

Don't Wander Off

2 Timothy 3

How did people who seemed passionate for God end up not caring about Him and doing things that at one time they would have never wanted to do?

Walking is one of the images used in the Bible to describe our faith and relationship with God (*Genesis 3:8, 5:22 and 24, 6:9, 17:1*). When some of Jesus followers didn't like what He said, John reports, "*many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him*" (*John 6:66*). The apostle Paul experienced this rejection too, and his letters to Timothy often use the walking metaphor to express his concerns about this (*1 Timothy 1:6, 6:21, 2 Timothy 4:3-4 and 10*). *2 Timothy 3:1-15* deals with the same topic without using exactly the same language.

The list of terrible characteristics in verses 2 to 5 could be a description of any of us. For Christians, this could be what "*wandering off*" looks like. How does this happen? Paul identifies love as the root cause: "*People will be lovers of self... [they will be] lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.*" When Jesus described people turning away from Him, the phrase He used was "*the love of many will grow cold*" (*Matthew 24:12*). In the book of Revelation, Jesus speaks to the same church that Paul and Timothy were concerned with, 20 or 30 years later, and warns them that they have "*abandoned the love you had at first.*" (*Revelation 2:2-4*)

If you're not convinced that what we love is the root of our problems, just consider the last time you saw an advert on TV that relied solely on facts. People in marketing are experts in human behaviour, and they know that emotion triumphs reason nearly every time. So adverts tell stories, and they give us a vision of the good life, and then

associate their product with it, knowing that we are drawn by our desires more than anything else. This is an exploitation of God's good design: we were made by Him to love Him, and love those around us; we were made to be motivated by good desires, and to gravitate towards what is right. But this capacity and drive to love is so easily turned elsewhere – in our culture primarily in on ourselves – and when that happens, we begin to act in the way Paul described to Timothy.

For example, you might be attracted to Christianity because people tell you that it will make you happy and more peaceful – and you really like those things. So you make a commitment to Jesus, but when something happens that makes you unhappy or stressed, you feel like either God has let you down or that it can't be God's will. If your desire is to follow God, then you'll do so through unhappy and stressful times as well, making decisions that are hard but obedient to the truth; if your desire is to be happy and peaceful, you'll try something else instead of Christianity. So the question each of us must ask is: What do you love?

We can learn to love God, but God knows that we cannot do this by ourselves. He doesn't just offer us a way to walk, but changes us completely so we can walk His way: we experience "*new birth*" and become a "*new creation*" with a "*new heart.*" Then we can walk with Him, whatever is happening (*2 Peter 1:3*).

When this has happened, we can learn to love God. Paul reminds Timothy of the importance of imitation (*verses 10-11*) and making and keeping godly habits (*verse 14*).

Lives and loves are truly changed by repeatedly making consistent decisions. They might seem spectacular, and once they become part of the routine of our lives they will seem very normal to us, but their power to direct our affections is remarkable. When we take many steps in the same direction, that's where we'll end up!

Questions:

- Why is it important that we take warning from passages like 2 Timothy 3:2-5, which for most of us would seem horribly different from how we intend to live?
- What do you think of Jonathan Haidt's image of our reason being like the rider on top of an elephant, our emotions? (Taken from *The Happiness Hypothesis and The Righteous Mind*.)

- Are you content that we can learn to love God, and that this isn't "fake it 'til you make it"? (Taken from James K.A. Smith's *You Are What You Love*)
- What habits do you need to form to form and firm up your love for God?



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