



Times of Difficulty

Series: 2 Timothy: The Final Charge From a Faithful Apostle

2 Timothy 3:1-17

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I don't know if you have seen the movie about the Revolutionary War called "The Patriot." Mel Gibson played the character of Benjamin Martin, a fictional character that is a compilation of such men as Francis Marion, Elijah Clarke, Thomas Sumter, Daniel Morgan and Andrew Pickens. There is a scene in the early part of the movie where the South Carolina legislature is considering whether to commit to the Revolution and to call up a militia. There is a great deal of debate, but one of the most memorable exchanges takes place between Martin and Colonel Harry Burwell.

Benjamin Martin: I have 7 children. My wife is dead. Now who is to care for them if I go to war?

Colonel Harry Burwell: Wars are not fought only by childless men.

Benjamin Martin: Granted, but mark my words, this war will be fought not on the frontier or on some distant battlefield, but amongst us, among our homes. Our children will learn of it with their own eyes and the innocent will die with the rest of us.

I recount that scene to you because it is very applicable to the text that we are looking at this morning. As we have seen throughout this book, Paul expresses concern for the war against the gospel, against the truth of God that he sees ongoing in this world. But it is a war that is not merely fought out in the public arena of ideas. It is not a war fought only in university classrooms or online in blogging forums. It is a war that is being contested even within the professing church. It is a battle that affects not only pastors or leaders, not only the strong in the Lord in the local churches, but the weak as well. The war isn't just out there; it is being brought to us. Paul wanted Timothy to understand, the church in Ephesus to understand and for us to understand that there is a war going on, a war for our very souls and souls of our children and it is being fought on a number of fronts. This is not a time for making truces; it is a

time for vigilance and action. Paul is going to speak to us, yet again, about this war because it is of such importance and he begins by describing

The Difficulty of the Last Days (1) Paul tells Timothy, “But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.” (2 Timothy 3:1, ESV) Now you have to understand, as we look at this, that Paul is not envisioning some days far off in the future that Timothy may or may not be around to see. The way that the phrase “last days” is used here is speaking of the entire range of time between the first and the second advent of Christ. It is the timeframe that has been inaugurated with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and which will continue until the day “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:7–10, ESV) We are in the last days even now.

And what Paul is saying to Timothy and to us is that there are going to be times, literally the sense is occasions and seasons, that will be particularly perilous, painful, hard to navigate -- times that will be hard to bear, when our professions of faithfulness and allegiance to Christ, above all others, will be particularly tested and tried. Timothy is not to be surprised by this, but to expect it and to make himself prepared for it. Just like a soldier expects to be shot at in combat, or a football player expects the possibility of injury, or a pilot expects that there could be a mechanical failure while he is flying, so Timothy must be realistic about walking with Christ in this evil age. It will be exceedingly difficult and trying at times. Not that there will not be exceedingly great joys. There will be – joys unspeakable, joys to be treasured, deep and lasting joys. But there will also with them come times of severe testing. It’s not a sign that Timothy or the church is doing something wrong, it is just part of walking with Christ in an evil world. Timothy is to understand that and not be surprised by it. And then Paul explains why. He speaks to Timothy of

The People Who Make the Days So Difficult (2-5) Paul says that there will be perilous times and in using Greek word that is translated here as “for”, he makes it evident that the reason for these difficult days are the very people that he describes next. There is a connection between these kinds of people and the difficulties he will face. He says: “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy,

heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.” (2 Timothy 3:2–5, ESV)

Paul tells Timothy that there are going to be people that will at times make life for him and for the church very difficult and the fundamental reason that they will make it so is because of their misplaced affections. They will be lovers of self...rather and than lovers of God. These two phrases form the bookend to this catalog of sins, these sinful defects and behaviors Paul explained. That they love themselves supremely rather than loving God is the root of all that Paul describes. Let’s look at this and get the picture that Paul is painting for us. Again the first phrase that he uses to describe these troublemakers is that they are:

Lovers of self – This is the fundamental problem of fallen man, self-idolatry, the love of self above all else and all others. These people love themselves supremely and see everyone else in relation to their own selfish interests. It is the worst form of idolatry. It denies God the worship He is due and places a rival god, oneself, on the throne. These people, Paul says, are supremely devoted to themselves – not Christ, not the church, not the family of God – but themselves. They are, as well...

