

2 Timothy 3:1-9 | “The Signs of the Times”
Preached on March 5, 2023 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles this morning to 2 Timothy 3, verses 1-9. *[pause]*

Are things getting better or worse in the world?

What’s interesting is that in a survey, only 6% of Americans believed that it was getting better.¹

But this confounds some people because they look at the great “progress” that they say we are making in the world. *[pause]*

In fact, from the *Cato Institute* to *Forbes* to *BBC* to *Psychology Today* there were articles written proclaiming that the world was getting better.² *[pause]*

Their proof? Our health and wealth.

This is because when considering whether the world is getting better or worse, what people tend to do is think only in terms of health and wealth. *[pause]*

In their articles, they were trying to point out...

“Hey, just look at the increase of life expectancy, the education we have, the better health, the more freedom, and the more tolerant political policies enacted recently.”

But here’s the thing: determining whether the world is getting better or worse can’t only be measured in health and wealth, can it?

There’s more to it than that. *[pause]*

In some ways, we can agree that in regards to health and wealth, the world has gotten better than, say, the Middle Ages.

But what about selfishness, pride, love of pleasure, love of money, and ungratefulness? *[pause]*

Interestingly, most people don’t consider those factors when trying to determine if the world is getting better or worse.

Not many people are writing popular articles that say, “The world is getting worse, just look at our love for money,” or “just look at our love for pleasure.”

¹<https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2017/11/30/why-the-world-is-getting-better-why-hardly-anyone-knows-it/?sh=76bd6c9b7826>.

² *Cato Institute*: “Things Are Getting Better. Really, They Are.” June 3, 2021 by Marian L. Tupy.

Forbes: “Why The World Is Getting Better And Why Hardly Anyone Knows It,” November 30, 2017 by Steve Denning.

BBC: “Seven reasons why the world is improving,” January 10, 2019 by Julius Probst.

Psychology Today: “Ten Ways the World Is Getting Better,” March 20, 2018 by Douglas T. Kenrick.

Yet, in a way, that's what Paul will do.

He will not talk about worsening conditions in regards to health and wealth, but in regards to sinfulness. *[pause]*

Let's see what he says, starting in verse 1. *[READ VERSES 1-9]*

Paul has just told Timothy that he must correct his opponents with gentleness, for God may grant them repentance.

Yet, Paul is also realistic, for he wants Timothy to know that this doesn't mean large swaths of people are just going to bend the knee in repentance, and that the world is going to be smooth sailing because of that.

Instead, Paul explains that actually opposition to the truth will grow. *[pause]*

That's where point #1 comes into play...

I. Realize the characteristics of the last days. (1-5a)

Look at verse 1, "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty." *[pause]*

First off, what are "the last days"?

Many people think of the last days as *only* right before Christ comes again, but the last days can also refer to the time between Christ's first and second coming. *[pause]*

In Hebrews 1, the writer says, "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."³

Peter talks about how Jesus was made manifest "in the last times."⁴

1 John tells us clearly, "it is the last hour."⁵

So in one sense, all Christians after Christ have been living in the last days, but we are told that the last days will get worse and worse.⁶ *[pause]*

And so Paul explains that these last days are characterized by "times of difficulty".

They will be hard times that bring with them pain for Christians.

It's not going to be smooth sailing, but rather, there's troublesome times ahead. *[pause]*

³ Hebrews 1:1-2a (Italics is mine).

⁴ 1 Peter 1:20.

⁵ 1 John 2:18.

⁶ See further down at 2 Timothy 3:13 and 4:3-4.

But why will there be difficulty? Because of the wickedness of people.

And this is what Paul wants Timothy (and us) to know, to realize, to understand. *[pause]*

But why does it matter that we understand that there's difficulty ahead and that people will get worse and worse?

Doesn't that just bring discouragement and despair, or complaining and whining? *[pause]*

That's not the purpose, but rather, the purpose is so that we are *prepared*. *[pause]*

Years ago, I got a job at a factory in the Lancaster area.

But what was helpful for me going into that new job was that my dad worked there for many years.

So he was able to talk to me beforehand and tell me all about working there. *[pause]*

He told me about some of the good parts, but he also told me about some of the difficult parts. *[pause]*

He wanted me to know that this wasn't some easy, comfy type of job.

Rather, it was lots of manual labor, and it was extremely hot in the summertime.

I'm sure he told me some other things to expect as well, but what did he do for me?

He told me what to expect, so that I was prepared for what was to come.

This helped me to endure and persevere through the hard times because I knew all about it walking in on the first day. *[pause]*

That's what Paul does for Timothy (and us) in talking about the last days.

