

Recognizing Evil

Text:

II Timothy 3: 1- 17

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. 2. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, 3. Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, 4. Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; 5. Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. 6. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, 7. Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. 8. Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith. 9. But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all *men*, as theirs also was.

10. But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, 11. Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of *them* all the Lord delivered me. 12. Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. 13. But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.

14. But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned *them*; 15. And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16. All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17. That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

Introduction:

This is one of the better known passages in II Timothy. It is not unusual to hear it referred to in Christian conversations. These conversations usually go something like this. Someone will comment on the moral degeneration of the present times and someone else will reply: "That's true, things are certainly getting worse, but that it just a sign that the coming of Christ is near because the Bible says that things would get really bad in the "last days". In general, the comment is not false. However, that is not exactly the point Paul is making to Timothy in this passage. As in the previous paragraph, He is encouraging Timothy to stand up to those within the church in Ephesus who are opposing him. For Paul, the "last days" are simply the time between the two comings of Christ. He believed that that time would be much shorter than it has been, but remember what Jesus told his disciples: only the Father knows the duration of that time. We should always be ready for his coming, Jesus said, "watch for you know not the day nor the hour."

The evil that Paul is referring to in this passage is not the evil in the world, but teachers within the church who have not truly escaped evil, who are still under its power. As we saw in the last verse of the previous chapter, they are still in the devil's snare; Satan has taken them captive to do his will. What Paul is saying to Timothy is that he should not be surprised that such evil still exists. Christ has conquered evil , but for the present this victory is only present in the lives of his true disciples who have been delivered from this "present evil age", who are indwelled by his Holy Spirit who is transforming them into the image of Christ and enabling them to live righteous lives in a wicked world. The final overthrow of evil will not come until Christ returns to put an end to the rule of Satan and to establish his own authority. In the meantime, the battle with evil must continue. To succeed in this battle Timothy must do three things: first, he must be aware of evil and not be ensnared by it; secondly, he must follow the good example that has been set for him by the Apostle Paul and the sound teaching of Christ that has been communicated to him; finally, he must stay attached to the Scriptures. Everything in this chapter can be summarized under one of these three headings,

and we will look at them all, but before we do I want us to think about the list of sins that we are given in verses 2-5.

Sin lists are not uncommon in Paul's letters. This is often the way he speaks of sin; by reeling off a litany of vices rather than just summarizing evil under a single word like sinners. For example in this passage he could simply have said: "remember that in the last days people will still be sinful". That would not have had near the impact of this list of 19 specific vices. There are at least a dozen passages in his letters where he does this. One of the most familiar is the list of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5 that he contrasts with the "fruit of the Spirit." Here he gives a list of 17 specific sins which are not at all the same as the ones we have read in our text:

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5: 19-21)

In I Timothy 1:8-11 he has another list. He is speaking of the same false teacher that he is warning Timothy about in the text we are presently looking at. He describes them as: "Certain persons, who by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions" (I Timothy 1:6-7). It is interesting that he describes them as wanting to be "teachers of the law" because he goes on to say in verse 8 that the law is good in its proper place, but that we must understand that "that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." In the list of ten forms of sin that he mentions he alludes to all of the ten commandments except the fourth.

So when Paul talks about evil he usually talks about sins not sin, and his lists vary according to the occasion that prompts the teaching. His reason for doing this is simple. Sin is an abstraction, sins are a daily reality. Every day of our life we deal with some specific sin, either our own, or someone else's. In the end we do not overcome sin in general but specific sins one by one as they confront us.

What can we learn from the specific list of sins that Paul gives us in this passage? Our tendency is to simply read the list and say to ourselves: "these are really bad people", but to understand the point he is making we must pay close attention to the list.

An initial observation is that he is speaking of religious sinners. Notice the final thing on the list: "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." The people of whom he is speaking did not stand out as wicked sinners. This list contains almost none of the sins of the list of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5. They are trying to be church leaders. They probably even appear to some as "good" men. They have a following among the members of the church at Ephesus. The worst sinners are often those who hide their evil behind a veneer of piety or religion.

It would be too laborious to go through the entire list item by item, but an examination of the list bears at least two important observations: First, the fact that sin is a privation of good. It is the absence of the positive elements of genuine holiness or in some cases of simple humanity. Secondly, since the essence of holiness is love, sin is in one way or another often a failure of love.

I. Sin as Privation

The first case, sin as privation of holiness, stands out in the text in the number of vices that are stated as privations. In Translation this often, but not always, is indicated by a word with "un" as a prefix followed by a positive quality. Of the nineteen vices listed eight fit into this category. In translation they are: "disobedient to parents", "unthankful", "unholy", "without natural affection",

“unforgiving”, “uncontrolled”, “untamed”, “not lovers of good”. In each case it is the absence of some positive good either by nature or by sanctification that is stressed. These are people who demonstrate their lack of spiritual life by a lack of the accompanying graces of that life. What is most important in the Christian life is the positive infusion of the holiness of God into the life of the believer by the Holy Spirit. It is this life that makes us grateful, holy, loving, forgiving, self-controlled lovers of all that is good. This kind of a positive Christ-like life is a gift of grace. Without grace we cannot imitate it.

II. Sin as Misdirected Love

The other thing that stands out in this list is that the word “love” occurs in different forms six times. The list begins with “lovers of self, lovers of money” and ends with “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.” Evil in this case is misplaced love. Last time we talked about fleeing and pursuing. We said life was all about fleeing and pursuing the right things. Here we see that it is about loving the right things. When we love the right things in the right order our lives will be in order, and we will be pleasing to God and a blessing to others, but when our loves are distorted or perverted we will be miserable and a burden to others. The text speaks of three specific things that these individuals don’t love that they should, and three that they do love that they shouldn’t. They don’t love God, others even those closest to them, or “the good”. They do love themselves, money and pleasure. Their great sin, in a word, is self-centeredness. They are all about getting what they want. They need to switch lists. The proper order is to love God with all our heart soul and mind, and our neighbor as our self, and to love all that is good. If we do this self money and pleasure will find their proper place in our lives. We will be blessed of God, content as disciples of Jesus and a blessing to others.