

Women's Bible Study Spring 2011
A Spiritual Legacy – Passing On What You Know
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Be Discerning: 2nd Timothy 3:1-7
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Generally when I stand up here I try to begin with something cheerful or funny. I like to get you laughing. But today I'm going to take my cue from Paul, who begins chapter 3 of 2nd Timothy:

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days.” (2nd Timothy 3:1)

Gee, what a happy way to start. I've been visiting my Norwegian bachelor uncle on the farm recently, and I always enjoy talking to him. But one common theme of our conversation is that the world is going off the rails. My friends, that's as old as time. Every generation thinks that the next one is getting worse. But are they? Not really. Paul told Timothy that we were in terrible times. And that was 2,000 years ago.

So what are the last days, and why aren't they over yet? The N.T. implies that the last days began with Christ's arrival on earth, and they will conclude with his second coming. So while the Bible calls them days, they are actually “years” and “centuries” and even “millennia”.

This term “terrible times” has two meanings. The first meaning is “hard to bear” or “difficult”, in the sense of physical or mental pain. And the second meaning is “hard to deal with, violent or dangerous”, like a wild animal or a raging sea. So we are living in an era where life is hard to bear, and dangerous. Paul wants Timothy to understand that this is permanent, not a passing phase. This is how people are, and the world is reaping the consequences of living without God.

And because of that, we need to be aware that not everyone who goes to church really has a changed life. In fact, within the church, Paul warns, there will be counterfeit Christians. That's why today's advice is to “Be Discerning”.

Let's start by asking,

I. What is a Counterfeit Christian?

Look at 2nd Timothy 3:2:

“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 them.” (2nd Timothy 3:2-5)

Paul is describing someone who's gone wrong in major ways. First, they have

A. Wrong Priorities

Priorities are what's important to us. And Paul describes a person whose first priority is:

1. Me

“People will be lovers of themselves.” When we love ourselves more than anyone else, it dominates all our choices. It becomes very difficult to choose what's inconvenient, or sacrificial – the very types of choices needed in marriage and family life. And the person who loves “me” before anyone else will also be unable to acknowledge the true Lord of their lives.

Next priority is

2. My money

Paul says they will be **“lovers of money”**. It's not wrong to be rich. Look at what incredible good wealthy people can accomplish through careful stewardship and giving. God never condemns people for being rich. He condemns us for loving money.

So anytime I start to think too much about our bank account or worry about our financial future, I try to mentally smack my head and think instead of how we can use what we have for God's kingdom.

How can we determine whether we love money or not? How often do we think about it each day? Do we constantly feel short of money? Paul wrote in 1st Timothy **“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” (1st Timothy 6:10)**. Loving money works against contentment. What it really boils down to is whether money has become a god for us instead of the true God.

The next wrong priority is

3. My will

The bottom line is, when we love ourselves best, we want **my** will be done. That makes us arrogant, proud and boastful without even realizing it. But verse 2 also mentions **“disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love.”** These are attributes which ruin us for family life. Because for family life to flourish there needs to be a degree of selflessness.

There's another pitfall about only doing my will. When we want our will we fail to recognize God's will, and then we miss what he has for us in the future.

Three years ago my future son-in-law, Jon, was a young man who'd always dreamed of serving his country in the Marines. At age 19 he decided to leave college and enlist. His parents tried to talk him out of it, but finally his father drove him to the recruiting station four hours away for his early morning appointment the next day. That night as Jon went to bed in the hotel, he prayed through the words of Jeremiah 29:11: **“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, ‘Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”** He prayed that God would show him the right decision. When he woke up he knew with great certainty that now was not the time to enlist, that he should go back to college and continue with his pre med degree. But Jon had to break this news to the Marine recruiters, who shamed him for going back on his decision. He stood his ground, still not knowing why God called him so clearly out of this life path that he thought he desired. About six months later he met our

daughter Emily. As they began to grow serious she said to him, “I want you to know...joining the Marines is a deal breaker for me. I don’t think I could bear being the wife of a Marine.” Since he already knew that he wanted to marry Emily, this was great confirmation of God’s direction for him. At the time he didn’t understand the closed door. In the present he is deeply thankful that he was on this path instead of the one he had wanted. In the future Jon may serve in the military, but as a physician, not a Marine. I am thankful that he is a young man who does not put his own will first, but instead listens to God. But it’s impossible to listen to God if we are committed to doing our own will before his.