It's like he's sitting down with us as a seasoned veteran explaining what to expect, so that we can be prepared for the last days. *[pauseeee]*

It's in knowing something that helps us to be prepared.

We are to know this so that we can beware of it, so that we aren't led astray, influenced, or caught off guard concerning their ways.

We are to know this, so we aren't to be surprised when people act wickedly in our country. *[pause]*

So many Christians are shocked when they see or hear about the wickedness in our country.

It's like you are inherently thinking that either things will get better, or that this won't happen at all.

Instead, we should think, “Yep. This is exactly what we were told would happen.” *[pauseeee]*

Ultimately, we are to know what will characterize the last days so that we are able to persevere through them in faith.

The sinfulness we see shouldn’t cause us to throw in the towel and give up, for God told us beforehand. *[pauseeee]*

Ungodliness is rampant, and difficulty comes because of that.

Know this, realize it, understand it. *[pause]*

We don’t understand this to complain and groan; we understand it to be prepared and persevere. *[pause]*

I think this is a huge problem for us.

Consider: how does seeing the increasing wickedness in our country lead you to respond? *[pause]*

Often, we act shocked that this could happen in our country, and then we grumble and complain about it.

But is that what Paul is calling us to?

Certainly not grumbling and complaining, for he’s the very one who told us in Philippians...

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”⁷ *[pause]*

No, telling us about the increasing wickedness of the world is to prepare us.

When you go into something knowing it’s going to be difficult, it helps you to be more prepared and persevere, than if you are caught off guard about it. *[pause]*

So we know about the wickedness and difficulty of the last days, so that we can live faithfully in them. *[pause]*

Realize that wickedness will increase and cause more and more difficulty for Christians.

But don’t let that lead you to gloom or grumbling, but to preparedness and perseverance. *[pauseeee]*

After telling us to understand that difficulty will come, Paul goes on to explain the characteristics of people that will make it difficult in verses 2-5.

⁷ Philippians 2:14-15.

And in so doing, he shows us that the last days are a time of great ungodliness in people. *[pause]*

Paul rattles off characteristic after characteristic of how people will be, and by doing so, it really impresses upon you how bad it will be.

It's not like people will only be sinful in one or two ways, but in myriads of ways. *[pauseeeee]*

Now this evening we can get into each specific characteristic, but this morning, let me try to summarize them for you.

If we could boil these vices down, what would be the root sin? *[pause]*

I believe that the root one is the first one: love of self. *[pause]*

If you think about it, it is love for self that is the ugly, wicked fountain that leads to all of the other characteristics.

When you love yourself above all, these other things come in due course. *[pause]*

Love of self leads to love of money and love for pleasure, for it's all about what you can get, get, get.

Love of self leads to pride, arrogance, and conceit.

Love of self causes someone to be abusive, brutal, slanderous, and treacherous with others since they are looking out for #1: themselves. *[pauseeee]*

Since they want their way above all, then they will be disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unappeasable, and lacking self-control.

And when love of self is placed on the altar of worship, then love of God isn't going to be in its rightful place, is it?

That's why they love pleasure rather than God. *[pause]*

Isn't it interesting that these people break the greatest commandments: love for God and love for others.⁸

It all goes back to love of self.

People will increasingly become more and more narcissistic, and because of this, so many of these other sins will follow. *[pause]*

So a love of self will be prevalent, but with that, there will be a lack of love for others. *[pause]*

Just look at this list and you see this all over it.

⁸ See Matthew 22:37-39.

Heartless and unappeasable: imagine dealing with someone like that.

They have no love or affection for others, and you can't ever placate them.

Nothing makes them happy, if you do them wrong, for they won't forgive. *[pause]*

This is actually seen in today's "cancel culture".

If someone does something that the culture deems wrong, there is no forgiveness extended, they are canceled.

Nothing you do can make things right, for nothing you can do will satisfy them. *[pause]*

What about slanderous, treacherous, and brutal - you think dealing with someone like that is easy?

They go behind your back and say untrue things, and are just brutal, like a wild animal.

There is no tenderness, gentleness, or love shown to others. *[pauseeee]*

Also, we are told that they don't love good.

Get this: they not only are bad in themselves, but hate the good that would help society flourish. *[pause]*

This is the kind of day that we are living in.

People don't love good, but hate it. *[pauseeee]*

All of these vices show the ugliness of life without God.

You turn away from God and follow your own wants, this is the result.

It not only destroys relationships, but it destroys societies.

For how can a society function well when people don't love good?

