

The Walk: Grow
2 Timothy 3: 1-5, 14-17
Sunday, September 14, 2025

“You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. ² For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ unfeeling, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power.”

Now, if you hadn’t just heard the scripture read, you might think that’s from a Facebook or a blog post. But it isn’t. It’s the apostle Paul writing to his protégé Timothy, a little less than 2,000 years ago.

Here’s the situation. If you’ve read the book of Acts, you know it ends with the apostle Paul in prison in Rome. Many scholars believe Paul was actually released from that first Roman imprisonment and continued his ministry. In the course of that ministry, an emergency came up in the city of Ephesus involving false teaching. Paul excommunicated the troublemakers and then left Timothy there to clean things up and continue fighting against the false teachings.

Not too long after that, Paul was back in prison in Rome and facing the trial that would result in his death. That is likely when he wrote this letter to Timothy. And in this letter, we see Paul’s deep concern for his friend. He wants to make sure that Timothy hold on to his faith there in Ephesus, surrounded as he was by all those false teachers.

And the scripture I just read is part of Paul’s description of those false teachers and the people who followed them: “lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive,

disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³unfeeling, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, ⁴treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” Now, this kind of a list of vices wasn’t all that uncommon for Paul. He put together a similar list in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans and some of his other letters.

What *is* unusual is that the list isn’t directed at Gentiles—non-Jews. In this case, the list is directed at people who claim to be followers of Jesus. People who are “holding to the outward form of godliness but [are] denying its power.” And I think what we can gather from Paul’s application of this list of Gentile vices to a group of putative Christians is that, at least in Paul’s view, the lives of those putative Christians weren’t really distinguishable from the culture around them. Instead of being an alternative to the greed, selfishness, and arrogance of the world around them, they had allowed themselves to be co-opted by it.

And Paul wanted to make sure that didn’t happen to his dear friend Timothy.

So, does any of this sound familiar? I mean, do I even need to say anything about the parallels to our world today?

OK, I’ll go ahead and do it. We live in a world that is every bit as greedy as the Ephesus of Paul’s day. Money—making more of it than the next person and keeping as much of it as we can—is the primary yardstick our culture uses to measure success. Selfishness isn’t even considered a bad thing anymore. You’re considered a sucker if you *aren’t* always looking out for number 1. And you’re considered a patsy if you aren’t boastful, arrogant, abusive, treacherous,

reckless, and swollen with conceit. Getting everything I can for myself—money, power, fame—is all that matters.

And, as bad as that is for our society—and our future—what makes it worse is that so much of the church today is going exactly the same way as the church in Ephesus. We are allowing ourselves to be poisoned by the values of the culture around us. I'm not talking about *this* church necessarily, but you don't have to look far to see how some in the church—especially here in the US—have abandoned Jesus' only real commandment—love God and love people—in order to amass money and personal power; how so many who claim to follow the Prince of Peace espouse hatred and division; how so many who claim to follow the one who came not to be served but to serve, are utterly self-absorbed. Quite simply, a lot of people who claim to follow Jesus really don't. They've been co-opted by the culture around them.

And, like I said, that's what Paul was concerned might happen to Timothy. So, Paul wrote this letter. And in it, he gave Timothy some advice on how to avoid the fate of the Ephesians.

This is the second week of our sermon series, "The Walk," in which we're talking about spiritual practices: the things Jesus did and told us to do to deepen and strengthen our faith. And in today's scripture, Paul recommends to Timothy maybe the most important of those practices: study of scripture.

Paul begins by explaining what scripture is: it is God-breathed, inspired by God. In a sense, this book was authored by God himself, with the Holy Spirit inspiring its human writers. Aside from Jesus himself, it is the primary means through which God has revealed Himself to humanity. Especially as it reveals Jesus to us, scripture is the most comprehensive and reliable

revelation of who God is, who we are as God's children, and of the relationship that God wants with us. And so Paul starts by reminding Timothy of this very important fact.

