

True Self

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We're striving to be bound together in divided times, and this passage shows us it's just about impossible to be bound together when you're divided against yourself. When we are lovers of self, succumb to predators of the self, out of touch with our true self. Lovers of Self, Predators of Self, True Self.

Lovers of Self

What time it is? To grasp the significance of this passage, our lives, we need to know the time. Paul says, **But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty** (1). Are we in the last days? After Jesus' death his followers hid away in a house, until God's Spirit fell on them emboldening them to come out of hiding to tell the world the truth about Jesus: **And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh** (2:17). As they proclaimed the gospel, the Spirit transformed people on the spot from all kinds of cultures. The clock started, the last days began then, *times of spiritual power and times of difficulty*, a word means stress. We live in what's been described as the age of anxiety: *who am I, what should I do with my life*, and more recently, will the economy tank, will I get

covid, will politicians ruin our country? Anxiety. How are you responding to difficult times? We look to something to cope with anxiety: *death*, suicide hotlines up 1k%; *escape*, alcohol sales doubled 2020, *knowledge*, internet deep dives. The coping mechanism we kept a lid on in good times will, in hard times, blow the lid off. What you thought you had under control will end up controlling you. Here's a list of 18 *bad* options. We could go vice by vice, but they all fit under one heading: **lovers of self** (2), misdirected love that terminates on ourselves. When we love ourselves, we're drawn to things that serve us, like money. We love, not cold hard cash, but the comfort it affords. I've found myself shopping for shoes at night during covid. I even waited for a pair to "drop" and snapped them up before they sold out. If you love yourself, you'll see money as power to obtain what you want, in my case, escape. Escape from oppressive covid conditions. Guess what? One pair isn't enough. It didn't fix things. Why not get another? Love of personal comfort leads to *more self-love*. We fall for the idea that we *deserve* certain treatment or things, and that self-preoccupation numbs us to the needs of others. *People become an obstacle to comfort not objects of love*. Kids get in the way of work, spouses in the way of entertainment, church in the way of our passion, and service a

total drag. *Misdirected love*. It's described as *swollen with conceit*; means wrapped in smoke. The thing about self-love is you can't see it; in fact, you can look like a good person on the outside while eaten up with narcissism on the inside, **having the appearance of godliness but denying its power** (5). What does that mean? *Its having a veneer of Christianity with very little Christ*. Secretly loving what money affords more than you desire God. Being passionate about politics or justice, but heartless and cruel to those who don't see things the way you do. You may look godly on the outside: attend church, participate in City Group, pursue justice, tithe 10% while indifferent to Jesus. Why stick with the church? Because the church gives us something. You might maintain an image of godliness to secure benefits other than God: acceptance from a group, a community to meet our needs, an organization gives you purpose...*until* that community fails you. Then, slander leaders, change beliefs, become reckless, blame others, and move on. Why? *Your godliness was only skin deep*. You were rooted in the benefits of Christianity not in Christ himself, the appearance of godliness while denying its power. Paul says: *Avoid* such people. How do you do that when you'd have to avoid yourself, your coworkers, friends. But there comes a point when people love themselves to

such a degree they become toxic, and as a result, we must make a choice to avoid them, to flee their contaminating character or put off *our* old self. Why bother? For the [love of God](#) (4). To redirect our love away from ourselves. But why is loving *God* the better option? Because when we find something to love that is deeper and higher than ourselves, we discover a love that loves us back so deeply and tremendously, it frees us to sacrifice for others. For years I kept score in marriage. What I'd done and what my wife hadn't done. I wanted to please her and her measure up to me. But over the years I've learned to settle into her love, to believe she's not sitting around counting my failures. That even when I do fail, I'll be met with forgiveness. That expression of God's love has allowed me to relax and be my true self. Where will you aim? Love of God or love of self?

