

'Beware False Teachers'

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[0 : 00] Okay, please keep your Bibles open to that passage in 1 Timothy chapter 4, as we continue our series in this letter, this first letter of Paul to Timothy.

! Before I begin though, I do want to say something about the song that was introduced tonight, Christus Victor. Now, some of you are probably oblivious to any of this happening, so don't worry about it.

But others may know a bit about the context, so I just wanted to explain. This title, Christus Victor, is simply Latin for the word as Christ the Victor, which was in that third verse of the song.

And taken at face value, Christ the Victor celebrates his victory, as James was explaining, over sin, death, evil, and the devil. So absolutely, there's no problem with that. That's absolutely the truth.

Christ's victory was achieved at the cross, and he was vindicated when he was risen, he rose from the dead. And so death did not defeat him, but he conquered death, so he is the victor.

[1 : 07] However, Christus Victor is also the title of a book written by a Swedish bishop, Gustav Aulén, in 1930, where he, in this book, seeks to downplay the penal substitutionary view of atonement, in favour of his alternate view, which is called Christus Victor.

And so instead of seeing the necessity of the cross for Jesus to take the penalty of sin on our behalf, Christ's death is viewed primarily as a victory over evil, to free humanity from its clutches.

And so it portrays humans more as victims, rather than people themselves guilty for their own sin. Now, as I said, I don't want to dwell too long on this tonight.

Some of you might only have a passing interest to any of this, in which case you can sing Christus Victor, and I love the song actually, people mistakenly think I don't. I don't know where that rumour came from.

But if some of you are concerned by the word association, then please come speak to me. But I want to raise it to say that not all references to Christus Victor that you see as you Google things on the internet or chat GPT are the same.

[2 : 29] So don't mistakenly associate this song with the views of that book that I mentioned. Okay? All right. Well, speaking about the devil, I have to say that he's not, I'm not referring to anyone else.

The devil is the devil. But I have to say that he is a tricky adversary, isn't it? As we are reading tonight in our text. And if you've ever struggled with your own sin, you would know this, right? Because you would have felt powerless to stop doing the thing that you know to be wrong. And that's because the devil is deceitful. Either convincing us that we're powerless to resist, or making us think that, oh, it's all harmless, so, you know, don't worry about it, when that's absolutely not the truth.

But he's also tricky because, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, on the slide there, 11 verse 14, Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.

He deceives us to fall for his lies, all the while thinking we're actually doing the right thing by God. That's why he's an angel of light, with a message from God.

[3 : 48] It's false piety that we fall for. And that's the particular false teaching and danger which Paul addresses in our passage today. It's described in verse 3, which is where I want to look to first, because I think it's helpful to understand the specific false teaching that Paul is teaching against before we then look at the source and the safeguard against it, as you will see in the outline.

You see, there were false teachers in Ephesus, where Timothy was, who forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods.

And such leaders or influential people within the church were creating extra rules to be followed. It's essentially a form of ascetism, that's the word on the slide, which is the practice of living under strict

discipline, that of abstinence and the denial of certain human desires.

And in this case, it's against marriage and against certain foods. Now, there are various takes on how this came about in the church. It could have stemmed from the Greek culture around them, where there was a view among some that the human body was impure.

The actual thing is called Gnosticism, whereas the spirit is pure. And so to satisfy the body in any way, whether with sex or food, was bad.

[5 : 19] And if you want a sort of analogous way of thinking, some parts of Buddhist philosophy is how it is taught, or transcendental spirituality, where it's freeing your body or freeing your mind from the body.

But it could also stem from a distortion of what is proper Christian teaching. Because after all, the Bible does teach against sexual immorality.

Self-control, called himself, extolled as a virtue. And he warned against things like gluttony and drunkenness. But asceticism took these things to the extreme.

Whereas the Bible is teaching that these things can be enjoyed, but in its proper context, these teachers were forbidding them altogether.

And all in the name of, you're doing this to pursue godliness, to be more holy. Now, whether the leaders themselves were subject to these own rules, the rules they made for themselves, or for others, we don't know.

[6 : 26] Paul doesn't say. But his language does suggest that these leaders were less than genuine, and therefore he calls them hypocritical liars. That is, they're saying one thing, but either knowing or doing another.

But for the people who fell for it, Paul warns that this is actually dangerous false teaching. Which brings us back to verse 1 and point 2.

