

Do Not Depart from the Faith: 1 Timothy 4:1-5
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The title of the sermon this morning is “Do Not Depart from the Faith.” Paul tells Timothy in verse 1 that “some will depart from the faith,” and the warning for Timothy and for the church in Ephesus and for our church today is, do not depart from the faith. As we consider the fact that some will forsake the Gospel and turn away from the truth and leave the church and depart from the faith, this fact should impact each of us in the form of a very serious warning. May this not be true of me! May this not be true of any of us here! Some *will* depart, but let it not be me. Let it not be any of us. My hope is that the warning of this passage will be a means of spurring us on to greater holiness and a more intense pursuit of God. My hope is that it will give us a greater resolve to remain faithful to the truth of the Gospel revealed in the Bible. My hope is that for any who are being enticed by false teaching, that you would be warned by this passage and strengthened in your commitment to Christ. My hope is that God will use these verses to change our desires and increase our delight in Him so that we don’t want to depart from the faith, we don’t want to be deceived by false teaching, but rather we want to walk more closely with our Lord and experience the joy of being with Him forever. May this warning serve to revive us and awaken us, that we might fight against certain sins and tendencies in our own souls that would make us susceptible to the tragedy that is described here.

Let’s first look at the fact that some will depart from the faith, then we’ll observe the means of their departure, and finally the truth of God’s good creation, which combats the asceticism of the false teachers.

Some Will Depart from the Faith (verse 1a)

Paul knows this to be true because the Spirit has revealed this fact very clearly to him. “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith.” Just as in Acts 20:29-30, where Paul said, “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.” We assume that Paul knew this because the Spirit had revealed it to him. And similarly in 1 Timothy 4:1 he knows that some will depart from the faith because the Spirit has revealed it to him.

He says that this will happen “in later times,” which is the equivalent of saying “in the last days,” a phrase that shows up in

other places in the New Testament (see Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3). One place where that phrase shows up is in 2 Timothy 3:1, where Paul writes, “But understand this, that *in the last days* there will come times of difficulty.” And we might think that he’s talking about events that are to come about in the distant future, or at least in the distant future from his vantage point in the first century. But then in the following statements it becomes clear that the difficult times have already begun, which means that the last days were already upon them. And the same is true here in 1 Timothy 4. The later times have already started, even in Timothy’s day. The last days were inaugurated with Christ’s first coming, and they will be consummated at His second coming. So from the time of Christ, including the time in which we now live, and continuing until Christ returns—these are the last days, the later times. And so the departure from the faith that will happen in the lives of some is a tragedy that has happened, and is now happening, and will continue to happen for the rest of this age. And that’s why this warning was extremely relevant to Timothy and the church in Ephesus, and it is also extremely relevant to us today. Some will depart from the faith, and this should serve as a grave warning to each of us to look after our own souls as well as to be attentive to those around us, that we might not “fall away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12-13).

In a moment we’ll look at the means by which some will depart from the faith. But first we have to deal with the question of how this is even possible. It clearly *is* possible, since the Spirit has expressly communicated that it will happen. But what about Jesus’ words in John 10:27-30? He says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” How can individuals depart from the faith if no one can snatch them out of the Father’s hand? The answer lies in the reality that many individuals show some adherence to the faith without possessing saving faith. There are many who sit in the pews of churches week after week, perhaps some of you here this morning, who profess to know Christ, and yet there has not been true repentance and faith. They haven’t been truly converted. And then when individuals like that depart from the faith, deny the truth, forsake the fellowship of believers, and live like the world, we don’t say, “They lost their salvation.” We say, as John does in 1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” In other words, those who depart from the faith were never truly of

the faith. They had never been born again. Maybe they came to church, maybe they read their Bibles, maybe they even taught the Bible and became leaders in the church, but it wasn't the fruit of saving faith. It was done for other reasons, whatever those reasons might be. And that's the scary thing, that it's possible to have an appearance of godliness without really being godly (see 2 Timothy 3:5). It's possible to look like a Christian without really being a Christian.

