

Godlessness and Godliness in the Last Days

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 28th of January 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Godlessness and Godliness in the Last Days and is from 2 Timothy 3.1-9.

Almighty God, we pray indeed that as your word works within us, that our response to you may not be just an outward form of godliness with words alone, but rather transformed and renewed lives, a sacrifice for Christ. Amen.

Please turn to page 967, if you are to the passage of 2 Timothy 3. And as I said at the beginning, this is continuing our sermon series through this letter.

Next week there's a break because Chris Mitchell will be preaching and then we'll continue and finish this series over the three weeks that follow after next week. Well, the news we hear on TV and radio and in the newspapers each day is rather mixed.

[1 : 22] We hear the crime is on the increase and there are endless accounts of various crimes reported, but then from time to time it's mixed with acts of bravery and courage, generosity and love.

We hear reports of family breakdowns and strife. And yet from time to time there is news of poignant family reunions, acts of great family love and unity and sacrifice.

We hear news of houses broken into or vandalised and destroyed. And yet from time to time there are news items of acts of great honesty, where maybe some treasure or wealth has been found and returned to its rightful owner.

On the one hand it seems that there is a descent into barbarism in our society. We could pick up a book like Lord of the Flies and see the story of boys on an island where in the end they kill one of their number and think that to some extent society is like that.

And yet on the other hand we see stories or pick up a book or see a film that talks about the highest and noblest of the human spirit, where a baddie becomes a goodie is transformed by some act of love or sacrifice.

[2 : 40] When we see such mixed news accounts, does it make us think that society is getting better or worse? Do we think we're on a downhill ride or are we going up, progressing as a society?

More particularly though, are people getting better or worse? Often people bemoan the next generation, they think their children or grandchildren's generation is worse than theirs.

That's not a new phenomenon. Socrates did the same well over 2,000 years ago. For some they think that the modern age has been an age of great progress and certainly there's technological progress, educational progress, health and hygiene progress in many parts of this world.

And in many ways we'd have to say that the gains of modernity have added a lot to our society and improved society in many ways. But on the other hand, there is also evidence of a deterioration into some forms of depravity, decline in moral standards and society's values.

For some people, this decline is associated with the coming of the end times, as though somehow it's a sign that society and history is winding up before Jesus returns or there's a great big bang or something like that.

[4 : 11] I think probably throughout society, we could map waves and currents, ups and downs, cycles and trends, improvements, but deterioration over time as well. Society does go up and down.

As society's laws and structures and institutions and values get modified and changed, then society may get better or it may get worse.

But they tend to be trends and cycles rather than long-term progressions, I think. But underneath all of those waves and cycles and ups and downs, human nature remains fundamentally the same.

Sometimes society gives it more freedom and liberation, but often actually that leads to bad things because there's opportunity to do bad as well as good. Sometimes society's strictness and limits actually produce good things because they limit the evils that people can perpetrate.

But underneath all those trends and changes and institutional values and structures, human nature remains fundamentally the same. From St Paul's Day to ours to the end of history, human beings are basically the same.

[5 : 28] Now, yes, there are noble and good parts of human nature. We see stories of honourable and noble people doing great and generous and sacrificial and loving acts.

But also there is a very strong sense in which human nature inclines towards bad things, evil things.

That's the context with which Paul is writing to Timothy here. Sometimes we hear it said that the end times are yet to come in the future.

Sometimes Christian books sometimes or preachers or newspaper articles will try to get us to think that some cataclysmic event is the harbinger of the end times, that Jesus is about to return.

And maybe when we begin to read 2 Timothy 3, we could get a sense that Paul anticipated that. He writes, you must understand this, that in the last days, distressing times will come.

[6 : 29] And if we stop there, we could be excused for thinking Paul is talking about something well into the future, beyond his lifetime, maybe beyond Timothy's lifetime, that distressing times will come in the future.

They're the end days, the last days. Something yet to arrive. But when we keep reading this paragraph, we realise that that's not what Paul had in mind. Paul has in mind that these end days that will come have actually come already, that the distressing times are here.

And he gives reason for that in verses 2 and onwards. He talks to Timothy about how to respond to the end times and the last days. What Paul is doing here is explaining why for Timothy, ministry and Christian living is hard.

Why it's tough. Why it's distressing. It's because the end times have arrived. And as Paul lived in them, and as Timothy lived in them, so too do we. They've already come.