Lovers of money – This one flows naturally from the first. It describes a love for stuff, for wealth, for that which makes their own life easier. It doesn’t mean that they are rich, it just means that they are discontent with God’s provision and are always seeking to accumulate more and more to please themselves.

Proud – This is a word that speaks of someone who makes more of himself or herself than objective reality justifies, someone who makes more of himself than he should, who promises more than he can perform, who is pretentious and thinks far more highly of himself than reality warrants. Hand in hand, Paul says, they are

Arrogant – This speaks of someone who is boastful, even in a round-about humble brag kind of way. It speaks of someone who is haughty and self-important and who holds others in contempt, believing himself to be far more advanced spiritually than others.

Abusive – This follows from the last one. Because he is arrogant, he is dismissive in his speech about others. Oftentimes, this kind of speech is veiled in false and faint praise, but always followed with some disparaging words that effectively negate that praise. It is an unhealthy, unwholesome, unchristian spirit.

Disobedient to parents – It may seem strange that this is on the list, but it shows us a couple of things. First, these people of whom Paul is writing, do not belong to just one certain age group. But even more, this points to a fundamental problem in these people. They disregard sound instruction and proper authority of their parents, but it doesn't stop there. It is indicative of rebelliousness to authority all together. Specifically the word used here speaks of disobedience to God and to the authority structures that He has in place beginning with the most basic. If you can reject the authority of your parents, whom God has given you for your good, then you can reject the authority of everybody else.

Ungrateful – This speaks of a real lack of thankfulness for the expressions of God's grace in Christ through the sacrifice and kindness of other people. They are not grateful as they should be simply because they believe that they deserve whatever goodness they experience. It is the root of the entitlement mentality so pervasive in our culture today. They simply do not know how to be grateful.

Unholy – The idea behind this word is that they are not devoted to God, not truly. Their actions are not characterized by devotion to God and to a consecration to Him for his purposes. Rather, they use God or other people for their own personal benefit.

Heartless – This just means that they are lacking in the natural affection that ought to be present in a family or in the household of God. Being without normal affection, they are able to cut people off, to dehumanize others, and to feel no real or lasting remorse or pain in doing it.

Unappeasable – They are implacable, unbending and cruel – unwilling to seek reconciliation. They set impossible conditions for resolution and then withhold their affections and fellowship. Nothing will satisfy them, even when their demands are met they are still unwilling to seek

peace and reconciliation. They are absent the spirit of mercy that should characterize the person who has encountered and experienced the mercy of God in Christ.

Slanderous – This is descriptive of a person who is filled with gossip and unsubstantiated claims, those who speak evil of others with no biblical basis and with the desire to injure or destroy the one being spoken about. This is a strong word – diabolos – devilish. The idea is of subtle and deliberate destruction of another’s motives and character as Satan did, concerning God, with Eve in the Garden of Eden. Whether it is to promote their own agenda, or out of jealousy, or simply to vent their anger, they will damage reputations and destroy lives.

Without self-control – This speaks of someone who is mastered by the flesh and not restrained by love for God or love for others. It is especially evident in those who use the grace of God as license for sin. They do what seems right in their own sight.

Brutal – This speaks of one who is wild and untamed, who is looking to destroy, maim or kill – either with words, cold and heartless actions, or real violence. In this context, it speaks of those who through their words or actions seek to injure the church of God.

Not loving good – This speaks of someone who is set against what God approves – either what is morally approved or people who are approved by God. They are set against what is good and right and proper.

Treacherous – Someone who is a traitor, a betrayer of trust and love. It speaks of someone who treats the trust and love of another with contempt and cruelty and devalues another’s sacrificial love on their behalf.

Reckless – It speaks of someone who acts rashly, without thinking or caring about the consequences of their actions for themselves, their family, or the family of God.

Swollen with conceit – This is the idea of being highminded and insanely self-assured. It speaks of the one who is exceedingly proud in his heart and regards his own wisdom as the measure of things, someone who sees themselves as the measure of truth.

Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – They are carnal, living for fleshly satisfaction, given over to the pursuit of earthly pleasure and enjoyment as their highest longing rather than having God as the highest love and motivation of their lives – His glory, His pleasure, His approval, His worth – loving Him supremely.

This is a terrible list indeed and these sorts of people in the world makes living in this fallen world difficult indeed. But what makes this particularly stressful, painful and difficult to navigate, Paul says, is that these are people who are within the professing church, those who claim fellowship with God through the blood of Christ. These are people whom Paul describes as: “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.” (2 Timothy 3:5, ESV)

What makes these sorts of people such a hardship on the body of Christ is that they have the appearance of godliness. They have the apparent form of godliness, the shadow of it, but it is all a show, all external and not reality. They will join the church, they will be baptized, attend the services, sing and pray and give and go through the motions, but their hearts will not be in it. They put on a good front, but in their motives, their thought lives, and their personal relationships, they are not godly people. They are convincing and able to fool real believers for a time, but by their very actions, they deny the Christ whom they claim to follow. Paul speaks of these kinds of people when he writes to Titus saying, “To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.” (Titus 1:15–16, ESV)

They have the appearance of godliness, but they deny its power. What is the power of godliness they deny? I can do no better than what Charles Spurgeon said. He said: “God himself is the power of godliness, The Holy Spirit is the life and force of it. Godliness is the power which brings a man to God, and binds him to Him. Godliness is that which creates repentance towards God, and faith in him. Godliness is the result of a great change of heart in

reference to God and his character. Godliness looks towards God, and mourns its distance from him; godliness hastens to draw nigh, and rests not till it is at home with God. Godliness makes a man like God. Godliness leads a man to love God, and to serve God; it brings the fear of God before his eyes, and the love of God into his heart. Godliness leads to consecration, to sanctification, to concentration. The godly man seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and expects other things to be added to him. Godliness makes a man commune with God, and gives him a partnership with God in his glorious designs; and so it prepares him to dwell with God forever. Many who have the form of godliness are strangers to this power, and so are in religion worldly, in prayer mechanical, in public one thing, and in private another. True godliness lies in spiritual power, and as they are without this, they are dead while they live.”

What is the source of this power of godliness? It is nothing less than the cross of Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us this very plainly in 1 Corinthians, where he says, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18, ESV) It is the denial of the word of the cross that constitutes this kind of Christianity without Christ, godliness without God, spirituality without the Spirit. The word of the cross is that which puts to death the natural life -- denies self, in other words. Jesus tells us what is required to receive the word of the cross: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:24–25, ESV) Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20, ESV) Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “When Jesus calls a man to follow Him, He bids him to come and die.” That is what is fundamentally missing from the people that Paul is describing – dying to self – to self-love and self-idolatry. They may be able to act the part for a while -- but the power of godliness, the power of the cross, the power of death to self and the grace of life in Christ is missing and because it is, they pose a great threat to the spiritual health and power of the entire church.

Paul’s directive to Timothy and to us, then, is equally clear. Avoid such people. Steer clear of them. Do not make your life with them. The idea is “to make yourself turn away.” Avoid such people and here’s why, because of

Their Proselytizing Zeal (6-9) Their ungodliness loves company. Paul says, “For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 3:6–7, ESV) Now understand what Paul is doing here. He is giving to Timothy an

example, not an exhaustive one. The influence of such people is not limited to women; he is simply using the way that some prey on weak women as an example to illustrate the common way that they proselytize others.

Paul says that these sorts of people creep into their households. Their idea is that they cloak themselves, disguise themselves and insinuate themselves into people's lives without people ever knowing what they are really up to. Their goal is to capture their prey as in war, to take control over them and influence them either by force or deception. They focus on the weak – those who are not strong in their spirit, not well established in the faith, not strong in the Lord, whose hearts and minds have not been sufficiently formed by the Word of God and as a result are not discerning. They focus on those who are burdened by the weight or guilt of sin that is weighing them down, those influenced by sins they have not fully dealt with before the Lord, who are led astray by passions and desires that are not of the Lord. They focus on those who are always learning – who are willing to hear anything that sounds spiritual, that seems as if it has a kernel of truth, but because they are undiscerning and willing to hear and consider anything, they never come to an experiential knowledge of the truth, capital T. They target people whom they see as weak, in this case women, and seek to take them captive to ungodliness like their own.

