

Religious Pretenders

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[0 : 0 0] Alright, so we are continuing on in 2 Timothy, and if you have your Bible, please open it up to 2 Timothy chapter 3. 2 Timothy chapter 3, and we'll be looking at the first nine verses this morning.

And as we come to this part of the letter, up till this point we've been hearing the Apostle Paul giving encouragement and instruction to the younger Timothy about how he should live and about how he should lead in the church there in Ephesus.

And last Sunday we heard Paul calling Timothy to live a holy life, to be set apart for honorable purposes, for the approval and the pleasure of Jesus Christ.

And we saw the contrast that Paul drew there between Timothy and Hymenaeus and Philetus, these false teachers who were causing trouble. And the last thing that we heard Paul say in chapter 2, just in the last couple verses there, was that Timothy is to instruct these opponents gently in the hope that God will grant them repentance and a knowledge of the truth.

And in the hope that they would come to their senses and realize how the devil's been using them. That's pretty sobering stuff. But then as we come into chapter 3, it gets even a little bit more sobering.

[1 : 3 5] Let me read what Paul wrote here in chapter 3. Paul writes, 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.

Slandorous, 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 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.

[2 : 4 8] Just as Janus and Jambres oppose Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. 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. Let's start at the top here.

Paul says, Mark this, quite literally, Know this. That in the last days there will be terrible times. That word terrible, the word used there means troublesome or hard or difficult.

So in the last days there will be difficult times. And then what follows is this lengthy description of the behaviors of people.

All of what makes these times difficult has to do with the behaviors of people, or at least some of it. And before we get to looking at all of these different behaviors that are listed, let's just ask the question, What does Paul mean when he says, In the last days?

[4 : 00] When are the last days? And there's really two main views among Christians about this. View number one is that the last days refers to the period of time between Jesus' first coming and Jesus' second coming.

View number one would say that we are in the last days right now, and have been since Jesus first came 2,000 years ago. Now, before you dismiss this view altogether, consider the following scriptures which refer to the last days.

Think of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. There he stood in Jerusalem, and the Spirit was poured out on the apostles, and some of the people thought that the apostles were drunk, because they were speaking in other languages.

And Paul stands up in the midst of this gathering, and he says this, Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you. Listen carefully to what I say.

These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning. No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. And then he quotes the prophet Joel.

[5 : 10] In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams.

Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. So what's Peter saying to the crowd that day of Pentecost, almost 2,000 years ago?

He's saying that the prophecy that was made by Joel hundreds of years earlier was being fulfilled right now, that day. In other words, in some sense, they were in the last days now.

And there are a few other scriptures we might look to here. Hebrews chapter 1. The writer there says, In the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, at many times and in various ways.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son. And then another one in James chapter 5, verse 3. James, the brother of Jesus, writing, addressing the rich people, says, You rich people, your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes.

[6 : 20] Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. And if you just look at the verb tense there in the context, it's James' writing as if the last days have already begun.

We're in it. And so when we come to 2 Timothy chapter 3, it could be that Paul's not so specifically referring only to those things that happen at the very, very end when Jesus returns or near to when Jesus returns, but that these are the kinds of things that will happen even in Timothy's lifetime, that this whole period is the last days that we're in, the last part of the great story of God.

View number two, of course, is that the last days refers only to the very distant future, to those very few days leading right up to the return of Jesus.

And I'm not going to get into all the different views of the tribulation and the rapture here, but the gist of this view is that the last days is just that period right before Jesus comes.

And most of those, most people who hold to this view would also say that we're right now living in the last days, that that time is very near, and probably would point to this passage in 2 Timothy as the evidence.

[7 : 41] And before we dismiss that view altogether, depending on how you read this, we could read the rest of the prophecy of Joel that Peter cited in Acts chapter 2 on the day of Pentecost.

And we notice there that there's actually more to what Joel said. Not only will I pour out my spirit in the last days, but I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke.

The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. So there's, excuse me, there's this great sign in the heavens which marks the beginning of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

And that sign in the heavens didn't happen on the day of Pentecost. It was also spoken of by Jesus, this sign in the heavens in his sermon or his discourse in Matthew chapter 24.

