

August 25, 2024

WALKING IN THESE LAST DAYS UNDER ENEMY ATTACK

1 Timothy 4:1-5

(9 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)

In 1939, C. S. Lewis preached a sermon titled, “Learning in Wartime.” He was attempting to answer the question as to whether it was reasonable to do something like pursue education or scholarly work while your country is in the midst of war. His answer, in short, was yes. But I don’t bring up this sermon to focus on why learning at all times is a good pursuit. I bring it up because of a warning that Lewis gave in the midst of his sermon. He was speaking of the one who gives himself to scholarship, especially scholarship in an area like theology, and he wrote, “The intellectual life is not the only road to God, nor the safest, but we find it to be a road, and it may be the appointed road for us. Of course, it will be so only so long as we keep the impulse pure. . . that is the great difficulty. . . . [W]e may come to love knowledge—our knowing—more than the thing known: to delight not in the exercise of our talents but in the fact that they are ours, or even in the reputation they bring us. Every success in the scholar’s life increases this danger. If it becomes irresistible, he must give up his scholarly work. The time for plucking out the right eye has arrived.”¹

What strikes me about that quote is just how crafty our enemy is. There are times when he seeks one’s downfall through channels we are all aware of, like appealing to his unbridled lust, or to a man’s bitterness and anger, or his feeling that he deserves more praise and recognition. We’ve all seen these desires lead to moral failings. But as Lewis notes, the devil may even take our good pursuits (such as learning theology) and even corrupt that, tempting us to love knowledge and our reputation for being knowledgeable more than you we the Lord himself. And we know that this is the tip of the iceberg in all the ways that he seeks to lead people astray, away from following the Lord.

In 1 Timothy 4:1-5, Paul considers yet another way that the enemy leads people astray. But Paul doesn’t bring it up because he’s entertaining hypothetical way the enemy might attack us. He’s speaking to the very thing that is happening at the church in Ephesus. Now, with the new semester starting, some of you are here for the first time or the first time in months, so I’ll help orient you a bit to this letter. When Paul went to Macedonia in his work as an apostle, he urged Timothy to remain at Ephesus (1:3), but he didn’t urge him to stay there because it was a nice, healthy church where he thought he could prosper spiritually. He told Timothy to stay there because a number of false teachers had arisen in the church, perhaps even claiming positions of leadership and teaching roles in the church (1:7), and they were leading people astray. They’d turned away from the gospel and sound doctrine as taught in the Scripture, and they posed a great threat to the church.

¹ See: <https://ontheruinofbritain.wordpress.com/2019/03/22/excerpts-from-cs-lewiss-sermon-learning-in-war-time/>. Accessed on August 19, 2024.

So Paul told Timothy to stay there and get things right in that church, which is not the most appealing of tasks and could no doubt feel overwhelming to a young Timothy. And Paul knew this wasn't an easy task. He'd actually hoped to come alongside Timothy in person and help him, but fearing he might be delayed, he wrote him this letter to provide instructions on all that needed to be done in that church (3:14-15) to ensure they had qualified elders and deacons (3:1-13) and were behaving properly when they gathered for worship (2:1-15).

As we come to chapter 4, then, Paul hasn't really mentioned the specifics of what these false teachers are saying or doing since chapter 1, and so he returns his focus to them. And in verse 1-5, Paul not only covers why these false teachers are there, why people are following them, and what they are saying, but he also addresses how a portion of their false teaching should be refuted. Therefore, as we walk through these verses this morning, I think we'll see that everything Paul unfolds to Timothy in his focus on these false teachers, what they're doing, and the results of their sinful behavior is helpful to us as we seek to proclaim and guard the truth of Scripture in our own setting. What then does Paul tell Timothy that we need to hear ourselves? I want to note four things. First, we should not be surprised when professing believers walk away from following Jesus.

We should not be surprised when professing believers walk away from following Jesus

You can imagine how it can rock a church to watch people who have professed to be believers, have been baptized, and may even have done great acts of ministry, walk away from following Jesus. Actually, we don't have to imagine, do we? We've seen it and lived it. We all know people, who seemed to be godly examples, that began believing lies and walked away from the Lord. Well, that was happening in Ephesus as well. And you can imagine how that shakes a congregation, perhaps leading them to ask, "What's wrong with us? Why in the world would this happen? Is the gospel Paul taught not really true or not powerful enough preserve people to the end?" And Paul answers by saying, "Actually, we shouldn't be surprised when this happens." Paul writes in verse 1, "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."

Now, this raises a few issues questions we might have. First, what does Paul mean by "later times" as he says that "*in later times* some will depart from the faith"? Though this may seem surprising to us, what he means by that is right now. In fact, he means the entire time between Christ's first coming (in the incarnation) and his second coming (at the resurrection). We can point to many texts to show this, but perhaps the easiest one is in Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, as the Spirit was poured out and men began speaking in languages everyone could understand, and Peter stood up and said that this was a fulfillment of what Joel had prophesied as he said, "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). Peter was saying, "This pouring out of the Spirit is a sign that we're in the last days." They had begun, and we're still in them and will be until Christ returns.

