

Avoid ungodly ministry

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Preacher: Craig Dyer

[0 : 00] There is a lady in my church family back in Glasgow who is in her 90s, but mentally she is very sharp and she keeps a close watch on global affairs.

And back in the days when I used to visit her regularly, we would talk about political situations and economic situations around the world. And she would often say to me, don't you think we must be living in the last days now?

And she was always very disappointed by my reply because I used to always say, well, we're definitely living in the last days, Gene. Not because of certain events that are happening currently, but because in Acts chapter 2, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter explained what had happened in the words of Joel, and he said this in verse 17, In the last days it shall be, declares God, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.

And I would say to this dear lady, we might not be living in the last of the last days, but there is no question that we're living in the last days. The next thing on God's calendar is the return to earth of his Son, the Lord Jesus.

So, when we read in 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 1, Paul writing to Timothy and saying, Understand this, that in the last days there will be times of difficulty.

[1 : 35] We know that he's writing about the times that he was living through and the times that we are living through. And in the time that we have this morning, I want us to think about these times of difficulty, these days of struggle, and to understand two things.

First of all, what Paul wants us to understand. He says, Understand this, verse 1. Paul, what do you want us to understand? And then secondly, why do you want us to understand it?

So, you'll see it in the outline. They're the two things, and then I have some subheadings. So, first of all this morning, let's notice what Paul wants us to understand. Verse 1, Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.

Well, I guess all of us this morning have known days of trouble, times of difficulty. But Paul is being very precise here.

Do you remember that occasion in Matthew chapter 8 when the Lord Jesus went to the region of the Gadarenes, and two demon-possessed men came out to meet him?

[2 : 50] They came out of the tombs, do you remember? And there is a word used to describe them. We're told in Matthew chapter 8, verse 28, that they were so fierce that no one could pass them.

Now, that's the word. That word fierce is the word that is translated here in the English, difficult days. The ferocity of these demon-possessed men is the same word that Paul uses to describe the times that he's writing about here for Timothy and for us in Kuching this morning.

Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty, terrible times, difficult times, times that are going to be fiercely violent, frightening to watch beyond human help, just as were these two demon-possessed men.

Now, this is what Paul wants us to understand, and there are three little subheadings I want to draw your attention to. Number one, the characteristics of these times. These terrible times are due to the way that people are going to act and behave.

And Paul takes the time to sketch them for Timothy here. You'll be very encouraged to discover that he lists 19 characteristics of human behavior.

[4 : 16] I'm just going to take five minutes on each of the 19. Would that be okay? I don't think it would. 19 subheadings under subheading 1.

Point one. Can you imagine it? Well, I'm not going to read the passage again, but look it with me. I'm going to come back to the beginning of verse 2 and the end of verse 4 in a moment.

But look at the characteristics of these terrible times. First of all, proud in the middle of verse C. A boastful spirit where we want other people to affirm our inflated view of ourselves. Then arrogance. Showing a sense of personal superiority that diminishes the importance of others. Then being abusive towards other people.

Sometimes because it helps me exalt myself. Other times because abusing them is just fun. And they're not worth anything. This proud, arrogant, abusive spirit starts early.

[5 : 20] Paul tells Timothy that there's going to be disobedience to parents. And then the word ingratitude. When a sense of entitlement to everything we have does away with the need to be thankful for anything.

So ingratitude will be part of it. Unholy is the next word. I think chapter 2 verse 21 that you looked at last week perhaps helps us to understand what unholy means.

Chapter 2 verse 21. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy.

Useful to the master of the house. Ready for every good work. So, an unholy life is a life where no effort is ever made to live with a desire and a plan to be useful to the Lord.

To be unloving or heartless in verse 3 is to be incapable of loving and caring. And that means that we have no vested interest in maintaining good relationships.

[6 : 36] And so we are, next word, unappeasable. Unwilling to forgive. Disinterested in being forgiven. No desire to be reconciled to people.

