

TITLE: “Reading the Road Signs: Understanding Our Time” (Slide #1)

TEXT: 2 Timothy 3:1-4:5

DATE: October 11, 2009

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Well, it’s good to be back with you in the pulpit:
 1. Thanks for all you prayers during the last couple of weeks as I underwent surgery and recovery.
 2. While gone you have been blessed with some rich words from Rev. Richard King and Rev. Eugene Lain. We need other voices with solid preaching and I’m grateful for these two men.
- B. While recovering, I’ve had some time to pray and think about the rest of this year and God has offered to me a roadmap that will get us all the way through to 2010:
 1. This week and next I want us to spend some time doing spiritual inspection.
 - a. As our guide we will be considering the words of Paul written to Timothy in his second letter – words known as “end times” warnings.
 - b. I believe the reason why God would have us look at these words is because there is a sense that the end times are upon us, or close to it, and we need to be ready.
 - c. They are words of warning, but they are also words that can help drive us to be better.
 - d. Can I encourage everyone to understand warning passage to be good news. While the words we will consider are sobering and challenging, the beauty of these words is that they stretch us and provide for us an opportunity to be all God wants us to be.
 2. Three weeks from today we begin our Fall Revival with Pastor Scott Petterson, chaplain at MVNU – you will not want to miss one service as we meet Sun. AM and Sun.-Wed. PM.
 3. Moving into November, our theme will be thanksgiving and I’ve been drawn to a look at Psalm 23 as a guide to thankfulness – there’s much to be thankful for in Psalm 23.
 4. The fourth Sunday of November we will enjoy a Thanksgiving cantata in the AM service, also offered Saturday night of the same weekend.
 5. Then after that we enter Advent.
- C. These days I believe will be good days as we grow in Christ. Amen?
- D. So let’s jump into the powerful words of Paul found in **2 Tim. 3 and 4**. Let us read the words together. **(Slide #2)**
- E. **(Slide #3 - Laying the foundation)** As Paul writes these words to a pastor he has trained, Timothy, they are some of the last words Paul will speak to those who will be taking over his ministry.
- F. As Paul writes, he’s trying to offer some final instructions and they are instructions that are very important for the future of the church.
- G. Paul is in jail as he writes – imprisoned for his faith. One of our General Superintendents, Dr. Jim Diehl calls this letter “Paul’s Last Letter From Death Row.”
- H. Having offered words of encouragement followed by a challenge to remain faithful and true to his calling, Paul in **chapters 3 and 4** offers to Pastor Timothy some vitally important words of “revelation” – an accounting of the signs of the end of time.
- I. They are in every sense sobering words, descriptive of a climate that is worthy only of weeping for those who succumb to the condition described in these verses.

- J. As we read the opening words in **verses 2-4**, honestly it could be said that the description seems to be one that is true of every generation, just in growing severity. We could easily read the words of Paul's description of the times on the front page of the Coshocton News for it is so current it is almost scary.
- K. Now here's the part that is the most sobering about these words of Paul: As he describes what it will look like in the last days, Paul is not describing for us what it will look like in the secular world; he is telling us what it will look like in the church – the church that fails to take seriously spiritual living.
1. Folks, I don't know about you, but the following description of the church does not sound overly appealing to me: **“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– (2 Timothy 3:2-4)**
 2. But I'll be honest with you: as sad as I am to say it, there are many within churches who call themselves Christians who look just like what Paul describes.
- L. Listen now, for this word is key: We at CoshNaz must never become like that!!!! We must do whatever is required so that our spiritual lives will never be reduced down to such a non-Christian life.
- M. A warning sign must occasionally be sounded that will help the church take a clear and honest look at themselves so that we can prevent such a devastating decline.
- N. As I read through the further words offered by Paul, there are three verses in particular that I believe are absolutely essential to look at. They are verses that identify causes for such a decline.
1. I highlight them this morning as a means of correction for some and a means of preventative medicine for others, cautioning us not to go there.
 2. This morning I want to talk only about the warnings. Next Sunday I will talk about the solutions.
 3. Why? Because so often we move so quickly to claim the solutions that we have not properly and soberly dealt with the description of compromised living. This week the challenge will be to take what we hear in this sermon and ask God this honest question: Am I guilty of acting like that? If so, please forgive me and lead me into a process of significant spiritual transformation.
- O. As Paul writes to Timothy, in the words of our text he sounds a three-fold alarm. He offers a description of three different signs of what can promote and preserve dead and ineffectual spiritual living. Let's look at the three signs together.