Paul says, “Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.” (2 Timothy 3:8, ESV) He likens them to Jannes and Jambres. Jewish tradition identified these guys as the magicians who opposed Moses when he came to Pharaoh's court. They were able even to approximate some of the miracles of God that Moses performed. But they were fakers, false religious men who opposed the truth of God, and were eventually proven to perverse and depraved in their minds and tested and proven worthless as it regards the truth of God. But Timothy is not to despair and neither are we, because Paul tells us what will be the ultimate result. He says:

“But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.” (2 Timothy 3:9, ESV) Some will indeed fall prey to these false brethren, but ultimately, they will be exposed by their own lives, it will become very evident and quite obvious to the faithful that these false brethren are just that – false. But understand this, Paul's purpose in these words was not merely to identify these people as the reason for the difficult and trying times in which Timothy would find himself. It was to send to Timothy the clear message...

Take Heed, Lest You Too Fall (10-17) Paul wrote to the Corinthians this warning about growing complacent in Christ that we find in 1 Corinthians: ““For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” (1 Corinthians 10:1–12, ESV) That is a serious warning that is applicable to all of us and it is the same sort of warning, mixed with affirmation and encouragement that Paul is giving to Timothy and to us. Not only do we need to avoid such people as he describes here, but we need to be careful to avoid becoming such people.

Notice how Paul does this. He begins by saying in essence, “There are false brethren in the churches, but I know that is not who you are.” He begins by affirming Timothy in his faithfulness. He says: “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.” (2 Timothy 3:10–11, ESV) He says to Timothy, “You, however, are not like the ones that I have described.” He commends him for his faithfulness. When he says that Timothy followed my teaching, conduct, aim in life, faith, patience, love, steadfastness, persecutions and suffering, he is using a very power and picturesque word.

This word “follow” means “to study someone at close quarters and to become like that person.” Timothy had followed Paul physically, standing by him through thick and thin. He had followed his teaching with his heart and his mind, receiving what he taught and seeking to understand it and apply it in own life, holding fast to the Apostle’s doctrine. He was a disciple of Christ, not chasing after every fad and trend but holding to the meat of the Word. He had

followed Paul spiritually – in his conduct seeking to walk in obedience to the Word of God, sharing the same aim in life – to yield all of his life in worship and service to God and to the people of God. Paul, in 2 Cor. 5:9 said it was the aim of his life, his ambition to please Christ, and Timothy had caught that same vision. Timothy followed Paul in the same faithfulness to Christ born of faith in the promises that defined Paul – promises from Paul’s pen that we love to recite to ourselves -- All things work together for good to those who love God. My God is able to meet all your needs according to His glory in Christ Jesus. You know that your work in the Lord is not in vain. God is able to do exceedingly, abundantly more than all we could ask or request. There is laid up for us a crown of righteousness – and so many more.

He had followed Paul in his patience with the slow of hearing, the slow of obeying, those with whom he had to labor strenuously in order to see Christ formed in them. He had followed Paul in his love for Christ, his love for the church and for the lost. He had followed Paul in his steadfastness, his persevering life in the midst of hardship and trial. And Timothy had followed Paul in his persecutions and sufferings for the sake of the gospel. Paul had been driven by persecution from Antioch. In Iconium he fled when a plot to lynch him was uncovered. In Lystra, he was stoned and left for dead. Likewise, though not to the same degree, it had not been easy for Timothy and it was about to get harder.

Timothy was not to despair but to be encouraged. From all of these persecutions for the sake of faithfulness to Christ and to His gospel, the Lord had rescued Paul and He would rescue Timothy as well, even in these times of difficulty. Only, Timothy needed to come to grips with this axiomatic truth. “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” (2 Timothy 3:12–13, ESV) There was no way to escape this reality. All who desire to live a godly life in Christ will suffer in one way or another for it if they determine to remain faithful and stand firm. Likewise, the evil impostors will get worse and worse, deceiving others and deceiving themselves into thinking that they are in aright standing with God, that they are ok with God unto their own destruction. These were perilous times and Timothy had shown himself faithful so far, but now was not the time for complacency, not the time for taking a break, not the time to be less vigilant over his soul and over the souls of others, but rather it was the time to be more alert and watchful.