Next word, slanderous behavior. Unleavened behavior means actively speaking in a way that spreads character-destroying poison about others.

To be without self-control is to be like a ship on the sea that is rudderless. People just completely at the mercy of their urges.

Brutal means to be untamed or savage. Do you remember a few years ago, a little three-year-old boy got into the gorilla enclosure at Cincinnati Zoo in America?

I don't know if you read about it or heard about it, but it was on the TV in the UK. A three-year-old boy got into the enclosure of a 450-pound gorilla.

[7 : 44] And the gorilla didn't really mean him any harm, but he just picked up that child and threw him around like a ragdoll. Brutal. Brutal.

Untamed. Savage. We're not talking about gorillas. We're talking about people in 2 Timothy 3. Next phrase, not loving good, being blind to the value and beauty of what God calls good, and possibly even redefining it.

Verse 4, to be treacherous means to be a practiced deceiver. Reckless means acting first, then thinking later, if at all.

Behaving with total disregard for anyone or anything else. To be swollen with conceit means that I struggle to think about anybody other than myself.

Now, these are the characteristics that describe the lifestyle of millions of people across the planet today. I can see them in my culture in the UK.

[8 : 54] I can see them in Scotland. I find your culture here is more gentle and more respectful. But I understand from talking to some of you that, of course, because this is the Word of God, it's right.

And these are aspects beneath the veneer of respectability. These are aspects of the culture here today. So the issues facing us in our cultures are not new.

Paul wants us to understand these characteristics. Second little subheading, not just the characteristics of these difficulties, but the cause of these difficulties. And I wonder, did you notice that Paul begins and ends these verses we've just been looking at with four references to love going in the wrong direction?

So beginning of verse 2, he says people will be lovers of self and lovers of money. End of verse 4, they'll be lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.

So society is fragmenting all around us, and we're experiencing these fierce difficulties that Paul describes because at a basic level, every human being is a lover, every human being is a worshipper, but the love and the worship of many hearts is catastrophically misdirected.

[10 : 30] I don't know if you know of G.K. Chesterton. You're going to find out one of the things he said, but he famously said, that when people fail to love and worship the living God, it's not that they worship nothing, but that they will worship anything.

It's a really interesting observation. So there are lots of places of worship around Kuching this morning, but in our country, most people would say they don't worship at all, but it's not true. It's not that they worship nothing. They will worship anything, and mostly they will worship themselves. They will love themselves. They will tread others underfoot. They will love money because it can amuse them with purchases, and it can reassure them with a false sense of their own personal significance, or their security or their superiority that money claims to give.

So the cause of these difficult days is love going in the wrong direction. Loving self, loving money, loving pleasures, rather than loving God.

[11:53] It's very interesting, isn't it, that nothing can take the place of God as the focus of the love of our hearts without doing us immeasurable damage.

Do you see that in this passage? When we love ourselves, when we love money, when we love pleasure, it promises great blessing, but it brings immeasurable damage.

When we fail to love God, we fail to love each other. When we declare war on God, we declare war on each other, though we don't intend to.

The love and the worship that we refuse to give Him has to go somewhere. It's impossible to live without worshiping. It's impossible to live without loving, setting our love on something or someone. And life simply implodes when we're lovers of self and money and pleasure, rather than lovers of God. Well, that brings me to the third little subheading as we notice it, which is the casualties of these difficulties.

[13:07] Well, we can see that society in general is going to suffer. But I was very struck by an emphasis here on the family unit, particularly suffering.

So we find in verse 2 that one of the characteristics is going to be disobedience to parents. But even more terrifying than that is when parents fail to love their children, and that's covered by the word at the beginning of verse 3, unloving or heartless.

Walter Liefeld, the commentator, remarks that this is the specific kind of love that is missing, is the love which normally exists between family members, such as the love between parents and children.