II. (Slide #4) SIGN #1: The Age of Imitation.

- A. The first road sign that Paul offers to warn people that compromised Christian living is present is found in **verse 5** where Paul describes those who would call themselves Christians as ones **“having a form or godliness, but denying its power.”** The **New Living Translation** writes it like this: **“They will act as if they are religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly.”**
- B. What is Paul trying to say in this verse? What he is describing is what I want to call “Imitation Christianity.”
1. I'm not using the word imitation in a good sense such as truly Imitating the life of Christ.
 2. I'm using the word imitation in the sense of “pretend.” It's a life that has an appearance, at least at times, as if it is real, but it is only a show, a performance, an act.
 3. It's not the real deal; it's imitation.
- C. **Illustration:** Let's look at some examples of things that are imitations:
1. “Genuine Imitation Vanilla.”
 2. “Splenda, Nutrasweet, or Sweet and Low.”

3. Caffeine Free Diet Coke.”
 4. Christa in adult clothing.
- D. Folks, let’s be serious. It’s a rather non-important thing that there are products out there that do nothing more than imitate the taste of something else, some imitating better than others.
1. It’s a harmless thing, really.
 2. It’s an attempt by companies to preserve a taste while eliminating something negative, like sugar.
 3. But let’s take the example of Christa in adult clothing. It’s cute to see a little girl dress up like an adult and pretend that they are their mommy. But let’s take this to another level for a few minutes:
 - a. Suppose that today when I get home and I see Christa I say to her, “Hi Christa,” she responds, “I’m not Christa, I’m Nancy.”
 - b. I laugh a little and say, “I know, you’re pretending to be mommy,” but she answers back, “No, I’m Nancy.”
 - c. As the day goes on, the charade continues and I get a little firmer saying that it’s time to quit pretending, and Christa gets firmer saying, “No, I’m Nancy.”
 - d. As the days and the week goes on, Christa continues to insist that she is Nancy. Folks, pretty soon it’s not funny any more.
 - e. One morning we get up and we smell something burning, and there is Christa standing at the stove with the burner turned up high cooking something. We ask her why and she says, “I’m Nancy. I’m cooking breakfast.” Now we’re really concerned because this false sense of identity could burn the house down.
 - f. The next day we are shocked out of our sleep by the sound of sirens and the sound of police radios outside our house. We look out the window and there is our car, smashed by another car, and little Christa being lifted from the drivers seat. We rush out and we say “Christa, are you O.K.? Why are you in the car.” She looks us in the face and says, “I’m not Christa, I’m Nancy. I was going to the store for groceries.”
 4. Together we all know how we would react. We would be horrified. Here is a little girl who is pretending but she does not in the least have the knowledge, the skills, the power to be who she is pretending and the inevitable is that she is living a distorted, psychotic, dangerous life.
 5. None of us in this room would feel good about a situation like that. We would see it as clearly a tragedy that will only result in more tragedy without some significant help.
- E. Folks, listen carefully to what I am about to tell you for the warning that Paul issues is not a casual one but one with equally tragic consequences to the imaginary scenario just presented using our daughter Christa: When a person tries to have the form or godliness without the power, it is an insanity that results in tragic and insane religious delusion.
1. You see, my friends, there’s nothing funny about **2 Timothy 3:5** – it is a warning sign that alerts us to a lifestyle that is spiritually psychotic and extremely dangerous.
 2. We see it in those who sure do look really good on Sundays and certainly say all the right things when in the company of Christians, but in truth, deep down under the skin deep covering, there’s nothing there that is Christian.
 3. On a regular basis what is really seen by the person in the world is someone who is “a 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.”

