

2 Timothy No. 6**2 Timothy 3:1-9****July 28, 2013****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

It has been a month since the last sermon in this series, so a brief reminder is in order. We are in the midst of Paul's last letter, at least the last of his letters to have made its way into Holy Scripture. He wrote while in prison in Rome anticipating his trial, conviction, and execution. He wrote to charge Timothy, his assistant and would-be successor, to "guard the gospel" perhaps in the expectation that Timothy would not reach Rome in time for Paul to give these exhortations in person. We do not know whether Timothy reached Rome by the time of Paul's death. Times were dark. Not only was the Roman government taking steps to punish those who practiced the Christian faith -- both Paul and Peter were to die during the persecution of Christians during the time of the Emperor Nero -- but churches, especially in the province of Asia, were in some way losing their grip on the apostolic teaching. There was a great need for the church's leadership to be faithful, as well as hard-working and indefatigable, and so this last letter to the man Paul was counting on to pick up his torch when he finally laid it down.

Text Comment

- v.1 Paul's "understand this" is meant to remind Timothy that the opposition of the world to the truth of God, its indifference to spiritual things, its hostility to the interests of godliness are not passing fancies. The church must always make its way through a world that is no friend to the grace of God.

In 1 Tim. 4:1 we have the phrase "latter days" and here "last days" but they mean the same thing. There we noticed that Paul clearly regarded his readers as living in these "latter" or "last" days and here it is the same. He is not talking about something that will be true some day in the future, but about what is already true.

The phrase originates in the Old Testament prophets who spoke of the prophetic future under this guise, "the last days." It was a way of speaking of the future, when God would act decisively in salvation or judgment. But the phrase or a like phrase is found a number of times in the New Testament and regularly as a way of describing *the present*. You and I are living in *the last days*. For example, in his Pentecost sermon Peter quotes Joel's prophecy that God would pour out his Spirit on all people, "your sons and daughters would prophesy," and so on. Joel said that this would happen "afterward," but Peter begins the citation with an interpretative addition: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people." Joel didn't say "in the last days," but that was what Peter understood him to mean. The phrase had thus become a way of speaking of the epoch

that was introduced by the coming of Christ and will be brought to its end by his return. The phrase, in other words, does not refer to the very last period of that epoch, as some have thought. Paul isn't talking about how we are going to know that Jesus is about to return. He is talking rather about what the world will be like *until he does*. He is not talking about the future but the present!

Interestingly, the use of this terminology in the New Testament reminds us that there are comparatively few statements that describe events that will specifically herald the Second Coming. Whether we are talking about the love of many growing cold, or of the world gone over to sin, or, as in the Lord's Olivette discourse, wars and rumors of wars and earthquakes, such things have been and will be a constant of life in this world until the Lord Jesus returns. There may be an intensification of such phenomena as the age comes to its end, though we don't know for sure that that's the case, but the phenomena themselves have always been with us and always shall be. I remember growing up and hearing sermon after sermon about how many more earthquakes there were in our day than there were five hundred or a thousand years ago and how this was the proof that Christ was to return any day now. This is not the teaching of the New Testament. The dawning of the last days did not bring a noticeable change to man's rebellion against God, to the machinations of the Devil, or to the disordered state of the natural world. All continued as before and shall continue.

At the same time, Paul speaks of "times of difficulty." It has never been the case that times are uniformly bad. Both the Bible and church history teach us that there are times of relative calm and times of great stress, hardship, and danger. There are calm seas and there are tempests through which the church shall sail.

- v.2 Before we go on, a few words about this list. The reason the church must face such difficulties is always the same: it is *men*, sinful men, men in rebellion against the law and the rule of God. Such men will be found outside the church, of course, but inside her as well, as is Paul's point here.

What follows is a description of such bad people and that in three respects: 1) their behavior in vv. 2-4; 2) their hypocrisy and their guise as religious people in vv. 5-7; and 3) their zeal to enlist others in their way of life, in vv. 8-9.

It would be unnecessarily tedious to devote time and attention to each one of the nineteen descriptions of the moral turpitude of such people, but note a few things.