Don't be conned by Christian thinking that something's yet to happen before the end times arrive. They've arrived already. Strictly speaking, when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, from that day onwards, the end times are here and we're part of them as Paul was and as Timothy was.

[7 : 44] But what Paul is saying to Timothy here is because this is the end times, in similar ways to how Jesus described it, say in Mark's Gospel, chapter 13, and other places, expect opposition, expect immorality, expect heresy, expect opposition to the Gospel, expect people to do bad things, expect persecution.

We shouldn't be surprised when it happens, Timothy, because it's part of the big picture. From the time of Jesus' resurrection and ascension onwards, we are in those end times.

So expect distress and strife. He goes on then to describe what is causing this distress and strife.

He says, distressing times will come because, verse 2 begins, for because, people will be like this. That's why distressing times are come. And then he gives a long list of 18 features of human nature that make rather sober and sombre reading indeed.

As much as it was accurate in the description of Paul's day, the height of the Roman Empire and all its good things that it brought, it is also an accurate description of our own day as well.

[8 : 59] Bracketing the list of 18 descriptions of human character are descriptions of love. People, he says, will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, and then at the end of verse 4, at the end of the list, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

In the end, the basic issue here is what or whom do people love? And the options are lovers of self, money, and pleasure, or lovers of God.

And by and large, this list of human nature is telling us that people basically do not love God, but love themselves, and wealth, and pleasure.

Now we see that in our society, that largely people love themselves. They spend an inordinate amount of money and time and effort, as well as fantasy, pandering to their egos and their desires and their comforts and their needs and wants.

People are largely selfish, seek to be self-sufficient, seek to be independent, and even those people who haven't got it all together and wallow in depression are often actually exhibiting self-pity, which is a different form, a perverse form of self-love as well.

[10 : 22] Indeed, even when people love other people, their love for others is actually a reflection of self-love because their love for others is because of what they'll get out of, the relationship in which they're trying to express some love for somebody else.

Sometimes I see that in couples preparing for marriage. They come and they talk about their love for each other. But there are times when I wonder really, is this a love that is selfless and giving for this other person?

Or is it as sometimes I suspect rather, I love this person because of what I get out of this relationship. This person makes me feel good. This person makes me feel important. This person adds to my desires and my wants and my needs.

Sometimes even love for another person is a distortion that is really self-love as well. Human beings are largely lovers of self.

They're also largely lovers of money. Don't be conned into thinking that rich people alone love money. So do poor people. You can read *The Great Gatsby* and see a rich man who loved money.

[11 : 29] But you can read Angela's Ashes and see that poor Frank McCourt was also a lover of money indeed. And so our society is typified by materialism, by the pursuit of wealth and status that comes from it and therefore it's greedy and covetous.

Every advertisement on television or in a magazine is pandering to our covetous desires. You can see it in the *Tatts* Lotto frenzy when there's a super jackpot draw. You can see it in the way that people are changing jobs not because of the satisfaction or the service that the job provides but sometimes because of the more money that the next job will offer.

And so the cathedrals of our materialistic wealth loving society are no longer churches but are the shopping towns of the different suburbs or the casinos.

And the Bible of those who love wealth has become the financial review or the all ordinaries index or the real estate guide telling them how much their property is enhanced in value and how much they could now sell it for and go up in the world further.

Now often such love for money is also cloaked or deceived under different goals. Some people say well I'm actually trying to accumulate wealth because I want to provide for my children and my children's children and my wife or my husband and our needs and our future and our retirement and all this sort of thing.

[12 : 53] And it sounds very noble but sometimes such desires cloak love of money. As Jesus said very bluntly you cannot serve God and money and this list describing people here makes the same point in a slightly different way.

Lovers of self lovers of money and the end of the list has lovers of pleasure. Now often these people are one and the same. People who love themselves are often lovers of wealth and lovers of pleasure at the same time.

They're not necessarily in exclusive three different groups. Sometimes it's describing the one and the same person. But certainly in our age enjoy yourself and have fun is more and more the motto.

How often do you hear it said to somebody often a grandparent to a grandchild so long as you enjoy yourself that's what matters. My grandmother said that to me when I said I was going to be ordained.

She's got no idea what it's like being ordained. It's not about whether you enjoy yourself whether I'm talking about me but any situation.

[14 : 04] You see for so many people enjoyment has become the God that they serve. Having fun another thrill enjoying yourself takes away our service of other people takes away our perseverance through difficulty and the gains that that might bring us.