Jesus speaks of this in the parable of the sower. Specifically, of the seed which fell on the rock and grew and then withered away, He says, "And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away" (Luke 8:13, using the same Greek word for "fall away" that is translated "depart" in 1 Timothy 4:1). There is initial joy and some sort of belief, but it is not a lasting faith, and therefore not a genuine saving faith.

To clarify, then, those who will depart from the faith are not Christians who are losing their salvation. Once we belong to Christ, we will always belong to Christ, and no one will snatch us out of His hand. But there are also those who profess Christ who do not really belong to Christ, and their departure from the faith will simply make that plain.

Examine your hearts, friends. Don't put your hope in the fact that you are a member of this church, or that you've been baptized, or that you serve in the church or give to the church. Don't put your hope in the appearance of godliness. Search your heart and see if there is genuine repentance and faith happening in your life. Has God changed your heart? Do you have an awareness of your own sin and the gravity of sinning against a holy God? Are you clinging to Christ as your only hope of escaping God's just wrath against sin? Are you rejoicing in the eternal inheritance we have in heaven? Are you fighting the fight of faith, wanting to be free from the entanglements of sin so that you can enjoy Christ more and more? Are you a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17)?

If God has changed our hearts, then, by His grace, we will not depart from the faith. We may have our doubts and our struggles, but we will persevere in our pursuit of Christ, because we have been given a desire to do so. We have been given a new heart that cherishes Christ and cherishes God's Word and wants to obey our Lord because we know that obedience to Him is the most joyful way to live and disobedience to Him only brings misery. And thus, a warning like we find in this passage, is a means of our perseverance. When our desire for Christ wanes, we need to be reminded of the fact that some will depart from the faith so that we

might be warned not to be among that number. Do not depart from the faith, but persevere in your pursuit of Christ. Fan the flame of your passion for God. However small that flame may be, work to feed that flame by spending time in God's Word and in prayer, by spending time in fellowship with other believers, by sitting under the preaching and teaching of God's Word, by reading Christian books that will inspire you and convict you. Persevere, brothers and sisters. Do not depart from the faith.

The Means of Their Departure (verses 1b – 3a)

We're further instructed by this passage in seeing the means of their departure. Some will depart from the faith, and Paul goes on to describe how this departure will happen. He says they will do this "by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons." We remember from chapter 1 in this letter that false teaching was a problem in the Ephesian church, and Paul is committed to stamping it out. This is a significant part of why he wants Timothy to remain there. He says right at the beginning of the letter, in 1:3-4, "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith." So we know that there were false teachers who were teaching and preaching things that constituted a different doctrine. They were venturing off into myths and genealogies and speculations that led them, and those who listened to them, away from the truth. What we learn now in chapter 4 is that the underlying cause of such teaching is both deceitful and demonic. Where there is false teaching being promoted there is deception and there is demonic activity. Satan is a deceiver, and just like he deceived Eve in the garden, he wants to deceive us today. He wants to pervert the truth just enough so that people may still retain a form of religion, but in reality they have departed from the faith. That is the purpose of these deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

Verse 2 tells us that this demonic influence comes through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared. These are the false teachers. And we have to realize that false teachers are not going to announce themselves as false teachers. They're not going to have a hat on or a nametag that says, "False Teacher." The Mormon or the Jehovah's Witness is not going to say to you, "I'd like to present to you some false teaching." Nor will the health and wealth preacher say, "I want to lead you away from the true message of the Gospel." Nor will the theologically liberal pastor or scholar tell you, "I'm denying the very essence of Christianity." It's not that blatant. It's very subtle, and that's why it can be so

enticing and so destructive. As Jesus said, they will come as wolves in sheep's clothing, and we will recognize them by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-16).

It involves insincerity. This is the word for hypocrisy. And it involves lying. The false teachers are liars because they are promoting falsehood. And they are hypocritical because they are promoting falsehood under the guise of genuine Christianity. They claim adherence to the Bible, while teaching things that directly contradict the Bible, as we're going to see in just a moment. And the reason individuals can persist in this hypocrisy and deception without going absolutely insane is because their consciences are seared. Through disobedience and the rationalization of disobedience, their consciences have become calloused. They are no longer pricked by the guilt of doing something wrong. This is what happened to Hymenaeus and Alexander, who were mentioned in chapter 1. They rejected a good conscience, and made shipwreck of their faith (1:19-20).