It's also referred to in Revelation chapter 6, this great sign in the heavens in connection with the final events of our world. So there's this element to Joel's prophecy.

[8 : 51] He spoke of something happening in the last days. There's a sense in which it began then, the outpouring of the Spirit, but it also speaks to the very end when Jesus comes in that great day of the Lord.

I think both of these views can kind of live together. They both have good biblical support and both seem to have some truth to them. The last days seem to have begun with the coming of the last king, Jesus, who will be king of the last kingdom.

And then the last days certainly seem to climax or culminate with his return and the troublesome times that lead up to that. And even as we look at this passage in 2 Timothy, there's another one in Peter.

We'll skip over that one. We see that there's both future and present. But mark this, there will be terrible times or difficult times in the last days.

So that's future language. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, and so on and so forth. Down to verse 9. But they will not get very far. Their folly will be clear to everyone.

[10 : 00] So this is kind of the language of future. But then we also see, very clearly here, the language of the present. After listing out all the things that they will be, Paul says to Timothy, have nothing to do with such people.

Which sort of implies that some of these people may begin to arise and appear even right now in Timothy's day. Now why make such a big deal over this?

The last days. There are many eager to teach and preach on end times and future Bible prophecies who come to these words and they see only one main point.

And the main point is usually that we are in the last days right now. The end is quite imminent, like any moment now.

And how do we know? Because this is what Paul said things would be like in the last days. And look at the world that we live in today. People are like this today, are they not? Therefore we're here. We're at the brink of the very end right now.

[11 : 16] But I wonder if there isn't reason to pause here. Look at this list. These descriptions of how people will be in the last days. Is this how people have been only in the last few hundred years?

Or are these things describing how people have been since Timothy's day? Let's look through this list just a little bit. Skim through it. It says people will be lovers of themselves.

Hasn't that been true for the past 2,000 years? Selfishness and self-centeredness. People will be lovers of money. Is greed only a sin mainly of the 21st century?

People will be boastful and proud. Is that something that we haven't really seen that much before the last couple hundred years? Has there been treachery on earth in the past 2,000 years all the way through?

Yes. How about brutality? Absolutely. Has there been all these things on earth as the norm, as par for the course for the past 2,000 years?

[12 : 25] I mean, I think it just takes a quick skim through a one-volume history of the world from the time Jesus came till now to see that the answer is yes. What about verse 5?

Have there been people having a form of godliness but denying its power? Having an outward appearance of religion and piety yet no real devotion to God?

Well, the past 2,000 years have been full of that. We could point to the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church or the Inquisitions or the Crusades or the great schisms and kings declaring themselves head of the church so they could authorize their own immoral marriages and all kinds of things.

And so actually this passage, at least in my opinion, isn't all that helpful in telling us precisely where we are on God's timeline or just how last are the days that we're in right now.

Now, this warning probably rung just as true to Timothy in his day as it does to us in ours. Paul and other Christians were treated brutally.

[13 : 38] Paul was executed not long after this even though he was innocent along with most of the rest of the apostles. Nero, the emperor, rose to power right around this time and he persecuted the followers of Jesus brutally.

We heard about Hymenaeus and Alexander and Philetus and we're going to hear about Demas, men who claim the name of Jesus and yet are proving to be like the description in these verses as well.

My point here is that I'm not convinced that these are behaviors that specially mark only those days immediately before Christ returns. I think from this description of behaviors that we've been living in the last days since Christ came.

And the purpose of this, I think then, is not to help us see and know that Christ's coming is just right about to happen, but rather to help Timothy know that these kinds of behaviors, even by self-professing believers, are to be expected in the days ahead right up till that final day.

Just to say it a little more clearly, I do think that teachers and preachers should stop using this passage to say, Jesus is almost here because the world has never been as full of this stuff as it is today.

[15 : 00] Now some might say, well, isn't it reasonable to expect that the closer we get to the end, the more like this people will be? And I think that is reasonable.

That's what some of the other passages that talk about the end seem to indicate. But now that still doesn't help us know exactly how close we are.

Is the world very much more like this today than it was 500 years ago? Or are we just more aware of the evil going on in many different places because of the information that's available to us through online news and social media?