Now the religion of pleasure or lovers of pleasure is called hedonism and it's what many people are on about young and old for that matter. Now often associated with hedonism and the love of pleasure is the escape from pain.

That's why escapist films and books are often so captivating because they take us out of our pain and our humdrum world to a world of pleasure and excitement and fantasy.

That's why drugs and alcohol are so enticing for people because it's all about pleasure and thrills and excitement and the dulling of pain. That's why in a hedonistic world euthanasia becomes more and more on the agenda of society.

That's why people are so engrossed with TV programs that take them to desert islands and foreign places and holiday travel escaping from a life that is humdrum perhaps painful and dreary to one of excitement and adventure and fun.

[15 : 20] They say that the me generation is only in the last few decades but they got it wrong. The me generation began centuries ago. The lovers of self the lovers of wealth and the lovers of pleasure.

That's the me generation and it's not new. Now what is bracketed by those descriptions of what you love are results or consequences of that by and large.

You see a lover of self will be a person who is as the list continues in verse 2 a boaster somebody who's arrogant or proud. If you love yourself you don't want anything to destroy your reputation and what you think about yourself and what you think other people should think about yourself.

So you become arrogant and proud you boast about your achievements and what you do. And if you're a lover of self then relationships will be fractured and break down because your primary concern is yourself not another.

And so what we see in this list are descriptions of what people who are lovers of themselves lovers of wealth and lovers of pleasure will actually be like. At some sense the list is a bit difficult to take and hard to swallow.

[16 : 30] It may not be that every single person is characterised by every single description but on the whole is a generalisation. There is great truth here about what people are like.

So lovers of self wealth and pleasure will not only be boasters and arrogant but they'll be abusive. That is in their speech against another person.

They won't be sympathetic to another person. They'll be putting down other people so that they can build themselves up for example. They'll be disobedient to their parents not something that's just new for our children's age at the moment but something that's typical of society throughout the centuries.

That is they'll be disrespectful of other people. They won't be loving their parents and submitting to their authority. Because it's a lover of self and pleasure, parents can be sidelined.

I mean the same could be said of the way parents relate to children as well. They'll be ungrateful which may be in the specific context of being ungrateful to their parents but ungrateful generally. You see selfish self-centred people will often be ungrateful because they don't think that anybody has given them something they don't owe that rather the world and others owe them.

[17 : 38] So when you get something, well you don't want to be grateful for it because you deserve it or earn it or you think you should have it. So ingratitude becomes a feature of people who love themselves and wealth and pleasure.

They'll be unholy Paul says. Maybe not strictly speaking in a spiritual sense, maybe the word has got a broader sense of just being disrespectful to God and maybe to other people as well is perhaps how that word is used.

He then says they'll be inhuman, slightly ironic I guess because this is such a typical description of humanism but actually they'll be inhuman. They'll be offending against the basic decencies of life.

They'll be trampling over other people in order to gain for themselves pleasure, wealth and their own ego being pandered. So in effect when he says inhuman he's actually saying in a sort of unloving, without sympathy, without affection, without care for other people.

people. But then the list perhaps in a sense deteriorates further. They'll be implacable. That is they'll be unable and unwilling to be reconciled.

[18 : 45] Not only will lovers of self-wealth and pleasure fracture relationships and divide but they will be refusing to get back together. They'll be unwilling to be reconciled or placated from broken relationships.

Not only do they break them but they insist on keeping them broken in the end as well. That is they'll be unforgiving, merciless people. There are plenty like that around.

Then they'll be slanderers. Maybe not strictly in a legal sense, maybe in a gossipy sense. You know, did you hear about so and so and what she said and what she did or what she was wearing? Sort of behind the back trying to bring down people's reputation, trying to sort of sow seeds of discord in relationships, trying to break relationships between other people.

That's what slanderers are about. Lovers of self, lovers of wealth, lovers of pleasure are like that. They'll be profligates, people without any discipline or restraint.

Morally, probably is the sense here. That is, they'll just do whatever they like. There's no self-control, no self-discipline, no moral guidelines for them. And then Paul says they'll be brutes.

- [19 : 58] You might think, oh, who would that be describing? That's a fairly harsh description of somebody. It certainly is. Somebody who's uncivilised, somebody who's untamed, somebody who's impolite is perhaps behind that sort of word.