- a. The list begins and ends with a set of embracive descriptions of their moral failure: they *are* lovers of themselves and they *are not* lovers of God. Those are the

- bookends. Those are the summary descriptions, all the rest is detail, as the two great commandments -- love for God and love for neighbor -- summarize all the specific regulations of God's law. As Bob Dylan famously sang during his "Christian" period, "You've got to serve somebody." The human being as we learn in the Bible and as we observe human life today is more *homo adorans*, worshipping-man, than he or she is *homo sapiens*, thinking-man. And the problem with man in sin is that his loves are misplaced; he is devoted to the wrong things. We will read that such men love money and love pleasure, but that they do not love what is good. Augustine famously described the state of man in sin as *homo incurvatus in se*, man curved in on himself. New life in Christ is always, on the contrary, a life turned outward to God and to one's neighbor.
- b. And so notice as well that almost all the terms that follow have to do with the sinister effects of self-love on human relationships. Sin of every kind is a form of anti-social behavior. We tend, as American individualists, to focus on our private sins and, true enough, they must be mortified. But the Bible places greater emphasis on the character of our conduct *towards others* than we are inclined to do. We are what we are in relationship to our neighbor! For example, the problem with our self-interest is that it makes us heartless, it disinclines us to honor our parents, it makes us slanderers of others -- gossip and especially evil reports are always told and heard for selfish, self-serving reasons, either because they make us look better in comparison to the person about whom we are telling tales or because we can pose in making the report as someone who has inside knowledge or who is concerned for the truth or even concerned for the person whose reputation we are ruining by spreading a malicious report!
- v.5 We do not expect to find people such as Paul has described in vv. 2-4 *in the church*, but, alas, they are there in numbers. We expect that religion should produce morality, but it wasn't the case in Israel and has often not been the case since. The OT prophets are often found excoriating a people who were highly religious *and* deeply immoral at the same time and whose immorality revealed itself most obviously in their indifference or outright hostility to their neighbor. The Lord had similar things to say, you remember, about the Pharisees, who considered themselves to be and were taken by many others to be paragons of religious virtue, but who did not love their neighbor.

The medieval church furnished us with exaggerated examples of this type, but they help us to see how clearly Paul is describing a real situation and easily human beings fall into it. Think of the 14th century nobleman, Charles de Blois. Charles was notable for his piety. He went the extra mile to mortify his flesh. He did all kinds of things that you've never done to beat your body and make it your slave. He wore unwashed clothes crawling with lice; he put pebbles in his shoes; he slept on straw on the floor next to his wife's

bed; he wore a hair-shirt under his armor; he confessed every night so as not to go to sleep in a state of sin. He walked barefoot to shrines in the winter. But he fathered children by women not his wife, and he was ferocious in his pursuit of a dukedom: in one battle hurling into the city of Nantes the heads of thirty partisans of the other candidate, and, after a successful siege of a town loyal to his competitor, he ruthlessly massacred two-thousand of its citizens, men, women, and children. [B. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 76-77] *That* is the profile of a man who has the appearance of godliness but lacks the power of it! It certainly is so by the standard Paul sets here, where true godliness is first and foremost a matter of one's treatment of others. Such a dramatic illustration, however, needs to be brought down into our own everyday life.

Paul's "avoid such people" is proof, if proof were needed, that he is speaking not of future days but of the chronic condition of the world and the church. "Religious" sinners are a perennial problem for the church. [Stott, 88]

- v.7 Such people are always eager to enlist others to their cause and so make their way among those easiest to persuade: people with weak convictions, likely to be swayed by emotional appeal and the like.
- v.8 Jannes and Jambres were, according to Jewish tradition, the chief magicians in Pharaoh's court at the time of the exodus. They are not mentioned in the Bible, of course, but we find their names in a Jewish targum -- or running commentary on the Bible -- on Exodus 7:11 where reference is made to the Egyptian magicians whom Pharaoh had summoned. The point is that as these men opposed Moses who was God's spokesman, so the men he is talking about oppose the truth. What is more, as *they* are like the Egyptian magicians, *he* is like Moses, a remarkable claim to authority on Paul's part.
- v.9 Not to worry; they may gain temporary influence, but sooner rather than later it will come to nothing because it will become obvious to everyone that they are frauds. The Egyptian magicians could mimic Moses for a time, but soon he was visiting plagues on Egypt that they could not imitate and their authority crumbled and we hear nothing more about them. We can become disheartened when we see the church succumbing to the culture and following it around as if it had a ring in its nose, but we are always to remember that the truth *will* win out *because it is the truth!*

We have before us this evening a very unflattering description of human beings -- in this particular case, human beings in the church, but the account can easily be generalized to human beings as a whole -- that, while typical of the Bible, is something Christians often struggle to come to terms with. Are people as really as bad as all that? Should we think of people that we know, whose lives we observe, in these highly negative ways? And how are we to reconcile this

description with the obligation of Christian love, a love that believes all things and hopes all things?

