



In Colossians 2, Paul writes, “As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, overflowing with thankfulness” (vv. 6-7). Today’s sermon text shows us how important this is. Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Timothy 4 (page 933 in the pew Bible).

Our two most recent sermons have focused on bearing fruit for God. Last Sunday Bob Lelio exhorted us to “bear more in ’24!” By God’s grace we will! The *Spirit* of God uses the *Word* of God to enable the *people* of God to bear *fruit* for God.

But in among the good fruit, there can be some bad apples. And “one bad apple can spoil the bunch.”¹ One of the most corrupting influences in the church is false teaching. That’s why in Paul’s farewell message to the elders at the church in Ephesus in Acts 20, Paul warned them that men from their own group would rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. Paul said, “Watch out for them!”

By the time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, false teachers were already on the scene. In chapter one, Paul urges Timothy to confront them and to keep preaching the gospel, saying, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” At the beginning of chapter four, Paul issues another warning:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared,³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving,⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

- 1 Timothy 4:1-5

A few Sundays ago, on Christmas Eve day, we focused on 1 Timothy 3:16, which may have been an early Christian creed or hymn that celebrates the person and work of Jesus Christ: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”

¹ A rotten apple produces ethylene, which causes a slight increase in the internal temperature, which then leads to a breakdown of chlorophyll and the synthesis of other pigments. “The starch in the fruit is converted to simple sugars and at the same time, pectin, a component of fiber that cements the cell walls together, begins to disintegrate thereby softening the tissue. Once this happens, it starts a chain reaction, stimulating the process in other apples.” Joe Schwarcz, “Can One Rotten Apple Really Spoil the Whole Barrel?” McGill, 3 December 2019 at <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/nutrition-you-asked/can-one-rotten-apple-really-spoil-whole-barrel>.

Having emphasized the “mystery of godliness” at the end of chapter 3, Paul now exposes the mystery of *ungodliness* at the start of chapter 4. It arises from diabolical doctrines that draw people away from Christ and kill their joy.

***False teachers forbid good things
God created for our enjoyment.***

Paul drives home this point by contrasting *bad doctrine* with our *benevolent God*. This contrast will help us to recognize false teaching – despite its deceptive appearance – and renew our gratitude for God.

**Bad Doctrine
(vv. 1-3a)**

Paul begins this section with a prediction that comes straight from the Holy Spirit of God.

The Prediction of the Holy Spirit

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times, some will depart from the faith...” (v. 1). “The faith” refers to the doctrines of the Christian life revealed in Scripture, all of which is a testimony to Christ. The creed Paul quoted in the previous verse affirms Jesus’ deity, his incarnation, his teaching and miracles, his death and resurrection, his ascension to glory, the spread of his gospel and kingdom. These are essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

But some who say they *believe* the gospel will *abandon* the gospel. The Holy Spirit clearly says this will happen, so it should not surprise us. It should sadden us. It should anger us. But it shouldn’t shock us.

As we consider the Holy Spirit’s prediction, two questions come to mind: (1) When did he make this prediction, and (2) when will it come to pass? The answer to the first question is that the Holy Spirit made this prediction at some point after Jesus’ ascension, before Paul wrote this letter. Shortly before his death, had Jesus declared to his disciples,

“Many will turn away from the faith ... and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.”

- Matthew 24:10-11 NIV

Jesus went on to say,

“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

- John 14:25-26

The Holy Spirit revealed these things to Paul the apostles by reminding them of what Jesus himself had predicted. When would this prediction be fulfilled? It already was being fulfilled! The actions of false teachers described in verse 3 appear in the present tense. The “later times” had already arrived! The “later times” refer to the whole Christian era – from Jesus’

ascension until his Second Advent. People ask, “Are we living in the last days?” The answer to that question is always “yes,” and the emphasis of Scripture is to be ready. Instead of trying to figure out when Jesus will return, we’re to focus on being faithful until he returns.