So wrong priorities – me, my money, my will – lead us further and further away from God. And that results in:

B. Willful lives

Here’s how Paul describes them in verse 3:

“...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.” (2nd Timothy 3:3-5)

Instead of talking about each phrase, I’m going to pick out the four which are highlighted. I’ve deliberately picked behaviors which are subtle rather than obvious, because they are the most likely to affect our lives.

First, a willful life is

1. Unforgiving

Think about why we fail to forgive. Often we are offended by someone. Someone has disrespected us! Someone has hurt us! But when we don’t forgive, we miss the grace of God: **“But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6:15).** Remember that Jesus is speaking to believers, not to non Christians. When Jesus first saves us, we are full of sins like unforgiveness. But once we follow Christ, a lack of forgiveness impedes us from receiving the grace of God. So we will never mature in our Christian faith if we’re unforgiving.

You’ve probably noticed that I hammer on this concept all the time. That means I need to be all the more alert to it in my own life. A few weeks ago we went to watch our daughter Hannah run in the NAIA Indoor Nationals in Ohio. After driving 750 miles to get there, we were thrilled to watch her relay team take first in their heat in the 4x800 relay. And a day later, we found out that Hannah would be substituted out for the final team because she’d had the slowest time of the four. That’s what you do in college running – you win a slot or not based on your performance. She had been sick and wasn’t running her best.

Now Hannah didn’t mind this at all. But I quietly seethed about it for two days. Finally I was ashamed enough to beg God to forgive me for being bitter. It wasn’t so much that I had to forgive anyone; it was that I had to realize that it was incredibly trivial. My bad attitude about the outcome was making me miss the joy of being with family in an exciting atmosphere. So that’s what lack of forgiveness does. It causes us to miss joy in the present because we are sulking about some incident in the past. I do not want to live that way. I don’t want to miss the grace of God in my life because of my lack of forgiveness...ever.

Another common affliction of living a willful life is that we have

2. No Self Control

Self control is important because it shows that we are no longer in charge of ourselves – God is. And when we lack self control we show that we are ungovernable and lawless on the inside even when we’re trying to look mature and grownup on the outside. Lack of self control shows itself in anger. In cruel words. In retaliation. As Peter wrote, **“Be self controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around you like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.”(1 Peter 5:8)** My friends, our self control helps keep Satan at bay. And by self control the Bible means that we are training our inner person to truly be what we’re living on the outside. So it’s no good trying to act religious if we aren’t devout on the inside. Self control teaches us to govern ourselves, inside and out.

Living a willful life can also make us

3. Untrustworthy – not reliable or consistent in character

Paul uses the term “treacherous”. And that word means “untrustworthy”. So do we keep our word? Are we faithful? Hebrews tells us to **“Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:23)** A Christian whose word can’t be relied upon doesn’t reflect the nature of Christ.

Living a willful life also makes us

4. Hedonistic

Paul describes these people as **“lovers of pleasure” (v. 4)** What’s so bad about pleasures? Nothing, if they are simply part of the fabric of life and not the main point of our existence. But Paul says that the love of pleasure for its own sake crowds out the love of God. Our true joy comes from God: **“The joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10).**

We should also ask what gives us pleasure. If it’s pornography, or an affair, or something against God’s holiness, then it’s not going to give us lasting joy. Do our pleasures harm other people? Like gossip? So thinking about what gives us pleasure is a helpful gauge to see if we are living a willful life.

