What is the greatest threat to the church of Jesus Christ in the last days? Is it secular humanism? Is it the new atheism? Is it the ACLU? Is it government efforts to limit religious freedom? Is it the movement that seeks to redefine marriage and the sexual mores that have been accepted in principle for 2000 years? All of these are, in my humble opinion, a threat to biblical Christianity but not one of them holds a candle to the greatest threat, which is the Fifth Column found in the Church itself.

If you aren’t familiar with the term “Fifth Column,” it apparently originated in the Spanish civil war and refers to a group of people who clandestinely undermine a larger group, pretending to be loyal, all the while sabotaging from within. The Apostle Paul tells his young protégée Timothy that in the last days there will be a Fifth Column in the church. It will involve church leaders who employ many of the forms of traditional Christianity, but all the while undermining the power of the Gospel and the authority of God’s Word.

I invite you to think with me through our Scripture passage today, 2 Timothy 3:1-15 by looking first at the outline in your bulletin. We are asking several questions of our text this morning:

When are “the last days?”
What are they like?
Who is responsible for what they are like?
What are we to do about it?

Look for the answers to these questions as we read our passage for this morning.

2 Timothy 3:1-15 (ESV)

1 But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. 2 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, 3 treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 4 having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. 5 For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, 6 always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. 7 Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. 8 But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

9 You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, 10 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. 11 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 12 while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 13 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.

Paul grabs Timothy’s attention at the beginning of chapter 3 with a strong statement:
“Understand this! Mark this! Pay attention! In the last days there will come times of
difficulty.”

WHEN ARE “THE LAST DAYS?”

Most Christians would probably respond, “The Last days are those immediately preceding the
return of Christ. It’s somewhere in the future, we don’t know when, and in fact we are not even
supposed to speculate about it.” But the fact is, “the last days” began with the advent of Christ.
Many Scriptures could be cited to demonstrate this, but I will mention only one, Hebrews 1:1-2:
“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.” The last days started with the Incarnation. Timothy
was living in the last days. The Church has been living in the last days for 2,000 years. The
warning here is not speaking of something in the far distant future. This is as relevant as this
morning’s newspaper, actually more so.

WHAT ARE THEY LIKE?

The ESV describes the last days as “times of difficulty.” That’s an understatement and probably
not a very helpful translation. The NIV renders it “terrible times,” which is closer to the root
meaning. In classical Greek the term is used of dangerous wild animals and of the raging sea. In
the NT it is found in only one other place—the story of the Gadarene demoniac, whose condition
was “so fierce (or violent) that no one could pass that way” (Matt. 8:28).

Every generation since Christ has been able to discern the characteristics of the last days that are
listed here, but there will be times or seasons (like Paul’s day and, I dare say, like ours) when the
spiritual climate becomes unusually difficult, fierce, and even violent. Could things get even
worse as the Second Coming gets closer? No doubt!

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

The answer in verse 2 is “people.” Not organizations, not nations, not philosophies, not Satan and
his demons, but individuals. What kind of individuals?

Ungodly, immoral people. Nineteen descriptive terms are used, and there is not a redemptive
syllable among the whole lot. I suppose we could profit by going through this list and defining
each term. However, that could become quite tedious, so instead I want to point out some
interesting relationships between the terms that I trust will give us some valuable perspective.

The first and last terms are similar though diametrically opposed: “lovers of self…not lovers of
God.” Those two expressions really explain everything else in the list. When a love of God is
replaced by a love for self, then everything in life becomes twisted—personality, relationships,
career, hopes, dreams, etc. And if there is any one thing that characterizes our culture it is self-love, self-focus, narcissism.

In between these two expressions are a number of others that employ the term “love”: lovers of money, without love, not lovers of the good, lovers of pleasure (the Greek word is *hedonism*). It appears from these that the fundamental problem that will characterize the last days is misdirected love. Misdirected love, in turn, expresses itself in misdirected energies. People will pursue means as though they were ends, temporal things as though they were ultimate. Love, of course, is the dominant theme of modern music, literature, film, theater, and religion, but more often than not it is misdirected love. For example, countless commentators and politicians and clergy have been telling us, especially over the past month, that any two people who really love one another should be able to marry, but no attention is given to how God defines love or marriage.