The danger of apostasy is real. “The Spirit expressly says that ... some will depart from the faith.” The Greek word for “depart” is *aphistēmi*, which sometimes refers to a simple geographical departure, i.e., moving from one place to another (e.g., Luke 2:37; 4:13; Acts 5:37; 12:10). You departed from your home or some other location to come to church today. But here in 1 Timothy 4:1, *aphistemi* refers to a *spiritual* departure from the truth of Christ to the teachings of demons.

That’s what the Holy Spirit says: “some will depart from the faith *by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons*” (v. 1, italics added). False teaching is no small matter. It has diabolical origins. It comes from seductive spirits, from deceptive demons.

Demonic doctrine is almost as old as Eden. There in the Garden the Serpent questioned the *clarity* of God’s Word (“Did God actually say...?”). Then the Serpent directly attacked the *authority* of God’s Word (“you will not surely die”). Jesus called Satan “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). In another one of his letters, Paul wrote to believers,

“I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

- 2 Corinthians 11:3

That is Paul’s concern here in 1 Timothy 4. And it is the concern of the other apostles. John warns believers,

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone into the world.”

- 1 John 4:1

Now some of you are probably thinking, “I know, Pastor Matt, I know. But trust me. I know the gospel and am fully committed to it and will not be duped by false doctrine.” But the Scripture says, “Beware! Be careful!” Because while some theology is so bad it can be spotted a mile away, “most false doctrines contain enough truth to resist detection.”² Philip Ryken warns, “If Satan’s favorite strategy is deception, it follows that the church is in real danger of being fooled by false doctrine.”³ I say this not to *scare* you but to *prepare* you. As we continue to work through this text, I hope you’ll see just how deceptive false doctrine can be and how it may have already seeped into your own life.

The Propagators of False Doctrine

Demonic teachings are transmitted “through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” (v. 2). The Greek word for “insincerity” is *hupokrisei*, from which we get the word “hypocrisy.” It’s a term from the Greek theater and literally means “stage-playing,”

² Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, New Testament edited by Daniel M. Doriani, series editors Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 157.

³ Ibid.

i.e., putting on an act. That's why it's so deceptive. False teachers are good actors. They know how to play the part of a Christian in order to gain a following. They're good at making themselves appear more godly than they really are.

They're so deceptive, in fact, that at some point they start believing their own lies. Their "consciences are seared." The Greek word for "seared" is *kautérizó*, from which we get the word "cauterize." It means "to burn with a hot iron." I've gone through this procedure many times due to skin cancer. After doing a biopsy or removing cancerous tissue, the dermatologist will cauterize my wound area to stop the bleeding. Sometimes the nerves become so deadened that the skin becomes insensitive and no longer feels any pain.

The same thing happens to a conscience cauterized by sin. It becomes desensitized to the truth of God. One commentator compares the conscience to an alarm clock. The first time a person commits a particular sin, alarms go off all over his conscience. But the next time he commits the same sin, it's not nearly as alarming. So, he finds the snooze button on his conscience so that he can disarm it more quickly the next time. Eventually he unplugs his conscience altogether and sleeps unto death. "Unless Christians are careful, this self-destructive pattern can be repeated anywhere."⁴ False teachers are a prime example of this pattern. John Stott wrote,

The grim sequence of events in the career of the false teachers has now been revealed. First, they turned a deaf ear to their conscience, until it became cauterized. Next, they felt no scruple in becoming hypocritical liars. Thirdly, they thus exposed themselves to the influence of deceiving spirits. Finally, they led their listeners to abandon the faith. It is a perilous downward path from the deaf ear and the cauterized conscience to the deliberate lie, the deception of demons and the ruination of others. It begins when we tamper with our conscience.⁵

Have you become desensitized to sin by pressing the snooze button on our conscience? That's the first step to spiritual ruin. Repent and reset your alarm with the Lord's help! Paul testified, "I always strive to have a clear conscience toward God and men" (Acts 24:16). Make this your commitment as well.

The Prohibitions of Lying Leaders

Verse 3: "who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods...." *Wait, what?* This is the "doctrine of demons" Paul is denouncing? Singleness and food restrictions? One would think that the diabolical teaching of lying leaders would have consisted of denying the deity of Christ or the incarnation or the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Nope. They simply taught that to be truly spiritual, you had to avoid marriage and meat. To serve God, stay single and restrict your diet.

