

Looks Can Be Deceiving

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 July 2025

Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 00] Well, folks, do keep those verses open in front of you and we'll get into them together. But just to kick us off, complete the phrase, looks can be deceiving.

! When was the last time that you either said that or thought that to yourself? Have a think. Before Alex and I moved to Edinburgh in 2012, we spent five months in Malawi. In Southern Africa. I remember one day going for a wander around one of the many marketplaces. And if you've ever been to that part of the world, you'll know that just marketplaces are absolutely everywhere.

I loved the marketplaces when we were there, full of all sorts of noises, sights, smells, colour that I'd never really encountered before. I remember this one day when we were walking around the marketplace and I noticed a man wearing a T-shirt.

And I'd never seen anything like this T-shirt before. And being an extrovert, I kind of ran up to him really excited about his T-shirt. And his T-shirt said on it, ex-atheist.

[1 : 11] So I ran up to him enthusiastically and I said, my friend, my friend, I love your T-shirt. And he just looked at me blankly, which wasn't the response I was hoping for.

I was hoping for some kind of marvellous testimony about how he'd come to faith, having down to God in the first place. But it turned out that this guy didn't speak a word of English. So he tapped his friend on the shoulder and he got him to translate to him what I was saying.

And his friend understood what he was saying and then he relayed it back to me. And he said, oh, you mean that T-shirt? He doesn't know what it means. He just likes the colour.

And I was gutted because here was a man giving the impression of something being true in the outside. But actually something totally different was going on in the inside.

Looks can be deceiving, can't they? And that's the issue that Paul's speaking into in these verses tonight. That he wants Timothy to understand that looks can be deceiving.

[2 : 17] Now what we're going to see is Paul give Timothy three things to heed when it comes to the people who have rocked up in Ephesus.

And we're going to see how they apply to us today. The people who have rocked up in Ephesus. Now if you've been tracking with this series, and I recognize the summer is a bit stop start and you might be in and out for different ones.

But there's this group who've rocked up in Ephesus into the church there. And essentially they are spiritual doppelgangers. Their message is a looky-likey one to Paul's.

And their lives are looky-likey ones to real deal Christians. And Paul's going to say to Timothy in this church where it's difficult to tell what's really going on.

He's going to say looks can be deceiving. And at this point I can hear the voice of my kids in my ear. And they're so good at this they make me a better preacher. So what? Right?

[3 : 16] I'm bored. Who cares? And maybe that's what you're thinking. You're too polite to say it in your lips. Maybe that's what you're thinking tonight. You read this list and you think can we not just skip chapter three.

And I wondered that when I was preparing for this. Why didn't Paul just go from chapter two verse 26. And that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil who's taken them captive to do his will.

Why didn't he jump just to chapter four verse one. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who judged the living and the dead and view the superior and the kingdom. I'll give you this charge.

Preach the word. That could have been a seamless jump.

Why give him all this detail? It's a good question isn't to ask. Why? But let me give you two big reasons. That's what we're going to explore as we go through here.

Let me give you two big reasons to care about what we're going to consider over the next 20 minutes or so. You with me? Two big reasons. The first one is in the text. And it's that phrase at verse one.

[4 : 17] Do you see it? The last days. That phrase means the time between Jesus ascending to heaven and the time when he returns.

Timothy finds himself in that gap. And we find ourselves in that gap. And the fact that we live there in the last days.

I want to suggest two things. I want to suggest firstly that it's a reason to be massively optimistic. Glass half full kind of guy.

I love this kind of stuff, right? It's a reason to be massively optimistic. Because this time, these last days are the time of gospel proclamation. Okay?

The gospel message of the risen Jesus is going forth to all nations and all peoples. And God is saving people to himself and giving life to men and women the world over through this message.

[5 : 26] And nothing will stop him achieving his purposes of seeing his salvation plan going to the ends of the earth. It's amazing. Just come back from a week in Keswick.