Not surprisingly, those who love themselves rather than God quickly become proud, arrogant, and abusive, which are the next three characteristics mentioned in verse 2. Show me a narcissistic politician, businessman, or even church leader, and I will show you someone who is haughty, looks down on others, and speaks evil of them.

The next five descriptive terms seem to deal principally with family life and normal human feelings and attitudes. But each one has the prefix “a” which in Greek signifies “not.” In English we usually translate such words with the prefix *dis*, or *un*, or with the suffix, *less*. Thus the ESV comes up with the following:

- disobedient to their parents,
- ungrateful,
- unholy,
- heartless,
- unappeasable (or unreasonable).

Family relationships are of extreme importance to God. We sometimes excuse ugliness in the family with statements like, “boys will be boys,” or “teens will sow their wild oats,” but God does not excuse these behaviors, because in fact, they are often precursors to abandoning the faith. In a day when the Simpsons and the Family Guy are heroes to a whole generation of kids (and even some Christian parents allow their children to watch such depravity), should they be surprised when their children exhibit the same attitudes?

The remaining seven descriptive terms are more general but no less serious: “slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit.” The term “not loving good” reminds me of Isaiah’s lament, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20). We have a lot of that going on today. Killing of their unborn children is viewed by many as a woman’s inherent right; those who uphold traditional marriage are intolerant bigots; those who acknowledge God in the public square are religious fanatics; and those who try to protect the nation’s borders or the ballot box are racists. Frankly, it’s hard to get our arms around this reversal of common sense, to say nothing of God’s laws, that is assaulting us on all sides. But should we be surprised? Paul warned it was coming. John Stott concludes correctly, “All this unsocial, anti-social behaviour . . . is the inevitable consequence of a godless self-centeredness.”
Friends, only the Gospel offers a radical solution to the misdirected love that produces a society such as we read about here in this list. Only the Gospel provides a solution to our sin problem and promises a new birth, a new creation which enables us to become God-centered instead of self-centered.

What may be surprising is that the people Paul describes as primarily responsible for the terribleness of the last days are not agnostics or atheists, but religious people.

**Ungodly, immoral people … who are religious.** This, of course, is not unique to the last days. It was also true in Old Testament Israel, where religion and morality rarely lived in harmony. Listen to just one of many of God’s indictments of His people’s phony religiosity, this one from Isaiah 1:14-15: “Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.”

Likewise in the New Testament we find that Jesus reserved His harshest criticism for some of the most religious people—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—who went to great lengths to keep the letter of the Law but were themselves, in Jesus’ words, nothing more than whitewashed tombs full of dead men’s bones. (Matt. 23:27)

Here’s how Paul summarizes these religious sinners of the last days: “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” They hold worship services, they sing hymns and worship songs, they say fine prayers, they contribute financially, they sign up for Love Wichita, they attend the Mayor’s Prayer Breakfast, but in the final analysis it is all form without substance, outward show without inward reality, faith without works, religion without a relationship with God.

At the end of verse 5 Paul urges Timothy to “avoid such people.” I don’t think this forbids all contact or witness to them. Rather he is not to have any ministry involvement with those who make a pretense of religious faith but exhibit no evidence of spiritual reality or power. He is not to share his pulpit with them, or treat them as brothers, or give their viewpoints any credibility.

I must say I was deeply disappointed in the speaker at the Mayor’s Prayer Breakfast a couple of weeks ago. He is someone I once knew well. He was a classmate of mine for four years at Dallas Seminary and we graduated on the same day. His name is Timothy, but he does not seem to embrace Paul’s message to Timothy. He told us about an epiphany he had eight years ago, when he left the pastorate to become a motivational speaker. Instead of following the apostolic advice to avoid Gospel impersonators, he has chosen to embrace the Dalai Lama, Hindus and Buddhists and Muslims with the message that Jesus is love, accepts you just as you are, and wants to unify us all. But sadly there was no mention of the cross, no mention of the Gospel, no mention of the division Jesus brings between those who believe the Gospel and those who do not.

