

“A Primer on False Doctrine”
1 Timothy 4:1-10
October 4, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

We have mentioned before that at the heart of Paul’s letter to Timothy is a problem of false doctrine in the church in Ephesus. This matter brings us face to face with one of the significant differences between the Bible and our own culture. Our culture’s view of doctrinal truth is similar to the decision people in Alabama make of whether to root for the Auburn or the Alabama football team. It’s just a personal choice that is not anchored in anything absolute. It’s good to make such a personal choice—just don’t go overboard by seeing it as all-important. In our culture’s view of relative truth, there is really no such thing as false doctrine, just my doctrine and your doctrine. Two doctrinal views may be different, but neither ought to be characterized as false.

Contrast this with Bible’s view of false doctrine. Throughout the Bible, but especially in the New Testament, repeated warnings are given about false doctrine. Wrong views about God are a serious problem leading to serious consequences. All the problems in the human race began with false doctrine, when Satan convinced Adam and Eve that God was not good and could not be trusted. Peter warns us, **“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”** (1 Peter 5:8). He devours through deception, because, as Jesus said, he is both a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). Doctrine is important because false views about God lead to destruction. So if parents embraced this biblical view of the importance of doctrine, we would never think of saying that we don’t want to impose our doctrinal beliefs upon our children. Of course we ought to impose our doctrinal beliefs upon our children. It is vastly more important than imposing a right diet upon them that doesn’t consist exclusively of French Fries, Oreo Cookies and soft drinks.

Our passage this morning gives us some instruction about this important topic of false doctrine. We learn here something of the origin, the root and the antidote to doctrinal error.

I. The Cause of Error – v. 1-2

The first two verses list two causes of false doctrine, one demonic and one human. People don’t come to false doctrines all by themselves. There are such things as deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, who are busily working to further the cause initiated by Satan himself in the Garden of Eden. They want people to disbelieve the word of God, with the result that they stop trusting in him and begin trusting in themselves. These are *deceitful* spirits. They don’t

come announcing that they are bringing error. Instead, they masquerade as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

There is also a human cause to false doctrine. There are certain things we can do to open ourselves to the deceitfulness of demons. Paul mentions two of them in verse 2. False teaching comes **“through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.”** There is a dishonesty on the part of liars that stems from a cauterized conscience. The conscience is a gift from God, designed to cause us discomfort when we sin. It is a warning system, similar to the nervous system of the body. Without the pain brought by the nervous system, we would destroy our bodies. You could unintentionally put your hand on a hot stove but not feel it until seeing the smoke from your burning skin. It is good for the body to feel pain and for us to listen to the pain of our bodies. In the same way, it is good to listen to the conscience when it is telling us that we are guilty. These false teachers had stopped doing so, and the result of that is to silence the conscience. The word Paul uses is to say that the conscience is seared. It is burned to the point of no longer being able to feel guilt.

The flip side of this truth is an important one. One of the ways we can protect ourselves from the deceitfulness of demons and the false doctrine they encourage, is simply to listen to the conscience. The reason we tend not to do so is that a guilty conscience is a very painful thing. The only way I know to continue listening to it is to know that the blood of Jesus alone can cleanse from a guilty conscience, washing it completely. All other attempts to silence a guilty conscience will lead to some form of hardening of the conscience.

II. The Common Root of All Error – v. 3-5

The particular form of false doctrine Paul mentions is called asceticism. We want to look at this false teaching and then trace it to its root, which it shares with all false teaching. Asceticism refers to the effort to increase one’s spirituality through denial to oneself of different elements of the created order. In this case, the false teachers are described as those **“who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created”** (v. 3). It is likely that this asceticism was an early form of an ancient error known as Gnosticism. The Gnostics believed that matter was inherently evil, with the implication that increasing one’s spirituality required as much separation as possible from material things. Asceticism grew in popularity during the first few centuries of the early church. One of the humorous expressions of it was the practice of “pole-sitting”, in which a hermit would live on a little platform built atop a pole. I remember reading years ago that hermits would sit on these poles for years at a time, having prearranged with someone to supply them with the necessary food and water for the sustenance of their lives, which would then be raised to them in a bucket. People would gather around these pole-sitting hermits and marvel at their spirituality and godliness.

Why does Paul describe asceticism as a teaching of demons? Such extreme asceticism as pole-sitting may seem odd to us today, but isn't Paul overreacting just a bit in describing it as having a satanic source? What is so bad about asceticism? After all, the two areas he mentions, celibacy and abstinence from food, have a long biblical pedigree. Paul and Jesus were both celibate, and fasting is frequently spoken of in the Bible. The problem, I believe, is indicated by two of the verbs of verse 3. They *forbid* marriage and they *require* abstinence from foods. When these things become rules for spirituality, they have the effect of cutting us off from Jesus. It is the grand purpose of Satan and his demons to disconnect us from Jesus, and they love to do so in a side-door fashion through something like asceticism, something that has a smell of spirituality about it. If a demon were to come and teach a Sunday School class at our church, what do you imagine he would teach? Would he urge us to take up child sacrifices, or introduce a new liturgy to praise the name of Satan? That would be too obvious. Instead, the demon would suggest something that sounds spiritual but has the effect of cutting us off from Jesus. This severing from Jesus is the root of all false doctrine.

Asceticism is a failure to relate properly to the created order. For much of the last two-hundred years, we have battled the opposite problem of materialism. This error makes matter ultimate. But it has not been uncommon for the church to overreact to materialism and fall into the opposite error of asceticism. For example, historian Mark Noll says that the song "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus" errs in the line that says, "And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." Actually, the things of earth will grow clearer in the light of Christ.

