

Prayer

Thank You, Heavenly Father, for the gift of this day, which brings with it the fresh promise of what is possible as Your Holy Spirit works through us. Even if we never know the full extent of Your plans, may we do everything You would have us do with vigour, and so find fulfilment in every part of our lives. May Your eternal plans be completed, and may we rejoice in them forever. Thank You, Heavenly Father: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Land

Pray for the Kingdom of God to come and defeat all the powers of evil. Pray for our world which will one day be 're-created' by the Lord in glory to make His new earth.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for the fellowship of believers throughout the world
- Pray for small businesses which are closing due to the economy
- Pray for all those caught up in the scandals which feed the press

Meditation

Sometimes, when we are tired of the life you have given us,
The strength seems to be sapped from our spiritual reserves.
We appreciate Your promises, but then we question them
Whilst trying to find some answers to our passing problems,
Not realising that in faithfulness, you will never let us go.

Hold us firmly, do not let us slip or fall;
Show us the way when we can see nothing,
Deal with us carefully and protect our fragility,
Calm our nerves when we are touched by fear;
And speak clearly when should listen to Your advice.

For discipleship counts when in our distress, we trust our all to You.

Bible Study - 2 Timothy 3:1-9

¹ Know this, there will come difficult times in the last days. ² People will love themselves, wedded to money, arrogant, proud, insulting, rebellious against their parents, ungrateful and irreligious, ³ inhuman, merciless, slanderers, lacking in self-control, brutal, haters of what is good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, those who love pleasure rather than God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness but denying its power! Avoid them! ⁶ For among them are those who worm their way into households and captivate gullible women who are loaded down with their sins. They are led astray by all manner of desires, ⁷ always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁸ These people oppose the truth because of their corrupt minds, just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses. ⁹ But they will not get far, because their folly will become obvious, as in the case of those two men.

Review

Paul, as with many other people in the days of the early church, unashamedly talked about the return of the Lord as part of normal speech. They understood that the Lord was delayed and that Jesus had told His disciples that they would not know the 'time and the place' of His coming, but they followed Jesus' teaching by actively expecting His return, and living in a manner which demonstrated their preparedness. It is in this context that Paul launches into one of the longest lists of vices recorded in his letters (3:2-5), but what a list it is! He was concerned about worldly behaviour that would distract the believer from being ready for the coming of our Lord on several grounds, but the two concluding evils on his list were 'those who love pleasure rather than God' and those who have 'the appearance of godliness but deny its power'! This list identifies many more evils than his other somewhat predictable lists of sexual, social and personal wrongs, but all of them prevent people from having a fruitful relationship with God and often each other.

Paul's critique of scholarship and learning As elsewhere in Paul's letters, his thoughts appear to have been triggered by the activities of those who he feels have misrepresented the church or led people astray. In this case, he does not identify any individuals as standing accused of this (3:6), but he comments dryly that there can be a real problem for the life of the church when people are 'always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth' (3:7). This is a serious critique of scholarship and learning in the church, and should be a warning to those whose commitment to academia is so strong that it controls their understanding of faith. In some places where theology is taught, a false world is created in which the things of God are judged according to human standards, and the real claims of people of faith are kept apart from honest human investigation and enquiry. I have seen too many people of faith begin theological study only to leave it a few years later with no faith at all, to doubt the wisdom of Paul's critique here.

Paul likens those who use their knowledge in this way to 'Jannes and Jambres' (3:8), and when Paul adds that they 'opposed Moses', we wonder where in the Old Testament this might be. You will not find these two characters mentioned in the Bible, but Jewish literature in Paul's day identifies these two as the magicians who attempted to counter Moses and Aaron's 'signs' performed before Pharaoh (Exodus 7:11). For Paul, it was a simple illustration, and the powerful story of the Exodus was enough to prove to Timothy and his readers that great and learned traditions of wisdom in ancient cultures were no match for the things of God revealed by the Spirit!

The list! Going back to the long list of follies and sins in the earlier part of the passage, we should note that Paul began his warnings about unbecoming behaviour in the church with the phrase 'people will love themselves ...' In nearly all of the items mentioned there is a strong degree of selfishness or self-centredness. Arrogance, for example, is the love of self paraded before others, and 'rebelling against parents' describes the classic attempt of the young to assert themselves and their identity over and against that of their parents and others. Please note, however, that neither Paul (nor I) make any blanket accusation about teenagers here; Paul's comment is entirely general. Ungratefulness (3:2) and then inhumanity, being merciless, and lacking in self control (3:3) all indicate various degrees of behaviour focussed on self, and most of the other items mentioned simply add related evils to these mentioned; such as 'wedded to money' (3:2) and also the ungrateful, inhuman, slanderers, treacherous and reckless etc. All of them indicate disregard of people, humanity in general or even life itself, and this is an affront to the Lord who comes to 'give life in all its fullness' (John 1:4,16).

A question of religious con-men! Right in the middle of the passage is a sentence that appears a little questionable. Paul says; '*among them are those who worm their way into households and captivate gullible women who are loaded down with their sins. They are led astray by all manner of desires.*' (3:6). Some versions of the Bible contain the

expression 'silly women', which can sound rather questionable because without qualification, the phrase can give the impression that Paul regards women (and by implication, not men) as susceptible to perversions of the Christian faith because they are incapable of understanding the nature of sin and faith. For this reason, I have translated the Greek word here as 'gullible', which is a perfectly good translation and avoids the possible prejudices associated with the word 'silly'.

If we look at the principle underlying what Paul says, then we might all agree that the scenario is one to which all might be susceptible. Our best way of overcoming any hint of prejudice against women is to ensure that we apply this text to all who are vulnerable to religious 'con artists'. Indeed, the subject of inappropriate religious trickery, and in some cases extortion, is important. For example, some tele-evangelists make millions for themselves by making questionable appeals on their own TV channel broadcasts, and such bad practice and bad faith needs urgent action in our own day. We do not help the church by ignoring a piece of scriptural advice because the manner of its expression is awkward. Religious 'con-men' do exist and are a danger to faith for all; they need to be exposed and removed from the church.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How does scholarship help the church, and how does academia create difficulties for the church?
2. What forms of selfishness make the proclamation of the Gospel difficult in today's world.
3. Discuss examples of religious con-artists you have heard about or come across. What dangers do they pose for the church today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There is a considerable mix of subjects within this condensed passage of Paul's letter. The three main topics I have identified each need more study if we are to arrive at a decent understanding of the issues involved. I am of the opinion that many of the subjects raised by Paul in his writings are best dealt with by scanning all his letters, so that we may arrive at a good understanding of God's will. Another way of saying the same thing is to remind ourselves that we can be led astray if we do not check out our understanding of scripture in one place with what it says elsewhere.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Reflect on the list of vices in this scripture, and ask yourself whether you are in any way subject to some of them. If you are, then pray about this and ask the Lord to help you deal with it.*
- *Is there any teaching that you hear regularly within your church, and which you believe to be wrong? If so, then seek the Lord's will concerning how to deal with this, and discuss the issues with others before taking any action or speaking to church leaders about it.*

Final Prayer

You grant us power to do Your will, O Lord, and we praise You for this. Lead us on to be able and willing to receive more from You and do more for you as time goes by, and so