How can a relationship function when people are unappeasable, brutal, slanderous, and treacherous? *[pauseee]*

I could go on, for this list has many things, but notice what Paul adds in verse 5, "having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power." *[pause]*

Some of the people that Paul describes are actually very godly-looking people.

Isn't that interesting?

On the outside, they have the appearance or form of godliness.

They look respectable and religious, but it's all a show.

Their godly-looking appearance is merely a shell, and there is no substance. *[pause]*

They aren't changed, for they deny the power for godliness.

They may look godly, but they actually aren't, for they don't look to Christ for the power to live a godly life.

They may have great knowledge about the Bible, and they even look the part, but they are not godly people.

They show many of the sins in this list, and they do not have a changed life. *[pause]*

This is why church attendance numbers are not an accurate accounting of the state of the Christian faith.

So many people point back to previous years of America as the "glory days", and they point to church attendance records, how businesses were closed on Sundays, and things like that.

But what is Paul showing us?

These people can have the appearance of godliness, but not be truly godly.

They may show up on Sunday, and they may have followed the "closed on Sunday" norm, but it's all a sham. *[pause]*

Sadly, there are many people across churches in America that have the appearance of godliness, but are not truly godly.

There are church members, who look so godly when you see them on Sunday's, but man, during the week, it's not a pretty picture behind-the-scenes.

There are some deacons, who look so holy, but they abuse their wife and kids. *[pause]*

This is because Christianity is all a show to them.

They like to appear godly, but they neglect the very place that actually leads them to be godly.

They are hypocrites and white-washed tombs.⁹ *[pauseeee]*

God is showing us that not only will people be extremely wicked, but many of those wicked people will appear righteous to us.

And the reason they do this goes back to a love for self: they want to look good in front of others, and for some, they are trying to cover up their wickedness. *[pauseeee]*

⁹ See Matthew 23:27-28.

How do people get this bad?

I mean when you look at this list, it's not a pretty picture at all.

Well notably, in Romans 1, Paul gives a list that has many of the same vices in it.

And there, what leads to such wickedness is that they suppress the truth, exchange the worship of God with other things.

And this leads to God giving them up to a debased mind, which then results in these sins.¹⁰

[pause]

So essentially, people get this bad because this is what happens when you rebel against God, and set yourself up as “god” of your life. *[pauseeee]*

Seeing this list should cause us to evaluate our own lives.

In what ways are any of these sins showing themselves in your life?

We should seek to put those sins to death, turn away from them, and rest in the forgiveness of Christ. *[pause]*

This list should also remind us of the grace of God, for we were once like this.

Titus 3 says, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.”¹¹

The kindness, grace, and mercy of God is the only reason why this list isn't us. *[pauseeee]*

Realize the characteristics of the last days.

Don't be surprised by what you see and experience in the last days, but understand that this is what God said would happen. *[pauseeee]*

After giving this long list of characteristics of people in the last days, Paul says, “Avoid such people.”

And so that's point #2...

II. Refuse to be associated with these bad characters. (5b-9)

Now this brings up a lot of questions.

¹⁰ See Romans 1:28ff.

¹¹ Titus 3:3-5a.

Are we to just avoid and never talk to any person that shows any of these characteristics?

Is that really what Paul is saying?

No, I do not believe that this means total separation from all people, who show these characteristics. *[pause]*

Paul just told Timothy that he should correct his opponents with gentleness in the previous chapter.

How can you do that if you never interact with anyone who shows these vices? *[pause]*

It seems as though Paul is talking about people who are stubborn and just keep pursuing the road to destruction.

There may be others who are more open to correction with gentleness, but there are some who couldn't care less. *[pause]*

Also, Paul seems to be concerned with Timothy not being influenced by these people.

So Timothy should avoid them in the sense of avoiding their wrong teaching and conduct.

Basically, don't let them influence and ruin you.

Don't associate with them, and make it seem like you approve of them.

Don't get entangled in their mindsets or methods. *[pause]*

So the people to be avoided seem to be professing Christians who have these characteristics, and are not open to correction.

For Paul goes on to explain how these types of people work: they deviously bring people down the path to ruin. *[pause]*

Look at verse 6: "For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions." *[pause]*

These are the types of people to avoid, for they are out there capturing people away from the truth. *[pause]*

If there is ever someone who is a false teacher and is not open to correction, they should be avoided.

They can cause great spiritual wreckage in people's lives, so don't mess around with them!

Just consider their devious work and wickedness.

They creep into households and capture weak women. *[pause]*

They are sneaks and worms, who will try to slip in and capture people.

