

When a Lover of Good Thinks About Evil

by John Piper

This sermon delves into the nature of evil in the world, emphasizing the need to understand, grieve over, and combat evil while holding fast to the gospel for deliverance. It explores the juxtapositions of emotions and truths in the Bible, highlighting the complexities of God's holiness and the call to pursue holiness amidst a darkening world. The message also addresses the intensification of evil in the last days, the severity and specifics of evil, the insidious creep of evil, the limit of evil, and the alternative of godly suffering and final deliverance.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:1, 2 Timothy 3:10, 2 Timothy 3:12, 2 Timothy 3:13, 2 Timothy 4:17, Romans 5:2, Romans 12:9, 1 John 2:18, Hebrews 1:2, 1 Peter 1:20

Topics: "Understanding Evil", "Pursuing Holiness"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray. Father, I ask that you would grant understanding of the nature and varieties of evil in the world. And I ask that you would grant us to grieve over its presence in ourselves and in the world.

And I ask that you would grant that we would cherish the gospel, which alone can deliver us from the power of evil and its damning effects. And I ask that you would grant us to pursue the lost and shun the evil. And I pray that one of the effects of this message would be that you would vaccinate your people with this measure of evil so that they would not die of these diseases.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. One of the great blessings of being a Bible-saturated church with a Bible-saturated eldership and a Bible-saturated people is that strange juxtapositions in the Bible, the coming together of seemingly contrary emotions and emphases and truths, prevent us, the juxtaposition that keeps happening in the head of Bible-saturated people, of unlikely things coming together, prevents us from being a superficial, simplistic, lopsided people.

For example, a simple, superficial, lopsided person might watch someone get angry at an attitude, a sinful attitude in a group of people and draw the quick conclusion that that angry person cannot be a compassionate person, that angry person can't have empathy, that angry person can't weep with those who weep. He's angry. A Bible-saturated person will not draw that conclusion.

Too often in his experience of God's Word, things have come together that banish that thought out of his mind forever. For example, Mark 3.5 says, Jesus looked around on them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. So forever the thought that you can't feel angry in a holy soul and be brokenhearted with grief at the same time, that's God in a Bible-saturated mind.

This is one of the great, wonderful things about being a Bible-saturated people. These juxtapositions of contraries, juxtapositions of strange bedfellows coming together over and over again in the Bible are stripping away our simplicity and making us more like God's complex holiness who is angry with the wicked all day long and can be grieved. Day after day, week after week, year after year, Bible-saturated minds and hearts are being formed.

Remember Romans 12, being formed by hundreds of deep and wonderful juxtapositions in the Bible. A people is being created whose instincts and inclinations are as complex as the Bible, whose responses to situations are often as little understood as the Scriptures as we get closer and closer to the mind of Christ. So, here we are, 2 Timothy 3, verses 1-13.

It is a predominantly bleak and ugly text. In verses 1-5, a list of 19 ugly characteristics of evil people. In verses 6-9, a description of how those people creep into houses and take women captive.

Then a glimpse into history of how it's been this way for centuries. And then, in verses 10-13, a description of what it costs you to be faithful in a culture like that. It's really bleak.

Would not be the kind of text I would choose to preach on. Which is why it is so good to have to preach through books. You just don't walk around text when you move through a book.

19 specific distortions, moral ugliness. And there's a longer list in Romans 1, 29-31. Is this the same Paul who said, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about those things, not these things.

Well, why are you giving it to us then? Welcome to the Bible. Welcome to life. Welcome to reality.

Welcome to the complexity of holy souls. And the mind of God Almighty. I love this book.

His power to shape you into an inexplicable person is so wonderful. So here we are. Of course, every holy soul prefers and delights more in lingering long and deep over the beauties of holiness than the ugliness of immorality.

But the Bible saturated soul knows there is such a thing as evil and we better not be ignorant of its nature and varieties first as it appears in the mirror and second as it appears in the media. So he begins, verse 1, Understand this. Literally, know this.

Know this all you beauty loving people. There is something that Bible saturated beauty loving people need to know about ugliness. Moral ugliness.

