

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. ² People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴ treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— ⁵ having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them. ... You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:1-5, 10-17)

Continue in what You have Learned

How long does it take to become a doctor? My mom always wanted me to be a doctor, but I was never interested enough in school to get the grades or do the time. And it takes a lot of time – usually four years of college and then four more years of medical school. But you're not even close to done then. After you graduate, you have three to eight more years of residency, which is still training. If you want to pursue a specialty, you may have a one to three year fellowship after that. So a doctor could spend fifteen years in training. Once he's finally done, he needs to maintain his understanding of the science and the practice that he learned and he needs to grow in his skills. So he will need continuing education for the rest of his professional life. There is a very real parallel to our Christian faith. Now, thankfully, it doesn't take fifteen years of intensive training to become a Christian. That happens in an instant. But we do engage in lifelong continuing Christian education. Obviously, our preschool, our grade school, our high schools and our colleges are Christian education. But so are Sunday school and Bible class. In the end, hearing sermons and reading your Bibles are all part of Christian education. And they need to go on for as long as we are on this side of heaven because the devil, the world around us and our own sinful flesh work day and night to erase our grasp of the truth. And every day our faith faces challenges. So this morning, we want to take to heart the exhortation that St. Paul gave Timothy: **continue in what you have learned.**

I.

I've encountered Christians over the years who believe that they've learned what they need to know. They know who Jesus is. They know they're forgiven, so they really don't see much point in coming to Bible class and sometimes, even in coming to church regularly. So for them, Christian Education is something that we do for children or for people who don't know the Lord. St. Paul addresses why we all need to continue with our Christian Education, no matter what age we are. **Continue in what you have learned. It will give you strength in a sinful world.**

That is where we live. The opening verses of our text describe **“terrible times in the last days.”** From the Bible's perspective, that means all the time from Jesus' ascension until his return. Paul says that in that time, **“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”**

People will be lovers of themselves and lovers of money. Doesn't that sound like our world? How much do we have compared to our grandparents or our great-grandparents? But is our society more content than they were with all this stuff? Could you live on less money? Almost certainly. Yet, if we want a nice house, and multiple cars, and expensive toys, we need more money coming in. Those things are not sinful in themselves. But the love of them and the love of ourselves that says, “If everybody else gets those things, I should too,” – that is what Paul is talking about. **People will be proud and boastful.** Have you heard coaches

and teachers tell your children to be proud? That's not what the Bible teaches. **People will be disobedient to their parents.** I can't tell you how many times I've watched parents tell their kids what to do and warn those kids over and over again about consequences, only to be ignored. Paul says **that people will lack self-control and will love pleasure rather than God.** Worse, he says that they will have **a form of godliness and deny its power.** This last one is people who go through the motions of Christianity, who talk about God, but do not actually listen to what God says or use his power, which is the good news about Christ.

All that Paul says here is true today. And you know what? If you had asked Christians at any time in the last two thousand years, they would have said the same about their time. Sin rules this world. How are we going to deal with the godless age we live in? It's kind of depressing, isn't it, to read the latest denial of what God says in the paper? Whether it's Wiccan chaplains in the military or the Supreme Court striking down laws against gay marriage or every TV show depicting unmarried couples jumping into bed or the latest school shooting – doesn't it all just depress you as a person of faith? Or make you mad? Or just frustrate you at what our society is turning into?

It gets worse. St. Paul reminds Timothy of all the persecution he suffered in his life and he says, **“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”** That's what God promises you if you try to live as a Christian. And it's never going to change. That's why we need Christian education. We need to prepare our children to face real life in a sinful world. And we need to sustain our own faith in the face of it. When people lash out at our faith, the devil likes to whisper in our ear and ask us, “Where is your God now? If all that Christian stuff were really true, would he let this kind of thing happen to you?” He likes to get under our skin and make us want to accept the things the world around us accepts. And the answer isn't to just keep repeating what we're supposed to do. We do need to know that. But the comfort we need when the world goes against us and the strength to stand up under persecution and to live as God calls us to, even when we know that we are going to be persecuted for it, that comes from the good news about Jesus.

Jesus is coming back. He is going to put an end to all persecution and we will triumph over the devil and all the forces of evil. He is going to sweep all sin away and we will live in a world that truly embraces God's ways and we will never again have to wrestle with what sin does to our world. He is going to wipe every tear from our eyes and give us a life that more than compensates for the hurts of this life. He's going to take sin out of our hearts and make us perfect. He's going to heal us and bring us to an eternity of joy.