Like all Satanic deception, these teachings contained a kernel of truth. There are many benefits to being single when it comes to serving the Lord (see 1 Cor. 7:25-35). Likewise, fasting is an effective accompaniment to prayer (see Matt. 6:16-17; 9:14-15). But to see

⁴ Ibid., 159.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*. The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), p. 112.

these things as essential for salvation or for improving one's standing before God is to twist the truth of God, turning it into a lie (2 Peter 3:16).

This kind of thinking was rooted in the dualism of Greek philosophy and the Gnostic idea that there is something sinful about the body. Your "spiritual self" is all that matters and must be cultivated. Physical appetites lead only to sin and are a barrier to true spirituality. Therefore, holiness is attained through abstinence. To improve your standing with God, you must abstain from marriage and all the sexual pleasure that comes with it. And since eating cannot be given up altogether, then at least give up meat.⁶ (No bacon, guys!)

These restrictions may sound silly and non-sensical to us, but to call them "teachings of demons" may seem over-the-top to some. And therein lies the deception. It's more than a restriction. It is a diabolical misrepresentation of God himself – one that Paul is quick to correct even before concluding verse 3.

Benevolent God (vv. 3b-5)

... who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

- 1 Timothy 4:3-5

The prohibitions propagated by lying leaders are immediately met by Paul's rebuttal. God is the one who created marriage. God is the one who created food. God is the one who created male and female. God is the one who gave them desires for food and sex. If God created it, then it's good and is to be enjoyed with gratitude to our Creator.

Like many of you, I started reading through the Bible at the beginning of the new year. Multiple times in the account of creation I came across the phrases, "And God said ... And God said ... And God said ... And so it was ... And so it was ... And so it was.... And God saw that it was good ... And God saw that it was good ... And God saw that it was good ... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."

Do you know what Eden means? "Delight." God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Delight where they could enjoy everything in his creation, with just one exception:

God commanded the Man, "You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don't eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you're dead."

- Genesis 2:16 MSG

⁶ John MacArthur further notes, "The teaching that self-denial on the physical level was essential for true spirituality characterized the Essenes. They were a Jewish sect that appeared in Palestine as early as the second century B.C. They formed the Qumran community near the Dead Sea, where the Dead Scrolls were found. They practiced ascetism, denying marriage and enforcing special dietary regulations. It is possible that their influence was being felt in Ephesus." John MacArthur, Jr., *1 Timothy*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), p. 152.

In his book, *The Whole Christ*, Sinclair Ferguson explains the significance of God's command by offering an expanded paraphrase of his directives to Adam and Eve:

I am giving you everything in this garden. Go and enjoy yourselves. But just before you head off, I have given you all of this because I love you. I want you to grow and develop in your understanding and in your love for me. ...

That's why I have put that tree [of knowledge of good and evil] there. I so want you to be blessed that I am commanding you to eat and enjoy the fruit of all these trees. That's a *command!* But I have another command. What I want you to do is one simple thing: don't eat the fruit of that one tree.

I am not asking you to do that because the tree is ugly – actually it is just as attractive as the other trees. I don't create ugly, ever! You won't be able to look at the fruit and think, *That must taste horrible*. It is a fine-looking tree. So it's simple. Trust me, obey me, and love me because of who I am and because you are enjoying what I have given to you. Trust me, obey me, and you will grow.⁷

Satan's shrewd tactic in tempting Eve was to divert her gaze from the superabundant plenty God had *commanded* her and Adam to enjoy, and to get her to fixate on the one negative command. Ferguson notes, "One small object near the eye can make all larger objects invisible. Now it was the sight of the forbidden tree blocking her vision of a garden abounding in trees. Now she could not see the forest for the tree."⁸

It is this – a failure to see the generosity of God and his wise and loving plans for our lives – that lies at the root of legalism and drives it. ...