One of the big things that I haven't been in a big Christian gathering for a long, long time. But one of the things I was powerfully reminded of is that God is working in all sorts of ways that I will never hear about.

You hear stories about what God's doing in Asia. And you hear stories about what God is doing in Cumbria. Places all over the world where God is at work through this message.

And it's such a great reminder to think about the fact that it's bigger than EH10. Yeah? God is working. Jesus is plundering Satan's kingdom.

The light is invading the darkness. And that's what happens every time someone becomes a Christian. It's one of the great joys of my job as I see people make small steps of faithfulness to Jesus.

[6 : 28] What is happening there? The light is pressing back against the darkness. So we have every reason in the last days to be wildly optimistic.

But the last days also means, secondly, that this is a reason to be realistic. Because this is the age when the spiritual battle rages.

If that first part is true about optimism, then you would expect that the forces of hell will do everything that they can to stop it. The devil is the father of lies.

The spiritual battle rages. So the first reason to listen to this tonight is in the text. We're in the last days. This is us. But the second reason to think about it and listen tonight is outside the text.

Because this day is our day. We can expect this kind of stuff that Timothy's up against in Ephesus to be par for the course until Jesus returns.

[7 : 31] So this advice is timely. And what this is, is a call for discernment. Now I spent a number of summers when I was a student trying to earn some cash to get me through the next term.

Working at the Clydesdale Bank. Some of you won't be old enough to remember the Clydesdale Bank. The Clydesdale Bank was bought over by National Australia. National Australia was bought over by Virgin.

And so technically I was working for Virgin Banks if you want to think about it like that. Working at the Clydesdale Bank. And I'm working as a teller at the front. So people used to come up to me and ask for cash.

And in my little drawer to the side where all my cash was. In amongst all the fives, the tens, the twenties, the fifties, the hundreds. Was a wad of what we called your robbery notes.

What would happen is that if somebody came in with a gun and said give me all your money.

There's a bag. You would empty all your money in but you would slip in the robbery notes. So that when the person left and thought they'd got away with it.

[8 : 32] What would happen when they left when they went beyond the door. Is that something would trigger in those notes. And a red dye would explode all over the bag. But the thing is those robbery notes looked really like the real notes.

Right? Otherwise you would see straight through it. They looked really like it. But the only way you could tell which ones the robbery notes were. Was by being so in touch with the real deal. It was all about the touch.

All about the touch. You could feel it. And this is kind of what Paul is saying here. All the way through this letter. You need to be so in touch with the real deal. That you can feel the fake a mile off. Discernment. Right? Difficult days call for clued up Christians. That's what he's saying.

And you'll see in the text there. Paul lists. I think I counted them. 19 characteristics that will mark people of the world in the last days. That's what's going on here.

[9 : 31] Things that Paul is saying are true of these gospel opponents in Ephesus. Again, remember the big thing. Looks can be deceiving.

It doesn't look like it. These guys are talking and walking in a sense like everyone else. But Paul's just lifting the lid off here of what's really going on.

And just scan your eye over them there at verses 2 to 5. Look in the text. 2 to 5. First impressions. Really strong.

Right? Even as we read it there, you would have felt it. Really, really strong. Very ugly words, isn't it, that he's using there. Now, we don't have time to look at all these things in detail.

But let me just draw our attention to the word that comes up so often here. Do you notice it? And it's the word love. In the last days, people will love themselves rather than God.

[10 : 34] Misplaced and idolatrous loves. Lovers of self rather than lovers of God. It's the essence of sin. But what's really surprising here is when we consider the group of people that Paul is talking about.

For this isn't the people of the world. This is the people who are in the church. So this isn't these people out there. This is these people who are in here.

The people who claim to follow Jesus. And of course, it's not obvious and clear to Timothy or to anyone watching who's who. But the fact that Paul takes time to mention it, I think, is meant to wake Timothy up to the reality of what's going on here.

You know, I remember getting a letter through the post a few years ago, came to my office. From the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints. And they were calling us to join them as Christians, fellow Christians, to work together in mission.

