

1 Timothy 4:1-5

If you have a Bible with you, let me invite you to turn to Paul's First Letter to Timothy, Chapter 4, beginning at verse 1. Over the past few months we have been looking carefully at this letter and hopefully have been helped by it since Paul's whole purpose in writing it was *to promote the good order and functioning of the church - which we are.*

In pursuit of that goal, Paul has touched on a number of different things, starting out by making some initial comments about false teachers and false teaching, and then addressing the Christian community on how they ought to act and relate to one another when they are together, and, following that, Paul provided them with some instructions on recognizing and setting apart appropriate people for positions of leadership.

Last week we closed out the first half of the letter by examining Paul's purpose statement which included a brief description of what the church IS - the household of God and the pillar and foundation of the truth - as well as a reminder that at the core of all that the church is and does lies the Gospel - the good news concerning Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

In chapter 4, Paul starts out by returning to a previous theme - false teaching and false teachers - and after briefly talking about that will address Timothy - in order to encourage him to remain a good leader and to stay the course which Paul set for him. And so, we will be looking at Chapter 4 in two parts - I think. This week we will focus on verses 1-5 and then next week hopefully the remainder of the chapter. With that as an introduction, let's pray before we dig in.

Father God, please attend now this reading of your Word so that it accomplishes all of your good purposes in both the one who speaks and in those who listen so that we are built up by your truth in order that, through that building up we become the church you are making us to be - for your honor and glory we ask it, in Jesus' name.

(Read 1 Timothy 4:1-5)

Immediately after talking about the church as the "pillar and foundation of the truth" Paul says here that, those things notwithstanding, there will still be some, perhaps many, who will *depart* and walk away from the truth and instead will embrace deceitful and diabolical doctrines. Now in looking at these things, there are a couple of informational details in the passage to highlight on the front end,

For example, Paul starts out this section with the phrase, "Now the Spirit expressly says" - and this could be referring to several things. It could be referring to something that Paul has come across in the OT Scriptures - which he saw as the product of the Spirit's work. It could be referring to something which Jesus said during his earthly ministry - which Paul would also equate with the Spirit's speech, or it could be referring to the Spirit's active work at that very moment, inspiring Paul as one of the writers of NT scripture.

Notice also the phrase "in later times". We would be quite justified in concluding that Paul is here referring to some future set of circumstances that would fall upon the church except for the fact that after talking about certain things happening "in later times", Paul talks in verse 3

about people who ARE doing the very things the Spirit was warning about, even as he was writing the letter. And so, while Paul uses the language here of "later times" he shows by his speech that he believes that those "later times" have already begun - which is similar to the way he speaks about these sorts of things in other places. To Paul's way of thinking, the coming of Christ marked the inauguration of "the final days" - the "latter days" of which the prophets had spoken and in which the church currently found itself.

Then, after saying these things Paul gets to the issue that lies at the heart of these verses - the fact that some were departing from the faith. That is, people were abandoning the truths that Paul and Timothy had taught and were starting to believe and act upon *other* teachings which were opposed to those truths. And it is instructive here to see some of the dynamics of how this departure from the faith was taking place. Several things should be highlighted.

For starters, notice that the ultimate source of the false teaching and the leading astray that was going on was *demonic*. Paul refers to the "teachings of demons" here and has in view the very real, albeit unseen, supernatural activity of demons in *this* world. For Paul the existence and activity of the demonic was as real as the existence and activity of Jesus. And he was not blind to this reality or to the very strong influence that evil had and could *have* in this world. And so, wherever there was false teaching, Paul looked behind such things, and behind the ones teaching them, to their ultimate source. Every teaching that opposes the truth of God is, ultimately, a demonic, diabolical teaching that wants to usurp the authority of God - whether those promoting it know it or not.

