

2 Tim. 3:1 Perilous Times (A Sermon from John Owen)

A few weeks ago, just after we made the decision not to meet (well, the decision was made for us as our meeting place is the YMCA), I spent one particular night in prayer and contemplation about what was happening. (For the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 we are facing are unprecedented. And this applies to both the world and the church.) Now, besides my daily Bible reading, I quickly opened up the Works of John Owen, particularly his sermons to see if he may have spoken to our situation. I found 3 that were helpful, but one in particular on the subject of “Perilous Times” from 2 Tim. 3:1 which says, **“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty”** (perilous times in KJV). Now, immediately I thought before reading the sermon that he would speak about a plague or a natural disaster, or some great physical peril in the world. But, this is not what I found. In fact, I found something I didn’t expect (though I should have). There is something much more difficult, more perilous, in this world than a virus. Paul’s emphasis is not on a plague or a natural disaster, but instead this warning is given in the context of ungodliness (as we will see).

Now, the “last days,” is understood in different ways in the NT. It can refer to the very last days just before Jesus’ return and the end of the world as we know it now. It can refer to the “days of the gospel,” in other words, the days between Jesus first and 2nd coming. And Owen points out that it can refer to the last days of a particular church in the sense that, when these things come upon a church, it’s end is near. A move away from the gospel of Jesus Christ to the things of this world is an indication that a church is in its last days. Therefore, we need this warning this morning and at this time as we consider what perilous times really are. Owen concentrates on 3 characteristics of perilous times.

1. A season is perilous when the profession of true religion is outwardly maintained under a visible predominancy of lusts and wickedness. In other words, religion on the outside looks good, but underneath lies great evil. Look at vv. 2-5: “vv. 2-5: **“For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.”** These are people or churches who confess the truth, but at the same time, love unrighteousness. I think of all those who profess the name of Christ, but their lives do not show the fruit of Christ. Do you know how many legislators and judges and even “Christian leaders” in our country name the name of Christ, but disregard the dignity of life by murdering the unborn in the womb. Do you know how many profess the name of Christ, but deny the good order of God’s creation of male and female? On and on I could go. And this applies to both individuals and churches.

And we wonder, how a person who calls himself/herself a Christian can do such things. This is very scary, and it must be a warning to us, but for those who continue in rebellion, God will pull away his gracious hand and even send a delusion; He will “turn them over” to their own desires and passions which leads to death. 2 Thess. 2:10-11: **“and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”** We see this also in Rom. 1. In v. 21: **“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God**

or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” And then in v. 24: **“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”** This is a somber warning to us!

As regards a church, this doesn't happen overnight. It happens over a long, subtle period of time. Think about the Church of Ephesus in Paul's day. Paul sends a young Timothy (40 years old?) into a church where many of the elders were already moving away from the Gospel. In 1 Tim. 1:3-7 we read: **“remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith . . . Certain persons, 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.”** This is certainly happening among professing Christians. And this happens subtly as a church moves away from the gospel of Christ. And this is a perilous time.

Owen gives two particular applications for us. 1) We should mourn for the public abominations in our land. The Psalmist says, **“My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.”** Often, I must confess that horrible, profane, acts take place all around me every day and my heart is unaffected. Oh, may it not be! Even during this time of Corona Virus, I am affected by the panic and fear and death that I hear about every day. But, even more than these things, we must mourn for the ungodliness of perilous times.

His 2nd application is this: We must take care that we do not become infected with the evils and sins of perilous times. Just think how much care we are putting into our cleaning efforts at this time. Wipe this, wipe that, wash your hands, take 3 showers, don't touch this or that. Why?! So we do not get infected with the virus! Shouldn't we take greater efforts in godliness to safeguard our hearts from a form of godliness without power. Brothers and sisters, do not have light thoughts of great sins.

2. A season is perilous when men are prone to forsake the truth and seducers abound to gather them up. Here we see two parts. One, truth is forsaken, or cast aside. Two, the one who forsakes the truth is then seduced by others. One person is leaving the truth and another person is waiting to help him continue in his way. When seducers abound, you know there are many who are turning away from the truth. Now, a seducer is one who leads another person away from the truth. We see this picture with the Jezebel in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. As they turned away from the living God to worship idols, so Jezebel was there to seduce them further and further away. In this we see both the hand of God and Satan. As we've seen, those who leave the truth, God leaves them alone and allows them to go that way. And at the same time, Satan is there to seize the occasion and stir up seducers to lead further astray. We see this in 1 Tim. 4:1: **“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons . . .”** Peter says the same thing. 2 Pet. 2:1-2: **“But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who**

bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed . . .” When these things happen, it is a time of peril.

Now, you may ask, “*What does this look like?*” “*How do we know when this is happening around us?*” Owen gives three ways we can judge in this matter. 1) Those who profess the gospel of Christ are not able to endure sound doctrine. Look at 2 Tim. 4:3-4: **“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths . . .”** Where professing Christians become weary of sound doctrine,--when it is too plain, too heavy, too dull, too common, too high, too mysterious, whatever, that displeases them,-- this is a sign that times are perilous.

This week, I read a shocking article from IX Marks where one guy spent 18 hours listening to sermons from America’s biggest churches. Here is his biggest observation: “*in 36 sermons, the good news of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection was unclear 36 times. Often, some or all of these facets of the Christian gospel were left out. “No gospel” became a common note.*” (in such sermons) This means our first application is to preach the whole counsel of God, no matter how difficult. We may not understand every jot and tittle about difficult doctrines, but we must not turn away from the truth.

