

## The Pillar (Part 1 of 4)

Teaching that Departs

1 Timothy 4:1-5

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*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, <sup>2</sup>through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, <sup>3</sup>who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. <sup>4</sup>For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, <sup>5</sup>for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer (1 Timothy 4:1-5).*

Just off the coast of Tuscany, Italy, sits a 951 foot, \$450 million dollar cruise ship half submerged. The *Costa Concordia*, with over 4,200 passengers aboard, ran aground on January 13, when it passed only 500 feet from shore and hit an underwater reef. For over an hour, the crew of the ship waited to notify passengers and failed to lower the life-boats, until the ship began taking on water and listing.

The much-reviled “Captain Coward” of the cruise ship has been ridiculed in the press for his refusal to stay on the ship until all the passengers had been evacuated. When asked how he managed to get into one of the few operational life-boats, he said that he tripped and fell into a life boat while coordinating the evacuation. He has since been arrested and is being investigated for manslaughter. Twenty-five people are known to be dead and fourteen are still missing.

It is estimated that it will take seven to ten months before the *Concordia* will be raised. In the meantime the empty and battered cruise ship rests on its side in the Tyrrhenian Sea. It will be one of the most infamous shipwrecks in our lifetime.

A shipwreck is a public disaster that often involves a large amount of carnage and loss of life. The scope and scale of the damage makes the term “shipwreck” a useful term to describe other situations in life that feel like they are a huge mess. In our industrialized vocabulary, we use the term “train-wreck” in the same way. I was having lunch with a man some time ago, and when I asked him about his life, he said, “My life has pretty much been a train wreck.” Without knowing the details, I knew what he meant. His life was a mess – lots of carnage.

### Fight to Not Shipwreck Your Faith

When the Apostle Paul wanted to describe the emotional struggles and the consequences of false teaching, he said the following to Timothy:

*"...wage the good warfare, <sup>19</sup>holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith" (1 Tim. 1:18b-19).*

In other words, we are in a war, and the casualties of failure look like a spiritual shipwreck. So how does "spiritual shipwreck" happen? How does a person end up making a mess of his faith such there is carnage, destruction, and pain as a result of his life? It begins with false teaching. Spiritual shipwrecks happen because somewhere along the line, a person bought into teaching that led him too close to the shore. And then disaster happens.

Today we turn another corner in our study of 1 Timothy as we begin chapter four. We return to the crisis which led Paul to send Timothy to Ephesus and that led him to write this letter: the problem of false teaching. The issue in the church was significant, and it had reached into the ranks of leadership. Timothy's mission was to personally lead the church through this challenging season, refute the false teachers, and lead the people to truth.

Chapter one introduced us to this problem of false teaching (1:3-11). The second chapter helped us understand what community worship should look like in the body (2:8-11). The third chapter dealt with the chief characteristics of elders and deacons (3:1-13). Chapter four returns to the two-fold theme that began in chapter one: 1) the false teaching and 2) Timothy's role in fighting it.

If you look at the entire chapter, you will see this division. Verses 1-5 deal with the false teaching, and verses 6-16 talk about Timothy's role in refuting and challenging it. Today we are going to look at two things: 1) characteristics of false teaching and 2) how the gospel works. I hope to show you not only the problem of false teaching but also the ultimate solution found in the gospel.

## **Five Characteristics of False Teaching**

In verses 1-5, Paul describes the content of the false teaching and sets it in contrast to the gospel. The content here is not primarily theological; it is practical with theological underpinnings. In other words, this false teaching had affected how the people in the church were living. You see, that is the problem with false teaching: it leads to practical disaster. Wrong teaching begets wrong thinking which leads to wrong living. Paul shows us what this looks like.

### **1. It is expected**

This might seem like a surprising place to start, but I think it is really important because part of the problem with our dealing with false teaching and its effects is that we are not looking for it or are not on guard against it. We can become passively naïve; we can lack discernment; we can make incorrect assumptions about it. There are a number of important things to note in verse one:

- The verse begins with the word "now," which serves as the linkage between 3:14-16 and this section. It is expressing something connected to the truth of the mystery of godliness.
- The main point of this verse is the reality that "some will depart from the faith." This is a very important and sobering point. Paul is essentially saying that the church is always

comprised of people who are not genuine. And this reality of apostasy is a major theme in what he writes to Timothy. Consider the following passages from 2 Timothy:

*<sup>15</sup> Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. <sup>16</sup> But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, <sup>17</sup> and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup> who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. <sup>19</sup> But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity" (2 Tim. 15-19).*

*<sup>2</sup> preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Tim. 4:2-4).*

Dealing with false teaching and those who are in error was a major part of Timothy's task.