Now listen, we love our Mormon friends. But we've got to understand that things might look very samey on the surface. But we believe completely different things about Jesus.

[11 : 51] And as far as it concerns these people in Ephesus, see verse 5. That's the kind of thing that Paul wants Timothy to see. We're totally different teams.

So what is it about these people in Ephesus? And this is really important to see the details here.

Paul says, do you see it, verse 5? They have a form of godliness. So they look like the real deal.

But peel back the skin, lift the bonnet. And they are just like everyone else in the world. So they value the same things. They love the same things.

They desire the same things. They chase the same things. They teach the same things. And how is Timothy to identify them? It would be easy if they wore a medallion with a big F for false teacher on the front, wouldn't it?

It would be really easy. But I take it that Paul has to write this because it's really hard. But he says, you'll know them, Timothy, not by what they wear, but by reflecting on and listening to what they are saying about the gospel message that I have passed on to you.

[12 : 56] And what we'll see next week is that it's intrinsically tied up with this idea of suffering. You've seen it all the way through the letter, all the way through, this idea of suffering because of Christ.

What are these fakes doing, says Paul? They are denying its power. And that's the message. They are denying its power. And I take it that's the power to really change a person internally.

And Paul's point is that only his gospel can deliver those goods. And this will happen in the last days, Timothy, and it will happen in the church for those who are supposedly on your team.

So remember this, difficult days call for clued up Christians. What is Timothy to do? What are we to do?

If this is going to be a constant battle until Jesus comes home, what are we to do? Because this can be really unsettling. Well, here's the first of the three things.

[14 : 07] Try and make this really easy so we can get it. Okay. Here's the first, I think, what Paul is saying here. Number one, watch the heart. Watch the heart. So if verse five, these men have a form of godliness, but are denying its power.

I think the invitation to Timothy is to do the opposite. To live a life that shows its power. That's been the theme all the way through this letter, isn't it?

To live a life that shows its power. Because if Timothy is almost tempted to try and beat them at their own game or to fight fire with fire, Paul has said all the way through this letter, that's not how the servant of God behaves.

How much of this letter is how Timothy is meant to conduct himself in unsettling and difficult times? Now, what's going to show its power? Well, if you glance back at verse 22 of chapter 2, and we're going to think about more of these things next week, what is Timothy to pursue?

So he's not just to go on the defense, he's to go on the offense as well. Okay? So what the reformers used to talk about, mortification of the flesh and the vivification of the flesh. So, right? [15:28] Killing sin, but pursuing Christ. What's he to pursue? Verse 22 of chapter 2. Really easy to remember, by the way, 2-2-2. He's to pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace.

Verse 9 of chapter 1. God has saved us and he's called us to what? Do you see it? Verse 9 of chapter 1. He's called us to a holy life.

Friends, what's going to convince the world? What's going to convince the people in your office? What's going to convince your friends and family? What's going to convince your course mates of the truth of what you and I believe and preach?

It's that the fingertips of the Spirit of Jesus, the fingerprints rather, of the Spirit, are all over our words and our actions. Now, if we see anything of these signs that are listed at verse 3 of chapter 3, if we see any of them in our lives, this is a call that it should be sounding alarm bells in our mind.

Because I don't know, I come to this list so often and this is what Jerry Bridges would call respectable sins, so much of this stuff. And it's so easy just to ignore it when we see it in our lives.

[16:51] You know, there's a warning sign that's been on my car dashboard for a while and it just says, add blue, right? I need to top that up and I'm looking at it thinking, well, the engine's not falling apart.

I've still got my tires are working. I think I can get to that later. But friends, this is a call when we see this stuff in our lives. Lord, would you search my heart and help me kill it?

Sin is sin. It is so easy to think and to sing about grace without any embedded repentance. Let's say that again, get our heads around that.

It's so easy to sing about grace and marvel at grace without any embedded repentance. When was the last time, friends, that we repented of a small sin that we saw in our lives?