And he cites in his little commentary, he cites Ellicott, who defines this lack of love, this heartlessness in this way, being destitute of love towards those for whom nature herself claims it. It's not just the absence of Christian love, it's the absence of basic compassion. that you would say would be natural. So it's natural for a parent to love his or her child.

[14:40] But that's missing. And I can tell you that there is a story in our newspapers and our television channels in Scotland just now about a woman and her female partner who horrifically abused and murdered her two-year-old son.

That's the kind of heartlessness that Paul's talking about here. And we see the lovelessness in our culture in the treatment of the unborn.

Parents getting rid of their own babies. in the treatment of those with a physical or mental disability, pushed to the side of the culture, treated as though they are an embarrassment, heartless, unloving.

We see it often in the treatment of the elderly. Not being honored, not being cared for, just regarded as a bit of a nuisance to us.

That's the horror of being heartless, of being without love. And it affects the family. The marriage relationship, the parent-child relationship is massively impacted by this kind of thing.

[16:03] These are the casualties. Again, speaking for the United Kingdom, which I think is different from here in this regard, but our culture can't get away fast enough from any semblance of a Christian heritage.

Do pray for us. Our culture is running as fast as it can from its Christian heritage. But all the evidence points to the truth of these verses, that where the knowledge and the worship and the love of God is expelled, self-love rushes into the vacuum and rules human hearts.

And the family unit is the first casualty. Instead of a secure, loving, supporting environment, the home becomes unloving, unruly, unsafe, unhappy.

So the family, the home, is the first casualty, but it's not the only casualty. The local church family is also likely to suffer. Notice in verse 5 how Paul describes those who love pleasure rather than love God.

He describes them in verse 5 as having an appearance of godliness, but denying its power. And Timothy is to avoid such people. Now, if you've drifted off, come back for a moment, because this is really significant.

[17:37] This is a significant addition to the description of this way of living. These people can be proud and arrogant and abusive and heartless and brutal, and yet they can still have all the trappings of respectability.

They can even have the trappings of spirituality. Do you see that? It's very important that we notice that. I was thinking about the elder brother when the prodigal comes back.

He thinks of himself as the model of respectability and yet he is proud and arrogant and abusive to his father and heartless and he refuses to be reconciled to his brother and he refuses to honor his father and all the things that we're reading off here were true of that man that Jesus told us about in Luke chapter 15.

Now, the fact that they have an appearance of godliness brings this very close to this home today, this spiritual home, this church family.

And Paul says that while they have no love for the Lord, they are still determined to be among his people. That's why Paul warns Timothy to avoid them because these people hang around the church.

[19:07] They have a form of godliness, an appearance of godliness, but they deny its power. And notice why they're so dangerous, verse 6.

Among them are those who creep into households or homes and capture weak women or vulnerable women. So there are two subsets going on here.

Paul's describing the lifestyle of these people in general and then he says, among them there are these creepy men. And then he's describing women in general and he says, among the women there are some who are weak and vulnerable.

So he's not talking about all men and he's not talking about all women. But as he writes about the characteristics of human behavior in the last times, it's obvious that some men being creepy, being creeps as we would say in Britain and some women being vulnerable to that is going to be a trend. So let's look at these one at a time. We learn more about the creepy men in verse 8. Paul writes that just as Janus and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men, these creeps, also oppose the truth.

[20:32] Men corrupted in mind, disqualified regarding the faith, but they will not get very far for their folly will be plain to all as it was of those two men. You know what Paul is talking about here?

Do you remember the Egyptian magicians who tried to mimic some of the miracles that God enabled Moses to do in Pharaoh's court? Well, apparently their names were Janus and Jambres. In Exodus 7, Moses and Aaron lifted the staff over the Nile and it turned to blood. The fish died. The river began to stink.

And the magicians did the same by their secret arts, we're told, in verse 22 of Exodus 7. So Pharaoh's heart remained hardened and he would not listen to Moses as the Lord had said.