One thing is for sure: very, very few people will accept that *they* are anything like the description that Paul gives of some seriously religious people in Ephesus at that time, people who were, no doubt, admired by some and accepted by many others as upright men. People will not thank you for pointing out that they are, in truth, as bad as this themselves. Even Christians nowadays have a hard time coming to terms with such a description, applied to themselves or to their friends. So what about this dismal report of the moral condition of many we might have thought would have been among the better human beings, Christian church-goers as they were?

The Bible, as you well know assumes that men are bad, very bad. We have descriptions of human life and behavior like this one everywhere we look in both the Old Testament and the New. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the Bible rubs our noses in the thorough-going moral failure of the human race. Absent this teaching and this assumption about human beings -- that they are really as bad as all that -- the rest of the Bible makes little sense. It is only because men and women are so profoundly selfish, proud, arrogant, abusive, ungrateful, heartless and so on; only because they love everything *but* God and their neighbor that we can believe that nothing short of the substitutionary death of the Son of God would avail to take away their guilt. It is only the reality of this disgusting badness that makes salvation the urgent issue that it is in the Bible. If you don't think about yourself in this way, if you don't see yourself as a comprehensive moral failure, you will never find Jesus Christ even a particularly interesting person, much less someone of vital importance to your life. Jesus made it clear that he had come to save sinners, not the righteous, by which he meant those who thought themselves righteous, like the vast majority who inhabited the church in his day. Their complacency inoculated them against the influence of Jesus.

So how do we defend Paul's so relentlessly negative portrait of even highly religious human beings, a specie of his general portrait of human life, as you can confirm by reading the first three chapters of Romans? You must be able to do this and convincingly or your own sense of the gospel will be weak and you will have a hard time making sense of it for others.

The fact is, the world does not believe this *at all!* They not only do not accept that men, ordinary men, religious men, men like themselves, could be so comprehensively bad -- ingrates, selfish, conceited, lustful, unholy prigs -- but they find the suggestion genuinely offensive. I was listening to an exchange on the radio the other day in the car. I entered the dialogue in the middle, not at the beginning, but obviously the host and the caller were talking about divorce. The caller was making the obvious point that when a person marries he or she makes a covenant -- perhaps the woman caller was a Christian though she didn't identify herself as one -- a covenant not only with the other person but with the community and with God. Divorce,

therefore, was a violation of fundamental moral obligations. The talk show host, however, didn't buy it. This was a conservative, political radio program. His response to her was "Then, you're saying that anyone who gets a divorce is a sinner," as if obviously no sensible person could believe *that*. Forget for the moment the fact that the other spouse almost always thinks the departing husband or wife is a sinner -- 90% of divorced people in the United States say that the divorce was the other spouse's fault!; that's 90%! -- forget for a moment the harm that so many Americans are willingly doing to their spouses and their children when they seek a divorce, forget for a moment what usually happens in a divorce, what is said and what is done, and concentrate on this single fact: the radio host, speaking for a multitude of Americans, even so-called "family values" Americans, dismissed the very idea that so many people could be characterized as liars, as selfish, and as unfaithful.

Here is the rub of the gospel, indeed of the whole message of the Bible. It requires us to embrace a deeply negative assessment of human life in sin and people are simply unwilling to do that. People may have no difficulty thinking others that bad, but not themselves, and it is impossible to defend the position that you are morally good, at least defend it over time, if *everyone* else is very bad. So we judge most people to be good, not bad, and in that way we can think of ourselves as also good.