I take it that instinct is a spirit-inspired, wonderful thing. Lord, search our hearts for the things that I don't even know are there.

[17:58] Would you help me search my heart? Would you bring to the surface the things I need to change? Father, thank you that you're in the business of transformation. Do you see how he's not going to fight fire with fire?

He's going to tackle them by holiness. It's wonderful, isn't it? The wisdom that Paul imparts here. That's the first thing, guys. Watch the heart. Second thing, stay the course.

Stay the course. Beginning of verse 7, what is the accusation against these men, these individuals? They are always learning, but never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.

I take it this is a person, and Paul's aware of this stuff going on in Ephesus. A person that has a mind that is restlessly infatuated by the latest and the shiniest and the most spiritual-sounding fad in town.

I wonder whether Timothy's tempted to believe some of it. Maybe he's got it slightly wrong. Maybe there's something that he could learn.

[19:11] Maybe there is more. What is the implication here for Timothy? Timothy, unlike them, you already have the truth.

Yes, it's cross-shaped. Yes, it's marked by suffering. Yes, it doesn't look or sound impressive to the world.

We're not so grateful for that reminder this morning. But make no mistake. It is a message about a Savior who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to life.

That's what the gospel is. How often we forget that that's the wonderful truth at the heart of it. Do you not love that? Go and read that again at chapter 1, verse 10.

It's now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

[20 : 11] This is Paul's gospel message. This is the one that we have. So life for you now, Timothy, is not about contemplating moving on or somehow thinking you are able to graduate the gospel.

No, life now and for the rest of your days is about pressing further into it. Remember that song from Kanye West years ago?

Harder, better, faster, stronger. Was that him or Daft Punk? I can't remember, right? But that is what the world says, infatuated by harder, better, faster, stronger.

Do you know what the gospel says? The gospel says deeper. Deeper. And we are talking marina trench depth to the gospel. Friends, there are contours, there are glories, there are marvels that we just have yet to see.

And this is an invitation for Timothy to see that he has the truth. He has the truth. The one that he heard, remember down his family line, we thought about that, chapter one.

[21 : 18] He heard it from his grandmother, Lois. He heard it from his mother, Eunice. And now Paul is persuaded, now lives in him. He has the truth. What Christ has done for us, the hope that's ahead of us, the status that is now ours in Christ, adopted children of the living God, you have the truth.

It's what a massive theme that has been in this letter, isn't it? You have the truth, stay the course. Remember those at chapter two, and sorry I'm jumping about a little bit here, it's just, I've had a lot of time to think about this, right?

Chapter two. Paul gives Timothy those three metaphors, those three images to think about. He says, verse seven of chapter two, reflect on what I am saying.

And you see how Paul gives him those three things. The soldier, verse four. The soldier, which I take it as just a call to focus. Stay focused on what God has called you to do.

Don't deviate. He's called you to preach the gospel. In Ephesus, stay where you are. Focus. The athlete, which I think is a call to don't cheat, right? Don't cut corners.

[22 : 28] And I wonder whether in the context, that is Timothy being tempted to take some of the sharp edges of the gospel to try and win a few more people to his cause. And then you get the farmer.

Do you see that? The farmer, verse six, hardworking. The image is him of the farmer sowing diligently night and day. But I wonder if there's something in the farmer, of the fact of, in the fact that the farmer doesn't see the results immediately.

And I wonder if Timothy's living in a world where things are instant and things happen. And Paul is saying, no, no, no, no. If you're going to stay the course, you're going to be in it for a long, long time. Keep on doing the right thing. And the wonderful thing about that image, isn't it? That you don't see the effects of your labor immediately. I mean, apple trees don't just appear overnight. You might not see it, but you know behind the scenes, God is working his purposes out in the silent and in the unseen and the everyday.

Now, you might not see it. You might never see it in your life, but you better believe that God is at work through this message. Does that not encourage you tonight? As you think about going to your workplace, I remember a young lawyer working away thinking, is this making any difference?