Paul uses all these adjectives to warn us about bad people because they are WITHIN the body of Christ. These are not unbelievers. These are people who profess Christianity. He says in verse 5, **“...having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”** In other words, they act the part. But inside they are lawless and unwilling to engage with the power of God which could transform them.

Having talked about dangerous people within the church, Paul expands it to false teachers, who were a real problem in Ephesus. So let’s look next at the question,

II. What Does a False Teacher Do?

Look at verse 6:

“They are the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over weak-willed women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth – men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected.” (2nd Timothy 3:6-8)

I’m going to mostly confine my remarks to the false teachers, but the **“weak-willed”** women should get a mention first. This word, variously translated **“silly and weak-natured and spiritually dwarfed women...”** (Amplified); **“unstable and needy women”** (the Message); **“vulnerable women”** (NLT), implies that the problem is not because they are WOMEN, but because they are women who don’t have the strength of character or faith to know when they are being sold a pack of lies. The passage implies that these women are particularly vulnerable because of the sins of their past. That’s an important reminder for us. A false teacher who reproaches us for our sins, without also stressing the grace that covers them, is teaching a gospel of works. And that is not the gospel that Jesus died for.

So these women are vulnerable, and because they are vulnerable, they fall for false teaching. They are characterized by their desire to be “always learning” – in other words, always on the lookout for the next religious fad or idea.

This happens to us when we’re dieting. Most of us want to believe that something will come along that will make losing weight painless. But with dieting and the Christian life, there’s not really any shortcut. Both involve discipline and perseverance. If we keep falling for the next fad diet or newest religious idea, we won’t make much progress.

Some false teachers teach the truth, but do so from wrong motives. Paul talks about these in Philippians where he says, **“It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill...The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.”** (Phil. 1:15; 17-8)

Thankfully, the living and active Word of God has the power to break the chains of being falsely represented.

“But God’s word is not chained.” (2nd Timothy 2:9)

What’s so wrong about false teachers? A lot. He or she
A. Controls others for personal gain

This can be financial gain. I’ve known of pastors who used their position to solicit money from their congregations. Look at what happened to Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. Their empire came crashing down, resulting in prison for Jim Bakker. Other wicked pastors entice people into sexual relationships. To misuse the authority the Word of God brings to a teacher is wrong.

Luke tells us in Acts about a man named Simon the Magician. He was entranced with the apostles’ miraculous power:

“When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, ‘Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ Peter answered, ‘May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!’” (Acts 8:18-20)

Someone who uses authority to control for personal gain is a false teacher.

Another aspect of false teachers is that they
B. Spiritually manipulate

This can be pretty subtle. But there are two key phrases to watch out for. The first is: “God told me that you should do this.” God either tells individuals themselves, or he tells them in his Word and everyone gets the same instructions. God does not generally use other people to tell us his will, especially if it’s contrary to his Word.

A second phrase is: “Listen to me because I am more [fill in the blank] mature, holy, older, important, or spiritually gifted than you are.” We could call this spiritual oneupsmanship. It dominates by using false authority. And it is completely counter to the servant attitude of Christ. **“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...” (Matthew 20:26-28)**

That is why Paul describes these false teachers as “gaining control” in v. 6. That describes spiritual manipulation.

A false teacher is also someone who
C. Misuses spiritual principles

Jesus had some very strong words for the Pharisees, who were known as great teachers:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness...You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” (Matthew 23:23; 25)

A false teacher presents outward compliance as more important than inward transformation. Peter talks about false teachers in his second letter:

“They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.” (2nd Peter 2:1-2)

How can someone misuse spiritual principles? Here are some examples.

They teach **added requirements** to make ourselves acceptable to God. Dress a certain way. Tithe. Don’t drink or smoke. Or we’re told, only listen to this or that pastor or teacher. That’s as old as the Bible, since Paul warned the Corinthians: **“One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’, another, ‘I**

follow Cephas,' still another, 'I follow Christ.'” (1 Cor. 1:12) Outward behavior is no substitute for heart change.