So that's what Paul is referring to here. And the magicians did the same with bringing the frogs onto the land in chapter 8. But then they fell away. They couldn't do the, they couldn't produce the gnats and they couldn't do much more after that.

[21:49] And Paul's point is just that as they tried to rival God's power and oppose God's truth, these magicians, so these creepy men go into the homes of other men in the absence of other men and they want to exert power and they want to exert influence in opposition to the gospel.

But in both cases, both the ancient magicians, Janus and Jambres, and these contemporary creeps have no real power.

They can have a form of, they can have an appearance of power, but they have no real power, no staying power. All they're good for is opposing the gospel.

All they're good for is causing people's hearts to remain hardened to the word. They can't compete with the reality of God's sovereign power.

So these creeps that Paul is writing about, they aren't strong enough to capture the strong so they go after the weak. Now it is a warning to us in church life, it's a warning to us for the church family, we need to be on our guard against this kind of creeping behavior by those who would not be considered capable of bearing official responsibility.

[23 : 25] We would never trust them with any kind of role. So what do they do? They seek influence by the back door. They're not trusted by the elders, but they will find some people that they can influence.

They will go after the weak, and they sometimes have an instinct for working out who these people are. I've seen this. Now back to the women of verse 6.

what makes this type of person so vulnerable when the creepy men come to their home is that like Eve in the Garden of Eden, they tolerate the creeps.

They shouldn't open the door to them, but they do. They listen to the wrong voice, just like Eve in the Garden of Eden. So this weakness, this vulnerability is not because these women are physically less strong or mentally less strong, nothing to do with that at all.

It is a spiritual weakness. It is a moral vulnerability. Notice that they're described in verse 6 as those who are burdened with sins, led astray by various passions.

[24 : 49] Verse 7, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Again, if you've dozed off, wake it up, come back, because I want you to notice something here in verse 7.

Do you ask yourself the question, do you say, that's interesting, how do we arrive at a knowledge of the truth that frees us from the burden of our sins, verse 6, and keeps us from being led to the truth?

And the answer of the Bible is that we arrive at that knowledge of the truth by combining our learning of the truth with our living in the truth.

The two things go together. The problem with these weak women is that although they were always learning, they were never arriving at a knowledge of the truth because they weren't combining learning with living.

Now, when Paul uses this phrase, knowledge of the truth, what does your mind go to? My mind goes to John chapter 8. Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, if you abide in my word.

[26 : 09] So they had believed in him, they said, we believe you. He said, right, fine. Abide in my word, remain in my word, let my word remain in you.

Don't just learn it, live it. If you abide in my word, you're truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

that's what the Lord Jesus said to them. If you abide in my word, in other words, you don't just hear it today and think you agree with it, but you live it tomorrow.

You live it tomorrow night. You live it on Wednesday. You live in the light of the truth that you've learned. And as you do that, you will know it. That's the amazing thing Jesus says.

Knowledge of the truth is learning and living it. It's very practical, isn't it? And it will set you free.

[27 : 07] But if you never apply the truth that you're learning to your life, you'll never arrive at a knowledge of it. It will never really grip you.

If you never really settle yourself under the authority of God's word, you will remain unprotected and you will remain vulnerable, men and women. because we will not listen to God's word and build our lives upon it.

And so we're morally vulnerable due to spiritual weakness. But I think the reason Paul warns of the attack on women is not because he has a low view of women, but the very opposite.

Paul knows how indispensable strong, godly womanhood is to the well-being of the family and the church family and the community.

Paul knows the phenomenal impact that strong, godly women can have. He began his letter, do you remember chapter 1 verse 5, I'm reminded Timothy of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother, Lois, your mother, Eunice, and now I'm sure dwells in you as well.

[28 : 37] Chapter 1 verse 5. There was no strong, godly, Christian role model in Timothy's life apparently. Godly.

But the Lord saw to him that he was immeasurably blessed and impacted by a godly grandmother and a godly mother. So, sisters in Christ this morning, be encouraged as you look at this.

