

## On the Other Hand

This chapter is as relevant to all of us here today as lunch and life itself. As for lunch I am thinking of all the decisions we face when we go out to lunch with a friend and have to order. Do I propose that I pay or that we go “dutch”? Do I get a burger or a salad? Do I get the fries or the fruit as a side dish? The reason we can be indecisive in this situation is because we have limitations of budget, calorie intake, and time. “On the one hand,” we might say as we lean toward one alternative; but then, if you are like me, you hear a voice in your head saying, “on the other hand,” pushing back toward a different answer.

You may laugh at me in my indecision, but if you are honest, you probably struggle with making decisions sometimes too. You’re trying to decide what to wear and you are inclined to pick a particular shirt, *but on the other hand*, you had hoped to wear that shirt later this week. Maybe you are facing a college decision, or buying a car, or deciding what job to seek, or trying to settle the matter of long-term health care, which may be the most complicated consumer decision out there other than mobile phone plans. Even though you may not have gotten out a sheet of paper with a line down the middle of it to mark the “pro’s” and “con’s” of a particular choice, you can still hear yourself saying both “on the one hand” and “on the other hand.”

It’s not just lunch, then, that’s hard on decisions. It’s life itself. But it wouldn’t be so hard to decide if all choices were really only an illusion. In the nineteenth century the German philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel wrote a book questioning the laws of logic compiled by Aristotle from the fourth century. He questioned the law of identity, the law of the excluded middle, and the law of non-contradiction. He argued for a “both/and” world in which grand forces beyond individual control moved inexorably forward in progress toward an Ideal that absorbs all individual choices in a grand collective whole. Instead of a thesis or an antithesis winning the day, it is synthesis that rules history for Hegel.

The year after Hegel wrote *The Science of Logic*, a philosopher was born in Denmark who would take strong exception to Hegel’s view. When he was 30 years old Soren Kierkegaard published his first book, entitled *Either/Or*. For Kierkegaard there was a word for a world in which there were no individual choices—prison! Without choice there is no freedom. It is our decisions that affirm our existence as human persons. If we seek truth, we must acknowledge falsehood and distinguish the two. In order to have “good” we must reject “evil.” We either choose faith or unbelief, light or darkness, liberty or tyranny.

In 2 Timothy 3 the apostle Paul argues that we live in an “either/or” world that requires our decision on how we will live and for whom. In verses 1-9 he provides the first horn of a dilemma with a thesis statement we could entitle, “On the One Hand.” In verses 10-17 he provides the second horn of the dilemma with an antithesis statement we could entitle, “On the Other Hand.” There is no synthesis in this dialectic! We must choose.

### 2 Timothy 3:1-17

**1** But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. **2** For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, **3** heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, **4** treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, **5** having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. **6** For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, **7** always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. **8** Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith. **9** But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

### All Scripture Is Breathed Out by God

**10** You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, **11** my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. **12** Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, **13** while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. **14** But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it **15** and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **16** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17** that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

#### I. On the One Hand (vv. 1-9)

Paul tells his first-century readers and us that in the last days, which he regarded as begun by Jesus, difficult times will come. Rather than inexorable progress in human history moving from East to West by the blowing of the Zeitgeist or spirit of the age, we see short-term ups and downs but long-term moral decline, because human nature inherited from Adam is flawed. In verses 1-6 Paul uses 19 descriptions of human behavior in the last days to show that we are *flawed generally*. We are flawed in our loves, in our authorities, and in our character. In verses 7-9 Paul shows that human beings are not simply flawed generally, but we are *flawed especially* in that part of humanity choosing to become false teachers. In approach, in targets, and in allegiance they are opposed to God and his truth and therefore opposed to Paul and all Christians.

#### II. On the Other Hand (vv. 10-17)

Paul exhorts Timothy and us to push back against the spirit of the age, which seeks to “squeeze us into its mold” (J.B. Phillips paraphrase of Romans 12:2). Two times in these verses (10 & 14) he says, “you however.” You are to be steadfast and stick with the timeless rather than being “progressive” and trying to keep up with the times. We Christians are called to be different than the world around us, what John Stott called a “Christian Counter-Culture” in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. The apostle calls us to stand firm by remembering two things: 1) *from whom* we heard the Gospel (vv. 10-13) and 2) *from where* (vv. 14-17). The first is designed to remind us of our trust in the people who loved us and grounded us in the good news about Christ. Paul has in mind himself (10-13) and also Timothy’s mother and grandmother (v.14, cf. 1:5). The second one is designed to throw us on the Scriptures, which are inspired by God, designed for our salvation and profitable for our growth and service.

### Discussion Questions

1. (Introduction) What is it that makes decisions easy or hard for you?
2. (3:1-6) How many times do you see “lovers” or “loving” in these verses, and what do those times tell you about fallen human nature that is setting the tone for the spirit of our age?
3. (3:7-9) Which of the characteristics of false teachers listed here do you find most troubling, and what do you think is the antidote to it?

4. (3:10-13) Which of the 8 aspects of Paul's life that Timothy should have known well after 20 years of joint ministry do you think should most make Timothy trust Paul over any false teacher? Why did you pick that one?
  
5. (3:14-17) In these verses today what impresses you the most about Scripture (also called "the sacred writings")—its purpose (salvation), its origin (God-breathed), or its profit (teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness)? Why?
  
6. (Over all) What one verse or thought from this chapter will help you the most this week to resist the pull of a culture opposed to truth, leaving skid marks in your push back against the spirit of the age and exhibiting the Beatitudes in this opposition?