Second, what does Peter mean by “the Spirit expressly says”? Well, he’s referring to one of two things—maybe both. He could be referring to the words of Jesus specifically. The later books of the NT will identify Jesus’ teaching as that which comes to us through the Spirit. And we know that Jesus taught that people would depart from the faith in the last days because he said in Matthew 24:10 and 12, “Many will fall away . . . and . . . the love of many will grow cold.” Or, Paul could be referencing the very revelation the Spirit had given him, as Paul explicitly told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” Or, he could be referring to both.

Therefore, what Paul is saying in verse 1 is that Scripture makes clear that in these days in which we live, “some [professing believers] will depart from the faith.” They will devote themselves to “deceitful spirits and the teaching of demons” and walk away from following Jesus.

Now, talk of deceitful spirits and the teaching of demons may conjure up in your mind some crazy scene like people gathering around and making animal sacrifices to Satan in the woods. And, to be clear, you shouldn’t do that. But I don’t think that’s the main thing Paul has in mind when he mentions “deceitful spirits and the teaching of demons.” The reality is every teaching that leads one away from Jesus and brings someone to deny the teaching of God’s Word is demonic in nature. The reason that our culture pushes so hard to destroy the lives of children is because the devil holds sway over the lives of unbelievers (Eph 2:1-3) and moves them to do detestable things and encourage others to do them well. This is why we need to be reminded when we see our neighbors arguing for irrational and destructive practices like a mother overseeing the execution of the child in her womb or the sterilization of her children through puberty blockers that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against . . . spiritual forces of evil” (Eph 6:12).

We are at war against the devil and his demonic hordes, who employs every weapon he has against us, and so we should not be surprised when some professing believers buy into Satan’s lies and turn away from following Jesus. In fact, the Bible makes explicitly clear that this will happen. So, that’s where this text starts. Don’t be shocked when we see this take place. But as Paul continues he makes something else clear about how Satan works, namely, he notes that the devil will utilize hardened people to lead others astray.

The devil will utilize hardened people to lead others astray

As Paul continues, he notes that some will depart from the faith by following the teachings of demons, adding, “Through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” (v. 2). What is Paul talking about here? It may seem a bit alarming and confusing, but I think he’s actually saying something quite simple.

Paul is simply noting that one of the avenues the devil will use to lead people to depart from the faith is men whose hearts and consciences are hardened to speak lies so that others will follow them. In other words, Paul is making the point that Satan will attack by using men who have hardened their hearts to the Lord and will do the devil’s bidding.

The reason I say that men will speak lies is because Paul calls them “liars.” But Paul speaks of the “insincerity of liars.” What does he mean by that? Well, I think he’s saying that the devil will use men speaking lies to lead many astray in our day, and the very lies the men are speaking, they themselves will know aren’t true. That’s why he mentions their insincerity. They themselves will know in their hearts that what they’re saying isn’t true.

So, what this means is that when someone tells you that Romans 1 doesn’t condemn practicing a homosexual lifestyle or that it’s an extreme position to say that there must not be a hint of sexual immorality in someone’s life, that person knows what they’re saying is a lie. They know they’re misrepresenting the Bible. They know they’re lying.

Then why would they say that? Well, Paul says that their “consciences are seared.” Here’s how this works. As someone gives themselves over to sin, it has a hardening impact on your heart. You know this to be true, don’t you? You might sin the first time and your heart is racing and everything in you is screaming, “This is wrong. Don’t do it.” But if you ignore it, the next time your heart doesn’t race as much, and that voice isn’t as loud. And eventually, your heart’s not racing at all, and you feel nothing. That’s the hardening effect sin has on your heart and conscience. That’s what Paul means by a seared conscience.

But it doesn’t mean you don’t know what you’re doing is wrong. You know it is. In fact, not only do you know it is sinful, but you know (as Paul says in Romans 1:32) “that those who practice such things deserve to die.” That means, after a day of sinning, you go to bed with your heart telling you, “This is sin, and because it’s sin, you deserve to die.”

And in that moment, you have a choice. You can confess your sin to the Lord, repent of it, look to the gospel of Christ as your only hope, and find forgiveness for your sins and reconciliation with God. Or, you can try to ignore it and silence it. But if you go that second route, it creates a problem.

You see, you can’t get away from the reality of judgment. You can’t get away from knowing you’re condemned. Periodically, even if you don’t want it to, your heart will remind you. And refusing to turn to Christ, you’re like a drowning man in the ocean, refusing to take the life preserver. And what does a drowning man do to those around him? He reaches out to drown them as well. He’ll thrust them under water in hopes of thrusting himself up out of the water. And a condemned man who won’t turn to Christ will do the same thing. He’ll reach out and pull down those around him as well in hopes of feeling better about himself—after all, if everyone else is doing it, then maybe I’m not as bad, right? Paul says about the condemned individual who knows that he deserves to die because of his sinful practices, that he “not only [does those things worthy of death], but give[s] approval to those who practice them” (Rom 1:32). That is, he pulls others toward his sin as well. And that’s why men with seared consciences and hardened hearts will lead others astray by teaching lies that they themselves know—in the depths of their hearts—aren’t true. And Paul is telling us here that the devil will utilize such people to lead others away from the faith.