Maybe I’m just getting crotchety in my old age, but friends, when a preacher has the opportunity to speak to business and government leaders at a critical point in our nation’s history, I would hope he would deliver more than pious platitudes and humorous anecdotes. The power that changes lives
is identified clearly in Romans 1:16: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

Edward Copeland, black pastor and a fellow-member of the Gospel Coalition Council, identifies the problem we are facing in the church today:

*We have television personalities posing as reporters who twist, spin, interpret, and omit facts to further their own ideological agendas. As tragic as that is, what is more damnable is that we have some pulpiteers posing as preachers who are not actually proclaiming news about the King’s Son. Instead they are giving their opinions about social, political, and cultural matters and drawing large crowds in the process but offering no good news in the truest sense.*

Frankly, I think this warning calls all of us to real self-examination. Just as it was possible to be a member of the church in Timothy’s day and still be a lost sinner, so it is possible today. Kent Hughes writes, “Unregenerate evangelicals are a growing reality in both clergy and congregation.” Are there some in the pews here at First Free? Are there those who quietly hold to the popular notion that there are many ways to God, who have adopted social values that contradict God’s Word in order to be accepted in the culture, who question the authority or relevance of the Bible for the 21st century?

**Ungodly, immoral people … who actively try to make converts.** It would be bad enough if these charlatans were just living their phony lives and going about their own business, but that is not the case. Look at verses 6 & 7 again: “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.”

At first glance Paul’s words may sound demeaning to women. They certainly are demeaning to these women. But I don’t think we should assume that Paul is speaking of all women. In fact, Paul had a great track record of affirming the ministry of women in his churches—just read the last chapter of Romans, where many women are included among the church leaders he praises.

But these particular women targeted by the false teachers are susceptible because of their sins and evil desires. These things put them in a weakened condition and make them vulnerable. The result is that these women (and many in the church today—both men and women) are described as “always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.” In other words, ever enrolling in Bible classes but never graduating to repentance, ever learning but never applying, overfed and undernourished.\(^\text{iv}\)

But after all this bad news concerning the church in the last days, Paul finally gives us some good news.

**Ungodly, immoral people … but they will not ultimately be successful.** In verses 8 and 9 Paul mentions two men who serve as examples of the false teachers he is talking about. “Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.” You won’t find Jannes and Jambres mentioned in the Old
Testament, but extra-biblical evidence identifies them as two of the Egyptian magicians who duplicated some of Moses’ miracles when he stood before Pharaoh.

(By the way, in every chapter of this book Paul names at least two people Timothy is to watch out for.  In chapter 1 it was Phygelus and Hermogenes; in chapter 2 it was Hymeneus and Philetus, in chapter 4 it will be Demas and Alexander.  Here it is Jannes and Jambres, who opposed the greatest prophet of all.  Timothy must not think he will escape the same treatment).

The good news comes in verse 9.  People like Jannes and Jambres pose a threat, but “they will not get very far.”  That’s important information for us as we see the growing success of false teachers of all sorts.  God is still in control.  Every lie has an expiration date but truth will prevail.  Why?  Because as John Stott writes, “There is something patently spurious about heresy, and something self-evidently true about the truth.  Error may spread and be popular for a time.  But it will not get very far.”  Edward Copeland again offers some great advice, especially for an election year.  He offers it to fellow-preachers, but it’s good for the rest of us to hear, too:

*If you are a proclaimer of the gospel, you are on the winning side.  Act like it.  Why are you so distressed about who is in office?  God is on the throne, and he is not up for reelection.  Why are you so distressed about the lies propagated by evil men when you have the truth?  Preach the truth.  That’s where the power to make a difference is.*

Now in the second paragraph Paul deals with our fourth and final question of the morning,

**WHAT ARE WE TO DO ABOUT IT?**

Well, what did Timothy do about it?

1. **Follow the apostolic example.**  Paul says of Timothy, “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings.”  Paul provides two objective evidences of the genuineness of his teaching—the life he lived and the sufferings he endured.  The false teachers lived lives of self-indulgence (remember, they were lovers of money).  They were altogether too soft and easy-going to be willing to suffer for their faith, and besides, who’s going to persecute someone who is preaching a health-wealth Gospel, or a Jesus-loves-everybody-just-as-you-are theology, as opposed to a theology of the Cross?