Or another question that we might ask, as bad as things seem today, we don't like this thought, but is it possible that things may get even 10 times worse or 10 times more like this in the decades or even centuries ahead?

And so I will not preach from this passage that we're right on the brink of the end. I think sometimes in our eagerness to know the future and in our anticipation for the Lord's return, which we should be anticipating, we get caught up in imagining what the future will be like and whether we're almost there and we can easily miss what this passage is saying.

[16 : 27] What was Timothy meant to understand from this? What benefit do these words have to him in his day? Is there more here than just a dark picture of the world at the end?

And I think to see that, we maybe have to take our end times glasses off a little bit and really seek to see, what were you trying to say, Paul, to Timothy? What is there for him?

And as we do that, I think that there's at least one key to really understanding this passage well. We could start with this question. Is this a general description of how the world will be, the people of the world will be?

Or does Paul have a specific group of people in mind here? We're going to look at some of these qualities in a moment, but let's not miss, I think, the key qualities which identify these people more precisely, which narrow it down for us.

These people will be all of these things, and you can see the list on the screen there. And it probably doesn't mean that every individual will have every single one of these things, but that people will have some or multiple of these behaviors.

[17 : 40] But then there's verse 5, which seems to stand apart as a truth that's representative for the whole lot of them. Whoever these people are, they seem to have this in common.

Having a form of godliness, but denying its power. They have a form of godliness, but it's just a form.

It's an outward appearance, a facade. And this, I think, really brings into focus who these people are that Paul is warning Timothy about.

This is not about the world in general or about unbelievers in general. This is not about how, you know, so many people in our day-to-day are greedy or loveless.

This is very specifically people who have a form of godliness, who claim to be religious or even confess the name of Jesus, yet who deep down inside do not love God and lack the characteristics of holiness that God's people are continually striving for.

[18 : 53] Now, is there any confirmation that this is what Paul has in mind? Well, we could look at what his instruction is to do with these people. He says, have nothing to do with such people.

So are we to ignore everybody in the world because this characterizes our world, does it not? I don't think so. I think that's a little bit of the pointer that this is specifically those who claim to know Jesus, claim to know God, have a form of godliness, but it's not genuine.

We could look to the second half of this passage as well. Paul says, have nothing to do with such people. And then he goes on. He says, they're 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.

They're the kind who are always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. Just as Janus and Jambres oppose Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth.

They are men of depraved minds who as far as the faith is concerned are rejected. So the people whom Timothy is to avoid are these kind of men, the kind who weasel their way into the homes of women who are weak to their wiles.

[20 : 13] These men are infiltrators. They're pretenders. Perhaps in a manner of speaking, sneaking into the church through the back door by charming some of the women.

But are they really believing brothers? It seems like they might be. They're always learning. You can imagine them sitting there in Sunday school enjoying the conversation, the discussion, eager to hear, eager to discuss, but at the end of the day never fully arriving at a knowledge of the truth.

Just like Jonas and Jambres oppose Moses, so they are men who oppose or resist or set against the truth. There is a resistance to just fully embracing it.

God's people and this description I think seems to confirm what we saw earlier. They are people who have a form of godliness but it's only a form. It's an outward appearance.

It's a performance that they're putting on. Now who were Jonas and Jambres? What's the story with them? Well, Jonas and Jambres were never mentioned in the Old Testament by name.

[21 : 22] It's possible that they were among some of the leaders of the Israelites and that they were some of the men who opposed Moses but again, they're not mentioned by name so we don't know.

There was that little dispute with Moses. Does God only speak through you or does he not speak through us also? There were some different names mentioned in that account. perhaps these were who these men are.

Many scholars suggest based on the names themselves that perhaps these were the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses when Moses went to ask Pharaoh to set the people free.

They were able to do some of the same signs it says in Exodus chapter 7 verse 3 and they opposed Moses.

In other words, is God really speaking through this man? No, look, we can do these things too. In either case, I think you see there's that element of religious devotion and also that element of crafty deception and opposing the one who God is really speaking through.

[22 : 32] So this I think is the key throughout this whole passage. It's not just about people in general or unbelievers in general. It seems to be very specifically about people having a form of religion having an appearance of devotion and yet it's false.