Paul counters this error when he says, "**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**" (v. 4-5). That last phrase guards us both from materialism and asceticism. It guards us from asceticism by saying that all creation is made holy by the word of God. I believe he is referring here to God's word of blessing at creation, when he beheld his creation and said, "It is good." Matter is good. God himself took on a material body. One of his last acts before his ascension was to grill some fish on the beach for his friends. Matter is good, but it is not ultimate. What guards us from materialism here is the last statement that material things are made holy by prayer. He is referring to prayers of thanksgiving. Matter is not ultimate—God is. One of the indicators of spiritual health, of being connected to Jesus by faith, is a proper relationship to God's material world. We are to relate to the world with guilt-free enjoyment and humble gratitude. It is a wonderful gift from God to enjoy his good material gifts without guilt and with gratitude.

III. The Antidote to Error – v. 6-10

Paul shifts gears a little beginning in verse 6 and talks about godliness. But I think the larger context is still treating this area of false doctrine. Paul urges godliness upon Timothy because such godliness is the antidote to false teaching. I believe that relationship is made clear in verse 7, where Timothy is told, **“Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths** [such as the false teachers were putting forth]. **Rather train yourself for godliness.**” What is godliness? I find John Stott’s summary helpful. “Godly people are God-fearing people. They have experienced the Copernican revolution of Christian conversion from self-centredness to God-centredness” (p. 117). William Temple said that the essence of sin is that “I make myself, in a host of ways, the center of the universe.” We become godly as this is reversed.

To be godly, then, is to fear God and put him in the center where he belongs. Godly people respect God. They respect his name. You will not hear a godly person call God “The Man Upstairs” or “The Big Guy in the Sky.” It is an amazing thing that people feel the freedom to make up names for God, something we would never dare do with anyone else. If you were to call me George just because you say, “I think I like you better as George, so that’s what I will call you,” I would be offended. My name is Brad, not George. God reveals his names (he has more than one) to us in the Scriptures, and we are guilty of ungodliness when we use names of our own making instead of these revealed names. Consider a second example of ungodliness, one that Paul refers to in chapter six where he mentions a group of false teachers who considered godliness a means of financial gain. They pretended to be godly, to center their lives on God, in order to gain some benefit for themselves. Their pretensions at reverence and piety were motivated by concerns for self. The same self-centered tendency is still with us. Many use God as a tool for successful living rather than as an object of worship. We read the Bible for tips on child-rearing, financial success or marital harmony, when we should be reading it to know God, love him more, obey him and worship him more fully.

Paul says that it is to our benefit to center our lives on God instead of upon ourselves. **“For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come”** (v. 8). Training for godliness brings benefits to us like that of physical training, only much greater. For example, one of the benefits of physical training is that the heart and lungs becomes more efficient so that less effort from the heart is required to oxygenate the blood. One’s resting heart-rate gets lower. The same thing happens as we learn the piety of a God-centered life. We become better able to rest. We learn to be less anxious, less controlling, better able to depend on God. But godliness holds benefits far beyond this life, extending into the next life as well. How does godliness benefit us in the life to come? It prepares us to live in that place where God is at the center of all things. So many people envision heaven as the place where our desires will be fully met. So if you like to play golf, heaven will have the greatest golf courses

imaginable. If you like to shop, watch football, or read books, heaven will be the place where you will be able fully to pursue those things. That's not heaven—that's hell. Heaven is the place where God's desires are fully met, and where our transformation is so complete that our strongest desires will be the same as God's desires. Unless we begin to learn godliness, we will be completely unprepared for heaven.

How do we acquire such godliness? Paul stays with his physical training metaphor and says that we are to be trained for godliness. Apparently, there are some similarities between how we acquire good physical conditioning and how godliness is acquired. Let me mention just a couple of them. First, training always feels like weakness. Imagine that you're at the gym doing the bench press and at the end of the third set of repetitions you are feeling very weak. Does anyone think, "This is not working—I came here to get stronger, and now the opposite seems to be happening"? Training, whether it is physical training or training for godliness, involves the paradox of getting stronger through getting weaker. Our godliness is strengthened as we get "weakened." This weakness can take several forms. It can take the form of repentance, as we experience the convicting work of God's Spirit. Or it can take the form of the trials of life, in the face of which we feel inadequate. Whether through repentance or through trials, we come to the place of feeling ourselves completely inadequate. But we find God there, and see his adequacies for all our need.

Another quality of training that is true both of physical conditioning and training for godliness is that both of them require repetition. Paul speaks of this down in verse 15. **"Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress."** If we are to be trained in godliness, we will need to rehearse something over and over again. What is it that we rehearse? It has something to do with the word of God, because it says in verse 6 that the good servant of Christ Jesus is **"trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed."** This doctrine is centered on Jesus. We must be trained repeatedly in the gospel truth that God is for us in Jesus. God's only Son has been crushed that we might be pardoned and have life. We have been bought with the most precious thing in the universe, the blood of Christ, and now God is forever for us. It is a holy God who is for us, and his holiness has not been compromised in the least. It is as we repeat these truths that we grow stronger.

CONCLUSION:

All false doctrine cuts us off from Christ by making him optional or unnecessary. All true doctrine connects us to Jesus. Let's close in prayer by reviewing this connection between sinners like us and Jesus.