But what lies will they utilize to lead people astray? As we continue on, we can see that one path is creating extra-biblical commands that they say must be obeyed.

At times they will point us to extra-biblical commands as the basis for our godliness

I don't want to suggest this is the only thing people will do in order to lead people astray, but it is definitely what was happening in Ephesus. Specifically the lies they were spreading in Ephesus seemed to be that if you want to be godly and holy before God, you should avoid eating certain foods and remain unmarried. Paul mentions what they were doing as he describes them in verse 3 as those "who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."

I don't know exactly how they got here, though you can see similar false teaching addressed in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, but it seems that these false teachers were adding to the gospel in saying that if someone really wanted to be godly, it was required of them to abstain from marriage and from eating certain kinds of food.

And I know that I've utilized the word "godly" a few times in describing what they were teaching, and that's intentional. One of the interesting things about this letter is how often Paul refers to godliness. You'll remember in 3:16, Paul described the gospel by writing, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness." That's an odd way to speak of the gospel. And then, you'll see the rest of letter that Paul continues to reference godliness. He mentions it in 4:7-8, 5:4, 6:3, and 6:5-6. What makes it more interesting is that Paul doesn't use this word frequently in his other letters. So I think he's continually bringing it up here because the false teachers are saying something like, "If you want to be godly (or obtain real godliness), then you have to abstain from marriage and certain foods."

But I want to note that neither one of those things is commanded in the Bible. That's why I label them extra-biblical (meaning *outside* the Bible). Jesus declared all foods clean in Scripture (Mark 7:19), and the Bible commends marriage to everyone who hasn't been given an explicit gift of singleness (1 Cor 7:8-9). These false teachers are trying to put the burden of extra-biblical commands on those in Ephesus. But we might think, "Who in the world would take the bait? I mean, obeying God's commands is challenging. Who would be convinced we need to do more, extra-biblical things to be godly?"

Well, the answer is more than you think. Have you ever looked at the monastic order or priesthood in the Roman Catholic church? In each case, extra-biblical commands are suggested if one wants to be really godly. Simeon the Stylite was a man who lived in the third and fourth century who wanted to be really godly, so he just obeyed what Scripture commanded. No, I'm kidding, that would make him a terrible example of this point. In order to try to be really godly, he actually went outside the city and lived on top of a pillar that was about 12-15 feet in the air, with people raising food up to him. Over time, he increased the height of the pillar until it ended

up about 60 feet high. He bought into the teaching that to be truly godly one had to practice extreme commands that that Bible doesn't put on us.

That's what was happening in Ephesus. These false teachers were saying that the gospel is insufficient for godliness, and if you want to be godly, you have to not eat certain foods and remain single. They were most likely doing something like the Galatians and adding these commands to the gospel, suggesting that faith in the finished work of Christ alone was insufficient for one to stand in holiness before God. I think that's why Paul makes such a big deal of this. These men were not only laying extra-biblical commands on those at the church in Ephesus but were turning their attention away from the gospel. Again, note the many ways Satan will tempt us to turn away from the gospel of Christ. Sometimes he'll do it not only by directing us against obeying Christ commands but will tempt us to employ extra-biblical commands that will distract us from what is truly necessary for our holiness.

So, if Satan is so crafty, what do we do? Paul's answer is that we hold to the Word of God and walk in faith and thankfulness.

We must hold to the Word of God and walk in faith and thankfulness

Paul says this three times in these final few verses. He writes that men are forbidding that which "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" (vv. 3-5).

Paul's response is that by rejecting certain foods and marriage, these false teachers are rejecting what God created and called "good." God did that in Genesis 1-2. When it comes to food, for example, we're simply to give thanks and eat in faith.

When Paul says at the end of verse 5, "It is made holy by the word of God and prayer," that could be confusing. You might think that Paul is saying, "If you'll speak the word of God over your food, though it's unclean, it'll be made clean." But he's not saying that. He's saying that food is made holy because God said it is good in his Word. In other words, read the Bible, and you'll see that God's Word declares all food clean. Eat Zebra, horse, or cat if you want. The Bible says it's fine.

Now, some of the believing Jews had a conscience issue with eating certain foods that God had outlawed under the old covenant, and so Paul will tell them elsewhere that they shouldn't violate their conscience. They shouldn't do what their heart tells them is sinful. I think that's what Paul is getting at when he speaks of eating with thanksgiving and praying. He's saying, "If you can do it in faith, then give thanks to God in prayer and eat."

So, if Paul's response is to say, "The Bible tells you to eat whatever food you can eat with a clear conscience, and that's why you shouldn't be taken in by this false teaching," then isn't the implication for us that we must know our Bibles? The key way not to be taken in by the lies of the devil that will lead people astray is to know God's Word and walk in faith and thanksgiving.

And so, let's stand strong against the devil's attacks by holding on to the gospel and its sufficiency, making sure we know the Bible, and living our lives by faith in Christ and with thanksgiving for all his gifts. Let's express our faith in him now and give thanks for his redeeming work for us as we come to the table. Amen.