And then he says they'll be haters of good. It's hard to imagine people being haters of good and yet actually it's all too common. You see, we think most of society probably likes what is good, but not necessarily so.

You see, if somebody loves them self and wealth and pleasure and they therefore serve them self and wealth and pleasure, good things will often get in the way of doing that service.

And you become not somebody who's just indifferent to what's good, but actually you hate the good because it curbs your love of wealth and pleasure and your love of yourself.

And so, as Paul says, you're a hater of good. You'll become actually fixed on what is evil as you serve yourself wealth and pleasure. The list continues.

- [21 : 04] It's fairly unrelenting. You almost need a tea break in the middle. He then says they are treacherous. That is, they're betrayers. They're people who are disloyal to other people.

They're employer, they're wife, they're spouse, they're children, they're parents, they're friends, they're acquaintances. They might say one thing, but then to another person they'll say the complete opposite. That is, they'll do whatever they like.

They're not actually interested in serving and being a person of integrity for somebody else's sake, but rather because they love themselves, they'll say whatever they like. They can be treacherous.

They betray their friends and their colleagues and their family in the end. That is, it's all about broken relationships because self is on the throne. And then they're reckless.

Not reckless in the sense of a young L plate or P plate driver sort of driving blindly around too fast at night or something like that. But reckless in the sense of not stopping at anything to gain what you desire.

- [22 : 04] That is, if you serve yourself and wealth and pleasure, that's your goal. That's your God. And so you'll do whatever you can to serve that. You'll be reckless in that pursuit and anything that will get in the way you will knock over or clear out in the end.

And finally at the end of this list, swollen with conceit. Yes, Paul's already said they're boasters and arrogant, but this perhaps portrays it a little bit more vividly.

You know those pictures of frogs that somehow puff up their cheeks? That's the sort of picture here. Somebody who's swollen with conceit. They're overflowing, puffed up with pride. That's the sort of picture that Paul is portraying in a very vivid expression, puffed up with self-importance and self-grandeur.

Now this is a devastating critique of what people are like. And though there is a remnant of goodness that surfaces from time to time in many people, if not most, it nonetheless is a fairly reasonable description of our world, is it not?

It's a damning indictment of human nature. And no wonder times are distressing for Timothy. No wonder times are tough for Christian ministry. No wonder times are hard for the Christian church, whether it's Ephesus in the 60s AD or it's us in the 21st century.

- [23 : 33] Now you might think that's a hard description of society, but let me tell you the punchline is now to come. verse 5 is the sting in the tail. This is not a description of the world out there alone.

It is not a description from within the confines of a holy huddle of a church saying, look at the world out there, that's what it's like. Verse 5 tells us that the world is in the church, has infiltrated the church.

And that's where this passage hits us hardest. That's why the opposition for Timothy is so hard. That's why life for Christians is so hard.

Because it's not the world out there so much as the world in here, corroding faith, attacking faith, weakening the gospel and compromising love for God.

What we find in verse 5, Paul says, they hold to the outward form of godliness but deny its power or reality.

[24 : 40] This is not unlike Jesus' words to Pharisees when he accused them of being outwardly very religious but inwardly empty in effect.

Paul is saying there is an outward form of godliness of these people. They look respectable. They even look religious. They look Christian. They might claim to be Christian but it's just an outward shell, an outward formal veneer.

They're like one of those cicada shells that the children sometimes find around here in the trees. The living animal's gone. It looks like an animal but all it is is a fragile, hollow shell and it's dead inside.

And that's what Paul is saying here. This is not a description of the world out there alone but it's a description too of religious, even Christian claiming people.

But their Christian claims are really just an outward form of godliness that is a paper veneer over all those other characteristics in verses 2 to 4.

[25 : 46] You see, people may love themselves and yet still warm a pew every Sunday morning or evening. People may well love money and yet they still have giving envelopes for their local church.

There'll be people who slander each other during the week and yet in church will extend a greeting of peace to the one whom they've slandered. There are people who are very arrogant and yet are quite happy to kneel in public prayer.

There are people who are profligates and yet they urge the church to be cautious and restrained. There are people who are very unforgiving brutes and yet they'll say their confession as loudly as the person next to them in a pew.

There are people who are haters of good and yet they serve in church leadership and ministry. There are people who are swollen with conceit and they're involved on rosters or committees in churches.

There are people who love pleasure and they come to church because they find it pleasurable but they quickly grumble when the gospel takes over.