And of course, this sort of thing is not something that was only going on in Paul's day. The teachings of demons and the activities of "deceitful spirits" is as much a part of our world as it was that of the early church. Indeed, as Stott incisively asks, why do you think it is the case, still, that all around us are people who, in many respects, are quite intelligent people, having all sorts of advanced degrees, and yet who will persist in believing the silliest, most non-sensical teachings of various cults, or forms of humanistic philosophy, or versions of eastern mysticism? Why do otherwise intelligent people believe in crazy things..... like Scientology?

Or, let me give you another example. I read a little while back about some Cancer treatment center that encouraged its people to go out and hug trees so that they might "benefit from the positive energy exuded by the life-force of the ancient spirits within the trees". Now you may laugh, but the article I read was totally serious. And people were buying this nonsense. Why is it that perfectly rational people will still be deluded by such patently ludicrous ideas? Well, part of the reason can be found in the on-going activity of "deceitful spirits", deluding the minds of unbelievers in various ways. It was a problem in Paul's day, and it is a problem in ours as well. The evidence is all around us.

Notice also not only the source of the false teaching that was going on in Paul's day, but also the vehicle of such teaching - It was being conveyed and promoted through the activity of teachers whom Paul refers to as "insincere liars" and "hypocrites". They are "liars" because what they taught was opposed to the truth. Further, Paul calls them hypocritical and insincere because, most likely, they did not themselves observe all the rules and regulations that they imposed upon the consciences of others.

Additionally, Paul describes these false teachers as those whose "consciences have been seared as with a hot iron". This could be understood in two possible ways. On the one hand, Paul might simply mean that their consciences are branded - like the sort of branding that happens on a cattle ranch, indicating a mark of ownership. In this case, the false teachers would have consciences that showed by the way they operated that they "belonged" to Satan.

On the other hand, Paul could be describing here the end result of a process by which the moral sensibilities of these false teachers had, over time, been burned or "cauterized" and thus rendered insensitive to stimuli which previously might have produced some sort of healthy response.

It's sort of like what happens when, for example, you take a sip of something that is too hot and it burns your tongue such that, for the next little while at least, you are unable to taste anything very well. In a similar fashion, a "seared" conscience has been over-exposed to sin or to some particular sin such that it becomes increasingly desensitized to it. Indeed, it seems that this is possibly the sort of process that went on with Hymenaeus and Alexander - whom Paul mentions in chapter 1, verse 20. And, given that, it seems likely that this is the sense in which Paul is talking about the false teachers' seared consciences in chapter 4.

This then points to a third dynamic that lay behind the false teaching that Paul was warning about - a moral dynamic - i.e., the connection that exists between the pursuit of godliness (or the lack thereof) and the effect of such things on the human conscience and, thus, on the teaching of truth - which is inherently a moral activity. If the heart is not persistently guarded, and sin is continually indulged, the eventual effect of such things is to dull the conscience and thus render the person more liable to indulge in further sin and, as well, render him/her more open to the on-going work of deceitful spirits - leading the person away into further error.

This is why, as we will examine more closely next week, Paul tells Timothy, in verse 16 to guard both his doctrine AND his life. You can be doctrinally careful all you want, but if it is not accompanied by a carefulness of life that is devoted to the pursuit of godliness, then eventually even your devotion to truth will be undermined.

Well, after seeing Paul's warning about people being led astray, and looking at some of the dynamics behind such realities, and why they did and CAN and still DO take place, we should take a moment to think about the particular things that were being taught by the false teachers in Paul's day.

The two particular aspects of false teaching that Paul highlights here - which surely are only a sampling of what was being taught - are: 1) forbidding marriage and 2) *requiring abstinence from certain foods*. Now where did the false teachers get these sorts of ideas from? Well, the first thing to say about them is, as we have already seen, that they are *demonic* in origin. To forbid marriage or to require abstinence from certain foods was, ultimately, a "teaching of demons" - it was true in Paul's day, and it is true in our own.