So I see six, at least six things that he wants us to know about evil. Number one, the times of evil. Number two, the severity of evil.

Number three, the specifics of evil. Number four, the creep of evil. Number five, the limit of evil.

And number six, the alternative to evil. That's what I see in the flow of this text. That's the flow of my message.

Number one, the times of evil. Verse 1, but understand this, that in the last days, there will come times of difficulty for people will be, and here come the 19 filthy, mind messing up statements of immorality. Paul believes that there will be an intensification of evil in the last days.

He says in chapter 4, now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter times, some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teaching of demons. Peter, the Apostle Peter says, scoffers will come in the last days. Jude says in the last time, there will be scoffers following their own ungodly passions.

They all agree in the last times, it will get worse. Ugly. And, they all agree, we're in them and have been since Jesus came into the world.

You know that. The arrival of the Messiah. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand was the beginning of the end.

1 John 2.18 Children, it is the last hour. Hebrews 1.2 In these last days, God has spoken to us by His Son. 1 Peter 1.20 Christ was made manifest in the last times for your sake.

So, we live and have lived for 2,000 years in the last times. And the evils that are to characterize the last times have cropped up and burst forth with more or less intensity over and over again. And then, as John said, there are now many antichrists that have gone out into the world.

And as the end of the end comes, it will get worse. I think that's implied in these teachings. This will happen, that is the end gets darker, while the faithful remnant of God's people experience white-hot devotion to Jesus.

Otherwise, they would not survive or get the Great Commission finished against such murderous opposition. There will be wonderful willingness for martyrdom. It will be beautiful to behold.

Most beautiful moral thing you've ever seen amidst the ugliness. Now, that means we must be very careful not to assume two things. Number one, we must be very careful not to assume that the degeneration of culture at the end of the age is owing to the failure of the church to be holy.

I hear that all the time. It's not true. There is no promise in the Bible that the holiness of the church guarantees the transformation of culture.

None. Don't go there. There are reasons to be holy as a church.

And there is no guarantee that our success at that will transform culture. None. It's going to go the other direction.

That's warning number one. Here's number two, almost in the other direction. We must be careful not to assume that our day is the last of the last days.

How do you know? You don't. You shouldn't. The Bible says you can't.

So, it may well be that God Almighty in His mercy and providence has yet in store for the church a massive revival and a glorious awakening for the world. And then, 500 years from now, we experience the end of the end and its darkness. I don't know.

Which means, how do you pray? And how do you evangelize? You don't agree with the darkness. Please! We don't agree with the darkness. We fight the darkness.

We preach Christ and the light of the world. We pray for awakening and transformation in the church and reviving in His people and awakening in the world. The timing of evil, number one.

Number two, the severity of evil. Verse 1, Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. Difficulty is a very weak translation.

That word is used one other time in the New Testament. In Matthew 8, verse 28, referring to the demoniacs of Gadara like this, two demon-possessed men met Jesus coming out of the tombs so fierce, that's the word, so fierce that no one could pass that way. Therefore, I prefer to translate verse 1 like this, Understand this, that in the last days will come fierce seasons.

That's, I think, closer. The word difficulty is like, I can't get my car started. In other words, evil will not simply be ugly to watch.

It will not simply be grievous to the holy mind. It will be violent at times and it will be fierce at times and Christians should not be surprised. Verbally fierce.

Physically fierce. This means, among other things, that the invincible joy of the Christian because of the work of Christ, forgiveness of our sins, reconciliation with God as our Father, and the absolute security that we're going to make it to the end and have everlasting joy in His presence. The invincible joy of the Christian must not depend upon the absence of moral ugliness.

You get that? Our joy must not depend upon, in our culture, the absence of moral ugliness. Nor must it depend upon the absence of danger, physical danger. Otherwise, the juxtapositions of joy and danger all over the New Testament make no sense whatsoever.

Oh, how easy. I speak from my own soul now. Oh, how easy it is to slip into a morose pity party that our little heaven on earth is becoming a hell.