So we Christians have the unenviable task to declare how bad people are, a message that has always been and will always be deeply unwelcome. And in our man-worshipping age the problem for us has intensified. We have turned the general congratulation of human beings into an art form, we have resolutely determined to call evil good, and now consider it terribly bad form to call much of anything evil or to represent the things that so many people do as bad behavior on their part, apart, of course, from a few sins that the culture has agreed to demonize, some of which, of course, are not sins at all.

But here comes Paul with a bucket of cold water to the face and any honest man or woman must admit that his "vivid sketch of the contemporary scene" [Stott, 81], is as accurate today as it was then. After all, as G.K. Chesterton reminded us, the doctrine of original sin is the only biblical doctrine that is comprehensively demonstrated in human life.

So, once again, what are we to do with such a negative description of human life? Well, first, we are to have the biblical sophistication to realize what is being said here and what is not. Paul is not caricaturing evil, not making a cartoon of it here, as if he intends us to think that people are all like Snidely Whiplash, twirling their mustaches, and cackling "But the mortgage..." while they foreclose on little old ladies. These people didn't kick dogs. I'm sure they helped old folk across the street. They probably gave to charity. They may even have had to some degree a faithful marriage -- many heretics do! But that is hardly the measure of true goodness, however much the world may think it is.

Consider these facts that, taken together, provide a foundation for the Bible's characterization of human beings as thoroughly bad.

- I. *Men and women, all human beings, have been invested with a moral nature that summons them to a life of real love, goodness, purity, and selfless devotion to God and others.*

When people talk about themselves or others as being "good," ["I'm a good person," [How many times have we heard that?] they are invariably judging human life according to an appallingly low standard, an standard that is their own invention, as if all true goodness required of us was being nice some of the time.

The story is told of John Gerstner, the raspy-voiced theologian and preacher, mentor of R.C. Sproul, who on one occasion was speaking on sin at a conference, perhaps it was one of those Ligonier conferences, and, in his sermon, he compared human beings to rats. A woman was offended by the comparison and told Dr. Gerstner so after his address. After lunch Dr. Gerstner spoke again and began his next address by telling the audience what had happened, how someone had been offended by his comparing humans to rats. He had thought about it, he said, and felt that he ought to apologize...*to the rats*. Rats, he went on to say, are what they are and do what they do because that is their nature. But what human beings are and do is a violation of the nature that God gave them. Men and women have corrupted their nature; they regularly ignore the voice of God within them -- their conscience -- and act in ways God never intended.

Rats are obedient creatures. Human beings are profoundly disobedient. Human beings live at a level far below what ought to be the case. Every human being knows very well that we ought to live on a much higher plane of love and goodness; that we ought to be regularly sacrificing our own comfort for the welfare of others, that our lives ought to be the demonstration of honesty, devotion, loyalty, faithfulness, purity and so on. No one can deny this because it is precisely the failure to be such people that he or she is always criticizing in the lives of others. We can't judge others without condemning ourselves. Or, as Dr. Schaeffer used to arrestingly put it, if we simply hung a tape recorder around our necks, we would condemn ourselves again and again every day by criticizing others for failures of which we ourselves are guilty.

This, you remember, was a point the Lord rang the changes on. "Judge not, lest ye be judged," he warned, but that hasn't stopped human beings from passing hard judgment on people all the time; if not in our words, then in our thoughts. By doing so they as much as shout from the rooftops that they were meant for a far, far nobler life than the one they actually live. We must judge human beings against the right standard, which is God's standard, not a standard of their own devising designed to salve the guilty conscience.

II. *Second, we must reckon with the human capacity for self-deception, and particularly moral self-deception.*

The fact is, it makes little difference to me that people think themselves good, because I'm well used to the fact that people typically entertain a wildly inflated estimate of the quality of their behavior. I've given you these statistics before, but they are startling in the insight they provide into the accuracy of human self-evaluation and reveal that a ridiculously inflated ego is a universal fact of human life.

In a survey of nearly a million high school seniors who took the SAT some years ago, 70% rated their leadership ability above average and only 2% thought it below average. As to getting along with others, *zero* rated themselves below average and 25% put themselves in the top 1%. In a more recent survey reported in the *Washington Post* 94% of Americans said they were above average in honesty -- the IRS obviously has nothing whatsoever to worry about -- 89% above average in common sense, 86% above average in intelligence, and 79% above average in looks. In a survey reported in the journal *Social Psychology*, 90% of American business managers rated their performance as "superior," 86% of employees rated themselves "better than average." It goes on and on. It would be hilarious if moral self-deception weren't so deadly.

