

Received With Thanks - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **1 Timothy 4:1-5** (#534)

Introduction: Sometimes, the contrast between two things can be hard to discern. When I was growing up, my first vehicle was an old, used GMC Jimmy. Some of you might be able to picture that beast of an SUV. But others of you aren't sure what it is. However, if I said that it is the GMC version of the Chevy Blazer, I suspect I'd catch a lot more of you. In that case, we have two vehicles that are – other than the logo on the grill and some trim options – otherwise the same.

But there are more important things in life that have huge differences between them, even though our world acts as if they are indistinguishable. The way that religion is spoken about in the public square and reported on in the media, you might get the impression that it's all the same, as if there are no real differences between Muslims, Jews, and Christians other than the fact that we are all “religious.” The confusion only grows when some folks see little or no difference between Lutherans, Presbyterians, and groups labeled “evangelical.” In each case, there is a real difference, yet our world acts as if all are the same, GMC vs. Chevy.

This morning, Paul aims to show us another very real difference: the difference between false teachers and where their teachings lead versus what the one true God has said and the life He calls believers to. My Bible is open to **1 Timothy 4** and I'd invite you to join me there; let's see this difference and why it matters...

4:1-3a We begin with the false teachers – the same group that Paul hinted at already back in **chapter 1**. What does their spiritual life look like? What does it lead to? Paul answers by showing a pathway: it begins by devoting oneself to the teachings of what is evil, proceeds by becoming numb to anything true, and results

in departing from the true faith. That's the big picture: false doctrine leads to false teaching which leads to a faith that saves nobody. Now, let's see the details...

When Paul writes of "the later times," he isn't speaking of the "end times," as if nobody really needs to worry about what he's saying here until the events of Revelation are upon us in full force. No, the New Testament pictures the entire time period from Christ's ascension until His return as the "later times" (see **Acts 2:16**). I've mentioned several times in this series that I see very close parallels between the situation of the early church and our own here in 2021 – that's not an accident. While we are separated geographically and technologically, we ultimately occupy the same era as we await Christ's coming. It should be no surprise then that we face many of the same problems. And the problem that Paul highlights here is that some will "depart from the faith," which is to say, they'll depart from the truth that Paul has been teaching all throughout this letter – not in the sense of losing their salvation (they didn't genuinely have it in the first place), but instead in the sense of taking a different road from the one that leads to Jesus. They end up at a different destination. And it won't save them or anybody else.

So it is here: Paul maps out that road so that we can see the consequences, and it begins with these false teachers – alongside those who follow them, hang on their words, and support them. These become enamored not with the truth of God, not with anything solid from the Scriptures, but instead are willfully deceived by wicked spirits, by the demonic. Let me pause a moment: when you hear that, what do you picture? Perhaps you don't often think of the spiritual battle that is going on all around us, but the Scriptures testify to it – and these words here are an example. Though we should be careful to not credit the servants of satan with more than they are actually doing, the reality is that our sins are motivated and prompted not only

by our own sinful hearts, not only by a world filled with temptation, but also by the evil one. So it is here: these false teachers aren't just mistaken, they haven't simply picked up on a weird fascination, no – what they are teaching is outright evil.

Like all evil – and like all sin – it will grow if left unchecked. That is what we see in **verse 2**: deception is a form of lying. Just as these teachers are deceived, by believing such lies they begin to promote the deception themselves: they aren't victims, but perpetrators. Have you ever wondered how some people are able to sleep at night? How the lying person in the TV interview or the person who writes the completely inaccurate report at work can live with themselves afterward? The answer is here: when you lie enough, your conscience becomes seared, it stops sounding the alarm, a bit like a smoke detector that is always silenced or – worse yet – where the battery is removed because nobody wants to heed the warning anymore. This shouldn't be surprising: Paul spoke of this very situation when he warned 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 your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” What was foretold then has become the reality that we see in this letter.

Where does this leave the Ephesians? In the first half of **verse 3**, it left them wrestling with what these false teachers were promoting: among other things, they were forbidding marriage and prohibiting certain foods.

These might seem like odd issues to our ears, but they were very common among heretical teachers at the time. Some thought that Jesus would be returning soon enough that marriage simply wasn't prudent – why marry if Christ could come back tomorrow? Others, perhaps drawing from pagan beliefs, saw marriage as

something unclean and earthly. To their minds, pure spirituality involved rejecting everything tangible about life. Similarly, we already know about the squabbles over what foods were clean and unclean amongst the Jews. These teachings are part of why scholars think that this set of false teachers had some sort of corrupted Jewish background. It is for these reasons that Paul's response focuses not on what to prohibit or allow, but rather on what to promote: thankfulness to the Lord.