Our little America, our little family, our little lake home. I thought I could carve out some heaven. We were never promised in the Bible anywhere that earth would be our heaven before Christ comes to reign.

And if you are preparing for yourself a little heaven on earth, you are in for a great disappointment. Now or later. We rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Romans 5. In this hope, we were saved. But who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. And not only patience, but unutterable and exalted joy.

Having not seen Him, you love Him. And having not seen Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy unutterable and full of glory. In hope, in hope, while everything around my soul gives way, He is my hope.

We do not join the pity party, folks, that our America is gone. We don't. It's not ours.

We're not citizens here mainly. It's an accident that you were born here. It was no accident that you were born again.

Number three. The specifics of evil. Verses 2-5.

19 examples of the kind of people who will populate the last times, that is now, and worse at the end of the end. And I'm going to do now, the next two minutes, what I encourage you to do. I thought, what do you do with these 19 ugly things? And I'm going to do what I encourage you to do.

I'm just going to read it. And after I mention each one, I'm going to give another word or phrase that I think it means. Because I think when you do that, you sit at home tonight or tomorrow, and just write down the list.

You won't do this many times. It's too ugly, and it's not the thing you want to do. But it's here, and therefore it's good for us, like vaccinations are good for us.

So you write it down, and then you try to think, now what does that mean? And you put it in other words, and that helps it go down deep, and you, okay, here's my reading of the list. Verse 2. People will be lovers of self, narcissistic, lovers of money, materialistic, proud, loving to draw attention to their accomplishments, arrogant, inflated view of self, abusive, wanting to be hurtful, especially verbally hurtful, wanting to be. I want to hurt you.

That kind of person. Disobedient to their parents, having a rebellious spirit, ungrateful, assuming that they have a right to the things they get, unholy, indifferent to the attitudes and acts that reflect the value of Jesus. Verse 3. Heartless, unable to sympathize or empathize, unappeasable, unwilling to forgive, slanderous, devilishly distorting what others say and do, consciously twisting it, without self-control, a slave to their appetites, brutal, dead to all tenderness, not loving good, unable to see and savor moral beauty.

Verse 4. Treacherous or traitorous, breaking promises for their own advantage, reckless, craving the admiration of others for taking risks, swollen with conceit, blind to the ugliness of self-preoccupation. Always talking about yourself and the beauty of admiring others. Blind to it.

Lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, finding more satisfaction in physical titillation than divine admiration. Verse 5. Having the appearance of godliness but denying its power, using religion for personal gain without any treasuring of Christ above all. Now, you can see that Paul knows he's in the last days because he begins this list in verse 1 and 2 by saying these kinds of people are going to come in the last days and he concludes it in verse 5 by saying to Timothy, avoid such people.

Well, they're there. Duh. They're here.

The times are here. I'm telling you, they're coming, and so avoid them now because they're here. They're in your church.

Avoid them. When he says avoid them, we know he doesn't mean never talk to them because he says in chapter 4, verse 5, do the work of an evangelist, which means talk to unbelievers, whatever their character. What he means when he says avoid them is just don't hang out with them as though there's no problem.

That's the problem with worldliness. We just are at home with wicked people. We're at home with wicked movies, at home with wicked songs, at home.

We're just at home. And we never get around to saying there's a problem in your life that will destroy you because we're just hanging out forever. Don't think that fits the word avoid.

The sheer fact that Paul gives such a long list of evil shows he's seen a lot of evil in his day, doesn't it? And he had thought a lot about it and the way it ravages the human soul. And you will see a lot, and a lot of you have seen a lot. You will see and you have seen a lot.

And I want you to think deeply about where it comes from and understand it. I want you to grieve over it. I want you to pray about it.

I want you to care for people who manifest it. And I want you to cherish the gospel more and more because of the power it has to save you from it. And I want you to pursue holiness with all your heart that pleases the Lord.

Number four. The creep of evil. Verses 6 and 7. Avoid such people, for among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

The Gospel Coalition Women's Conference last June was historic for several reasons. A lot of our women went. It was historic because it was reformed in its theology.