[27 : 01] You see there are lovers of self and lovers of wealth and lovers of pleasure who inhabit the churches of our countries of our world in every age. But their service to God is just lip service really.

It's an outward form of godliness but a denial of the power and reality of the gospel. Paul says to Timothy avoid them.

Shun them. Keep out from them. Keep distinct from them. Even though they're in your churches it's not the world out there. But they're in the church in Ephesus.

Avoid them. And they're doing great damage in the church in Ephesus. They're exercising some sort of teaching and preaching ministry as heretics presumably. That's what Paul goes on to say in verse 6.

If the description of 2 to 5 is godlessness in the last days now we get a description of godless ministry in the last days. And it's firstly ministry that's very manipulative. For among them are those who make their way into households.

[28 : 05] Literally who worm their way. Creep their way. Sort of sidle into households. Underhandedly. And captivate silly women. Overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

Now don't get your backs up and think Paul's being very sexist here. In his day women were uneducated by and large. They'd be home during the day by and large. And they were easy prey therefore for teachers.

It may be why in 1 Timothy Paul is so anxious that women are not teaching in the church. So these women are not silly because they're women. They're silly because he says they are overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires.

You see what makes these women vulnerable to false teaching and manipulative ministry is that they haven't appropriated the gospel for themselves. That is they've denied its reality and power as he says in verse 5.

That is they're not forgiven. They're overwhelmed by their sins and their burdens. They feel guilty. They feel unclean. They're wanting to try some new method of getting right with God.

[29 : 15] Some salvation. And so they're vulnerable to every whim and every novelty that comes their way from people who sidle up to them and try to promise them something they can't deliver. Whenever I get a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon or somebody like that at my doorstep I say to them along the lines of what can you offer me that Jesus has not already done for me.

Now they don't come to my doorstep very often. Although one did just last week astonishingly knowing it was a church vicarage. And there's no answer to that.

They can't offer anything that Jesus has not already done for me. But you see if we're not convinced that Jesus' death has brought us forgiveness from our sins and eased the burden of guilt and promised us and assured us of heaven life with him then we'll be vulnerable to any manipulative preacher.

The gospel you see makes us not silly. The gospel liberates us from being manipulated and diverted into untruth and heresy. But these women have not appropriated and understood it.

Not only is this ministry manipulative but it's also opposed to the truth. And Paul uses an example here from the book of Exodus. He says as Janus and Jambres they're the two Egyptian magicians in Exodus 7 though they're not named there but in Jewish history by Paul's day it was well known that that's what their names were supposed to be.

[30 : 41] They're the Egyptian magicians who were able to do some of the things that Moses did but only the first couple and then they had to stop and say hey there's something more here than we've got. As Janus and Jambres opposed Moses so these people of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith also opposed the truth.

But then Paul reassures Timothy they will not make much progress because as in the case of those two men those two magicians who stopped after the second plague their folly will become plain to everyone.

These words are sobering words indeed and we disregard them at our peril. We must assess ourselves in the light of these descriptions here.

Are we like verses two to four individually and as a church? To what extent are we people who love ourselves and love wealth and love pleasure but not God? Because that's the contrast in the end.

At the end of this list Paul says you're lovers of self, wealth, pleasure or God. For all their outward piety they're actually opposed to God's gospel.

[31 : 53] No lover of self will suffer for the gospel as Paul was doing and he urged Timothy to be willing to do. No lover of money will be poor for Christ's sake as Paul was wallowing in a Roman jail.

No lover of pleasure will do as Paul urged in the previous chapter to shun youthful desires. You see in the end lovers of self, wealth and pleasure are ashamed of the Christian gospel.

And if anything characterises this letter as we've seen in recent weeks it is do not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ. In many respects the weakness of the western church around the world is due to its compromised love.

It might like God but it loves itself. It tolerates people but it doesn't love them. It loves money but it's not enough to give it away for gospel causes.

And it loves pleasure. So church becomes a form of entertainment and not gospel ministry. The distressing times of Ephesus in the 60s AD are so similar to today.

[33 : 02] But God allows no uncompromised love. Time and again in scripture he says of us that we are to love him alone with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

And our neighbour as ourself. So in these last and distressing days whom or what do you love? Self?

Wealth? Pleasure? Or God? Let's pray. Lord, take my life and make it holy thine.

Fill my poor heart with thy great love divine. Take all my will, my passions, self and pride. I now surrender, Lord. In me abide.

Amen.