

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD
Arlington Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Distancing Yourself from the Character of the Devil

2 Timothy 3:1-5 (593)

January 27, 2002

Haddon Robinson taught homiletics at Dallas Seminary for nineteen years. In 1979 he became president of Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary where he continued to teach preaching. In 1991 he assumed the Harold John Okenga Distinguished Professorship of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Robinson has influenced generations of students and preachers through his example, classroom instruction, and books. Of the preacher he says, “The expositor must also be aware of the currents swirling across his own times, for each generation develops out of its own history and culture and speaks its own language ... Men or women who speak effectively for God must first struggle with the questions of their age and then speak to those questions from the eternal truth of God ... To expound the Scriptures so the contemporary God confronts us where we live requires the preacher study his *audience* as well as his Bible” (*Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, pp.77-79).

In **2 Timothy 3:1** Paul urges Timothy to an “awareness of the currents swirling across *his* own times” (H. Robinson). He begins, ***But realize this***. In ministry, as in every other area of life, “to be forewarned is to be forearmed.” Paul is giving Timothy an invaluable “heads up.” With reference to the situation in which

Timothy finds himself, Paul is saying, “Don’t be surprised. Don’t let this state of affairs confuse you, discourage you, or sidetrack you in your ministry. You must understand ***that in the last days difficult times will come.***” Paul had written something similar in his first letter to Timothy **1 Timothy 4:1-2** (Ph) ... **1** *God’s Spirit specifically tells us that in later days there will be men who abandon the true faith and allow themselves to be spiritually seduced by teachings of demons,* **2** *teachings given by men who are lying hypocrites, whose consciences are as dead as seared flesh.*

When Paul wrote this letter to Timothy there was a cadre of men who were known by and who were at one time identified with the church there in Ephesus. *Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Philetus* are mentioned by name (**1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17**). These men and their associates had rejected the faith (**1 Tim. 1:19**) and any conscience they had was now hard and calloused (**1 Tim. 4:2**). In spite of their excommunication from the fellowship (**1 Tim. 1:20**), they still exerted a devastating influence within the Christian community. They were teaching error-filled doctrines which spawned quarrels and disputes within the congregation (**2 Tim. 2:14**). In the church which he pastored, Timothy witnessed the result of this malignant ministry – dear saints whose *faith* was being *upset* (**2:18**), friends whose spiritual lives were being *ruined* (**2:14**), church members whose moral practices were becoming more corrupt with each passing day. This real-life situation in Ephesus serves as the backdrop for what Paul says in **2 Tim. 3:1-5**.

1 But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. 2 For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, 4 treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; 5 holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these. I think what he's saying is this: We must recognize and distance ourselves from evil men who would destroy the church.

The last days began when Christ came in the flesh (**John 1:14**) and will last until He returns in glory before the consummation of all things (**Acts 1:11**). So we are now living in the last days. **Hebrews 1:1-2a**, *God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.* This period of time is characterized by difficulty - *difficult ... [terrible] times will come.* Phillip Towner says they will be times "dangerously wild and out of control" (p.190). Michael Bentley says, "Ever since the time of the early church there have been, and there will continue to be, specific periods when life becomes extremely difficult for God's people" (p.264). Over the entire period of the last days I believe there will be "a general increase in evil" (Fee, p.268). It might be likened to inflation. There are periods when it's up and periods when it is down but over the long haul it increases. Likewise evil and wickedness "vary in intensity" (Bentley, p.264) but over the long-haul they

will increase. Look down at **verse 13**. *But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse.*

Calvin writes, “We note what the danger will be in those days. In Paul’s view it will not come from war, famine, disease, or from any of the other disasters that happen to physical bodies, but it will come from the wickedness of depraved men” (p.148). But you ask, “When have things been otherwise? Such evils have characterized men since the Fall. What makes these *last days* any more difficult than the former days?” While it is true that such things do in fact describe fallen human culture in general, in II Timothy 3 the Spirit of God is describing conditions which will be more and more prevalent in the professing church itself. Again, Calvin says, “Note ... who it is that Paul is talking about. He does not attack or accuse outside enemies who are openly opposed to Christ’s name but people who belong to the family and want to be known as church members. For God wants to test his church to the point of letting her carry such pests in her own bosom, though she shudders at the thought of nurturing them” (p.148). How could this be?

