

Creekside Community Church
“Be Strong” Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy
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John Bruce – Pastor

Real or Counterfeit?
(2 Tim. 3:1-9)

Church attendance has been declining in America for a while and there is a growing number of folks who are now classified as “dechurched;” people who believe in Jesus but have left the church. They may have been hurt or disappointed or just never really found the right church, but they don’t attend church any more even though they still consider themselves to be followers of Jesus. There are probably as many reasons people leave the church and never return as there are people. My mom attended the same little Presbyterian church for over 50 years but when the new pastor visited her shortly after my dad died and asked if he had left money to the church, she never went back again. (That pastor obviously had more to work on than just his people skills.) But one thing most of the dechurched have in common is that they expected something better than what they found: they expected Christians to be kinder, to be more understanding and caring and forgiving. But that’s not what they found and they aren’t going back. I’m not saying that people don’t have good reasons to leave a church nor am I’m saying I think they’re right in writing off the entire church because of what they experienced in a particular church. But I do think that many of the problems people have with the church today is rooted in the unrealistic belief that everybody who attends or serves or is paid by a church is a real Christian; because Jesus said that would never be the case. Most of the parables Jesus told described what the kingdom of God would look like between His resurrection and His return (the time we are presently in); and in one He compared the church to a great field of wheat where an enemy sowed tares; weeds that look like wheat so that in this field, wheat and tares grew up side by side. You can’t tell the difference between wheat and tares until the grain appears. Jesus explained that the field is the visible church, the wheat represents the sons of the kingdom and the tares represent the sons of the devil who will be sprinkled throughout the church until the harvest at the end of the age. Jesus taught that there will always be counterfeit Christians in the church and these counterfeit Christians are Paul’s subject in 2 Tim. 3:1-9. One of my greatest burdens for Creekside is for people who participate here regularly and think because they are part of Creekside they are real Christians when in fact they’ve never been born again. I don’t know who those folks are. I just know that Jesus said you would be here. My job is not to identify who is counterfeit and who is real; but to help us all to see the difference between real and counterfeit faith. If you can attend Creekside for years and believe you are a Christian and yet are not – that’s on me. If you know you’re pretending to be a Christian, that’s on you. Today as we continue in our series in 2 Timothy, we’ll look at how Paul describes phony Christians and then draw out three important lessons about how to tell if our own faith is real.

In the previous verses, Paul told Timothy that as God’s servant he is to gently correct those who are in opposition and now in chapter 3, Paul reminds Timothy that he will never lack those opportunities because there will always be people who oppose the truth in the church. Verse 1, “But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come.” Many Christians today believe that we are living in this world’s final days and that Christ’s return is imminent and they are right. In the New Testament, the last days refer to all the days between Christ’s resurrection and His return to earth to restore this world to what God created it to be. The apostles believed they were living in the last days. Jesus taught that these last days would be hard days for the church because the world would oppose its Lord; and so Paul reminds Timothy that the dangerous times the church was experiencing in the first century with the Roman persecution as well as the heresies surfacing within the church is exactly what Jesus said would happen. Difficulties are normal. Jesus said that in the world you’ll have tribulation. That’s why Timothy needs be strong. And one thing that will make the last days difficult for Christians are the people within the church who seem to be Christians but who are not and the rest of this passage is a list of things which characterize counterfeit believers.

Here’s why the last days will be difficult. **“For men will be lovers of self...”** (2 Tim. 3:2). People will be selfish - literally “self-lovers.” The Greek word for love which Paul uses means a tender affection, to cherish something, to kiss it. So a self-lover is someone who treats themselves tenderly; who cherishes themselves and who always puts themselves first; a person who may appear to be a Christian but who is ruled by their own self-interest. Instead of

denying themselves, they pamper themselves. Paul puts lovers of self at the top of this list because self-love is the cause of everything else on this list. This list is a description of people who love themselves. Augustine defined sin as “disordered love;” loving the wrong things more than the right things because sin has deformed our heart. I had a friend who argued that when Jesus said we were to love our neighbor as ourselves, He meant that we can’t love others until we love ourselves; that we don’t love others enough because we don’t love ourselves enough. But the Bible never commands us to love ourselves; it assumes we love ourselves. In Ephesians 5 Paul says no one ever hated his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it. According to the Bible, we don’t love ourselves too little, we love ourselves too much. Sin amplifies the natural love we each have for ourselves into something unnatural and so we love ourselves more than we love God or others; and this is the root of all our problems. Why will the last days be difficult? People will be selfish. How many of society’s problems are the result of selfishness? How many of the church’s problems are the result of selfishness? How many of our problems are the result of selfishness? Christ came to save us from this unnatural preoccupation with ourselves and so it is evident from the beginning of this list that Paul is describing people who have never been born again and given a new heart. However, sin is alive and well in all of us and sin will always manifest itself as self-love, self-regard and self-interest; so even genuine believers must also constantly fight the temptations of selfishness – more about that in a minute. Let’s look at the results of self-love.

