

Every good gift II

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 0 0] Our passage this evening talks a little bit about how we should think about creation, or at least about certain aspects of it. And the response seems to be that we should feel joy when we look at the world around us, that we should rejoice in what God has made for us, in the provision that he has made. I hope that as we dive into these verses this evening, that some of that will come through, that we will see why that is, that we are called to rejoice in what God has provided. Those of you who were here last week will remember that we did just the first couple of verses of chapter 4. The first five verses are really a unit that thinks about the predictability of the false teaching, and then the source of the false teaching, and then moves on to the nature of the false teaching, what these people are actually teaching, and then gives Paul's response to it. So we dealt with the first couple of those last week, and this evening we come to part two, if you like. So we're reflecting on just what it is that these false teachers are saying, and then how Paul responds. As he looks at what these men and women are teaching in the church, as he considers what they are saying, he identifies here, doesn't he, two strands to their falsehood. Firstly, he says that they are forbidding people to marry, and secondly, that they are forbidding the eating of certain foods. Let's take each of those elements and consider for a couple of moments what's involved in that, and maybe what's behind those prohibitions as well. So he says that these false teachers are forbidding people to marry.

Now that is a very strong statement, isn't it? He doesn't say that they're discouraging marriage. He doesn't say that they're doing down marriage. He doesn't say that they're kind of vaguely objecting to marriage. No, they are forbidding people to marry. They are saying this is wrong, this is evil, this is wicked, you must not marry. Now Paul himself does in other places commend the single life, doesn't he? 1 Corinthians chapter 7, to the unmarried and the widows I say, it is good for them to stay unmarried as I do. Paul was a single man, and Paul knew the benefits of that to him in his particular ministry at least. He has a specific objective when he commends the single life. He talks later in the same chapter about being free from concern that an unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs, how he can please the Lord, but a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world, how he can please his wife, and his interests are divided. Now Paul does not take those things and say, and therefore you must all not get married. No, he looks at it and says, so there are advantages to the single life. And yet, for many, marriage is the right path. Paul's advice is balanced and sensible, but these false teachers are forbidding marriage. They are saying, under no circumstances should you get married. Why are they saying that? What's their motivation for saying that people ought not to get married? Well, it seems to come out of a broader kind of rejection of family life as a whole. Do you remember when we looked at chapter 2 and verse 15, we have that odd verse, but women will be saved through childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety. Now we don't want to dive right back into that in detail again, but remember one of the things that we said there was that Paul chooses that example of what it is to be a woman because that's one of the areas that the false teachers were attacking. These false teachers are saying, no, no, you need to reject normal family life and come and do this instead. And that comes through in a few different places through this letter. And Paul is not having that. So these false teachers want to do away with normal family life. They want to do away with having children and so on. And so they forbid people to marry. Remember in this context, verse 2 says, these false teachers are hypocritical liars. It seems likely that for all that they're forbidding people to get married, that actually many of these false teachers are themselves sexually promiscuous.

That for all that they're saying, no, no, don't get married, that they're not following their own advice or they're going around and doing other things instead. So we see these false teachers with a very low view of marriage that in fact rejects it completely. And in contrast to that, Paul has a much higher view of marriage. We'll come back to that in a couple of minutes. Secondly, there is this command to abstain from certain foods. Again, that's a pretty strong position. It's not quite as strong as forbid, but abstain really does mean, no, don't eat them at all. He's not saying that the false teachers aren't saying, well, just have a little bit of meat. No, they're saying, no, no, really, don't eat meat at all. Now, to abstain from things is, of course, in and of itself, not a bad thing.

This isn't a negative word. Paul uses this same verb of abstaining to commend refraining from fornication and from every form of evil in some of his other letters. So abstaining from things is fine. The issue then must be with what they're being told to abstain from or why they are abstaining from it. So what are they abstaining from? Well, certain foods is probably as specific as we can say with confidence, but it seems likely that this is particularly that they're being told to abstain from eating meat. There are other ways that the same words get used in different contexts in other parts of the Bible and so on. Most likely what they're saying is we should all be vegetarians.

It seems that part of what they're trying to do is to say that they're kind of going back to the Garden of Eden, that they're restoring that kind of unspoilt creation by saying, no, we don't eat meat.

[6 : 47] Now, possibly there's something commendable in that objective, but clearly the way that they are going about it is not acceptable to God. It doesn't seem likely that what they're doing is saying, we've all got to follow the Jewish dietary laws because Paul's response to these prohibition of certain foods, his response here is not the same as in other places where people are going back to those Jewish food laws. So it's likely something different to that. And ultimately, I don't think it matters massively what food specifically is being forbidden, but clearly they're being quite selective in their forbidding of certain food and drink because elsewhere in this same letter, these same false teachers are condemned for their drunkenness. Again, they are hypocrites. They are not creating a coherent picture. They're not creating something that is justifiable and defensible, but rather they are imposing on others rules that they don't themselves really want to follow. Why? Why are they imposing these rules on other people? Well, firstly, remember that this false teaching is demonic. It's there back at the end of verse 1, isn't it? These are things taught by demons. Now, it doesn't at first glance sound demonic to abstain from things, does it? What could be wrong with saying, no, don't eat that? We think about being tempted to gluttony, don't we? Not about being tempted to not eat things.

