

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 25 – Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus

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Have you ever tried to read something really, really old, like a letter from centuries ago, and just thought, what on earth is going on here? Today, we're jumping into that exact puzzle. We're going to see how scholars decode ancient, complex texts, like the Bible, which were written for a completely different time and a completely different culture. And really, this is the question at the heart of it all, isn't it? We're not just looking at what these letters say.

We're diving into the incredible process scholars use to figure them out. It's kind of like being a detective, you know? You're piecing together all these clues from history, language, and culture, just to get a handle on the original message. So first up, we've got what you might call a theological balancing act.

We're going to look at two letters from the Apostle Paul to a church in a city called Thessalonica. And boom, right out of the gate, we're faced with what seems like a massive contradiction. Okay, so check this out.

In his first letter, 1 Thessalonians, Paul sounds super urgent, like the end could happen any second. He even says, "We who are alive will see it. But then, you flip to 2 Thessalonians, and it feels like he's slamming on the brakes.

He tells the same people not to be fooled, because a whole bunch of other stuff has to happen first. So, which one is it? For these people, this wasn't just some academic debate. It was changing how they lived their actual lives.

And, you know, when you grab on to just one of these ideas and totally ignore the other, well, things can get weird, fast. In fact, Dr. Dave Mathewson, whose work is our source for this, tells this wild story about what happens when that balance gets completely lost. Picture this.

It's the early 90s. The first Gulf War is kicking off. There's a lot of fear, a lot of uncertainty in the air.

Dr. Mathewson is listening to a Christian radio show, and there's this panel of prophecy gurus on, connecting everything happening in the news to biblical prophecy. They are absolutely convinced the end of the world is right around the corner. And then, one of them says this.

He tells listeners to cash out their savings, empty their bank accounts, because, hey, this is it. They're not going to need money anymore. I mean, can you imagine? Decades later, you just have to feel for anyone who actually took that advice.

It's the perfect example of what happens when you get fixated on just one side of the story. So here's the crucial point. The two letters aren't actually contradictory.

They're meant to work together. See, in Thessalonica, some people were so convinced the end was coming that they'd actually quit their jobs and were just mooching off everyone else. Paul's first letter gives them that be ready, message.

But the second one is a massive course correction. Hey, get back to work. You have to live with that sense of urgency.

Yeah, but also with the practical wisdom that you've got to provide for yourself and your family. It's this necessary tension, this balance between readiness and responsibility. OK, so if that wasn't complicated enough, let's go a layer deeper.

Sometimes the puzzle isn't just about what a letter says, but who actually wrote the thing in the first place. And this brings us to a group of letters that scholars call the pastoral epistles. Now, this is a huge debate among scholars.

For letters like 1 Timothy in particular, some experts seriously question whether Paul himself was the author. And this isn't some new crazy idea. It's a question that's actually rooted in a really old literary practice.

And to understand this debate, you have to get your head around this concept: pseudonymity. In the ancient world, it was actually pretty common for a writer, maybe a student of a famous teacher, to write something new in that teacher's name. It wasn't always about trying to trick people.

Sometimes it was a way to honor their legacy or to apply their ideas to a new situation. So you've basically got these two camps, right? The people who argue against Paul's authorship, they'll point to things like different vocabulary, a different writing style, maybe some new theological ideas. But the counterarguments are really strong, too.

For one, we just don't have enough of Paul's writing to do a real statistical comparison. And of course, he tailored his message for different audiences. Plus, other letters we know he wrote also mentioned church leaders.

So where does that leave us? Well, the debate is definitely still alive and kicking in academic circles, and it's fascinating stuff. But it's also really important to note that the earliest historical evidence we have from church leaders who lived right after the apostles, they all consistently said these letters were from Paul. So for our purposes, we're going to move forward with that traditional understanding.

All right. And that brings us to the real heart of this whole thing. We're going to look at a passage in First Timothy that honestly is one of the toughest, most controversial verses in the entire New Testament.

Wow. Okay. So reading that today in our world, that lands pretty hard, right? It sounds incredibly harsh, incredibly restrictive.

If you just read it plainly, it seems to be setting an absolute universal rule. But the question is, is a plain reading the right reading? This is where we have to put on our detective hats again, because the answer isn't just in what the words say. It's in the world they were spoken into.

To understand a command like this, we have to travel back in time to first-century Ephesus, the city where this letter was sent. See, in that world, there was this cultural trend happening that scholars call the new Roman woman. Think of it as a kind of counterculture movement for some wealthy women.

They would deliberately break social rules, dress in flashy, provocative ways to show off their money, and openly disrespect traditional marriage rules. It was a lifestyle that was so disruptive that even a lot of non-Christians at the time thought it was way out of line. And it seems this exact kind of behavior was creeping into the church in Ephesus.

It was causing chaos, especially during worship services. So when you hear Paul writing against things like braided hair, gold, and pearls, and telling women not to seize authority, he's not just throwing out random rules. He is directly addressing the specific, disruptive, and culturally scandalous behavior of this new Roman woman movement.

Knowing that context is literally the key that unlocks this whole passage. But it also forces us to ask a much bigger and much more difficult question. Once you know the specific problem Paul was trying to solve, you have to decide what his solution means for us today.

Was he laying down a hard and fast rule for all churches, everywhere, forever? Or was he giving a specific command to fix a specific problem in first-century Ephesus? And this is really the fundamental divide in how people interpret this. On one side, you have the view that this is a universal command, a timeless principle about how a church should be ordered. But on the other side, you've got the view that this was a cultural instruction, a temporary rule that was absolutely necessary for that situation, but not necessarily meant to be binding on everyone forever.

And look, this dilemma goes so much further than just this one passage. It is the central challenge of reading any ancient document. We have to do the really hard work of understanding its original, historical, and cultural world before we can even begin to ask what it means for us.

So this is the question we're left with. It's the tightrope that every reader of ancient text has to walk. The process is complicated, the debates are still going, and it really shows that to truly understand a 2,000-year-old letter, you have to do more than just read the words.

You have to decode an entire world.