

Living in God's Church Today

Godlessness in the Last Days

2 Timothy 3:1-9

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Introduction

In the Disney animated classic *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice wanders through a frustrating world of tardy rabbits, singing flowers, and one curious-talking cat. Her visit with the cat begins as she continues down a mysterious darkened trail and stops at a large tree. The tree is covered with signs that point in every possible direction: “Up,” “Down,” “Yonder,” “Back,” “This Way,” and “That Way.” Poor Alice looks more confused than ever and asks herself, “Now let’s see. Where was I? I wonder which way I ought to go?”

Just then, Alice hears a melodic voice that seems to be drifting down from the trees. She looks all around and finally observes two ghostly eyes and a wide toothy grin floating amongst the boughs of the great tree.

The grinning teeth inquire of Alice, “Lose something?”

“N-n-no, I was just...” stammers Alice in reply.

Suddenly, a pink-striped feline body emerges from the branches.

“Oh, you’re a cat!”

“A Cheshire cat,” he responds.

“I just want to ask which way I ought to go,” asks Alice.

“Well that depends on where you want to get to,” says the cat.

“Well, it really doesn’t matter,” answers Alice.

“Then it really doesn’t matter which way you go,” says the enigmatic cat just before vanishing into the woods again.¹

¹ *Alice in Wonderland* (Walt Disney, 1951), directed by Hamilton Luske and Clyde Geronimi. As quoted in PreachingToday.com.

The Cheshire cat is the perfect picture of a false teacher. He pretends to be knowledgeable and able to offer help. But when it comes to pointing you in the right direction, his promise of hope quickly disappears.

The Apostle Paul was in a prison cell in Rome. He was on death row awaiting execution. But rather than think about his impending death, his mind was preoccupied with the gospel and how to get the good news to as many people as possible. Paul also understood that he lived in perilous times. Moreover, his young assistant, Timothy, whom he had left in Ephesus was facing problems with false teachers who were promoting their false teaching. Timothy was cautious and timid, while the false teachers were certain and bold.

With this background, Paul wanted to sketch the contemporary scene and help Timothy understand how to identify false teachers. Armed with this knowledge, Timothy was to continue serving God with faithfulness and commitment.

Scripture

Let's read 2 Timothy 3:1-9:

¹But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. ²For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. ⁶For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, bur-

dened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. ⁸ Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. ⁹ But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men. (2 Timothy 3:1-9)

Lesson

2 Timothy 3:1-9 shows us how to identify false teachers. Let's use the following outline:

1. False Teachers Can Be Identified by Their Lives (3:1-5)
2. False Teachers Can Be Identified by Their Ministry (3:6-9)

I. False Teachers Can Be Identified by Their Lives (3:1-5)

First, false teachers can be identified by their lives.

Paul now turned his attention in his Second Letter to Timothy to the godless character of people in the last days. He wrote in verse 1, **“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.”**

What did Paul mean by using the expression **“last days”**? The New Testament authors considered themselves to be living in the **“last days.”** For example, Peter explained the events that took place on the Day of Pentecost as the fulfillment of Joel 2:28, as we read in Acts 2:16-17a, **“But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.’ ”**

The author of Hebrews declared that “long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these **last days** he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2a). Thus, Paul’s mention of the “**last days**” refers to the time beginning with Christ’s first advent and consummated at his second advent (*cf.* 1 Peter 1:20; 1 John 2:18).

I became a Christian on Easter Sunday in 1976. The 1970s were filled with “**last days**” expectations of Jesus’ imminent return. The bestselling nonfiction of the 1970s was Hal Lindsey’s book titled *The Late Great Planet Earth*. The book asserted that we were living in the “end times” or “**last days**” and that Jesus might return by 1988, within one forty-year generation of Israel becoming a modern nation. Other popular books predicted that we were living in the “**last days**” and that Jesus would soon return. Well, it is now 2022 and Jesus has not returned a second time. While there was a miscalculation about the 1980s as the time of Jesus’ second advent, the fact is that we were—and still are—living in the **last days**. The **last days**, as Scripture teaches, began with the first advent of Jesus Christ and will conclude with his second advent. So let us be prepared for the return of Jesus, whenever that may be.

Paul’s point, however, was “**that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.**” What did Paul mean by “**times of difficulty**”? This refers to “difficult, terrible, grievous, hard to live in” times. Paul then went on to describe in great detail the kinds of difficulty that would be present in the last days, which he was already seeing in his day and that would continue until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The “**times of difficulty**” would be seen in the lives of people. Paul described their *moral conduct* in verses 2-4, “**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.” In the Greek text, verses 2-5 are one sentence. Eighteen characteristics of people in the last days are listed in verses 2-4. These character traits have to do with the moral character of individuals. They are not all present in one person. Nor do we see the character traits in their full-blown ugliness. Godless people often put masks on so that these character traits are not clearly seen. But they are there.

Paul concluded this description with a statement about their *religious observance*. He said in verse 5a that these people are **“lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.”** It may be shocking to realize that people who lack moral character can be religious. People make a profession of faith. They attend worship services. They may give money to the church. They may even serve in some ministry of the church. However, all of that is merely **“the appearance of godliness.”** They have no vital, experiential relationship with God. They are not born again. They are not justified by faith alone in Christ alone by God’s grace alone. In reality, they are **“denying its power,”** that is, they are denying the reality of the power of God in their lives.

Sometimes we think that we live in the worst era. We think that a generation before us or a century before us things were much nicer and easier and better. However, that is not true. The characteristics that Paul listed in these verses are not showing up only in the 21st century. They were present in the 1st century too. Paul was writing about what he was seeing in his day. In fact, these godless character traits were present as far back as the early days of humanity. We read in Genesis 6:5-8, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in

the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." 'Then God gave Noah instructions to build the ark and, after the ark was built, God destroyed the earth through a worldwide flood.