Another way of misusing spiritual principles is to require a **specific spiritual experience**. In Paul's day, it was circumcision. In our day it might be, in some churches, speaking in tongues or prophesying. Other churches might require a certain type of worship. Who remembers when guitars were first used in church in the 1960's...how radical was that? Churches split over the use of drums. So we can misuse spiritual principles by requiring a specific spiritual experience for everyone beyond that which Christ requires.

We are very careful to teach our children how to identify bad people even when they look trustworthy. But are we as careful to teach our children and our baby Christians how to identify evil people in a spiritual guise? Christ taught that Satan sowed weeds among the wheat. But instead of trying to uproot them while they were growing, Jesus said to let the crop grow up together, and then the weeds will be pulled out and burned at harvest time. You see, initially, most young plants look the same. But they become identifiable in their adult state. The weeds no longer look like wheat. They look like weeds. So here are some comments to help us identify false teachers.

They usually do not work under the spiritual oversight of the church. In other words, they are lawless – they don't accept guidance or authority from elders and pastors. They are often at odds with people. They usually work alone. *“The church says this, but I think that.”* To be honest that's one reason why this Bible study is a team ministry. I think it's healthier for all of us teachers to work together under the oversight of a pastor.

A false teacher might be very subtle, and very knowledgeable. Satan commands an excellent use of scripture. But someone who is truly and demonically working against the life of the gospel within the church will cause ripples of damage, like a dangerous undertow. I grew up near the ocean. And one of the first things I learned was to scan the sea for the telltale signs of a riptide – an undertow that will take you right out to the open sea. You can sometimes see a little wave in the wrong place, and that might be the only sign of the riptide. The same is true with a false teacher in the body of Christ. Even if the undertow itself isn't visible, we see its effects on the people in its path.

Sometimes clever, psychologically damaged people can use teaching or discipleship as a platform for themselves, which warps the message of God to others. That is why we should be wary of any person who wants to meet only with us, not with a group; who refuses to be under meaningful spiritual authority, and who does not demonstrate humility. Listen for phrases like: *“Others don't understand because they are not spiritual enough. God has told me this. I have true spiritual authority in your life. My spiritual gifts qualify me to disciple you.”*

Historically, these kinds of teachers may have even had demonic or miraculous powers that mimicked those of God, like Jannes and Jambres. They were the magicians at Pharaoh's court who were able to mimic the miracles that God permitted Aaron and Moses to do. But they could only go so far. Eventually Moses did something Jannes and Jambres could not counterfeit. Magicians can only pretend to look holy. Eventually what is inside comes out.

So the proof of a teacher's ministry is in the outcome. Do they extend blessing, or destruction? Does their teaching result in growth, or defeat? Does it lead to Christ, and to commitment, and to service? Or does it lead to spiritual superiority and a critical spirit?

Of course it's scary to talk about false teachers...especially when I'm the one up here doing the talking. It leads to the question,

III. Who Can We Trust?

Here are three quick guidelines. First, we can trust

The one who **A. Handles truth correctly**

We spent last week's study looking at handling truth correctly, so I'm not going to delve into this too much except to remind you that when we're handling truth correctly, it means that we are fleeing from evil and running towards the good. Do we see that trait in another person's life?

Next, we know we can trust someone who

B. Has character, not just words.

Character is revealed over time. When you've had the chance to observe someone over a period of years at close quarters you will know if they have Christian character or not. My husband is an eccentric and funny person. He's not perfect. Believe me. But I know him over 34 years to be of unwavering character. I have never seen him do something that contradicts his belief or his principles. And that's pretty good when you've lived with someone through all sorts of joys and sorrows. So look for people who have consistent and observable Christian character.