To summarize the reality that Paul is describing in verses 1-2 of our text for this morning, there are individuals who, in effect, have no consciences, which causes them to be hypocritical liars, and thus become the vehicles by which deceitful spirits and teachings of demons are dispersed among those in the church. And it's through that deception that some will depart from the faith.

The particular false teaching that Paul has in mind is described in verse 3. It has to do with an unbiblical asceticism, a kind of strict self-denial that is not in accord with the teaching of God's Word. They forbid two things: marriage and certain foods. These prohibitions were probably connected to an early form of Gnosticism which held that the material world is inherently evil. And assuming that the material world is evil, these ascetics tried to avoid physical pleasures as much as possible. And thus they taught that marriage is wrong, for within marriage the physical pleasure of sex is enjoyed. And since they couldn't restrict eating food entirely, they restricted eating certain kinds of foods. One can eat in order to live, but food should not be a source of enjoyment. This is mindset of this unbiblical asceticism.

On the question of singleness and marriage, we do find Paul commending singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, and we should recognize that God calls many to a life of singleness and it is a high and noble calling. Indeed, it allows one to be free from many anxieties, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:32, and allows one to be focused on pleasing the Lord. So, on the one hand, singleness is to be commended. But on the other hand, marriage cannot be condemned. Even there in 1 Corinthians 7, as Paul is commending singleness, he acknowledges that "if you do marry, you have not sinned" (verse 28). We also know from Ephesians 5:22-33 that

there is a glorious divine plan for the institution of marriage, that the relationship between a husband and a wife should be a picture of Christ's relationship to the church. Therefore, any talk of forbidding marriage is clearly at odds with biblical teaching.

Regarding food, Paul speaks to this sensitive issue in Romans 14, where he acknowledges that there may be different personal opinions and practices. But the fundamental reality is that everything is clean (verse 20). Nothing is unclean in itself (verse 14). So while we should be sensitive to those around us and be careful not to cause anyone to stumble (see also 1 Corinthians 8), we should also recognize that requiring abstinence from certain foods is unnecessary and harmful. It's unnecessary because no food is unclean. And it's harmful because it creates a legalistic form of righteousness that encourages people to put their hope in rule-keeping rather than in the righteousness of Christ.

This is the pride of legalism – the pride of setting up one's own standards rather than following God's standards. Ligon Duncan, in a sermon on this text, made a very insightful comment. He said that false teaching will either be “narrower than the word of God and it will not allow things that the word of God allows, or it will be broader than the word of God and it will allow things that the word of God does not allow” (<http://www.fpcjackson.org>, sermon on 1 Timothy 4:1-5). We have to be careful on either side, and we do that by recognizing that God's Word is the authority and not ourselves. We might have our own ideas of what is permissible and what is not permissible, but ultimately our ideas don't matter. The teaching in God's Word is what matters.

The situation described here is something that we might not encounter in this precise form, but it is something that can creep into our thinking and into our church very subtly. Among our Christian friends there may not be anyone forbidding marriage or forbidding certain kinds of food, but there are plenty of other ways that we can make Christianity a religion of rules, and we need to be on guard against that tendency. It is our sinful pride that makes us want to reduce Christianity to a set of rules, a list of “do this” and “don't do this.” That's what these false teachers had done. Don't get married. Don't eat these foods. And very easily we can set up similar rules for the Christian community around us.

Christianity is not a list of rules. Young people, let me talk to you for a moment. I don't want any child to grow up in this church and think that Christianity is about rules. Do this and don't do that. If you've gotten that impression somehow, I want to tell you right now that it's wrong. Christianity is about Christ. It's about having a relationship with Christ. It's realizing that we cannot keep God's rules because we're sinners, so we need someone to save us from our sin. And Jesus Christ is the One who

died on the cross to do that. To become a Christian, then, is to repent of our sin and trust in Christ for that forgiveness. It's not trying to impress God by keeping some list of rules. It's resting in Christ, who is the only One who ever lived up to God's perfect standard of righteousness. Don't be mistaken, becoming a Christian *will* change the way you live in so many different ways, but if we think of Christianity just as changing the way one lives, then we miss what Christianity is really about—finding forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us not fall into the error of legalism or unbiblical asceticism as these false teachers did. And parents, I exhort you to be careful not to give your children the impression that Christianity is a religion of rules.