“...**lovers of money**,” Why would loving myself most lead me to be a lover of money? According to the Bible, money is God’s chief rival for my heart. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, “*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*” If I don’t worship the true God, I’ll likely worship money because I think that with enough money, I won’t need God. I can control my life; I can handle anything that might happen. Self-love leads to the love of money because self-love leads to idolatry; depending on anything or anyone other than my Creator. Jesus doesn’t say, “You shouldn’t serve two masters,” He says, “You CANNOT serve two masters.” It’s impossible to love both God and money. There’s nothing wrong with money. It’s just a convenient means of exchange. But once money becomes my ticket to power, control, safety and happiness, it’s no longer my tool. It’s my master and lover and that’s why the Bible has nothing good to say about lovers of money. How much money I have isn’t the issue; how much of me my money has is. How can I tell if I love money? The only way I know is to check your charitable giving for 2016. The average Christian in America gives 2.5% of their income to their local church which is significantly below the 10% even the people in the Old Testament gave. Do you think that someone who spends 97.5 % of their income on themselves qualifies as a lover of money? It’s something to think about. “...**boastful, arrogant, revilers**,” People who love themselves are boastful; they love to talk about themselves. All their conversations are about me, me, me; what’s I’ve accomplished, what I bought, how great my kids are. And people who love themselves are arrogant. Ever size people up and make judgments about them? I don’t want to get too close to him; he’s not well-educated or he’s a little rough around the edges or he’s a little too liberal or a little too right wing or a little too effeminate or a little too old. That’s arrogance: mentally placing ourselves above others. And people who love themselves are revilers with nothing good to say about anybody. I can’t remember a time in my life when people have been as insulting and mean-spirited as they are today and Paul says it all comes from self-love. “...**disobedient to parents**,” How did that sneak into Paul’s list? “Disobedient to parents” sounds like a misdemeanor in a list of felonies. Everybody disobeys their parents; so what’s the big deal? Well, the Bible teaches that who we are at home is who we really are because home is where we learn how to live. When our kids started dating, we told them that if they wanted to see how a prospective mate would treat them after they were married, look at how they treat the members of their own family. How does he treat his mom? How does she treat her dad? That’s how she’ll treat you because who we are at home is who we really are. In fact, if I don’t learn to obey my parents, I’ll have a problem with authority for the rest of my life. That’s why Proverbs 29:15 says, “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother.” We may think we’re being kind to our children by letting them have whatever they want and not expecting them to obey us but we’re setting them up for disaster. I have never met a man who had a problem with authority who had a good relationship with his dad. It may have been an abusive relationship or an indulgent relationship but they have a real hard time handling anyone telling them what to do. If I never learn to submit myself to my parents’ authority, it’s because I never submitted myself to God’s authority and that’s why disobedient to parents is on a list describing lovers of self. “...**ungrateful, unholly, unloving, irreconcilable..**” If I love myself more than anyone or anything else, I’ll always be ungrateful because I’ll feel like I deserve everything good that happens to me. Want to know if you’re a