4. And let me just add this thought to the mix: those who are imitation Christians are the very ones that Satan will wipe out because they are the easiest pickings of the lot – easier than even an outright sinner.
- F. Down through my years of ministry I have seen numerous tragedies happen to people you would never dream it could happen to; people that everyone in the church just assumed were absolute saints because they had put on such a great act.
 1. Nancy and I have a friend from seminary, one of our closest friends, in every way seemingly one of the most spiritual people you could know, suddenly walk out on her pastor husband because of an affair with another man.
 2. We have a friend who seems as if they were as spiritual as they come be arrested for having sexual contact with a minor and be sent to jail.
 3. Christians, falling into sin and giving away everything that is good. Folks, it doesn't just happen. It happens with those who push aside the scriptural warning to not just be imitators, but instead be spirit-filled and empowered real-deal Christians.
- G. Paul does all of us a favor by issuing a warning sign: Be careful not to pretend. The walk must be genuine.
- H. **(Slide #5) The question for you and me:** Is our experience true? Is it more than skin deep? Does it remain constant on Monday through Friday just like on Sunday? If not, God needs to do some TRANSFORMATION in your life today and this week.
- I. There's a second sign.

III. **(Slide #6) SIGN #2: The Age of Information.**

- A. We read Paul's second warning in **verse 5** when he writes these chilling words: **[there are many who call themselves Christians who are] "always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth."** The **New Living Translation** states it like this: ***"They are forever following new teachings but never understanding the truth."***
- B. What does Paul means and what's the big deal about these words? Paul is issuing a warning concerning a second danger within the community of faith: Christianity that is based only upon information and not application. . . . "Smart Christianity."
- C. Let me offer to you another ridiculous **illustration**.
 1. As a teenager I have just spent the last week in my science class studying the rules of gravity: why it happens, the consistency of it happening, the overall effects, etc.
 2. On a Friday afternoon after a week of learning the rules of gravity, I'm sitting in a third story apartment building and look across the street and see a Coldstone Creamery and I say to myself, "Man, wouldn't a Coldstone Creamery ice cream cone be great.
 3. Understanding from my Geometry class a truth that I learn, "The shortest distance between two points is a straight line," I walk over to the window, open up the window and walk out."
 4. As my science teacher comes to visit me in the hospital (because I'm one of his smartest students), he says to me, "Why did you walk out of the window. Don't you remember everything we talked about concerning gravity?" And I respond, "Well yes, I remember what I learned about gravity, but what does that have to do with me walking out of windows?"
 5. I would venture to say that my science teacher might say something like this: "Don, it's not just about information. . . it's about applying that information to life. Gravity is a real life reality that you have to pay attention to or you'll end up in a hospital."

- D. Paul knew, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that a day would be coming when Christians would arrive at the conclusion that Christian living is not what you do, it's what you know. And he knew as any of us should, that this is a false as it could be.
- E. **Illustration:** A few years back I read an article in the newspaper that spoke about the progression of ages from the Agricultural Age to the Industrial Age to today, which the author called the Information Age.
1. It's an age that is driven by the exchange of information.
 2. The tools we have available to drive this age is overwhelming: we have the Internet which offers us google.com that answers any question we have. We have e-mails and instant messenger and facebook that makes the transferal of information immediate. We have TV, radio, cell phones that do much more than make phone calls (you can track your stocks, keep track of the weather and your favorite sports team, etc.).
 3. Honestly, folks, we have so much information available to us today I think we are being overwhelmed by it. We know more than we have ever known, and practically speaking it may not mean a thing.
- F. Paul is issuing this warning: Christian living is not about information. . . .it's about life. But as I observe the Christian church today, I am more and more convinced that there are many who call themselves Christians that are intellectually smart and biblically informed by practically ignorant of the Christian walk.
1. Paul describes it this way: always learning by never able to acknowledge – live out – the truth.
 2. It goes into the ears and makes it as far as the head, but that's as far as it goes.
- G. Friends, this is a warning that is meant for today. The warning is this: if we try to claim Christianity solely based upon what we know, it is not Christianity at all, it's just knowledge. True Christianity takes the truth of the word and uses it for life transformation.
- H. **(Slide #7) The question for you and me is this:** Week in and week out as you read the Bible, attend Sunday School classes, listen to sermons, etc., is the result a real change in life? If not, your Christian experience is a “head thing” and God is instead looking for a Christianity that is a “living sacrifice thing.”
- I. One last warning, and it too is sobering and real.