However, beyond thinking about the *ultimate* origin of such teachings, one may still wonder what the *proximate* or more immediate source of such ideas is. Most likely these ideas had a combined Jewish and Greek background. On the Greek side there was the philosophical notion quite popular in that day which believed that *matter* and things of the *physical world* were evil and something to be liberated from or escaped from or

otherwise *subdued*. For those who held to this view - or some version of it - the goal was to seek a lifestyle that kept the flesh in check and which minimized its influences on the mind - which was what really mattered, according to that view.

And so, pursuing this sort of philosophy meant reducing your life, as much as possible, to being a life of *contemplation*. It is not hard to see how this sort of framework would put something like marriage - and in particular SEX - in a bad light, as something to be avoided. Apparently some of those teaching in the church had drunk deeply of this philosophy and had embraced these ideas, in spite of clear teaching to the contrary in the Scriptures, and in the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles.

Where the Jewish influence was being felt was in the prohibition against eating certain foods. More than likely these prohibitions against eating certain foods were carryovers from OT eating restrictions. This resulted in some within the church not feeling right about eating certain kinds of meat. Now, if God had not revealed otherwise about these things, then these people might have had a point. However, places like Mark 7:18-19 and Acts 10:14-15 show that what was once restricted no longer is. And yet there were some who, apparently, rejected such things and were still making an issue about eating or not eating certain foods, especially certain meats.

And so, while the ultimate source of false teaching that was going on was demonic, the proximate source of such things was elements of Greek and Jewish thinking that were infiltrating the life and thought of certain teachers within the church.

Now, as one commentator suggests, one thing we can learn from the examples highlighted by Paul here are that *celibacy* and *vegetarianism* are not part of God's general will for his people and so for a church to demand such things from any of its people is to engage in error and promote "teachings of demons". To be sure, individuals might legitimately *choose* to be celibate, or to avoid eating meat - that's all fine and good. But to go beyond that to making such things a requirement or to suggest that they lead to some sort of higher spirituality is to cross the line.

But beyond such specifics there is more to be said here. And it comes through seeing why it is that these sorts of teachings are wrong. And, in thinking about this, we are guided by what Paul says in verses 3-5 (read these again). Now, in looking at these verses, we notice several things which help us to see where the false teachers were getting it wrong in the things they were saying, and which will help us from repeating these - or similar - errors.

Firstly, we see in Paul's words that he is driven by a strong *doctrine of creation*. That is, Paul looks at things like marriage and food and sees that these are things which God Himself has created and FURTHER sees in that fact an inherent *goodness* attached to them. If God has created something *for us* then it ought to be received *by us as* the good gift that it is.

Now, of course, crucial to this sort of thinking is distinguishing between that which is legitimately a creation of God and that which is an aberration or misuse of such. As one commentator puts it,

"Notice carefully. ... what Paul writes. It is not that 'everything is good', but that 'everything created by God is good'. This is an indispensable qualification, since not everything that exists has come unsullied from the Creator's hand. For the creation was followed by the fall, which introduced evil into the world and spoiled much of God's good creation. Indeed the creation has been 'subjected to frustration' and is now 'groaning' in pain. We therefore need discernment to know what in our human

experience is attributable to the creation, and what to the fall.... 11

We certainly need to hear the warning inherent in those words. Indeed, the whole current debate on homosexuality going on in the Episcopal church centers on this very issue: the need to discern that which is a creation gift and that which is a perversion of it. At the same time, we need a more fully developed doctrine of creation ourselves and a greater freedom to recognize the goodness of God's creation, and it's many gifts. Amidst our legitimate concerns to be "in the world but not of it" and to not be taken in by the thinking of this world we can sometimes become)N as ascetic and life-denying as the false teachers in Paul's day - seeing the creation only in terms of the many traps that are to be avoided, rather than in terms of the many great and wonderful things that still exist to be enjoyed and appreciated and which ought to turn our hearts, again and again back to God with thanksgiving.