person of faith? How often do you thank God during the day? Real faith recognizes that every good thing that happens to us comes directly from the hand of God and not because we're good but because He's good. That's why Paul says in Romans 1 that all of humanity's problems are rooted in our failure to honor God as God and give Him thanks. If I'm ungrateful for the good things that happen to me and blame God for the bad things, it's because I love myself more than I love God. Unholy means I lack moral clarity. Have you ever met someone you assumed was a Christian until you began to see what they watched; what they read, what they talked about or how they spent their time and money? They have no boundaries. Nothing seems to bother them. Their conscience seems to be non-operational. That is what Paul means by unholy. Holy means separated to God; and recognizing the difference between what is sacred and what is common and between what is good and what is evil. A holy person embraces what's good and avoids what's evil. The unholy person does not which is why we're still shocked when some famous Christian turns out to be a serial adulterer or addicted to porn or financially dishonest; it just doesn't fit what we expect from a moral leader. And people who love themselves most love others least which is why Paul includes unloving in the list. The more people love God, the more they love others because we love because He first loved us. But if I don't care about people, it reveals a lot more about what I really think about God than how I feel about people. **Irreconcilable** means unwilling to reconcile. People who love themselves most are easily offended and know how to hold a grudge. They won't forgive, won't return phone calls or emails and they write people off because people who love themselves are always right. They expect to be forgiven but they refuse to forgive others. The fact is, we can't always reconcile with everyone we have a conflict with but we should never be the one who is irreconcilable. Jesus warned that if we don't forgive others, we won't be forgiven and so if I refuse to reconcile with those who want to make things right with me, I have every reason to wonder if I have ever been forgiven or know Christ at all. "...**malicious gossips...**" Socrates said "Strong minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, weak minds discuss people." People who love themselves most delight in building themselves up by putting other people down. They love to pass on bad news. They talk about people behind their backs as everybody's self-appointed critic and judge, destroying people's reputations and dividing entire churches. Gossips are a poison and a cancer and if you are serious about experiencing Christ's peace, you will refuse to listen to them. "...**without self-control...**" In a classic psychological study, several thousand people were given beepers to carry around with them and when the beeper sounded, they were to record what they were thinking about precisely at that moment. Researchers discovered that the desire to be doing something other than what we're doing is not only universal but constant; people are constantly distracted from what they know they should be doing by their desire for food, sleep, sex, TV, checking their email, or surfing the web and most give into those desires regularly; and it makes sense. When I love myself most, I have a hard time saying no to myself. The Bible says we lack self-control because we're born slaves to the sin which dwells in our body which uses self-love to control us. That's why according to the Scriptures, self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit who gives us the strength and the desire to do what we want to do rather than what sin wants us to do. "**Brutal**" is literally untamed; acting like a wild animal. Do people seem to be getting angrier? I pulled into a Taco Bell recently and as I got out of my car, a guy pulled in right next to me and began screaming, "Are you trying kill me? What's wrong with you? Are you off mentally?" I had no idea what he was talking about but I apologized and told him that if I had cut him off in traffic, it was unintentional. He yelled that he didn't want my apology; and continued to vent and then drove off. When we love ourselves, we overreact to perceived slights and injuries and get angry when people don't worship us the way we worship ourselves. Fatal accidents caused by road rage are at an epidemic pace right now. And the level of abuse, bullying, violence, and taking offense have never been greater in our culture in my lifetime than now. "**Haters of good;**" more attracted to the darkness than they are to the light. Haters of good find wickedness more interesting than righteousness; entertained by more by stories of violence, immorality and revenge than by stories of virtue, heroism and kindness. One reason the early church was persecuted was because Roman culture was so depraved and the Christians wouldn't go along. Christian husbands and wives were faithful to one another which rarely happened in Roman society. One writer said their homes were open to everyone and their beds to no one and Roman culture resented them. The same thing is true today. I never imagined I would live in a culture where being a virgin was something that would be attacked and mocked. The fact is, people who love themselves are intolerant of those who don't dance to their tune; because they believe everyone should think like me. "...**treacherous;**" people who love themselves are only loyal to themselves and will turn on you when it's no longer to their advantage to put up with you. Ever been stabbed in the back by someone you trusted? Everybody has because people who put themselves first are by nature traitors. They'll hang with you only as long as they think it is to their advantage. "...**reckless:**" is the attitude that I'm special and so the rules don't apply to me. Reckless