Then, Paul goes on to explain how studying God's word is going to enable Timothy to keep—and to deepen—his faith in the midst of all the forces trying to take it away. He lists several ways in which scripture is “useful.” You’ve no doubt heard the list before: “All scripture is ... useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness”

Now, whenever I’ve read or heard this passage before, I just thought Paul was just putting together a random list of the benefits of studying scripture. But as I looked at the scripture this week, I was struck by the fact that the list actually doesn’t look that random. It seems like Paul is building a progression, with each of the benefits of scripture study building on the next.

Here’s what I mean. He starts with teaching. Scripture is useful for teaching. A few verses earlier, he explained in more detail: scripture “instruct[s] [us] for salvation through Jesus Christ.” And this, of course, shouldn’t be surprising to us. It’s kind of our default understanding of Bible study. We study scripture to learn about God, about us, and about the relationship between us and God.

And so, we have several Sunday School classes here at Salado United Methodist Church that meet between services on Sunday. There are Bible Study classes that meet here or around town on a regular basis. I do a Bible Study on Wednesday nights. And pretty much all of those can be boiled down to what Paul is talking about here: teaching.

Which is, of course a good thing. We need to learn about God. We need to learn who we are in relationship with God. But that kind of learning, as important as it is, is not complete. It is aimed pretty much exclusively at our heads. We absorb knowledge, which is good. But that still leaves the question of, having gained that knowledge, what do we do with it?

So, Paul goes on to say that scripture is also valuable for reproof. Another word for reproof is rebuke, or criticism. The idea is that when we dig into scripture and are taught what it says, we are brought face to face with why God created us—the relationship of divine love God wants for us and expects from us. Which, if we're honest with ourselves, will lead us to recognize that we're not doing it.

Which then leads to correction. We recognize the ways in which we have fallen short of what God wants and expects of us and we resolve, with the assistance of God's Spirit, to fix it.

But, that still leaves the question of how? As I said last week, just knowing something doesn't mean you're going to live it. I know I shouldn't eat so much ice cream but I do it anyway. How do we take the teaching, reproof, and correction we've found in scripture—what we know in our heads—and learn to live it?

Which brings us to Paul's final point. Scripture is useful for **training** in righteousness. Last week I talked about how we learn to live what we know through practice. I talked about how my kids learned to swim by practice; how I learned to drive my stick shift Mustang through practice; how first responders learn to head towards the danger instead of away, through practice. And I talked about how it works the same way with our faith. We live our faith by practicing it; by

physically doing it; by embodying it and bringing it out of our heads and into the physical reality of our everyday lives.

So, what Paul is saying here is that study of scripture isn't just an exercise in gaining knowledge about God. Study itself is a way to *practice* our faith. As we immerse ourselves in the Biblical world—where God and our relationship with God is the whole point—we begin to see the world less in terms of what's in it for me and more in terms of “where's God in all of this and how can I help?”

As we become intentional about setting aside time and attention to devote God's word, that's that much less time we have to dedicate to the greed, selfishness, and arrogance with which we're constantly being bombarded.

And all of this, of course, leads us into some of the other ways we can *practice* our faith; things like giving, hospitality, and service.

It's an iterative, cyclical process, like breathing. We breathe in God's word and presence through study and in doing so, we recognize our need for deeper relationship with God and others. We commit to making it happen, and then under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we do it through other spiritual practices like service.

And that's how Paul finishes his description of scripture in this passage. What's the point of the teaching, the reproof, the correction, and the training? ¹⁷ “[S]o that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Study of scripture is good. It is necessary. It is the main way we learn about God and ourselves. And it is itself a means through which we live our faith and are thereby trained to

live our faith. But, as Jesus' little brother James said, "faith without works is dead." As we study, we learn more about God. And as we learn more about God, we become more like God. And, as we know, God doesn't sit on His hands. God works for the good of God's people. And so do we. And, in doing so, we become even more like God.