This was part of the point made so poignantly by the Jewish writer Hannah Arendt in her famous description of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi organizer of the so-called "Final Solution," the elimination of European Jews. Eichmann, you remember, escaped to Argentina after the war, but was eventually captured, taken to Israel, tried and executed for his crimes. Arendt attended the trial and wrote about it. After observing him during the trial and talking to him herself, she spoke finally of what she famously called "the banality of evil." Eichmann was an ordinary person, in many ways like everyone else and in nothing except his deeds could be distinguished as a devil. According to him, he was simply obeying orders and doing his job. What he did, after all, was legal in Germany in those days. We would like to believe that he was a monster, a psychopath; but in fact he was quite ordinary, very much like us. What we learned again in the 20th century and are learning still further in the 21st is how much evil perfectly ordinary people will do if the circumstances are right and if they are given the proper encouragement. After all, it was the highly educated Germans who put Hitler into power, not in the case of a great many because they admired the vicious brew of hateful ideas that animated his political life, but because they thought he would bring them prosperity. They were, like all men, lovers of themselves and lovers of money rather than lovers of what is good.

In other words, don't trust a human being even to know, much less to tell you the truth about himself or herself!

III. Third, we must not forget the state of the world.

When people claim that they are good and that most people are likewise, they leave us with little explanation for the woe of human life. A progressive politician may believe that injustice, crime, and man's inhumanity to man are caused by social structures and not by the tendencies of the human heart, but we've been at this for a long time now, and all the work that has been done on social structures doesn't seem to have gotten us any closer to Eden.

The husband who betrays his wife, the boss who is cruel to his employees, the bully at school, the thief who devastates another human life virtually without thought for the grief and pain that he causes, the gang member who murders for virtually no reason at all or to protect his criminal enterprise, these are not the exception but the rule, otherwise why is the world so devilishly hard a place for so many human beings.

IV. Fourth, and very briefly, as we mentioned in a sermon sometime back, God evaluates human behavior first and foremost by its motive and so much behavior that seems to be good in human life, so much that people use to offset the moral deficit, is, in fact, bad, not good, because it is ill-motivated.

In human life one may get credit for doing the right thing for the wrong reason -- after all, who really knows the motives that inspire human action or how self-serving, how pride-stoking, how others-belittling a man or a woman's good deeds can often be -- but God does not credit a deed as good that is done for evil purposes. And that, dear friends, eliminates an immense amount of what human beings call good in the behavior of the human race!

I could go on and on explaining how it is that the Bible can teach such a relentlessly pessimistic view of human behavior and the human heart lying beneath it. Many may think themselves better than this, but, then, as we say, there is even honor among thieves. The worst people still consider themselves good and look down on others as worse than themselves. It all depends upon whose standards are being used to evaluate behavior. God's standards are what matter and compared to those, the dismal truth is that human beings are comprehensive moral failures, defiant in their failure, unrepentant in it, and comfortable with it. They do not desire to change and have no intention of doing so.

So Paul has done nothing but speak the truth, hard as that truth may be to hear. But, we cannot leave this text without reflecting on the fact that, as he wrote these words, Paul must have thought, "And there, but for the grace of God, go I." *He* had been such a religious sinner. He had been abusive -- good grief, he had conspired in the murder of Stephen and the arrest of many other innocent people -- he had been proud, arrogant, heartless, slanderous, swollen with conceit

and all the rest all the while sure he was a paragon of virtue. He had been a lover of himself rather than of God or the good.

And as soon as he had, by the grace of God, seen himself for what he actually was, he found forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you remember a similarly bleak list of man's moral failures that Paul gives us in 1 Cor. 6?

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” [6:9-10]

But then Paul goes on:

“And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God.”

The honest recognition of how bad human beings are is important for one reason only: that those who come to see the bitter truth about themselves are in a fair way of being delivered from that badness and being made good; deliverance in the only way in which a human being can be delivered from sins mountainous as all that: by the power of God and the grace of Jesus Christ.