How do we know that it will be worth all that we suffered here? Because we know God's love in Christ. Because God the Father loved us, he sacrificed his Son to pay for our sins and set us free. Because Jesus loved us, he laid down his life to give us a new and better life. Because the Holy Spirit loved us, he came to us in the gospel and gave us faith and he still comforts us now. If God loves us that much, he's not going to let us lose in the end. And in Christ, we see God's power to conquer sin and death and hell and persecution and pain. Jesus rose from the dead. He has the power to conquer all evil and he will return and use that power for our good. Every day that we wait here, he uses that power in the gospel to build us up to withstand what sin does to us every day. That is why we all need Christian Education – it is the power and love of God for us in Christ.

II.

Now, not every day feels like an attack of the devil. But every day, we do live on this earth, surrounded by sin. So every day we need our faith to be alive and active. Every day, we need to understand that God has a plan for us. **Continue in what you have learned. It will give you life, now and forever.**

St. Paul spoke of how Timothy had known the scriptures ever since he was a child. He said that those Scriptures were “god-breathed.” God breathed into the hearts and the minds of the writers the exact words he wanted us to have. Paul tells us why that matters: it makes the scriptures useful. We Americans are a practical people. We want to know what good something is going to do us before we invest time and effort into it. Maybe that's why so many of us don't come to adult Bible class. We're sure that it really doesn't apply to our lives. But Paul says that the Scripture is useful for us. Useful for what? He says, **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

How will we learn the things God wants us to learn? You can't discover them in nature or by studying the world around you or even by listening to your own heart. The Scripture is useful for teaching. To spend eternity with him, you need to know the things Christ wants you to know. To understand what's happening in

the world we live in, to avoid being perplexed and troubled by what you see around you, you need to know what God says. Paul also says that it's useful for rebuking. You and I struggle with sin every day and sometimes we need to hear that we're wrong. The truth is, the devil tries every day to convince us that our sin just isn't all that bad. If we go down that path, eventually we will live like the unbelieving world around us lives and we will lose our faith. The Scripture tells us when we're sinning, even if we don't want to know.

Paul says that the scriptures are useful for correcting and for training in righteousness so that we can be thoroughly equipped for every good work. What kind of life do you want to live here? You cannot live a righteous life unless you are in touch with Christ. That means you need to hear and study the word, not just to understand what is God pleasing and what isn't – although that's very important. But also to be in touch with the source of power: the good news about Jesus. It's a kind of spiritual fill-up that gets us through the next day. You would never let your car get to empty and then drive fifty or sixty more miles before you fill up. But we often seem to let our spiritual tank hover near empty and figure we're good for another couple of weeks. That's flirting with spiritual disaster. If we want a new life here, we need Christ. We need the scriptures.

And of course, the Scriptures also make us wise for salvation. The Bible repeatedly teaches that it is spiritual foolishness to try to stand before God on the basis of our own efforts. Yet, we humans do that again and again. We are convinced that we're basically good people. Sure, we mess up now and then, but those things are more mistakes than real sins. Even among us, that creeping belief is real. But God's word tells us otherwise. There is nothing good in us apart from our faith. Every sin that we excuse as a mistake is still a sin. Even the little ones deserve God's wrath in hell. We need to remember that sin is alive and well inside us and it wages war against our faith and our Christian life.

But God has an answer for us in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus was born without sin because we are all born with only sin. Jesus lived a perfect life because we sinners can't stop sinning even after we come to faith. Jesus died and he paid for all the sin that we hide and make excuses for, for all our belief in our own righteousness, for all our pride and guilt. He paid all that we owe. He rose and now God says that we are free and forgiven. He rose and God says that we will rise with him. That wisdom is the central message of the Scripture. And because we do sin every day, because we do live in a world that denies Jesus every day, because the devil never stops trying to take our faith away, we all need Christian Education. We all need to hear that word, to teach it to our children, to study it and grow in it until we are free from this world and live with Jesus in the next.

Through that word, God lifts us up and renews our faith. Through that word, God comforts us when life hurts and strengthens us when the world attacks our faith. Through that word, God reminds us of what we first learned and leads us ever deeper into it. Doctors need as many as fifteen years to practice medicine. It doesn't take us nearly that long to become Christians. But all our lives, we need to reinforce and renew our faith. God in love has given each of us the perfect tool to do that: the gospel. Use that tool. Amen.