If they claim the name of God or Jesus, they're imposters. If they advocate for some other cult or form of religion, they're false teachers. And it really fits well with what Paul has been saying just a minute ago to Timothy, doesn't it?

What was the problem with Hymenaeus and Philetus back in chapter 2 verses 17 and 18? It wasn't that they were full-blown atheists. It was that they were claiming Jesus plus this other special revelation that we've received.

We know that the resurrection has already taken place. We know that eternal life in its final form is attainable right now. And they were leading people astray.

And so I think what Paul is saying here is that even though Timothy is to be able to teach, even though he's to gently instruct his opponents in the hope that they will repent and come to their senses and come to a knowledge of the truth, I think what he's saying is, Timothy, know this.

[23 : 54] You can expect that many, like them, in the days ahead will not. They will not repent. this will be normal. This will be par for the course.

There will be people out there, there will be people even in our midst who are advocating religious ideas and claiming to be devoted to God. They're having a form of religion but they're not people who love God.

And even though they're gently instructed and the truth is shared with them and they love to talk about it and seem like they're learning, they will often oppose, they will often resist it. They will continue teaching falsehood.

They will continue living wickedly. This is what's going to make the days ahead difficult and troublesome. One of the things I noticed in this list is just how often the word love appears.

People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money. They'll be without love, not lovers of the good. They'll be lovers lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

[25 : 03] There's at least two problems here with these religious pretenders. Love is misdirected into all these various things and also the problem that love is just lacking.

Love is misdirected and love is lacking. That's one of the markers of these religious pretenders. They're caught up in loving the wrong things.

Loving themselves. This word essentially means selfish. They just care mainly about themselves and prioritize themselves above all others. And they're lovers of money.

He says, they cherish money and the things it buys. This is just a reference to greed. In fact, this is probably one of the easiest marks of a false teacher to identify is a love of money.

The prosperity preachers of our day do their best to hide their love of money but it's just obvious to those of us who are true followers of Jesus. Why is it that the TV prosperity preacher always ends their episode or broadcast with a plea to support the ministry financially and a promise that God will bless you if you do and on and on and we'll throw in a free gift.

[26 : 23] And if you don't give, if you don't tithe, God won't prosper you. Don't expect him to heal you if you don't first sow your seed of faith by writing that check.

They will be lovers of money. And love is often misdirected towards pleasure. These religious imposters will be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

Notice the contrast here. Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. So it's not that they're, you know, it's not that they're just trying to enjoy the many God-given pleasures of life, the good ones.

No, they love pleasure rather than loving God. They are hedonists. They're living for pleasure. They're just living to scratch the itch of the flesh and its desires, whatever it may be.

It doesn't matter if the pleasure is illicit or immoral. They'll go for that too because they love pleasure and they do not love God. Many of us were shocked to hear in the past few years the full evidence and report of Ravi Zacharias.

[27 : 38] Even though he was a very prominent pastor and ministry leader, it came out, came to light that he'd been concealing a long-term life of sexually immoral behavior, preying upon all kinds of women, engaged in countless acts of sexual immorality.

You can read the full report on Christianity today. These were not occasional falls into temptation, which he repented of. He was constantly, continually through this period, manipulating and coercing women.

He was making threats about what would happen to them spiritually if they didn't comply with what he wanted. It was heartbreaking to read this. Notice in verse 6, they are the kind who are opportunistically taking advantage of women.

It's one of the marks of these religious pretenders. So we see these variety of misdirected loves. They will be marked by these misdirected loves.

And we notice also that they'll just be straight up people without love. See that in verse 3. They will be without love. They'll be lacking in concern for others.

[28 : 51] Cold, hard, indifferent. That's pretty obvious in the way that he was treating those women. How could you do that? Paul says they will not be lovers of the good.

That's kind of a funny phrase in our language. It's kind of the word good-loving, but then he negates it by putting the negative particle on the front. So they're like un-good-loving. They're not people who love what is good.

They're not generous. They're not caring about the common good or the public good of others. Again, a lack of love. They'll be unforgiving, he says.

A loving person forgives. A loving person releases another person from the debt that they owe you or the wrongs they've done to you, just as Jesus has done for us.