They are like spies, going behind enemy lines, trying to capture a victim, and that's why they are so dangerous. *[pause]*

What would happen is these people would find a way into the trust of a household, and would spread their false teaching to them. *[pause]*

Many women in that day were looking for spiritual teaching, and they were often not as educated as the men.

So they would allow these false teachers to come in and teach them, and then they would be led astray by it. *[pause]*

Now Paul is NOT saying that *all* women are weak women, but he's talking about a situation that was going on.

These false teachers noticed that there were certain women that they could easily target, and so they pounced on them.

They were like the Devil, who went after Eve, seeking to overthrow the household. *[pauseeee]*

These women were weak-willed, foolish, and gullible.

Verses 6-7 tells us the reasons: “[they were] burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” *[pause]*

These women were burdened by the guilt of their sin, so they were open to any solution that would release them from that burden.

They allowed their passions to guide their actions.

And they wanted to learn more, but this learning never led them to arrive at the truth.

It's like they were taken in with every religious fad. *[pause]*

This led them to be easy targets for these snakes.

They knew that these women were burdened with guilt, led by their passions, and always willing to learn something new.

But the women didn't have the grounding of God's Word to give them the solid foundation to stand firm.

That's a recipe for disaster. *[pauseeeee]*

So that was the situation of Paul's day, but what about today?

Certainly false teachers don't creep into households by becoming spiritual guides in literal homes anymore, but I'd say they still creep into households in other ways.

They creep into households when you turn on the TV and give their teaching a hearing.

They creep into households when you scroll social media, and follow those self-proclaimed Bible teachers who spread their falsities. *[pause]*

Satan realizes that he doesn't have to send people knocking on doors nowadays, but he can just get you through Facebook, Instagram, or TV.

There are so many false teachings on social media, and weak-willed people are captured, who are burdened, led by feelings, and taken in with every new trend. *[pauseeee]*

These weasels, who are capturing people and dragging them away from the truth, are the type of people we ought to avoid, for just consider their devious work, but also, consider their wickedness. *[pause]*

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." *[pause]*

Many people at this time believed that Jannes and Jambres were the names of the magicians who tried to duplicate the miracles performed by Moses in Exodus.¹²

So these men are like that.

They oppose the truth, and try to duplicate God's power and work by spreading false teaching.

They are like magicians, deceiving others with their religious sleight of hand.

But really, they are corrupted in mind and rejected when it comes to the faith. *[pauseeee]*

These men are dangerous, but we don't have to worry about the outcome, for just consider their disastrous end...

Paul says, "But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men." *[pause]*

They may be making some progress, but they are not going to get very far.

Eventually, their folly will be evident.

Like the magicians, whose power was seen for the sham that it was, so these false teachers' teaching will ultimately show itself powerless.

Eventually, God's people will recognize their foolishness. *[pause]*

¹² See Exodus 7:11ff.

Isn't it interesting that many heresies throughout history have ended up falling by the wayside.

It's a reminder that truth prevails!

Error doesn't triumph in the end!

Their powerlessness and folly will be displayed!

The church won't be totally corrupted and taken over by these men, but God will preserve His church. *[pause]*

Yes, there are people to avoid and beware of.

Yes, false teachers are capturing many weak-willed people.

But don't worry about the outcome, for the truth will prevail, and their folly and powerlessness will be clear.

So we shouldn't live in constant pessimism and discouragement about the signs of the times, for we know that God always wins. *[pauseeee]*

I find that so often the signs of the times can lead us to grumbling and discouragement.

This ought not to be!

We know the outcome and Who controls the outcome!

And He is with us all along the way in the "times of difficulty" that we face, so we have no reason to fear. *[pause]*

So yes...

Realize how bad it is in the last days, avoid its influence, yet be encouraged about the outcome!

Know and understand the characteristics of the last days: ungodliness will be rampant.

Understand this, not to grumble, but to be prepared and persevere. *[pause]*

God has told us beforehand, so we need to be ready, and we can't let this ungodliness influence us.

For there are those that should be avoided, since their false teaching is dangerous. *[pause]*

But amidst all of this evil, we are not those who are discouraged or pessimistic.

For the truth will prevail, and the end of those who are false teachers is their revealed folly. *[pause]*

Like God showed His power in the Exodus by doing miracles that the magicians couldn't duplicate, so God will show off His power, and no one will be able to match it.

Truth will triumph, Christ will come back in power and glory, and make all things right.
[pauseee]

Yes, there may be difficult days ahead, but we have a faithful God, who gives us all that we need for all of our days.

So we look with eyes of faith to the promised life and hope that we have received in Christ Jesus, who died for our sins and rose again.

He's the only hope for a changed life, and He's the only hope for the world.