Those who are the source of difficulty for the church – whether from inside or outside – are driven by the same evil motivations. Jesus said, *“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you (John 15:18) ... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you (20) ... If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin (22)*

... And from **John 3:19**: *“the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil.”* As difficult as it may be to believe some of those who despise Christ and all that is good are found within the precincts of the community of faith itself. This is a time when in the church itself there is, what Barclay calls “a kind of terrible flowering of evil” (p.182).

Now difficulty comes to all men on account of wickedness itself. It is a spiritual principle that obedience produces prosperity and sin always and in every form destroys. It destroys souls, homes, families, churches, cultures, property ... everything. The church as a divinely ordained institution in society will know difficulty. In a culture that is fundamentally and increasingly godless, the people of God will be marginalized, suppressed, opposed, and persecuted. But in addition local churches will know internal pain and hardship on account of depraved men who connive their way into the covenant community and as preachers, teachers, elders, big-givers, or other positions of influence spread their malignant views and attitudes.

In **verse 2** Paul launches into a description of these men. Barclay says, “Here is one of the most terrible pictures in the New Testament of what a godless world would be like, with the terrible qualities of godlessness set out in a ghastly series” (p.184). George Knight has suggested that these nineteen characteristics are given to us in a chiastic arrangement. Refer to your sermon outline to see what this looks like. I want to point out a couple of noteworthy features. First, you will

notice the “love” words which form the bookends of the chiasm – *self-lovers, money-lovers, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God*. Second, notice the string of Greek words which begin with alpha, the letter that looks like a little “a.” That prefix means *without* and so those words are translated *ungrateful, unloving, unholy*, and so on. These words are related and appear together in Knight’s structure. The word placed in the middle of the chiasm is *diaboloι*. In **1 Timothy 3:6,7** and **Ephesians 4:27, 6:11** this is the Greek word translated *devil*. So these men are imitators of the great *diabolos*, the devil.

fi autoi (self-lovers)

fi arguroi (money-lovers)

alazonej (boastful)

uperhphanoi (arrogant)

blasphmoi (revilers)

goneuḗsin apeiqeij (disobedient to parents)

akaristoi (ungrateful)

anosioi (unholy)

astorgoi (unloving)

aspondoi (irreconcilable)

diaboloi (malicious gossips)

akrateij (without self-control)

anhmeroi (brutal)

afilagaqoi (haters of good)

rodotai (treacherous)

propeteij (reckless)

tetufwmenoi (conceited)

fi hdonoi (lovers of pleasure)

mal lon h' filogeoi (rather than lovers of God)

econtej morfwsin eusebeiaj thn de dunamin authj hrnhmenoi (holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied his power)

Let’s work our way through this list. The 1st Commandment says, “*Thou shalt have no other gods before Me*” (**Ex. 20:3**). These men and women are their own gods. They are **lovers of self** (1). Calvin makes an observation which we are

wise to remember. “The person who loves himself ... despises all other people” (p.149). **Lovers of money** (2). Financial gain is a prime motivation in their lives. This is a “basic trait of false teachers” (Knight, p.430) and most don’t even try to disguise it (see **1 Tim. 6:10**). **Boastful** (3). Their inordinate self-esteem is expressed in their speech. In their conversation they are forever calling attention to themselves. **Arrogant** (4). Their inordinate self-esteem is expressed in their attitude. They exaggerate their own worth often in an overbearing manner. Ironside observes, “How nauseating it must all be to Him who said, ‘*Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart*’ “ (p.214). **Revilers** (5). They talk about others in an abusive way. They tear down the reputation of others in order to build up themselves. **Disobedient to parents** (6). “Disobedience to parents describes a behavior pattern that, when persistent and aggravated, is regarded in the OT as a clear sign that the person is rebellious (Dt. 21:18ff). It may well be placed first in this group as the first step, or the most basic violation, in these violations of the natural order” (Knight, p.431). **Ungrateful** (7). They are void of appreciation for all they have received from God and from others. There may be specific reference here to parents. William Hendriksen says, “Though blessings are common enough, there is in this world no “common gratitude.” “Common grace, yes; common gratitude, no” (p.285)! **Unholy** (8). Again Hendriksen says these folks possess “no reverence for established sanctities” (p.285). Theirs are “vile thoughts and motives” (Towner, p.192). **Unloving** (9). They are “unfeeling, unsympathetic, heartless” (Hend., p.285) ... void of even the most natural affections. **Irreconcilable** (10). These