people are headstrong and think they can force their will on others and on circumstances because why shouldn't they have what they want? They seldom plan ahead, take unnecessary chances and put others at risk. Whether it's rapid lane changes at 80 mph when everybody else is driving 60, or making some big financial commitment because it feels right in their gut without consulting anybody else who will be impacted by it, or failing to watch your children because you can't tear yourself away from the NFL, recklessness is just another manifestation of selfishness. "...**conceited:**" conceit is having a higher opinion of myself than is warranted. Early in my career in the ministry, I was standing around with a bunch of older leaders from our ministry who were discussing some problem; and even though I had only been on the staff all of two months, I waded right in with my opinions. I'll never forget the look on their faces. "Who is this guy?" Have you noticed that the most conceited people have the least to be conceited about? You can't tell a conceited person anything; they're always the smartest person in the room and can't stand to be corrected. "...**lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God:**" because they love themselves more than God, whatever they think will make them happy is more important than what God says. The idea that "God wants me to be happy" has been used for years to justify clear disobedience to the commands of Scripture. If my spouse doesn't make me happy, I walk away from my marriage. If I can't be happy without succeeding in my career, I sacrifice my children on the altar of my success. If a friendship doesn't make me happy, I end it. "God wants me to be happy" has ruined the church in America and Paul identifies it for what it really is; loving pleasure rather than loving God. God doesn't want me to be happy; He wants me to be obedient because there can be no lasting happiness without obedience. There are things I won't do and there are things I do for no other reason than my love for God. "**Holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power;**" This is how we know Paul is talking about counterfeit believers in the church. The word for form Paul uses here means appearance. They look like believers on the outside but there's no power. They aren't born again and haven't experienced the liberating power of Jesus in their life. It's all appearance. They attend church, they talk like Christians and they claim to be Christians; but they are still enslaved to their love for themselves. "**Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses.**" Why avoid them? They're wolves in the flock. They use their reputation as Christians to take advantage of the church; sexually, financially and in a million other ways, manipulating the weak through guilt. How many pastoral counseling sessions end up in immorality? How many guilty Christians are fleeced out of their money as they try to buy forgiveness? The church will always attract wolves who look like sheep but are only here for themselves; and Paul says they're not to be petted or fed but avoided; more on that in a minute. "**Always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth...**" Notice that these counterfeits often know their Bible. They can quote chapter and verse and yet they are blind to the truth because they refuse to obey the truth. The Bible is just a tool to be used for their own ends; not something to be believed in and obeyed. That's why Paul summarizes, "**Just as Jannes (Jans) and Jambres (Jam'brez) opposed Moses, so these {men} also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected in regard to the faith. (Meaning they are not true Christians) But they will not make further progress; for their folly will be obvious to all, just as Jannes's and Jambres's folly was also.**" Jannes and Jambres were the Penn and Teller of Pharaoh's court, illusionists who tried to duplicate the miracles Moses did to show the power of the Lord. When Moses' staff turned into a serpent, Jannes and Jambres' staffs turned into serpents – but then Moses' serpent ate their serpents. After that, they couldn't keep up or duplicate the real miracles Moses was performing with their illusions and they were exposed. Paul's point is that counterfeit Christians will eventually be found out; that they can only fake it for so long. So Verses 1-9 are a description of counterfeit believers. Next week we'll look at Paul's description of real Christians in vs. 10-17, but for the brief time we have left, I want to draw three lessons from these verses about how to know if we are a real follower of Jesus or just fooling ourselves and others.

1. It's all about love.
2. Evil is often the absence of good
3. Some assembly required.

It is all about love. The biggest difference between true Christians and phony Christians is what we love. Notice all the examples of what the counterfeit Christians care most about. They are lovers of self which we saw was the root of their problems, lovers of money, haters of good, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. Everybody loves something and who I am is determined by what I love. The sin which dwells within us corrupts our heart so we cannot love what we should love but instead love what we should not. That's why salvation requires a heart transplant. Hebrews 8 shows why the old covenant - the Law of Moses - couldn't save anyone and why a new

covenant was necessary; "For if that first {covenant} had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them (referring to Israel; the problem wasn't with the old covenant itself, Israel just couldn't keep it.), He says, (the writer quotes from Jeremiah 31) "BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING, SAYS THE LORD, WHEN I WILL EFFECT A NEW COVENANT WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AND WITH THE HOUSE OF JUDAH; NOT LIKE THE COVENANT WHICH I MADE WITH THEIR FATHERS ON THE DAY WHEN I TOOK THEM BY THE HAND TO LEAD THEM OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT; FOR THEY DID NOT CONTINUE IN MY COVENANT, AND I DID NOT CARE FOR THEM, SAYS THE LORD. "FOR THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS INTO THEIR MINDS, AND I WILL WRITE THEM ON THEIR HEARTS. AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. AND THEY SHALL NOT TEACH EVERYONE HIS FELLOW CITIZEN, AND EVERYONE HIS BROTHER, SAYING, 'KNOW THE LORD,' FOR ALL WILL KNOW ME, FROM THE LEAST TO THE GREATEST OF THEM. FOR I WILL BE MERCIFUL TO THEIR INIQUITIES, AND I WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE." (Hebrews 8:7-12) God promises a new covenant which will give people a new heart since our heart is the source of our problem. In Ezekiel 36:26 God promises, "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." That's why we need to be born again. We need a new heart. We need new loves. And if becoming a Christian hasn't changed your fundamental desires and the things you want most in life, it is unlikely that you ever became a Christian. Ask yourself, "Are there things I do or things I refuse to do because of my love for God?" Getting a new heart isn't something you can miss. That's why one of the primary differences between a real believer and the counterfeit believer is what we truly love. And if you realize that you don't love God, you don't love what is good, you don't love people; then throw yourself on God's mercy and ask Him to give you the new heart which He promises to everyone who trusts in Jesus to save them.