But what is so much more disconcerting is that these character traits show up not only in the lives of godless people. They show up in religious, false teachers as well. That is what Paul was particularly concerned to warn Timothy about. And that is what we must look out for as well.

So, first, false teachers can be identified by their lives.

II. False Teachers Can Be Identified by Their Ministry (3:6-9)

And second, false teachers can be identified by their ministry.

Paul wrote in verses 6-7, **“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.”** After describing the character of the false teachers, Paul warned Timothy about these men who **creep**, that is, worm their way, into the houses of **weak women**. I am not sure that Paul was asserting that women were more vulnerable than men to false teaching. In those days, Christians did not meet in church buildings. They met in the larger homes of the more wealthy Christians. And, for the reasons that Paul listed,

some of the women of these houses fell prey to the false teachers and their teaching.

Paul described the ministry of the false teachers in four ways.

First, they **“capture”** weak women. The Greek word for **“capture”** (*aichmalotizō*) is the same Greek word that is used to describe prisoners of war.

Second, they go after those who are **“burdened with sins.”** They are loaded down with feelings of guilt.

Third, they go after those who are **“led astray by various passions.”** *The Amplified Bible* says that they are “swayed and led away by various evil desires and seductive impulses.”

And fourth, they go after those who are **“always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.”** It is not that they assimilated what they heard but, instead, it might be better translated as “always listening, but never able to learn or know the truth.”

The point is that the false teachers found ready listeners who were captured by their false teaching.

There are always people who attend worship services but never want to join and become communicant members of the church. One such person once said to me that she visited different churches over several weeks because she liked certain aspects of one church and different aspects of other churches. But she would not commit to any one church. It seemed to me that she was **“always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.”**

Paul wrote in verse 8, **“Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.”** Paul compared the false teachers to **Jannes and Jambres.** These two men are not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible,

although their names do occur in the *Targum of Jonathan* on Exodus 7:11. The Targums were interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, written in Aramaic, though most of the Targums were composed later than Paul's letter to Timothy. By the time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, it was presumably common knowledge that two of Pharaoh's magicians bore the names of **Jannes and Jambres** (Exodus 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18; 9:11). According to Jewish tradition, they pretended to become Jewish converts, instigated the worship of the golden calf, and were killed with the rest of the idolaters (Exodus 32). Paul's reference to them may indicate that the false teachers in Ephesus were practicing deceiving signs and wonders. The point is, according to Paul, like these two men, false teachers were **"corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith."**

Some of the prosperity preachers have television programs. One can watch them broadcasting portions of their services and listen to their teaching. I remember listening to one such preacher who talked about having an experience in which he was caught up to heaven and walked down the street with Jesus. He went on for several minutes describing his walk and talk with Jesus. I don't recall now what they talked about but what held my attention was the hundreds of people in the audience who listened and cheered and approved of all that he said. Then, of course, at the end of the show, the prosperity preacher asked for money!

Paul concluded in verse 9, **"But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men."** Just as Jannes and Jambres were exposed as false teachers in the days of Moses, so the false teachers in Ephesus would be exposed as frauds as well. Because they **"oppose the truth"** and reject **"the faith"** (verse 8), their end is utter folly, which is evident to everyone. Paul wanted to assure Timothy

that even though he may face opposition, the truth would triumph in the end. The cover-up of sin is unwise. And even if their sin was not exposed in this life, it most certainly will be exposed in the next.

Having a large audience and the means to pay for time on television is not necessarily a sign of biblical success. Prosperity preachers seem to have large audiences and large sums of money to pay for their time on television. And yet, their false message will eventually be exposed. Sometimes their followers come to an understanding of the truth and leave the ministry. The folly of the false teachers became plain to them. However, not everyone will leave, and exposure of the false teachers will take place in the next life.

So, false teachers can be identified by their lives and their ministry.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed godlessness in the last days in 2 Timothy 3:1-9, we should avoid false teachers and their false teaching.

There are only two commands in 2 Timothy 3:1-9. The first is found in verse 1, where Paul wrote, "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty." The Greek word for "understand" is a command. Paul commanded Timothy to understand the times of difficulty he was facing. He was to understand the lives of the false teachers. And he was to understand the ministry of the false teachers.

The second command is found at the end of verse 5, where Paul wrote, "Avoid such people." Timothy was to avoid false teachers. He was not to listen to them. He was not to entertain them. He was not to support them. He was to have

nothing to do with their false teaching.

The Puritan colonists who settled in New England in the 1630s had a nagging concern about the churches they were building: How would they ensure that the clergymen would be literate? Their answer was Harvard University, a school that was established to educate the ministry and adopted the motto “Truth for Christ and the Church.” It was named after a pastor, John Harvard, and it would be more than 70 years before the school had a president who was not a clergyman.

Nearly four centuries later, Harvard’s organization of chaplains has elected as its next president an atheist named Greg Epstein. Epstein, the author of the book *Good Without God*, is a seemingly unusual choice for the role. Yet many Harvard students—some raised in families of faith, others never quite certain how to label their religious identities—attest to the influence that Epstein has had on their spiritual lives.

Epstein said, “There is a rising group of people who no longer identify with any religious tradition but still experience a real need for conversation and support around what it means to be a good human and live an ethical life.” He also said, “We don’t look to a god for answers. We are each other’s answers.”²

We live in an increasingly secular world. False teachers and false teaching grow exponentially day by day. Let us not be swayed by false teachers and false teaching. Let us stand firm on the word of God. Amen.

² See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2022/march/harvards-chief-chaplain-is-atheist.html>.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org