- To say that "the Spirit expressly says . . ." means that either by prophecies or in relationship to what Jesus had said in Matthew 24:10-11 ("many false prophets will arise and lead many astray"), what is happening has been told to them in advance.
- Paul identifies that they were living in what is called the "last days," a term that is used for the time period after the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost and continuing even until now. And these "last days" have a particular character to them that is very challenging spiritually (see Jude 17-18, 2 Peter 3:3-7). So there is a sense in which the world that we are presently living in, as seemingly normal as it has been for us, is a place filled with the characteristics of the last days. Now it is not as bad as what it will be, nor is it as bad as what it could be. But it is still a spiritually dangerous season to live in.

And the problem is that we don't think like that enough. We have a naïve definition of what is normal and what should be expected. Paul identifies for us that we ought to realize that false teaching and false living are to be expected. We ought to not be surprised when we encounter it, because it is part of the environment of these days.

## **2. It is demonic**

Here is something that we don't often think about! Paul says that the teaching that leads to apostasy has a demonic source: *"some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons"* (v 1). The apostasy happens by false teaching, and this false teaching is not just bad teaching; its ultimate source is very dark.

Now I don't want to be, nor do I want you to be, overly dramatic here. Yet, I also don't want you to be naïve or treat false teaching as if it is merely wrong. What we are dealing with here is serious stuff. We are a very real battle, a spiritual battle, with eternal consequences.

Our world is not a spiritually safe place, and it is dangerous to not see it that way. The devil is a master deceiver, and his aim is to "persuade people that true theology is false and false theology is true."<sup>1</sup> Satan's aim is to do anything he can to divert people from the truth, and he is the ultimate author of everything that distorts the truth or distracts people from living in the truth. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). He is constantly scheming against God's purposes (Eph. 6:11). He is master at deception, confusion, and counterfeit actions (Gal. 3:1, 2 Thess. 2:9). He is a master of embedding just enough truth or just enough of the goodness of God's creation into something as the bait. But his ultimate aim is to destroy you and the glory of God expressed through you.

Why would Paul talk this way about false teaching? He wants us to take what he is saying here seriously. He has seen the effects, the destruction, and the devastation. This is serious.

Our twins are presently enrolled in a driver's education class. As a part of their course work, they had to watch a video called "Red Asphalt." The video is filled with images and videos of car accidents and the disastrous consequences. It is graphic and disturbing, and it is designed to show a driver in training that operating a vehicle should be taken very, very seriously. I've often wished I had that kind of tool when it comes to the lies that people believe and the consequences of it: "watch this church split," "sit here while this person confesses his sin," "look at the pain in the eyes of these kids," "watch what happens to the name of this church," "look how alone this person is." Being deceived creates a spiritual train-wreck.

### **3. It is fake**

Paul turns next to the teachers themselves and points out that it is not just the devil that does the deceiving; the teachers do it as well. Here is what he says: "*through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared*" (v 2). There are two problems.

First, the false teachers are espousing things that are not true, but what makes it even worse is the fact that they are not sincere. The Greek word for insincerity is *hypokrisei*, and you probably hear the familiar English word – hypocrite. It means to give an impression of one direction while in reality having different ones. It means to play a part. In verse three we will see what they teach, but it is clear that they do not practice what they preach. They try to appear godlier than they really are.

Second, the false teachers have "consciences that are seared." A strange and disturbing thing happens: "Liars start to live they own lies. They don't even realize they are lying anymore."<sup>2</sup> The Greek word here is *kausterizo* from which we get our word cauterized. The meaning is either 1) that the person bears the branding mark of Satan or 2) that the false teacher's heart is hardened or

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Ryken, *1 Timothy – Reformed Expository Commentary*, (Phillipsburg: New Jersey, 2007), 156.

<sup>2</sup> Ryken, 158.

insensitive to the truth. Sin has caused the deadening of sensitivity to hypocrisy, inconsistency, and consequences.