Predators of Self

The battle for our true humanity isn't waged just against ourselves but predators of Self, [For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women](#) (6). They creep, the word is *worm* their way into homes. In 1st century Ephesus spiritual predators were capturing women with their ideas, but it could just as easily be men. He mentions women

because a) that's what was happening historically and b) women worked in home more than men. Nevertheless, men, women, and children are susceptible to being taken captive in the home, especially during covid. In fact, the predators are already in our homes, a click away. There was a couple in our church whom everyone looked up to. They attended faithfully, active in City Group and City Seminary, the wife mentored others. Until one evening her husband decided to do an internet deep dive on rabbinic interpretations of Scripture. He stumbled across a less than credible rabbi whose whole ministry is to evangelize Christians out of the church into Judaism. And in a matter of weeks, he fell for it, handed the apple to his wife, and they renounced their faith, hate Christianity. Spiritual predators are *real*. Verse 8 compares them to two magicians who opposed Moses when he threw down his staff and it turned into a snake. J & J's also turned their staffs into snakes. Spiritual predators have *power*, and they use it to oppose the truth. They are *corrupted in mind*. *Their teaching assaults true reason, attempts to distort thoughts and align them with an enemy whose primary aim is for us to swerve from the truth.* Who's in danger? All but especially the weak. The word means diminutive, not in worth, but in *character*. Those burdened by sins, sins that have piled

up, unconfessed, unrepentant, making them easily led astray. But *godliness* is powerful puts us next to ultimate power. Self-love sets us up to fall. We are weakened by the things we cling to in hard times, like Gollum who only love the ring, his precious—it altered his being entirely, unrecognizable, like the couple who sang God's praises but now sneer at Christ.

True Self

How do we avoid all this? How can we be our true selves, lovers of God? The answer is tucked away in the phrase, *always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth* (7). There's an approach to learning that *doesn't* arrive at the truth and an approach that *does*. The first approach, women are learning, studying, examining. Like the men earlier, H&P, they are educated, reflecting on important weighty things. *But* they don't arrive at the truth. Why? Their learning is circular; it doesn't pull into the truth *and know it*. The word know suggests intimate knowledge not objective knowledge. In fact the translation misses a preposition: arriving *into* a knowledge of the truth. The idea is that true learning inhabits the truth, knows it like a person, which in fact it is. Jesus: *I am the truth* (Jn 14:6). But those attentive to the just facts of the truth remain on the

outside, *educated but unknowing, learning but never arriving*. How do we fall for this? By handling the Scriptures incorrectly. A cultural view emerges that doesn't align with the Bible, and instead of cutting Scripture straight to close gaps in our beliefs, you miscut Scripture to align with cultural beliefs. There are those who read the Bible to submit to what it says, and those who read culture use the Bible to submit to what culture says. If all your views align with progressive beliefs, you're probably out of step with Scripture. If all your views align with conservative beliefs, also you're probably out of step with Scripture. The Bible, *God*, is much more nuanced than our systems. Be *leery* of learning to accommodate cultural views. What are the signs we're doing this? William Gibson the novelist says, *If anyone tells me they are spiritual, I look at how they're treating people*. When your views are challenged, are you like the *Lord's servant*: kind, patient with evil, gently correcting those who oppose; or *lovers of self*: abusive in language, slanderous, heartless? Diagnose: Are you willing to stand up for your theory but not for Christ? For your pet doctrine but not *gospel* doctrine? Then you're learning but not arriving at the truth. You're like the train in *Snowpiercer*, all that's left of humanity in last days packed into a train that goes around and

around but never pulls into the station. *But* those who arrive into a knowledge of the truth, pull into Scripture, strive for *a deeper knowledge of Christ*. Whether string theory, critical theory, or conspiracy theory, the aim isn't to stand outside of the truth, arms crossed, but to pull so far into the truth, arms wide open, your knowledge of Christ becomes intimate, transformative. Not like Gollum and the ring, when we cling to Christ he doesn't deform but transforms, you don't sneer; you sing. *To discover your true Self, study the Scriptures with the goal of arriving, pulling deeper and deeper into union with Jesus, where we are increasingly convinced of his perfect love, and then—sacrificially love others!*