Before we move on to Paul's response, I want to ask you something: are you becoming fascinated with strange and extreme teachings? Is there an area of your life where you've set up your own laws, stricter than the Scriptures? This could happen by believing conspiracy theories, or from following certain Bible teachers who don't teach the whole counsel of God. These and many other deviations from the truth are promoted in best-selling books about secret codes hidden in the Bible and in far off corners of the internet where only those who "truly believe" are in the know. If that's you, dear friend, you are in danger! Cry out to the Lord to rescue you! And then start filling your mind and your time with truth. How can you know what truth is? Especially in a world like ours where it seems that most everything has an agenda or spin to it? You can know by one simple test: are you looking to God's Word? When you hear teachings from others, can what they are saying both be found in God's Word and also not contradict any other part of what God says? Give yourselves to truth, dear friends, for there – and only there – is where eternal life is to be found. Now, let's see how Paul himself says it...

4:3b-5 First, Paul characterizes the teachings of these false teachers, and he does so in a way that is brilliantly simple. When it comes to forbidding marriage and prohibiting certain foods, Paul's response couldn't be more clear: God created

these things, and far from being prohibited, we should be celebrating His grace to us with thanksgiving.

Do you see the difference in the attitude between what is promoted by the false teachers and what is promoted to the faithful believer? False teaching can only give rules and regulations to follow – it never offers joy. While following the Lord isn't easy, it leads to thanksgiving. That's a filter that can help you to discern whether a particular teaching is true or not: "does this lead to more legalism, more of trying to justify myself and make myself look good and holy before others? Or does this lead to giving God thanks for how Jesus provides and cares for me?"

From the specifics, Paul zooms outward to make a bigger point in general: all that God created is good. That's been the truth since **Genesis 1:31** and it is repeated in **Romans 14:20**. Christians do not believe that matter is somehow evil and that only the spiritual is good. God created both body and soul, the spiritual and the material. Take Jesus' cue: He was fully present to teach, to eat, to cry, to go to wedding celebrations. Far from thinking that such things were evil, He completely engaged with life. Yet He also taught that true life was more than these: true life is eternal life, given by Christ in exchange for our sins. Do you trust Him to give you life?

Ultimately, those who follow Jesus are to receive all that God gives with an attitude of thanks. Marriage is good and given by the Lord, not only for the happiness of a man and a woman, and not only for continuing the human race, but also because it teaches us something vital about how Christ loves His church. Food is provided for us not simply for keeping our bodies going, but as Christ prayed in the Lord's Prayer, it is also part of how God demonstrates His daily care for His people. It's a celebration and reminder of the Lord's love. As George Knight sums

it up: the whole point of Paul's argument is that Christians are to have – and should have – an attitude of “thankful acceptance of God's good gifts.”

So, we Christians can make a difference to each other, in our church, and in our communities by having a different attitude than the world around us: an attitude not marked by the legalisms of only buying fair trade coffee, of following all the correct parenting blogs, or of posting the right virtue signaling messages online. Instead, we approach our world ready to show joy in Christ. How will you demonstrate that joy at God's work in your health, your job, your family, this church? Hobbies you enjoy, books you read, music that stirs your affections towards the Lord? Would somebody watching you think that you are a thankful person? If not, what needs to change? Ask Him to produce that change in you starting this very day. If you are already known for joy, ask the Lord to help you train others in how to be thankful, so that they could follow Christ more fully.

Paul's point concludes by how Christians are to respond to these kinds of false teachings: logic and influence are not our primary strategies; instead our tools are the Bible and prayer. We need to hear what the Word of the Lord is. We need to become familiar with truth. And our prayers are to be directed according to that truth: that we would only believe what brings about holiness. So ask the Lord to continue developing your taste for His Word. If you find it hard to read the Scriptures, to understand them, to make it a priority, why not ask the Lord to help? Ask Him to change your heart, your schedule, or anything else that gets in the way. Ask the Lord to make you satisfied with nothing less than the pure truth offered to you through the record of Jesus Christ, the Savior of all who trust in Him. If you are a Christian, He's already done a marvelous work in you, so trust Him to continue doing that work to make you – as us! – holy and joyful in our faith.