IV. **(Slide #8) SIGN #3: The Age of Isolation/Insulation.**

- A. As we move into **chapter 4** we read these words in **verse 3:** *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.”* The **New Living Translation** puts it this way: *“For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to right teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them what they want to hear.”*
- B. What is Paul saying as a final warning sign? Simply and yet tragically this: A day is coming (and has now come) when many Christians will not only see Christianity as information driven versus live style driven, but they will take it to another level: They will decide on a lifestyle they like and then look for people – even pastors – who will tell them it's O.K. And if they don't tell them what they want to hear, then they'll go somewhere else.
1. Now listen carefully to understand what this is saying.
 2. The warning we hear from these words is that a day is coming – and I think it is today – when the Bible and it's truths will no longer be an authority. Instead, mankind will become the authority and twist the word to say what we want it to say.

3. Note the progression: Now we have moved from knowing but not living to what we know to a worse condition: Caring only about what we want to do and distorting truth to match it.
- C. The danger is overwhelming because it results in a form of isolation or insulation from God's truth.
1. If we can find someone to endorse our behavior to the point that we are convinced that we are living a truly biblical life, but we really are not, how does one find their way out of such a trap?
 2. It would be very difficult.
- D. One might ask, "Don, is that really happening in Christian churches? Isn't that really speaking to cults and wild religious movements?" Let me answer with a **simple illustration**, one of hundreds I could offer:
1. We read in **Romans 6** these words: **"If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin--because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. . . . Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. . . . For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. . . . You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."**
 2. Well, those words are pretty uncomfortable, as are the words of Jesus in the sermon on the mount when he says emphatically as the conclusion to His sermon: **"Be perfect, therefore, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."**
 3. So what do you do with verses like that who state that as believers filled with God's spirit we are called to live a life that no longer participates in habitual sin.
 4. I'll tell you what many have done down through the years. They have come to this conclusion: "Well, in my life I can't live like that, so obviously neither Paul nor Peter meant what they said. They just meant do the best you can and it will be fine." They get a bunch of people around them who say, "Yea, that makes sense, and a pastor up the street said the same thing." And together that's how they live.
 5. It's not as foreign as one might think.
- E. Paul issues the warning because he knows our human tendency to water down truth so we don't have to actually be transformed into the image God has for us. And it's too bad.
- F. **(Slide #9) The question one must ask is this:** As a Christian, am I more prone to read God's word to be shaped and transformed by the word or am I more prone to read the word to validate my lifestyle so I don't have to change a thing?

V. **(Slide #10) THE CHALLENGE**

- A. My good Christians friends, today's sermon was not preached to tickle the ears. It has been preached as a warning and a call.
- B. Today's sermon is a sermon that calls each of us to inspection.
- C. Normally when I come to the end of a sermon like this, I would want to offer the correctives that we can use to change anything that might not be right in our lives.
 1. Today, I'm not going to do that, and I'm not going to on purpose.
 2. We could easily press on to a solution when my sense is that genuine transformation needs to spend adequate time considering what is wrong and confessing.

3. Next Sun. I will talk with you about Paul's correctives to his warnings, but this week I am calling the church to serious and deliberate spiritual inspection around the three sets of questions posed in this sermon. They will be on cards as you leave today so you can pray over them and seek God's face.
- D. Here are the three questions (**Slide #11**):
1. Is our experience true? Is it more than skin deep? Is it as true on Monday through Saturday as it is on Sunday morning. If not, then real transformation needs to take place.
 2. Week in and week out as we read the Bible, attend SS, and listen to sermons, is the result a real life change in response to what we hear or is it simply a matter of information? If it is just information, that's not enough. God is seeking transformation.
 3. As a Christian, am I more prone to read God's word to be shaped and transformed by the Word or am I more prone to read the word to validate my lifestyles so I don't have to change a thing?
- E. Let us allow God to do some significant work in the lives of all of us this week.