Next, you can trust a person when he or she

C. Affects others positively

For example, a trustworthy person seeks unity. One of the sad lessons of our early ministry was realizing that some of our closest friends were actually working on a very different agenda. It happens sometimes that people make an effort to be close to a pastor in order to influence the church in a particular direction. Sometimes that direction is ungodly; sometimes it's merely not where God is leading the congregation, and the result is disunity. In this case the friends were very big on reformed theology and wanted us to leave our Baptist heritage behind. This was fine as long as it just meant lively discussions, but the day came when that friend attempted a coup in the deacon board and nearly split the church. They left the church very vocally, taking some families with them. This was not a positive effect, because it worked against unity.

A trustworthy person who affects others positively produces growth in others.

As a teacher, does this person's ministry result in spiritual growth? That growth is a gift from God, but it comes about when a teacher puts together people and the Word of God. Teaching should show faithfulness on the part of the teacher, and growth on the part of the listeners.

And finally, we can trust someone when we see Christ in them.

We see the mark of the cross in their words, their actions and a willingness to serve others as Christ did.

Now it's time to turn the spotlight on ourselves and ask:

IV. Are We Counterfeit Christians?

Here's a simple three question test.

First, Do we bow the knee to God?

I'm not talking about lip service here. I mean that, when an omniscient God looks into our hearts, does he see himself or us on the throne? We can fool others. We cannot fool him.

Second, Do we want respect but not character?

Why do counterfeit Christians even bother to act religious? Because they want the respect and the honor that comes from being trusted. Sometimes that godly veneer masks a brutal marriage, or child abuse, or criminal business practices. We cannot conceal our true nature forever. So if we want the respect that comes from godliness, we'd better have the character to support it.

And third, Do we have remorse or repentance?

Remorse is being sorry for the consequences of what we've done. Repentance is being sorry enough to turn away and stop for good. I recently heard an excellent sermon preached by my brother in law Simon Steer, and this last section draws heavily from his sermon *Denial and Betrayal*.

First, let's think about Judas. Disciple for three years, observer of the power of God, in constant proximity to Jesus. Yet he betrays Christ. And what happens after? Judas suffers from remorse.

“When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,’ he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’” (Matthew 27:3-4)

Judas didn't like the consequences of his act. But he did not truly repent, for if he had, he would have understood that Jesus could forgive even that act. He would not have succumbed to despair.

Peter was different. He had repentance. He, too, was a disciple for three years, in constant proximity to Jesus. Yet early on Peter realized something profound about his companion. When Jesus asked him, “Who do you say that I am?” **Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ.’ (Mark 8:29)**

And the Bible tells us that these are no light words:

“Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Cor. 12:3).

So Peter truly had bowed the knee to God. But later on, in the crisis when Peter was afraid for his own life, he denied ever knowing Jesus. Not once, but three times.

“Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly.” (Matthew 26:74-75)

Just like Judas, Peter had betrayed his relationship with Jesus. Oh, maybe not by selling him, but by not standing up for Jesus in his time of need. But eventually Peter faced the risen Christ again, walking on a beach in Galilee in the early morning. Three times Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?”

“Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’” (John 21:17)

Peter knew that Jesus had the ability to look deep into his heart. And even though Peter’s actions had showed denial, Peter’s heart still showed love. So Jesus forgave and restored him, and Peter was never the same again. He became a man of power and courage, the rock on which the early church rested.

The Bible tells us that there is a difference between worldly sorrow, what we might call remorse, and godly sorrow, or repentance:

“Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.” (2 Cor. 7:10)

So let’s ask ourselves: Do we bow the knee to God? Do we want the respect but not the character? And do we have remorse or repentance? I have one final, simple question for anyone who’s troubled about being a counterfeit Christian: As I look back over the last several years, am I generally making progress in my faith? Sometimes it’s possible to feel defeated in the moment without realizing that we’re feeling bad because our standards are higher, our conscience is more tender, or we’re more responsive to the Spirit than we were in the past. So take heart. Jesus is there, and he will not let us go. We do not have to be counterfeit Christians.

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