There is a reason why our community tests tornado sirens on Fridays at 11:00 AM. They test it the same day of the week, at the same time of day, whether it is good or bad weather so that you won't wonder when it really sounds if it is a test. A warning is only as good as the sensitivity of the people to it. And the problem here is that these teachers had become accustomed to the alarm in their conscience. They made the mistake of thinking that because they no longer felt as bad as they used to that they weren't as bad as what they actually were. A seared conscience convinces you that there is no threat because you no longer notice the alarm.

How does the conscience become seared? The same way that you sleep through an alarm, ignore the yellow light on your dashboard, read through the flight attendant's instructions, or fail to act when you hear the fasten seat belt: practice. A conscience is seared over time by doing the same thing over and over and over again. Before long the person is convinced that he or she is right.

But this is even worse because the person ends up leading others to the same self-deceived destruction. This is why you should be scared to death about where your heart could go and what you could become. Self-delusion is a practiced self-destruction.

#### **4. It is performance-based**

Now we get into the actual content of the teaching. What you will find here is that, like all false teaching, there is a major focus on performance or external obedience. Paul lists two primary and familiar issues: *"who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving..."* (v 3). What is this about?

In chapter one, we learned about false teachers who were using the Law, myths and genealogies (1:7). We are not entirely certain as to what this heresy involved, but it is likely similar to the asceticism in Colossae, and it has the distinct marks of the problem of the influence of Greek dualism in Corinth.

A widespread worldview through the influence of Hellenism was that the body was bad and the soul was good. In this line of thinking, two extremes emerged: 1) a licentiousness that discounted what one did with the body since the soul was only what really mattered (see 1 Cor. 6:12-20) or 2) a legalism that elevated the restriction of the "bad" body as a means of attaining higher soul life, leading to a dim view of sexuality and of marriage, in particular (see 1 Cor. 7:1-7, 25-28).<sup>3</sup> In some contexts, like Colossae, this extended to food, beverages, festivals and Sabbath observances (Col. 2:16-17).

Apparently this legalism had taken root in Ephesus. There were teachers who were suggesting that being married or eating certain kinds of foods created second-class Christians. Typically this

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon Fee, The New International Biblical Commentary – 1-2 Timothy, Titus, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 99.

doesn't manifest itself as a "heaven or hell issue." Rather, it sounds like this: "Real Christians don't eat that," or "If you really want to be spiritual then you shouldn't be married."

The problem with this is that it creates a performance mind-set with self at the center. The licentious person is filled with self-indulgence, but the legalist is filled with self-effulgence. The licentious man knows what he did is wrong but in pride he thinks he's the exception. The legalist man thinks what he's done is right but in pride he thinks he's the model. At the root of both is a proud, self-reliant, deceived, and performance based heart. The licentious man could care less about what he does; the legalist cares too much.

The problem in Ephesus was a performance-based perspective which will lead a person to believe that real obedience, real righteousness, and real Christianity are mostly connected with what I've done. And this leads to ruin with your name stamped all over it!

## **5. It is not the gospel**

Remember what Paul had just finished talking about in 3:14-16? The church is a pillar and buttress of the truth. The truth about what? The truth about the gospel – the mystery of godliness. So when Paul says in verse three that people were abstaining from foods which *"God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth,"* what truth is he talking about? He's talking about the gospel.

Now you might say, "No, he's talking about foods and thanksgiving. He's not talking theologically." And that would be to make a huge mistake. It would be to think that the gospel – that Christ Jesus came for sinners – is only about theology. The gospel was meant to work, to be lived. The gospel is so transformative that it affects everything. And to make this point very clear, Paul says the same thing three different ways in verses 3-5.

First, he simply says that those who believe and know the truth look at food differently. They see it through a lens of gratitude and thanksgiving. The false teachers were purporting that certain foods and certain practices were off-limits, Paul says, "No, we know the truth about the gospel, and we receive those things with gratitude."

Then he states that the things in creation are not bad. They are good if they are viewed and used the right way. Just listen to what he says in verses five: *"For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (4:5).*

Finally, he states (v 5) that foods that others deem as sinful can actually be holy or righteous if they are combined with the word of God (the gospel) and prayer. Food doesn't make a person righteous. It is the gospel that makes a person righteous. Food isn't holy or unholy; the word and prayer make it holy.