[23 : 51] Does it not encourage you tonight with your family who are unbelieving, perhaps?

Thinking, is my witness making any difference? Is it making a difference when you think about your kids, bringing them up, about your marriage, about your friends?

All these things. Does this make a difference, doing the right thing? This is an invitation to see that it does. Stay the course. That's what we're called to do here.

And then third, mind the end. Mind the end. So look at verse eight. Who does he mention here at verse eight?

He mentions these two individuals called Jannes and Jambres. You see that? Widely understood to be the names of two of Pharaoh's magicians in the Exodus story.

So Exodus chapter seven. What happens in that narrative? God tells Moses and Aaron to perform a miracle in front of Pharaoh. So they rock up and they try their best to demonstrate to Pharaoh the truth of the God that he is defying and denying.

[25 : 01] You can make a case that the whole book of Exodus is about that. Pharaoh declares straight off in that first encounter, who is the Lord? The book of Exodus is about the world knowing who the Lord is.

But Pharaoh says, who is the Lord? And Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and they throw down their staff. And it turns into a snake and you think, wow, that's incredible. But what do Pharaoh's magicians do?

They do exactly the same trick. What does Pharaoh think to himself at that point? Well, he thinks, if my guys can do it, if my guys can do the same thing, then your trick, Moses and Aaron, your God, he's met his match.

Isn't that all special after all? So Janes and Jambres oppose God's truth by pretending to be the same thing and in so doing, lead people away from coming face to face with the living God and God's truth.

Do you see the connections? That's the comparison that Paul makes between them and these false teachers who are in Ephesus.

[26 : 18] And it's interesting why he mentions Janes and Jambres of all the people from that Exodus story that he could have picked to illustrate that point.

And here's two reasons I think he does it. Firstly, and quite simply, to help Timothy understand the side these false teachers, these gospel opponents, the side that they are really on is the same side that Janes and Jambres were on all those thousands of years ago.

Not on your team, Timothy. But secondly, and I think this is really powerful and encouraging for us tonight, is in relation to what Paul says here at verse 9 of chapter 3.

Have a look at it. He says, ultimately, they will be exposed. What happens in the Exodus story, Moses throws down a snake, Janes and Jambres, they throw down their snakes.

Is it a draw? Well, it isn't a draw, is it? Because who eats who in this mighty battle of the snakes? Moses' snake eats up the magician's snakes.

[27 : 31] God will have the victory in the end. And Timothy, it's the same for your situation. Friends, it's the same for our situation today. Right now. We don't know when the Lord Jesus will return and victory will be visible and final for all to see.

We don't know when that will happen. But we do know that one day Jesus tells us that it will. And in the end, God's truth will swallow up every single God pretender.

And this is a call to play the long game. Play the long game. It's a call to wait faithfully. I don't know about you, but I'm not very good at waiting.

But this is the kind of waiting that is called for here. The kind of waiting. It's not like I'm waiting on a letter to come through the post kind of waiting. Right?

You don't organize your life around the fact that you know you're getting a letter through the post, do you? No. But when you're waiting on a new sofa or a new fridge, or whatever it is you're waiting for, the kind of thing that you annoyingly need to be in for to sign, you arrange your whole day.

[28 : 50] In fact, they annoyingly give you, it will be there sometime between nine and five, don't they? You organize your whole day around that. Everything else pivots around your day around that thing. And that's the kind of waiting that Paul's talking about here.

It's the kind of waiting, the friends that you and I, because of Jesus returning that event, we organize our whole lives around its certainty. That's the kind of waiting, faithful waiting, that Paul is urging Timothy to adopt and see.

And it's the kind of faithful waiting that God is inviting us into as well. You know, just as we close, there was a magazine that's still going, I think it's still going.

I remember my dad gave us an annual subscription of it when we were young. Just to try and get us reading more widely than Roald Dahl. We had a year subscription to Time Magazine, right?