It was historic because it was complementarian rather than egalitarian in its understanding of how men and women enjoy their differences. And thirdly, it was historic because it wasn't about women's issues. It was about God for women.

And maybe a fourth reason it was historic is because 4,000 women from all over the world were willing to show up under those banners, which made me thrilled to be a part of it. But the reason it is so important is because of verses 6 and 7. These evil people are creeping in and preying upon the weakness of women, the guilt of women, and the passions of women. Now, the last thing this text is is an endorsement of that.

This text is a loud cry for churches and conferences to announce it is not God's will that women be weak in discernment. Theological, biblical, moral discernment. It's not God's will that women be weak in moral, biblical, theological discernment so that they're sitting ducks for creeps.

It's not God's will that they be burdened with sin. It's not God's will that they be led about by passions. It's not God's will that they be vulnerable like this to these moral and theological errors that are coming into the church and looking for the weakest.

Now, that vulnerability may have been the case in Timothy's church. It looks like it was. That women were especially vulnerable.

And you can think of all kinds of reasons why they were given the cultural milieu in which they lived and the attitudes towards education and so on in those days. The point here is not to encourage that, but that evil is insidious. It creeps toward the weak.

Weak women, weak men, weak children. That's what evil does. Evil's not going up against the strongest women, men, children.

It's going to snoop out the person with the least discernment. There happen to be a lot of women vulnerable like that in Timothy's church. I am thrilled that owing to extraordinary ministries here and extraordinary women, that's not very much the case here.

But it would be wrong of me not to wave the banner of the text anyway. The task of a church is to make men and women and children mighty in the Word of God. Bible-saturated with the Word of God so that women and men stand against the wiles of the devil.

Women and men don't dabble forever in every new thing coming across the Internet ever unable to land anywhere solid and firm and unshakeable. No, it's not the kind of women we're going to breed. Or men or children.

So, let it be said loud and clear that the vision of biblical complementarity complementarity between men and women and their different roles in that vision at Bethlehem and represented by that conference and the Gospel Coalition both men and women are to be deeply and solidly grounded in Bible and doctrine. You will know the truth, women and men. And the truth will set you free.

Free from weak discernment through the Bible. Free from heaps and heaps of guilt for sin through the Gospel. And free from being led everywhere by passion through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Free women! Number five. The limit of evil. Verses 8 and 9. Just as Janice and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men, these creeping men, also opposed the truth.

Men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith that they will not get very far for their folly will be plain to all as was that of those two men. I think this means that those who are true Christians will not be taken in by the creeping opponents for very long. True Christians will not be taken in by the opponents of truth for very long.

Janice and Jambres, those names don't occur anywhere else in the Bible. They are from the Jewish Talmud tradition the names of the magicians who went up against Moses. Remember that? Back in Exodus 7, verse 11.

Moses came and he's going to turn some water into blood. They did the same thing. Threw his stick on the ground, became a snake.

They did the same thing. Three times in the ten plagues, they did it and then they could do it no more. That's the point here.

They will not get very far. Like three out of ten. It's over.

They're exposed. They're not the real deal. That's satanic magic.

This is God Almighty in the hand of Moses. And he's making the analogy between these false teachers and they're coming in and they've got some stuff to show. They have a form of godliness, right? Probably able to do some miracles.

But those who are Bible-saturated know how to discern. And they won't get very far with those people. They will with the world, and they will with the carnal, and the undiscerning, but not the remnant, not the true.

The Lord knows those who are his, and he grants discernment to his people. Number six, and lastly, the alternative to evil. Verses 10 to 13.

This is now the good news. Hard good news, but good news. You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my faith in life, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me in Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra, which persecutions I endured.

Yet, from them all, the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil people and imposters go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. Now, what's the alternative to evil? The alternative to evil is godly suffering and final deliverance.

Godly suffering. If you want to join the evil, you can avoid that. But if you choose to be an alternative people to the culture, it will cost you.

That's the first alternative. The alternative to evil is suffering. Godly suffering.

And the second is final deliverance. So, he says, Timothy, you've seen my persecutions. You have followed my life.