But I think what's behind that is it is sin to call sin what God says is not. It is wrong to condemn what God says. If God says all foods are clean, then for you to say no, no, no, they're not, is sin, is demonic. We'll have more of that when we come on to Paul's response.

Again, Paul's attitude to food is far more balanced than these false teachers. He doesn't have a blanket anything goes, but rather we see him in other places in 1 Corinthians 8.

We see Paul talking about refraining from certain foodstuffs. We see him talking about doing that for the benefit of the weaker brother. So the problem is not with refraining from certain things, but rather the problem is with saying these things are evil, is with calling sin what God does not call sin.

Now Paul's response to this false teaching that begins partway through verse 3 and runs through to the end of verse 5, this response has two strands that run through, and each of those strands has three elements, has three beads on the string if you like, and the first strand is to say that things are created good, and the second strand is to say that things are to be received with thanksgiving.

[10 : 09] So first of all, partway through verse 3 there, we see that these foods are in fact those which God created to be received, or rather first element is God created. That's the first bead on the string of God's creation if you like, and then bead one on the other string is that there is to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. Then into verse 4 we have a second element on that creation string, everything God created is good. And the second element on the other side, nothing is to be rejected if received with thanksgiving. Verse 5, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. So we have these two strands each with three elements on them. That last one is perhaps hard to understand what's going on there, the verse 5, consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

If this pattern holds true that he's alternating between creation and thanksgiving, then it seems that talking about being consecrated by the word of God, it's most likely that's a reference back to creation.

That's a reference back to God looking at what he has made and saying, this is good. This is good. This is good. On and on. And all that he has made, he looked and saw that it was very good.

And as for consecration, for being set apart as holy, well that's not so much saying that the thing was previously unclean and needs to be brought over onto the holy side, but rather saying that where this thing is created good, it's possible that a person's scruples, that a person's thanklessness might make that food unclean. But in contrast to that, no, it is made holy. It is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

So it's not that it changes from being unclean to being holy, but rather that the people's perspective on it changes from thinking that it's unclean to recognizing that it is holy. And as we see these two strands interwoven together, they form an attack on these false teachers, don't they? Because what he says is, he says, if God has created these things good, if God has given these things to his people, then it is profoundly ungrateful to reject them. Because God is the giver of good things.

[12 : 51] And it is wrong for us to take that gift and throw it back in his face. I think that's part of what Jesus is talking about when he talks about receiving the kingdom of God like a little child. Remember Mark chapter 10? People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant.

He said to them, let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them, and blessed them. I think there are probably two elements to what it means to receive the kingdom of God like a little child. The first of those is complete dependence. A child knows that a gift is bestowed upon it, that the child cannot earn that gift, cannot contribute anything to it, that it is a gift of grace. Children are dependent. And the second element, I think, is joy.

If any of you have seen a child recently receive a present, you see the joy with which that present gets unwrapped and the celebration. A little child receiving a present is not like your stereotypical grumpy teenager. It is not, thanks. No. Children rejoice when they get a good gift, don't they?

We are supposed to receive that supreme gift of entrance into God's kingdom in joy and independence. And I think the same is true here of his lesser gifts as well, of the gifts of creation.

That we are supposed to receive these things in dependence and with joy. That we're meant to receive the food on our tables with joy. There's a reason why bacon tastes so good.

[14 : 53] There is a reason why God designed cows to produce tasty bits that we can cut into delicious steaks to eat. There's a reason so that we can rejoice in God's provision for us.

We're supposed to receive these things recognizing dependence, even if that is possibly less obvious that we depend on God for the food on our tables because we think that we're making that provision for ourselves. And that is why Paul commends thanksgiving. Because giving thanks reminds us of that dependence, reminds us that these things come from God's hand as good gifts to us.

So, can we be vegetarians then? I think it depends on the reasons why. If you think eating meat is evil, then you have got it wrong somewhere. But if you just don't enjoy meat and it's easier to say you're a vegetarian than to feel socially awkward saying, oh no thanks, I don't want to eat well, okay, that's all right. If your motivation is ecological, it takes however much grain to feed a person or however much to feed a cow that then feeds a person, all right, fine, you know, that's a reasonable motivation I guess. If the doctor tells you it'd be better for your health to be a vegetarian, great, go for it. But don't come to me with eating meat is wrong.