Look what he says: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been

acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Timothy 3:14–15, ESV) Past faithfulness was no guarantee of future faithfulness. Timothy had done all of these things that Paul mentioned but he must keep doing them. Continue being a disciple. Timothy must continue in the truth – in what he had learned and seen modeled for him by Paul, but also by his mother and grandmother. He must continue to shape his life, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit working within him, according to the truth of God that had saved him and that would continue to shape and fashion him as He submitted His mind, emotions, reason and will to it truth. He must continue in the wisdom of the Word – that wisdom that leads to salvation in the eternal sense – salvation from the penalty of sin, from the wrath of God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ – but that wisdom that would also save him from the power of sin, from sliding into the hypocrisy and ultimately the apostasy of the false brethren Paul had described. Timothy must continue in the truth. And so must we if we would be saved from the present evil age. Hold fast to the truth and let your mind, your heart, your thinking, your wisdom, your reason, your emotions, and your living be shaped by the Word of God.

And then comes one of the great testimonies to the value of the Word of God found anywhere in the Bible. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17, ESV) I just want to point out a few things – we will look more at these words next week. But see the incredible testimony that Paul gives to the worth, the power, the sufficiency, the trustworthiness and the inspiration of the Word of God here. These are the very words breathed out by God and they are powerful, oh so powerful. God’s word tells us what is right (teaching), what is not right (rebuking), how to get right (correction), how to stay right (training in righteousness). And the result is this: we are thoroughly equipped to do what God wants us to do. The truth of the Word of God, the God of whom it speaks, the Christ it declares, the Spirit whom it promises, will save you, forgive you, justify you, sanctify you, purify you, transform you, regenerate you, and keep you.

Paul is saying, “Timothy, Ephesian church, believers at West Salem Baptist Church in 2014, make the Bible the foundation of your life. Love it and believe it and obey it and follow it and then teach it to others. Be a disciple.” A disciple loves the word of God, lives out the Word in conduct in life, has it as his purpose to glorify God and please Him -- has faith in God, faith in Christ, faith in the Scripture -- is patient with people and labors with them for their good -- loves God and loves people -- endures trials -- and is willing to stand with God and Christ against the opposition and persecutions and sufferings that will invariably come. Be a disciple and make

disciples. That will make you strong and give you confidence when trouble comes your way, as it must come sooner or later. Do that, continue as a disciple, and these things that characterize the false brethren will lose their attractiveness, lose their traction.

We would do well to listen to Charles Spurgeon who said: “Oh, that you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord—not crawl over its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts. It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord. I would quote John Bunyan as an instance of what I mean. Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like the reading the Bible itself. He had read it till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim’s Progress—that sweetest of all prose poems — without continually making us feel and say, “Why, this man is a living Bible!” Prick him anywhere—his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him. He cannot speak without quoting a text, for his very soul is full of the Word of God. I commend his example to you, beloved.”

Those are good words. Build your life on the Word of God, submitting to it even when you might dislike what it says even – no, especially -- when it contradicts your human wisdom, willing to run all of your opinions and beliefs and actions through the grid of Holy Scripture. Make Christ’s word the rule of your life and take heed. Make sure that you have experienced the transforming power of the gospel through personal faith in Jesus Christ. Make sure that daily you feed on His Word, allowing it to confront your sinful thoughts, attitudes, words, and behavior and when you see any of the characteristics of the false brethren that Paul describes, even in seed form in your heart and life, go to the Lord in earnest prayer and confess it to Him and ask Him to root it out. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” (1 John 1:8–10, ESV)

Lay hold of the promise of grace -- forgiveness through the blood of Christ, but also of grace to be changed and transformed even more into His image through the work of His Spirit and Word

in your soul. God delights to give you such grace, beloved. He delights in it and will never hold back His grace from those who ask in sincerity and faith. Walk with Christ, being filled with the Holy Spirit, growing in the fruit of the Spirit in your character. Take heed of yourself, take heed of Christ's grace, take heed of His Holy Word and you will not fall in these difficult times.

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