Another application to avoid such perilous times ourselves as a church is to hold on to the gospel of Christ. We must not assume. We must preach the cross of Christ, particularly the substitutionary, penal, atonement of his death. Christ became a curse for us! In our place he stood. Though He did not sin, in fact He fulfilled God’s law in every way, He laid down his life as a sacrifice for sin in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. Our sins were laid upon him and in his death, they were judged. And now for those who are in Christ, there is therefore no condemnation from God. We are declared “not guilty.” And the reason we know it is so is because Jesus conquered death. He is risen. And from this perspective, there is no such thing as a perilous time for the Christian.

A second way Owen gives for us to judge if we are in perilous times or not is when professors of Christ lose the power of the truth in their conversations and are ready to depart with it in their minds. This is the person who confesses the truth, the person who says, “I am a Christian,” but his/her predominant conversation is worldly. And what Owen means here by “conversation” is not merely what they say, but how they live. These are those who have a “form of godliness, but deny its power.” Beloved, how are you in your home at this time. What does your family say about you. You are what you are in your home. If these words convict your heart, and you test your profession against such truths, and find that you are not a Christian, then NOW, look unto Christ. He will save you from your sins. And you will find, there will be the power of the gospel through the Holy Spirit to live in a different manner.

Thirdly, Owen says that when we see professors of Christ depart from the truth in a perilous season is great evidence of the withdrawing of the Spirit of God from his church. In other words, when truth decays in a church, or in a society of Christians, it is the greatest evidence of the departing and withdrawing of the Spirit of God. And this is SO dangerous; for if the Spirit of

God departs, then our glory and our life depart. This is why as a church, we do our best to guard the front door of membership with great effort. We want to make sure those who come in are actually Christians. And in this way, we guard the sheep; we guard the truth. This is why we are precise about our confession and the use of our covenant. This is why we preach through books of the Bible, so as to not leave things out.

So what do we do by way of application. Owen says, firstly, that we must not be content with what we might judge as a sincere profession of the truth, but to labor to be found in the exercise of those graces which represent the truth. In other words, love the truth and everything it means for us. Truth will do none of us any good if we do not love it. This also means that we also strive for the power of the truth in our hearts. How? We follow the example of Christ in the way we live. Eph. 4:17 ff. the Apostle Paul says, **“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”**

Another application is to hold on to the means God has given to keep us in the truth. Read the Word (every day). Pray. Meet with God’s people. At the present time, fathers lead your families in worship. Parents, lead your kids in this way. God has graciously given us means to endure. So much I could say here. But, let’s move on.

3. A season is perilous when professing Christians mix themselves with the world, and learn their ways. This truth really follows the first two. We see this in the very beginning of the Bible in Gen. 6:1-2 which says, **“When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose.”** This was a great apostasy which brought the displeasure of God, eventually leading to the great flood. In the history of Israel, we see this happen over and over. Ps. 106:35-36 says, **“but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them.”** I think we’ve seen this throughout the first two truths this morning. But, when we professing Christians mix with the world in their thoughts and in their ways, these are perilous times. John says to us: **“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”** Now, I’m not going to say much this morning as to what this looks like. If God wills there will be more times for this.

But, I do want to point out the danger of mixing with the world. Owen says when we mix and think and act like the world we are the doing the very opposite of what Christ came to do. And what did Christ come to do in this regard? Tit. 2:14 says, **“Christ gave himself for us, that he might purge us from dead works, and purify us unto himself a peculiar people.”** We are called a peculiar people and a royal nation. Do you remember last week? James says we are God’s first fruits. This means we are God’s special people in this world. And this is evident in

the way we live, particularly the way we are different from a sinful world. Christian fathers, you are different than worldly fathers. You love and care and discipline as your heavenly does with you. Mothers, you are different than the mothers of this world. You also love and care and nurture your families because this is what God does. Children, you are different than the children of this world. You are obedient. You love your brothers and sisters. You care for your friends.

And Owen points out a grave consequence. If we will not be different from the world in our ways, we will not be different in our privileges. This means that when a professing Christian thinks and acts like the world, he/she will get as reward what the world gives; which is passing away and which will amount to nothing. Christ came and gave his life and shed his blood to recover us from the world and when we throw ourselves to the world we bring the greatest contempt that can be put on Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, our privileges as Christians cannot compare with the privileges of this world. The world lives for what it can see and touch and feel RIGHT NOW. The world lives for food and drink and substances. The world lives for the power of men, places of prominence at the great banquet tables of political power. The world lives for health, wealth, and prosperity. The world lives for the next pleasure. But it is not so for the Christian. Our ultimate privileges are not of this world. They are not made by human hands. As James says, “**Our gifts come down from the Father of Lights.**” Our privileges are not of this world. They come down to us through the person of Christ, who is God, through whom ALL God’s blessings come to us. And we are seated with him in the heavenly places. Our hearts are renewed. Our sins are forgiven. Our inheritance is all that God owns.

Now, Owen mentions a couple more ways we know we are in perilous times, but I will save those for another time. Let me end with four applications.

i. May we all be exhorted by these words to do all we can to get our hearts affected with the perils of the day in which we live. Owen says, “*It is not time to be asleep on the top of mast in a rough sea, when there are so many devouring dangers around us.*” Therefore, look around and pray our hearts will be affected. Look into the Word of God and find out what He has to say. Pray God would give us grace to be sensible of the real perils all around us.

ii. Remember there is a special frame of spirit required in us believers in such perilous seasons as these. And what is that? It is a mourning frame of spirit. Pray God give us eyes and ears to see the real perils around us.

iii. Be watchful! As Christians we should have no greater jealousy upon our hearts than that God should withdraw himself because of the sins of the people, and leave us. Brothers and sisters, the 7 churches of revelation came and went as physical churches. Today, churches also come and go. May these words today spur us on to godliness!

iv. Be careful, lest you yourself fall. “**Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall**” (1 Cor. 10:12).

May God bless us in these days as we consider what are truly perilous times.