A mandatory abstinence from good things has nothing to do with the gospel, and as such, it is actually the teaching of demons!<sup>4</sup> Undergirding the false teaching was a deceptive, demonic error. And undergirding freedom and truth was the gospel. The contrast between the false teaching and the gospel is so clear. And frankly, it is a bit scary. These five characteristics show us how far off and how dangerous this situation was. It shows us how easily a spiritual shipwreck can happen.

However, knowing about the problem of false teaching is one thing; understanding how the gospel works is another. I think it is helpful to see not only what you should avoid, but also what you should embrace.

### **How the Gospel “Works”**

Some people make the mistake of thinking that the gospel – the good news that Jesus died for sinners – is simply a matter of what you believe about what happens to you when you die. The gospel certainly answers that question, but it is far more. And to not see the gospel as something that actually “works” right now is to miss the power of its transforming work and to set oneself up for false teaching.

Let me give you four summary statements about how the gospel works in everyday life:

#### **1. Everything good is an undeserved gift from a gracious God**

The Bible clearly affirms that God is the creator and that everything he created was good (Gen. 1:31). Sin entered the world through Adam’s transgression and marred everything. Death became the ultimate penalty, and the entire world became an insurgent territory – a planet full of rebellion. Now God’s ultimate aim is to restore everything back to the way it was in Garden, and that will happen one day. He made that restoration possible through the death of his Son. Between the marred creation and the future restoration is where we live. Even though we live in a fallen world, the sun comes up, your heart beats, children are born, marriages are celebrated, friends laugh together, sleep is deep, and food is enjoyed. Do you know what all of these things are? They are gifts given by a gracious God. And while they are normal, these gifts are not deserved. Every single one of them is a reminder of God’s kindness (Matt. 5:45, James 1:17). Food and marriage are good gifts from a gracious God in the midst of a broken world.

#### **2. Identity and worth are found in Christ not performance**

In the midst of this broken world, God sent his son to make forgiveness possible (John 3:16). Those who see their sin for what it is and turn to Christ as their Lord and Savior are fundamentally changed – from the inside out. God forgives them, adopts them, fills them with the Spirit, and makes them “new creatures” (2 Cor. 5:17). And from the moment forward, a person’s identity now changes. He or she now belongs to Christ, and everything about his or her identity is wrapped up in the beautiful reality of what it means to be “in Christ.” These redeemed children of God are now marked by promise, not performance. In other words, their identity and worth is based upon what

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<sup>4</sup> Fee, 101.

God promises to do for them in Jesus, not what they can do on their own. Their worth is not found in their ability to “do” anything – that was the problem in the first place. Instead, their lives are based upon the promise of God. And this changes everything, because it makes a person free!

### **3. God gives us the right desire and empowers the right choice**

What’s more, in changing a person’s status and heart, God empowers new and right desires, new and right choices that would have never been there before. “It is God who works in you to will and work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). God creates true obedience – true physical obedience – by changing the will and the desire, so that the right choice – the really right choice – can follow. Those who experience this know full well that on their own, they’d never make this choice. God creates obedience in us.

### **4. The glory of God is the goal now and in the future**

What do you do with this kind of grace? You glory in it for all eternity! Heaven will be place of physical existence where we glorify God perfectly. But even now we are called to glorify God even if it is not with absolute perfection. We are called to take the good gifts that God has given and use them as platforms to make much of God and his grace. After all, we know who we are. We know what we deserve. And look at what God has done! Therefore, we embrace all of the gifts from God as conduits to glorify him.

The enemy doesn’t want you to live this way! He wants you to take little parts of your life and keep them for yourself. His aim is to convince you that you need a little “kingdom,” a place where you can be autonomous. Sometimes that thralldom is licentious actions; other times it is taking the good gifts that God intended to make much of him and neglecting them so that we can feel more spiritual. Whether your kingdom is named “license” or “legalism,” it makes no difference.

Both kingdoms have the same source, the same problem, the same goal, and the same YOU right in the middle. And the problem will be disastrous. The enemy knows you, and he knows the human race. His aim is shipwreck your faith so he can destroy your soul. Where does it start? By following the wrong path and by embracing the wrong teaching.

When the navigation records were searched after the *Concordia* crashed, do know what they found? The captain had come dangerously close, numerous times before, to the reef that sunk the ship in earlier travels. The *Concordia* should never have been that close to shore. It was a shipwreck that should never have happened. If only they had stayed on the right course.

Beware of believing anything that will shipwreck your faith!

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