserted him. And Alexander the metal worker who's done him a great deal of harm.

[25 : 48] He's naming the people so that the church would know and beware. So when we've come to see, come to recognize that someone's ministry is not the real deal that we thought it was, what do we do?

When we've realized that they're not taking Paul's teaching as their pattern and being faithful to the New Testament gospel. Well Paul tells us what to do at the end of verse 5.

He says have nothing to do with such people. So clearly at this point you see, clearly he's talking about people in the church.

If we were to have nothing to do with non-Christians who love pleasure and money and themselves, then we'd be doing a pretty bad job of mission as a church. But in the church itself, when we find people who are teaching like this and their ministry is marked with this, Paul's saying have nothing to do with them.

It takes some discernment this because at the end of chapter 2, Paul talks to Timothy about what he does when people oppose him and his teaching in the church. And he talks about how his godliness is really important.

[27 : 03] He says the one who opposes you, you must gently instruct. He says be kind to everyone. He talks about being patient, pursuing righteousness and godliness and self-control.

But here, there comes a point where he's saying you have to distance yourself from false teaching. You can't continue in fellowship with false teachers.

So I've heard people speak about the church they belong to and say, there's real diversity in what we believe, but we've found a way to journey on together as though that's a virtue of a church.

Some mainline denominations speak like that. You know, they talk about how good it is to be a broad church with a home for people who believe all kinds of different things. But Paul says some ministries, they look authentic, but all the time you see that they're not guarding the gospel, so they're actually opposing the truth, have nothing to do with them.

But in case Timothy or we were to lose hope as a ministry that we think is false and have identified as false grows and grows, he assures us in verse 9, he says, they will not get very far because as in the case of those men, Janice and Jambres, their folly will be clear to everyone.

[28 : 32] So you get teaching that gains traction in churches, best-selling books that don't stick to the truth, but you have to keep your head and not lose heart.

In a few centuries' time it will be forgotten, it will just be a footnote in the pages of church history. And what do we do when we encounter or experience this kind of counterfeit Christian ministry?

Well, one thing to remember is that we're forewarned about it here in the Bible. So if you've experienced something like this, if you've been really hurt by Christian leadership that looked good at the beginning and then you found was harmful to you, then let me apologize to you that you've experienced that.

I'm really sorry that you've experienced that. And at the same time, could this passage encourage you not to dismiss Jesus because you've experienced something like that?

the real Jesus is the good shepherd and he warns us here because he loves us to expect this kind of thing in the last days.

[29 : 43] And there is hope. So let's just turn to our third point. Just look at verse 10. Our third point is an example to remember. An example to remember. So Paul shares all of that grim reality with Timothy and then he says verse 10, you however know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance.

Timothy shouldn't give up because as well as these terrible examples, he has a good example to remember. Remember Paul. And hopefully for us as well, if we hear of a scandal that's rocking a church or a church leader and we feel disillusioned, hopefully we could say, have we not seen a good model in our lives of the authentic Christian life, a transformed life, a life of joyful service that assures us this is real, this isn't a sham.

So that instead of allowing our whole view of Jesus and his message and his church to get derailed by some scandal about a church leader who falls from grace, we can remember that Christian friend we've had or an older Christian in our church or in our family whose life really adds up to something in their gentleness, their joy, their integrity, their perspective.

And a key mark that could help us spot a false teacher is what does it cost them? What is their ministry costing them? Have they had to suffer to stay faithful to the gospel?

Or are they actually gaining from it? Because in verse 11, Paul lists things to remember about him and have a look what he says in verse 11 to Timothy.

[31 : 40] He says, you know all about my persecutions, sufferings, what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, the persecutions I endured, yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.

He's saying, remember Timothy, what authentic ministry looks like. Remember when we were in Lystra and that mob arrived from Iconium and Antioch where they rejected our message and they came in and they saw that people were following us, so they stoned us.

And remember when they threw the stones at me and I fell unconscious and they thought I was dead and they dragged me out of the city and they left me there because they thought I was dead and the disciples gathered round Paul and they managed to revive him and got him up but he went back into the city but he had to move on.

Here is the pattern of authentic gospel ministry. Remember it. And our fourth point is a wisdom that you can be sure of. Now we'll come back to this next week as we spend more time in these verses but here's the point.

Even if we found ourselves surrounded by people out to control us or manipulate us there is a place that we could always turn and find truth. Truth that's for our good from a leader who loves us.

[33 : 00] Verse 14 comes like a shaft of light through the dark clouds of this chapter. Have a look at verse 14. Paul says but as for you continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of because you know those from whom you learned it and how from infancy you have known the holy scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

So long as we have a Bible we have the truth that can set us free. We have the words that can make us wise for salvation. They reveal to us that by ourselves we are people who belong to our times.

We live as lovers of self lovers of money lovers of pleasure and by rights God could have had nothing to do with us. He could have said to Jesus his son have nothing to do with them.

But we have a saviour who didn't come for what he could get from us who didn't come to get control over us no he came to serve us and he gave and he gave and he gave of himself until he spent himself spilling his blood for us at the cross so that he could rise conquering death and promise life forever to everyone who follows him.

and one day present us before himself in chapter 4 verse 8 the apostle Paul close to death talks about the crown of righteousness which the Lord the righteous judge will award to him on that day.

[34 : 43] This picture of standing before Jesus and him crowning his people who've waited for him in righteousness and saying come with me where life will last forever.

so that even if the church around us is very messy and we see false teachers going from bad to worse and even if guarding the gospel is very costly in our times and takes great suffering we can say like Peter said to Jesus Lord to whom shall we go you have the words of eternal life.

Let's pray together. Just a moment of quiet to reflect on God's word. Gracious God and loving heavenly father we thank you so much for your warning of the kind of self-love that will mark our world and infect your church in our days.

Thank you that your word and spirit offer us freedom and the power to be rescued forever from this generation. Thank you for your promise of life.

by your spirit give us the wisdom to be discerning the perseverance to keep going the good examples to remember in our own lives of people who've walked the path of faith before us and give us the courage to continue in your word the scriptures that we would be wise for salvation in Christ.

[36 : 38] We ask these things for our good and for your glory. Amen. Well we're going to sing in response to God's word we're going to sing songs that remind us that even though there are grim realities out there for us to face and perhaps even in our church as well we have a great saviour a good shepherd and one whose mercy extends to all who come to him empty handed as he offers us his grace.

Amen. Amen.