Verse 11. You've seen my sufferings. Now, I'm telling you, Timothy, that with this kind of evil in the world that we've been talking about, anyone, not just me, anyone who takes a stand for godliness, who seeks to live out a life of positive purity, love, holiness, who rescues the perishing, will be persecuted.

All of them. Not just apostles. If they live that way.

Verse 12 says that. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. That's a reflex of the kind of evil that is surrounding and hating that godliness.

So, Christian, don't think it's strange. No, it's coming. It isn't here for you.

And remember, Paul says, remember my patience, my love, my steadfastness, and imitate me. And the last point is this. Where does the power come from to take those stands? I'm going to stand for what's true and right and pure and good and holy and let the chips fall where they will at work or in my family or in the neighborhood.

I'm just going to do it. Where do you get the power to do that? And Paul, I think, answers the confidence of your blood-bought deliverance from every evil. Let's read verse 11 again.

Here it is at the end of verse 11. Which persecutions I endured, yet from them all the Lord rescued me. That can't mean He didn't let him suffer because He just said, you've seen my sufferings and my persecutions.

So, the rescue isn't, I'm rescuing you. In fact, He names Lystra here. Remember what happened in Lystra? He was stoned in Lystra.

Stoned. He was stoned so severely they drug him out and thought he's dead. That's how he was stoned.

So the rescue did not include that not happening. So, you might think, yeah, but he's alive. He's not dead.

He's writing this letter. So he was rescued. His physical life was rescued.

Is that what he means? Maybe. I don't think so. I don't think that's what he means.

I think he means, and I'll show you why. The Lord stood by me. He never forsook me.

And He preserved my faith so that I'm still walking with Him and haven't given up on Him. And He's got me on the path that leads to His heavenly kingdom. And I, by grace, will make it.

And He'll never let me not make it. He will rescue my faith from every opposition. He will rescue me from apostasy.

He will rescue me from making shipwreck of my life by copping out on my Christ through suffering. He will rescue me. Now, why do I think he means that instead of, He rescued my life from every one of those perils? I think that because of what he says in chapter 4. Why don't you turn here? We're going to close with these two verses.

They are sweet to me. I preached on this text at the end of my first year at Bethlehem, 31 years ago. And took it for myself then.

And will, with all the greater emotion, take it for myself continually. Starting at verse 17 of chapter 4. The Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued.

There's that word again. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. Could be the Colosseum.

Could be Satan. But here's the point. Verse 18.

The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into His heavenly kingdom. That's it. To Him be glory forever and ever.

Amen. In other words, Timothy, every one of God's children who has endured the persecution that comes through taking a stand for holiness will be rescued. Yes, they will.

The final rescue is entrance into the heavenly kingdom. When Paul was finally killed in Rome, he was rescued for the heavenly kingdom. Are we there? When Paul was finally killed in the Colosseum in Rome, God rescued him for His heavenly kingdom.

He did not go to hell and He did not deny the faith. And so I promise you on the authority of God's word, if you stand by faith in your crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ, you will be delivered from every evil deed in this world. Yes, you will.

Your faith will be delivered. Your soul will be delivered Often your body will be delivered. But in the end, when your body is no longer delivered, you will be delivered.

Because, maybe we just end with this, that the flag flying over your afflicted life, the flag flying over your afflicted life is your God will rescue you from every evil and bring you safely to His heavenly kingdom. And when He does, with the greatest joy, you know what we're going to say, among other things? Goodbye, evil. Lord, I'm so ready to say goodbye to evil.

Mainly, I hate my own and like to be done with it. And I'm thankful for the promise in the gospel of Christ crucified for me and risen that I can know as I walk out of here. You will deliver me and us from every evil deed and bring us safely to your heavenly kingdom.

So God, if there's any in the hearing of my voice who is ready to turn away from Jesus because of the cost, I pray that they would think again. The heavenly kingdom is a beautiful place. There will be no ugliness there, no immorality there, no sorrow there, no disease there, no corruption there, no pain there, no brutality there, no abuse there.

It will be wonderful. And anything we must pay in the cost to be pure will be worth it. So draw them to yourself, I pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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