Anyone read Time Magazine, you know what I'm talking about, yeah? Every year Time Magazine used to publish this thing, and I think it still does, the top 10 most influential people in the world list, right?

[29 : 58] Well, in 2002, in that top 10 people, the most influential in the world was this man called Robert Atkins. And here's how I first encountered that name, Robert Atkins, as I think a 15, 16 year old.

So I remember coming down as a teenager one morning for breakfast. And this was a school morning, it wasn't even a weekend, coming down and all I could smell was the smell of bacon. And I thought, this has never happened in our house before on a school day, school morning.

Absolute jackpot. But my hopes were absolutely dashed in the cruelest way possible because I got there and mum said, it's not for you, it's for your dad.

Dad, dad who sat right next to me at the breakfast table, you can imagine how painful an experience it was each and watching him eat his bacon. But my mum said, dad's on the Atkins diet. So Robert Atkins was this man whose diet program at the tail end of the 90s, it swept the world. It was absolutely everywhere.

[31 : 07] And the crux of it is, the crux of his program was, the key to weight loss is to just cut out carbs and replace it with whatever you want.

And the marketing behind this was absolutely brilliant. That's why it was able to take over the globe in a matter of months. But the science behind it was absolutely lacking.

Robert Atkins, ironically, get this, he died of a heart attack in 2002. And his company that was a multi-billion company, it filed for bankruptcy in 2005.

Today, the Atkins program, the Atkins diet, is officially a fad. Now, if you had told someone that in 1999, that that's how it would turn out for Robert Atkins and his so-called wisdom, you would have been laughed out the joint.

But now, looking back on that, decades later, it was so obvious to everyone looking back on that, just how lacking in wisdom it was.

[32 : 20] Friends, in the end, do you see how Paul finishes this at verse 9? in the end, in the end, in the end, in the end,! It might be in time, but it will definitely be in the end when Jesus returns.

In the end, wisdom will be shown to be wisdom. And in the end, folly will be clear for everyone to see.

In the last days, many imposters will come, they will make a splash, and they will go. And as difficult as it is now, what we need to understand is, we look around at our world today and think, who's going to be standing in the end?

We need to understand that in the end, there's only going to be one person left standing. And one person's wisdom declared to be wisdom. And his name is Jesus.

So this is an invitation tonight to live our lives in the world where, to be honest, it sometimes doesn't feel like God is winning. It's an invitation to trust Jesus, to live out our identity in who he has made us to be, to trust fully as people of faith in the promises of God, and play the long game.

[33 : 46] So friends, we're going to pray, but why don't we just be quiet for a minute and let's just allow God by his spirit as we've encountered him in his living word to speak to us, maybe individually bringing some things to mind, areas of challenge, but I hope tonight as we take in the gospel and God's truth, some wonderful words of encouragement and hope.

They will say of me, in the Lord alone are deliverance and strength. All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame, but all the descendants of Israel will find deliverance in the Lord and will make their boast in him.

And so, Father, thank you tonight that we have encountered you as we've opened the pages of your living word. Father, thank you tonight for the wonderful source of assurance and comfort that we've gazed upon in the risen and the reigning Jesus.

So, Father, I pray that you would help us tonight to be a countercultural community of faith. Lord, help the world look in at us and see that there's something different about us.

Father, would you help us to be a people who are discerning, who know your word so well, who are able to spot the real from the fake. But, Father, would you help us to be a people who hope and who trust in the work of Jesus and trust in the promises that you've made us and live such holy lives, the ones that you've called us to live, as we faithfully seek to follow him.

[35 : 33] So, Lord, we thank you for each other. Thank you tonight that this isn't an individual pursuit that you've called us to. But, Father, thank you that you've given us each other. We thank you for our church family.

And so, Lord, I pray that you would help us to be speaking truth into each other's words, others' lives as well. So, Father, we thank you for this evening and as we close our time together, I pray that, Father, this message would live long in our memories and lives.

Lord, help us to be the people that you've called us to be because we pray in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.