When this distortion of God's character is complete, we inevitably mistrust him; we lose sight of his love and grace; we see him essentially as a forbidding God.⁹

A *miserly* God. A *restrictive* God. A *stingy* God. Satan's messengers continue to portray God this way – by twisting God's truth into a lie.

***False teachers forbid good things
God created for our enjoyment.***

The antidote to the "teachings of demons" is not an "anything goes" kind of Christianity. Paul does not say, "everything is good," but that "everything created by God is good." Creation was followed by the fall, which brought evil into the world and spoiled much of God's good creation. To cite just one example from John Stott, professing Christians that practice homosexuality say, "I'm gay because God made me that way, so I intend to enjoy my homosexuality." But, no, what God created was male and female with heterosexual marriage as the intended consequence (see Gen. 1:27; 2:24; Matt. 19:4ff.).¹⁰ "Let marriage be honored by all and the bed kept undefiled, because God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers" (Heb. 13:4).

⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance – Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), pp. 81-82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰ Stott, 114.

We must calibrate our consciences with the word of God. Everything created by God is good and is intended for our enjoyment. Therefore, the appropriate response is to give thanks. Gratitude is so important that it is mentioned twice in three verses.¹¹ Believers in Christ should be the most grateful people of all, for we not only enjoy the gifts, but we also know, love, and enjoy the Giver. Christians are described in verse 3 as “those who know and believe the truth.” As we enjoy our food, we celebrate Jesus as the Bread of Life, the Fount of every blessing, who satisfies our spiritual hunger and quenches our spiritual thirst. We enjoy marriage, knowing it portrays the ultimate, unbreakable union of Christ and his Bride, the church, a love that will last forever.

We know how good and benevolent and kind and gracious God is, because he did not withhold his only Son from us. “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). These things are made holy by the word of God – spoken from creation – and by prayer as we give thanks to God before our meals and countless other times throughout the day as we enjoy the innumerable blessings of God, the greatest gift being God himself.

Concluding Applications

As we prepare to participate in the Lord’s Supper, we should examine ourselves in light of God’s generosity, which has been revealed to us through his preached word today. we have been reminded through God’s revealed word today. preached today.

One way to test if God’s gifts are being used properly is to ask yourself at any given moment: “Can I thank God for what I’m doing right now without feeling ashamed?”¹²

Furthermore, true gratitude always leads to generosity. Christians who keep their food to themselves – or other blessings and benefits God has given to them – without sharing them with others are not receiving God’s gifts with thanksgiving.¹³ That’s what made the self-centered actions of the Corinthians so especially egregious as they “celebrated” the Lord’s Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-32).

Communion Hymn:

Behold the Lamb Who Bears Our Sins Away

Behold the Lamb who bears our sins away,
 Slain for us: and we remember:
 The promise made that all who come in faith
 Find forgiveness at the cross.
 So we share in this Bread of life,
 And we drink of His sacrifice,
 As a sign of our bonds of peace
 Around the table of the King.

¹¹ Ryken, 163.

¹² Ibid., 164.

¹³ Ibid.

The body of our Saviour, Jesus Christ,
 Torn for you: eat and remember
 The wounds that heal, the death that brings us life,
 Paid the price to make us one.

*So we share in this Bread of Life,
 And we drink of His sacrifice
 As a sign of our bonds of love
 Around the table of the King.*

The blood that cleanses every stain of sin,
 Shed for you: drink and remember
 He drained death's cup that all may enter in
 To receive the life of God.

*So we share in this Bread of Life,
 And we drink of His sacrifice,
 As a sign of our bonds of grace
 Around the table of the King.*

And so with thankfulness and faith
 We rise to respond: and to remember
 Our call to follow in the steps of Christ
 As His body here on earth.

*As we share in His suffering,
 We proclaim: Christ will come again!
 And we'll join in the feast of heaven
 Around the table of the King.¹⁴*

Benediction

“As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, overflowing with thankfulness.”

- Colossians 2:6-7

¹⁴ Stuart Townend, Keith & Kristyn Getty © 2007 Thankyou Music (CapitolCMGPublishing.com excl. UK & Europe, adm. by Integrity Music, part of the David C Cook family, songs@integritymusic.com).