The Truth of God's Good Creation (verses 3b – 5)

Finally, let's talk about the truth of God's good creation, for this is the response to the unbiblical prohibitions against marriage and certain foods. The reason why forbidding marriage and forbidding certain foods is wrong and dangerous is because it denies the truth of God's good creation. The second half of verse 3 describes the foods which the false teachers forbid as things "that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." In other words, Christians should not forbid these good things which God has created, but we should receive them with thanksgiving. One way we can do this is by pausing to pray before meals. We should voice our thanks to God for what He has so graciously and generously provided for us.

Verses 4-5 explain this statement further by giving us a theology of creation. He writes, "For everything created by God is good." This is an important truth, and we need to understand how this fits with the biblical teaching on sin. We understand that sin entered the world when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and the presence of sin has devastated so many things. John Stott makes a helpful observation in noticing that the statement in verse 4 is not that "everything is good," but that "everything *created by God* is good." Stott goes on to write, "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. . . . We therefore need discernment to know what in our human experience is attributable to the creation, and what to the fall" (*Guard the Truth*, page 114). That discernment comes from studying God's Word as it speaks to various issues. To take the two topics that are mentioned our passage this morning, we know that God created marriage to be a covenantal union between a man and a woman, that the relationship between a husband and wife should put on display the relationship between Christ and the

church (as Ephesians 5 spells out so clearly), and that sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed between a husband and wife and only within the confines of marriage. So on the one hand, we must acknowledge that marriage is good as God created it, and sex is a good gift of God to be enjoyed within marriage. On the other hand, though, we must also realize that sin has perverted the gifts of sex and marriage in many ways. The idea of homosexual marriage is not part of God's good creation. And any sexual intimacy outside of marriage cannot be called good, for it is contrary to what God has instituted and instructed.

Similarly with respect to food. This is another one of God's good gifts to us. It is part of what He created, and it is good, indeed. We should not reject it, but receive it with thanksgiving, as verse 4 tells us. At the same time, however, we must also be aware of the sin of gluttony. This is another way that sin can pervert one of God's good gifts. We must not make food a god. We must not look to food as our comfort, as our hope, as our treasure. We must look to Christ as our comfort, our hope, and our treasure. So let's be discerning, and let's study our Bibles, so that we can enjoy what God has created and also fight against the sinful perversions of those good gifts.

Verse 5 closes this paragraph by saying that these good gifts of God are "made holy by the word of God and prayer." This is a way of summarizing and reiterating what he has just said in verses 3-4. The gift of marriage and the gift of food are good gifts from God. They are holy. They are sanctified, consecrated. And we know this, first of all, from the word of God. "The word of God" in verse 5 is probably a reference to the repeated declaration in Genesis 1 that "God saw that it was good." The context here is talking about creation, and we remember that as God created, over and over again He looked at what He had made, and He saw that it was good. And on the sixth day after creating mankind "He saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). So we know that everything God created is good, first by the word of God. Then, secondly, we also acknowledge this goodness in our prayers. Notice that verse 4 says, "nothing is to be rejected *if it is received with thanksgiving.*" I think the mention of prayer in verse 5 is referring to this thanksgiving. Thus, God's gifts are made holy when we profess our thanksgiving to God for them. They are good gifts, declared to be so by God's Word, and we are also to recognize and declare God's goodness in giving them to us.

In closing, let me say again: Do not depart from the faith. Do not be deceived by the legalism of false teachers, as we see an example of here in the Ephesian church. Let us be aware of the dangers that lurk all around us and even within our own hearts.

And let us be alerted by the grave warning of this passage in knowing that some will depart from the faith. May that not be true of us. Fight to good fight. Finish the race. Keep the faith (2 Timothy 4:7).