Here's a second lesson about how to know if we are a real follower of Jesus or just fooling ourselves: evil is often the absence of good. Did you notice how many things in Paul's list of the things which characterize counterfeit believers began with the negative; "Ungrateful, unholly, unloving, irreconcilable, without self-control;" (no gratitude, no holiness, no love, no reconciliation, no self-control) all examples of the absence of good. We're all by nature ungrateful, unholly, unloving, irreconcilable and without self-control. So how is the truly born again individual any different than anybody else? When Jesus comes to live in us and gives us a new heart, there is a counterforce to the sin in us. There is a new power and desire for good and that's why there is a conflict where there wasn't before. That's why Paul says that the Spirit wars against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit. For those who have been born again, there's a war going on inside of us that wasn't going on before Christ came in; a war between good and evil; between God and sin. We can't ignore our ingratitude, our unholiness or our lack of love. We can't hold a grudge without feeling bad about it. Do you experience that war? Does your conscience refuse to give you rest when you know you did the wrong thing? Evil is often the absence of good and if I don't experience a push toward what is good and true and right within me, I have most likely never been born again.

Finally, here's a third lesson about how to know if we are a real follower of Jesus or just fooling ourselves: some assembly required. Only Christ can change us but we must cooperate with the change. Real faith always involves action; if I believe in Jesus, I will follow Jesus. Notice there is only one command in this passage, verse 5, *Avoid such men as these*. Stay away from these counterfeit Christians. Don't allow them to prey upon your fellowship. Now Paul isn't talking about people who think they're Christians but aren't – but who are otherwise harmless. He's talking about dangerous people here – predators, dividers, users, tempters; people who hurt people. For a long time I didn't know this command was in the Bible and so I mistook my natural fear and avoidance of conflict for Christlike love and tolerance. I tolerated dangerous people because I thought that was what loving people like Jesus meant – even though Jesus never did that. But Paul says that with these kinds of people, Christlike behavior is avoiding them and not allowing them to influence you or others. In the New Testament church, nobody expected perfection. The early believers were well-aware that we are saved by grace alone and that we will struggle with our own sin and with each other's sins as long as we're in these bodies. However, when people refused to repent and continued to cause division or hurt others or gossip or use people, the early Christians would – after a careful process of repeated corrections and warnings, eventually separate themselves from those folks until they repented. For the good of the community, certain people were avoided until they repented – because some people won't repent until they see how seriously the community takes their behavior. That's why Paul tells Timothy to avoid such men as these. But since Jesus said that we can't take the speck out of our brother's eye

until we remove the log from our own, we can't avoid evil in others until we learn to avoid evil in ourselves. Avoid such men as these and avoid such behaviors as these in your own life. Even though we're born again and have a new heart, sin still tries to reign over us. We're still tempted to love ourselves more than God along with all the other behaviors and attitudes Paul lists in this passage. Those temptations don't disappear once Jesus comes into our lives. He gives us the power and the desire but we still have to defeat them. That's why Paul writes in Romans 8:12-13 "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, (to the sin which lives in our body and continues to attempt to control us) to live according to the flesh-- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; (since the wages of sin is death, every time we allow sin to control us I experience the ruin which comes as the result of sin – physical, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual ruin) but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." Paul's point is that even though we still live in the same sin-infected body we lived in before we came to know Christ, we don't have to be controlled by it. We have the power to say no to selfishness, materialism, pride, arrogance, ingratitude and to all the rest. We just need to exercise that power. So the third way to see if your faith is real is to ask yourself, "Am I resisting evil" A friend of mine used to say, "I can resist anything but temptation." It's easy to think we're more spiritual than we are if base our opinion on how much we know. But knowledge doesn't equal maturity. It's possible to be always learning and never coming to the knowledge of the truth. The question is, how do I do when I'm tested? If I'm not resisting temptation, then I have no evidence that I am a genuine believer. That doesn't mean that I'm not born again but if there's no evidence that I've been born again, I should take that seriously.

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