The reason Timothy was a strong, well-grounded believer and worker was the influence of strong, spiritual, godly women.

And we thank the Lord for biblically informed, spiritually strong women in our church families. And we should trust them as Paul did, and we should treasure them as Paul did.

And we should say there is a vulnerability because of the significance of your role. Not because of the insignificance of your role, sisters, but because of the massive significance of your role.

[29 : 51] And we want our sisters in Christ to be protected, to be strong, godly women. So that, I think, is what Paul wants us to understand.

Second main heading as we draw this to a conclusion now, why does Paul want us to understand this? it's quite stunning to read all that Paul has to say about this perverse culture, and then realize it's in the church.

That's the shock of this passage, isn't it? That's why Paul wrote to young Timothy and told them to avoid these people. That's why he said, understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.

And there are two reasons in the wider context of the book that I can find as to why Paul wants us to understand this. Number one, you'll see them there, number one, so that we can live through the pain.

Paul wrote in chapter 1, verse 15, you're aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me. Lovers of self, lovers of money, arrogant, abusive, heartless, without self-control, treacherous, reckless.

[31 : 17] He felt the pain of this. Chapter 4, verse 9, you've still to come to it. Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

Chapter 4, verse 14, Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm, beware of him yourselves, for he strongly opposed our message. That's Janus and Jambres' behavior, strong opposition to the message of the gospel.

So there was personal pain for Paul in this kind of behavior. But painful though it was, none of this destabilized Paul.

In fact, his whole reason for writing is to recruit disciples of the Lord Jesus, like Timothy, who will, chapter 1, verse 8, share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.

So that's the big picture of what's going on in 1 Timothy. And I think that's why Paul wants us to understand this. So here, in this hall this morning, some of you may be feeling the pain of suffering for the gospel.

[32 : 36] You may have the pain of these creepy men who are seeking influence where they shouldn't have it. You may have the pain of some women, some people who have been captured, but they appear to be strong and free and they're leading a bad example.

or you may have experienced the backlash of a culture that hates everything you stand for in Christ. You may have experienced the pain of some people who stood with you in the gospel walking away from you, abandoning you as Paul did, as Paul felt.

These are the difficulties of the last days that we're living in. And why does Paul tell us about them? Because he doesn't want us to be surprised by them. His example of the Egyptian magicians is very interesting because they did what they did and Pharaoh's heart remained hardened.

He would not listen to Moses as the Lord had said. God was working out his purposes even through the terrible behavior of these magicians.

And God is working out his purposes even through the terrible behavior of people here in 2 Timothy 3. God has not lost control. These people may have lost control, but God is still in absolute sovereign control.

[34 : 02] Paul wants us to know that. He wants us to understand so we can, first of all, live through the pain, and secondly and finally, so that we can live for the promise. These are difficult days, but Paul wants us to stay unflinchingly loyal to the gospel and unflinchingly confident in the gospel.

He's looking ahead with joy as he looks around him with sorrow. He knows that the creeps won't get very far. And Paul's whole future orientation is summed up, do you remember in chapter 1 verse 1? He describes himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to what? The promise of life that is in Christ Jesus. He's writing about the promise that is still to come.

Now, every true believer has life in Christ now, but our experience of life now is only the deposit guaranteeing the glory that will follow.

Brothers and sisters, we will live through some fiercely difficult times. It will be painful. But even as Paul recruits disciples of the Lord Jesus to be willing to suffer, his message is so encouraging.

[35 : 27] We've looked at an encyclopedia of ugly human dysfunction this morning in these verses. But Paul ends his letter like this, chapter 4, verse 18.

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. And the same is true for you if your trust is in him.

The same is true for you if you are learning his word and living his word. He will rescue us on the coming day from every evil deed.

This will not get very far. Brothers and sisters, he will bring us safely into his eternal kingdom. So to him be the glory forever and ever.

And all God's people said? Amen. Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.