While Christians tend to do these things in very *limited* ways, the short-sighted approach we sometimes take to these matters is illustrated well by something written by G.K Chesterton, a number of years ago when he wrote,

*You say grace before meals. All right.
But I say grace before the play and the opera,
And grace before the concert and the pantomime,
And grace before I open a book,
And grace before sketching, painting,
Swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing;
And grace before I dip the pen in the ink...*

What Chesterton was saying is that being thankful for meals - however you choose to express that - is for many Christians one of the few ways and times in a normal day where they stop to do so. But in reality, one would be justified to stop and say a prayer of thanks before every single breath, before you brush your teeth, or start your car, or play with your children, or make love to your wife or husband, etc.

In short, we ought to be continual students in God's School of Thankfulness, fighting the life-denying and stultifying tendencies of false teachers - like those in Paul's day - and instead learning to embrace a lifeview that rightly distinguishes God's good gifts of creation - and celebrates them daily.

And so we see in Paul's words a strong doctrine of creation. But we see more than that here. We also see that accompanying that doctrine of creation is a strong *doctrine of revelation*. That is, while Paul takes his cue for what is and is not acceptable from God's creation, it is not *only* that fact which enters into his consideration. Paul sees that there is a strong interplay between *what God has created* and *what He has said about what He has created*.

We see this most clearly in thinking about the prohibition against eating certain kinds of food which, as we have seen, was almost surely the work of former Jews who had come into the church carrying their OT eating restrictions with them. While Paul says here that "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected" - clearly it is not *only* this bare principle that came into play, in his mind, and in this matter of food restrictions. After all - the foods that were restricted in the OT were also "created by God" - and yet they were off limits. Why?

Because in spite of their being part of God's good creation there was some additional specific revelation that God had given regarding these certain items.

And so when Paul evokes this "creation principle" he is not appealing to something new but something that has been in place all along for God's people. The only difference is that where in the OT there was a qualification given by means of special revelation which *restricted* their access to certain elements of God's creation, in the NT this qualification was *removed* by means of the same sort of special revelation from God.

Which is why we see Paul talking here about foods created by God being received with thanksgiving *by those who believe and know the truth* (as the ESV) says. And again, in vs 4-5 we see that everything created by God is good and is not to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving - and then you get the further qualifying comment, again from the ESV, that "it is made holy by the *word of God* and prayer". Paul shows here that he intends the application of this creation principle to be carried out within the context of God's revealed truth - and not in isolation from it.

In short, then, if the church today is to avoid the sorts of problems that Paul and Timothy faced and/or if the church is going to battle already entrenched aspects of false-teaching, then it will require us to take an approach similar to Paul's - maintaining a strong doctrine of creation which is tempered by a knowledge of and embrace of God's revealed truth. And that means we will be as world embracing and creation affirming as God's Word allows us to be. It means we will have to work hard to avoid binding our own consciences - and the consciences of others - on matters which actually go beyond the pale of Scripture.

Now, I don't know about you, but I spent my early Christian years growing up under a pretty heavy sort of extreme fundamentalist legalism which told me lots of things were forbidden which actually weren't and which not only managed to suck the life out of me but also made the Christianity I was promoting pretty unattractive.

Now, don't get me wrong - I am a fundamentalist - in the theological sense of that word - holding to the fundamentals of the faith. And I understand that there are lots of things about what we believe which are unattractive to unbelievers and *will always be that way* - until God opens their eyes to see. But that being said, the reality is that when Christians begin adding to what God has said and modifying what He has said, prohibiting and forbidding all sorts of things with no real biblical grounds for doing so - when that happens they are merely cooperating with the work of deceitful spirits and - whether they know it or not - have started heading down a path which will only take them further and further away from the faith. And, on top of all that, they will have succeeded in creating *additional* and *un-necessary* stumbling blocks for those outside the church.

And that's a tragedy. And it's one that we can avoid. How? By keeping in mind Paul's creation principle and by viewing all things within the context of God's revealed word. "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."