will not forgive and they care not one whit about being forgiven. **Malicious gossips** (11). Here is another sin of speech. They persist in spreading vicious rumors and in telling lies all with an evil design and intention. **Without self-control** (12). Several commentators use the word “untamed” here. They live unrestrained and uninhibited lives. They make no effort to check their sinful drives and impulses but rather give them full vent. **Brutal** (13). Fierce. Savage. **Haters of good** (14). They “despise virtue” (Hendriksen, p.285). You will search their lives for moral sensitivity and come up empty-handed every time. **Treacherous** (15). Like an ice-covered bridge they are completely unreliable. They will betray a trust in a heartbeat. To destroy a personal relationship is a small price to pay for what they want. **Reckless** (16). Like a wild-driving teenage kid, they rashly “plunge ahead in their wickedness” (Hendriksen, p.285) never stopping to think about what they’re doing. **Conceited** (17). They have an excessively high opinion of themselves. **Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God** (18). They are preoccupied with fleshly indulgence. **Holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power** (19). Did you know that the men or women just described will be in the church? That’s scary isn’t it? Theirs will be a godliness of their own creation; a godliness consisting of outward appearances – attendance, hugs and smiles, piety, religious lingo; a godliness consisting of ascetic practices – prayer, fasting; a godliness consisting of endless, trivial religious discussions. But it is all religious “smoke and mirrors.” The Spirit does not indwell them. There is no divine life within their souls.

I want to close with three questions. **First, where might I find such men?**

These men normally occupy positions of influence somewhere within the church. They may be well-known national or international religious figures with easy access to the public forum. They may be men or women who have their own ministries and are accountable to no one spreading their poison through all sorts of media. They may identify with the church as seminary professors, denominational leaders, or so-called “Christian” authors. They may be pastors, elders, Sunday School teachers, or just influential members of the church down the street.

Second, what is the danger for me? Listen. First of all, attachment to error and deception can actually lead to your financial, moral, and spiritual ruin. Second, unwary saints can be lead out of the path of freedom and joy into the bondage and misery of law by those who do not know and love the gospel of grace. Third, the peace, harmony, and joy of the fellowship you love can be ripped apart by division and contention caused by these trouble-makers in the church.

Third, how should I respond to such people and their influence within the church? The Spirit instructs us, ***Avoid such men as these***. What does this mean in practical terms? On a corporate, judicial level I think this means excommunication. In other words, the ordained leadership in a church – those charged with protecting and nurturing the flock – must exclude those persons

from the rites and fellowship of the church. Here is my simple counsel. Don't listen to the arguments or get embroiled in the debates of folks who have absolutely no interest in seeking out the truth. Don't engage them on a social basis. Don't imitate their character, language, attitudes, or views. Don't partner in any so-called "ministry" with them.

Can I do this without offending them? Probably not. But remember. These men are out to ravage the bride of Christ. They are out to destroy the communion of saints. They are out to bring dishonor on the name of Christ and the reputation of the church. They are out to disrupt both the peace and purity of the church. I would be as concerned about offending them as I would about offending the felon who has just broken into my house with the intention of doing harm to me and my family.

But let's make sure that in all of this we do not forget a very important point. We ourselves manifest, to one degree or another, every one of those nineteen despicable characteristics. A consideration of this will give shape to the rest of our worship this morning. Remember, *It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am the foremost of all. And yet for this reason I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1:15-16).*

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Ungrateful (7) ... void of appreciation for all they have received from God and from _____.

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Holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power (19) Theirs will be ... a godliness consisting of _____ appearances ... But it is all religious "smoke and mirrors." The Spirit does not indwell them. There is no divine _____ within their souls.

Three questions

First, where might I find such men? These men normally occupy positions of _____ somewhere within the church.

Second, what is the danger for me?

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... unwary saints can be lead out of the path of freedom and joy into the _____ and misery of law by those who do not know and love the gospel of grace.

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