But a person who lacks love, they hold a grudge bitterly. They refuse to forgive a wrong despite the many wrongs that they've done to others.

[29 : 57] And ultimately, I think we see here at the bottom, the biggest problem, the massive problem here is that a love for God is what is lacking. Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

They don't love God. I mean, that's shocking to read right beside having a form of godliness. Having a form of godliness, but they don't love God.

So there's a variety of bad fruit that we see that will be normal in the lives of these people who have a form of godliness, but deny its power. We see the misdirected loves, we see the lack of loves, we see in some cases that they'll just be straight up brutal.

Brutal, slanderous, treacherous, disloyal. And we only need to look back in history to see how this has happened in the name of God, in the name of Jesus.

Things like the Crusades. Timothy, these kinds of people, you need to avoid them. Have nothing to do with them.

[31 : 10] Turn away from them. If they don't respond to that gentle instruction with repentance, if they persist in living wicked lives like this, avoid them. They're going to cause hurt and harm to others.

They oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds. And as far as the faith is concerned, Paul says, they're rejected by God. Turn away from them. I think verse 9 is especially helpful for us knowing why Paul is sharing all this with Timothy.

In verse 9 he says, but they will not get very far, because as in the case of those men, their folly will be clear to everyone. So in the long run, in the grand scheme of things, don't worry about these kinds of people, these religious pretenders.

They may have some momentum at the moment. They may gain some following, their teaching may spread, but they will not get very far, because their folly will be clear to everyone.

This is the good news when it comes to false teachers and religious pretenders. Eventually the truth comes out, and all who belong to the Lord truly and believe in his name will see clearly that religious pretenders and false teachers are not true brothers and sisters in the Lord.

[32 : 30] The fruit that's being produced as the norm in their lives betrays their profession. And that's why I think Paul writes all this to Timothy. It's so that he and us might know what are the marks of religious pretenders and false teachers.

Just as Paul said earlier in the letter after naming Hymenaeus and Philetus back in chapter 2 verse 19, everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.

Paul's saying, Timothy, there's going to be more like Hymenaeus and Philetus in the days ahead. What you're seeing now is going to happen a lot. People will be having that outward appearance of godliness, but you'll know that they're imposters and pretenders and crafty deceivers because they will be those who confess the name of the Lord, yet do not turn away from wickedness.

people who live in all manner of sin. Ultimately, you'll know that they're imposters. You'll know that they're pretenders because you'll see the foolish and sinful attitudes and behaviors that mark their ways.

It'll be obvious. The truth will come out. Then when you go and bring that gentle correction or instruction to bear on them, they will resist it. They will oppose it.

[33 : 52] They won't respond. They won't change. And so you, for your part, at that point, must turn away from them and have nothing to do with them. And so I believe this passage is here not so much to help us discern the times in which we live, but to help us discern the people, the teachers, the influencers in our day.

Are they genuine or are they imposters? Finally, these words are a good reminder of how we are to be different as true followers of Jesus, of how we're to be set apart and holy.

I mean, look at this list, these descriptions. It's an awful description, but now flip them the other way around. This is what the true follower of Jesus looks like. Not a lover of themselves, but lover of others.

Not a lover of money. Greedy, but content. Not boastful and proud, but humble. Not ungrateful, but grateful.

Obedying their parents. Holy, loving, forgiving, speaking the truth about others. Self-controlled, gentle, loving what is good.

[35 : 12] Loyal, and ultimately at the bottom there, loving God more than anything else. may the Lord work powerfully within us to make this so in our lives.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this sobering warning, and we know that you're coming.

We know, Jesus, that your return is soon. You said so in your word. Lord, we do look out at our world with alarm, and it is hard to live in a world that is full of these things, and we know that before we came to know you and believe in your name and were saved, we participated.

And so we thank you for the encouragement and assurance you give us. We thank you that at the end of everything, those that you have called and chosen will not be ultimately led astray and deceived and missed the way.

So long as we keep our eyes on you, Jesus, and we ask that you'd help us to do that, to stay fixed on you, to love you more than anything else, more than life itself.

[36 : 23] Do that in us, we pray, and show through us your goodness and your grace to the world. In Jesus' name, amen.