No, it is not. It is a good gift from God. So Paul's response here is framed in terms of a response to that command to abstain from eating certain foods, isn't it? And Paul doesn't seem here to be directly responding to these false teachers' attitudes to marriage, to their command to refrain from getting married. I think probably two reasons why he's not kind of directly responding. The first is that he's going to deal with some of that later on in the letter when he comes to commending that younger widows remarry and so on.

Secondly, I think he doesn't deal with it explicitly because this same argument about food applies as well. This same argument about food that is created good for us applies to marriage as well.

[17 : 18] Remember I said earlier, I think that behind this forbidding of marriage is a view of sex and a family life that is incredibly negative and condemnatory. Most likely what's happening is these false teachers are saying that sex is base, is unclean, that people shouldn't get married because of what will happen if they do. These false teachers have a very dismissive view of sex and of what it ought to be and of what marriage ought to be. And today, today our views of sex and marriage are often every bit as messed up, aren't they? I think there are often kind of two basic views of sex that we have that get woven together today. Firstly, there's the evolutionary view. Sex is a means of spreading genes, the survival of the species. And secondly, there's the pornographic view of sex, if you like. The meaning of sex is physical gratification and nothing more. And what that means is that a person's worth extends no further than their ability to satisfy someone else's cravings.

If you think about it for a moment, I think you'll agree with me that that view of sex pervades not only what we label as pornography, but also much of the broader entertainment industry as well, doesn't it?

What does a romantic comedy tell us that the point of sex is? Let's have fun. Let's enjoy ourselves. Let's get to know one another better. Let's get to know one another.

It's so pervasive in our culture that it has infected our churches as well, and possibly particularly in the younger generations. So a couple of weeks ago, I was reading a blog post that responded to this question. This question comes from a woman in a church. She said, you speak of sex like it is a pure and holy thing. Yet when my husband wants to have sex with me, I feel like he's just responded to all about bodily urges and wants to use me as a way to relieve those urges. It's all about the release. What is holy about this? And sadly, there are too many marriages where it is indeed the case where one partner is all too often merely an outlet for someone else's urges.

But that is not a Christian view of sex. Because God created sex to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good.

[20 : 37] Why? Why is that the case? Why is it not only about passing on genes or only about having a bit of fun? Why? Because the deepest meaning of sex, because the purpose of sex is not physical.

That the physical desires that God has given to us should, when rightly expressed in marriage, should be a driver for us to receive the benefits that sex is designed to bring to us.

Because the true joy of sex is not physical, but is in being completely exposed to another person, in every sense of that word. And that is why it is designed only to be enjoyed in a covenanted lifelong relationship. Because intimacy comes by way of vulnerability. It says, this is who I am.

Do you accept me? Sex is a question. Do you accept me like this? And sex is the answer to that question. I accept you as you are. And that kind of intimacy is integral to marriage.

And we neglect it at our peril. We are supposed to receive God's creation as a gift. It is true of the bacon on our tables. God loves to give good things to his children. There's a reason steak tastes so good.

[22 : 09] I shall leave the parallel thought unspoken. Now again, that doesn't mean anything goes. That doesn't mean you get to just say, everything God created is good, and go and do what you like.

We know fine well that that would do violence to the rest of Scripture. Here's a partial test, though. Can you receive it with thanksgiving? Can you thank God for this?

Can you say, this is consecrated by the word of God and prayer? There are wrong expressions of sex. And in today's society, we must also say wrong expressions of marriage.

Just as much as there are wrong ways to use food. Lust and gluttony are both deeply troubling sins. But I think where the church has mostly managed to respond to gluttony with quite a sensible view of food, too often our response to lust has been a sort of prudish abstention, like these false teachers, rather than receiving marriage and sex as part of God's good design.

Okay. That probably wasn't what you were expecting this evening, was it? It wasn't what I was expecting when I started preparing this passage. But here's the thing. Paul says in these verses that to call evil what God has created good is a great sin.

[23 : 49] He says it is demonic. The source of this false teaching in Ephesus is demons mediated through hypocritical liars. So if you and I are going to live godly lives, well, one of the things that that means is rejoicing in what God gives to us.

Rejoicing in the things that he has designed for our pleasure. Rejoicing when we give thanks for the meals on our tables. We don't only thank God for the fact that this food will enable us to make it through the next day.

Food is not just fuel for our bodies, is it? We give thanks to God for the joy and the delight that it brings as well. And the same should be true of marriage in all of its aspects.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you that you created a world that is good for us.

A world that meets our needs and much more than that. A world that can bring us great joy. We thank you that you make provision for all that we require.

[25 : 10] And we thank you that you go beyond that. You drive us to rejoice. Lord, would you help us to rejoice not in the gifts that you have given us, but in you as the giver of good things.

Lord, help us to receive these things as gifts from your hand to be used according to your purposes. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.