Paul, on the other hand, lived a consistent life and remained steadfast to his principles through great persecution.  The rest of verses 11-13 are devoted to describing those sufferings.  Paul mentions three cities in Asia Minor where he endured tremendous suffering.  One of those, Lystra, is Timothy’s hometown; perhaps Timothy even witnessed Paul being stoned there by a hostile mob, taken out of town, and left for dead.  Perhaps that event had even played a part in Timothy’s conversion.

But Paul makes the point that his experience of persecution is not to be viewed as unusual.  Oh, it may have been unique in regard to its frequency and intensity, but he makes it clear in verse 12 that suffering and persecution is part and parcel of following Jesus:  “Indeed, all who desire to live a
godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” The godly arouse the hatred and antagonism of the worldly. It was true for Jesus, it was true for Paul, it will be true for Timothy, and it will be true for us.

The second major thing we are to do in order to counteract the influence of the Gospel- impersonators is to…

2. **Continue in the Holy Scriptures.** Look again at verses 14-15, “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.”

This is a powerful passage but I’m going to leave the thorough development of most of it until next Sunday when we’re going to couple it with the next verse–easily one of the ten most important verses in the entire Bible, telling us why the Scripture is the authoritative Word of God.

However, I do want us to note the sequence here in verse 14. Timothy learned the Scriptures; he believed the Scriptures; he is to continue in the Scriptures. He was taught it as a child by his mother and his grandmother, later by the Apostle Paul. But he also firmly believed what he was taught. Their faith became his. That is essential because God has no grandchildren, only children. Each person must come to know God personally. Verse 15 is the reason and justification for our nursery ministry and our children’s ministry and our AWANA ministry. Oh, how important it is to inculcate the Gospel into the hearts and minds of children.

Paul urges Timothy to think back and examine the lives of those who taught him. Was his mother’s faith genuine? Did his grandmother exhibit a lifestyle worth emulating? What about Paul himself? If the lives of his teachers were genuine, and if Timothy personally committed himself to the faith, then he should continue in it. I don’t think this means he should never change a viewpoint and never differ with his mother on any issue, for none of us was blessed with a perfectly consistent Christianity in our homes.

Nor does Paul mean that the forms in which the message was delivered can never change. But Timothy does not need to update the faith itself, to modernize it, to make it relevant to his own day. It is relevant because it is God’s Word, and what he needs to do is to continue in it. Too many today are throwing off the faith of their parents in favor of viewpoints that are more in keeping with sociology or the “assured results” of modern science. I encourage you, young people, to study the history of scientific consensus before automatically accepting the prevailing opinions of these all-powerful arbiters of popular opinion. Following them can give you status, acceptance in the culture, and freedom from persecution, but only the Holy Scriptures are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Friends, we are living in the last days. These are terrible, fierce times and they may get worse. Know who your most dangerous enemies are— they are not “out there.” They are “in here,” that is within the institutional church. They are preaching health and wealth, peace and security, unity and acceptance, love and tolerance. They are often what one writer calls “spiritual color commentators preaching recreationally.” They preach just enough truth to inoculate their
hearers against the Gospel. They are not telling you that the answer to your sin problem and resulting estrangement from God is that God sent His one and only Son to die on a Cross, in your place, for the forgiveness of your sins.

As we close this morning, I challenge you with this question: Have you personally received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?

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ii. Stott, 86.

iii. Stott, 86.


v. Stott, 91.


vii. Recall these words of Jesus from John 15, which Josh preached just a few months ago: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you.” (John 15:18-20). Two spheres are mentioned here— in the world and of the world. Think with me about this: If you are in Christ but not *in* the world, you will not be persecuted. That is, if you separate yourself completely by withdrawing from the world they will pretty much leave you alone. That is true of monastics, ascetics, or even Christian fundamentalists. If you are in Christ but of the world, you will also not be persecuted, for the world sees nothing to persecute in those who have fully assimilated to its values. It’s the one who is in Christ *and in* the world but *not of* the world who will be persecuted.