Because the source of such false teaching is actually the devil. It's from deceiving spirits being taught by demons. But it shouldn't surprise us, Paul says, because the spirit has clearly warned and predicted this beforehand.

And so whether he's talking about the Old Testament or Jesus' own teaching, because if you look at Matthew 24, for example, he does talk about this. We read in verse 1, the spirit clearly says, that is, God has forewarned us, that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

Such teachings come through hypocritical liars whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. You see, in the last section, Paul had just declared the mystery or the truth of the gospel, from which he says, true godliness springs.

[7 : 47] And yet here, the devil is hard at work seeking to undermine that very truth. And sadly, it was working to deceive some. How he does it is to distort the truth.

And that is to take what is true and good, but then to twist it so that it deceives people into following a lie, but all the while thinking that what they're doing is good.

Paul, you see, is here not referring to pagans, is he? People who have not heard about Jesus or heard about the gospel. No, these people are, Paul says, abandoning the faith.

That means they're actually within the church, aren't they? They have heard the truth and yet are still falling away. And so this warning is for us, isn't it?

For us who are within the church. The human agents that the devil uses are false teachers in the church, but whether wittingly or unwittingly, they are doing the bidding of the devil, his evil spirits, his demons.

[8 : 59] And these false teachers have had their consciences so seared as with a hot iron that they don't even realise the wickedness that they are engaged in. Now, when the Bible speaks of a seared conscience, the image I often have in my mind is that of the human body and of skin, right?

Some of you medical students will know this, or everyone probably knows this, but the nerves that are under the skin were created to be sensitive so that they act as a warning system, isn't it?

And when it works properly and, you know, you touch something very hot or very cold, it prompts an instant reaction, doesn't it? We pull our hand away from a hot stove, or we jump into icy cold water, which I've done, gradually, into the sea.

We immediately jump out, don't we? These instant reactions stops us from getting into worse trouble, right? Getting further burns or hypothermia or something like that.

But when the nerves are damaged and desensitised, they are no longer able to warn us of this danger. You don't feel it. And that's what happens when our consciences are seared.

[10:15] We become impervious to the warning signs of sin. And so, for example, when, you know, you're enticed on your device with a link to access, whether it's a porn site or some gambling site, if initially your conscience is working, you know, even before you click it, that, no, I shouldn't.

That's a gut reaction that is really your conscience working, telling you, this is not right. Warning, warning, warning. But if you keep ignoring it, then over time, it becomes seared.

You no longer hear that inner voice sounding the alarm. You start rationalising and saying, oh, yeah, yeah, no, it's fine. Last time I did it, it wasn't that bad.

It's okay. That's what searing your conscience looks like. And the false teachers, therefore, probably don't even realise that what they're doing, what they're teaching, is wrong.

They have deceived even themselves into thinking that what they're doing is okay, is right, is good. Now, you may initially think, what's so wrong with that teaching, right?

[11:31] I mean, if someone doesn't marry and abstains from sex, I mean, is that really a sin, I mean, that they're asking them to do? Or if they decide not to eat certain foods like meat or unclean animals like pork or something, is that really that bad?

Not eating a particular food? Well, it's dangerous and demonic not because of the act itself, but actually because of the motivation behind the prohibition.

You see, it's not simply someone remaining single because they haven't found anyone suitable to marry or abstaining from meat because, you know, you don't like the taste of meat. And if that's you, then, you know, that's fine.

I'm not going to force you to eat yummy steak. That's fine. No, it's the fact that they practice such things thinking all the while that this is a sign of holiness, right?

That what these teachers have done is made the very acts of prohibitions a spiritual or even salvation issue. And by doing so, Paul says, they're teaching or carrying a false view of God and His character.

[12:49] they are distorting God's purpose for creation. They are making God out to be what He's not and so we are believing a lie. And that's the thing that ultimately the devil loves to do, isn't it?

Portray God in a way that's actually opposite to who He is. And ultimately, it does endanger one's salvation because Paul goes on now to explain in verse 3, even as He then shows us how to safeguard this.

So, reading on from verse 3, we read again, they forbid people to marry and all of them to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.

For everything God created is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by the Word of God and prayer. Sex within marriage and food to be enjoyed, these are good things God has created for us and we can enjoy them if we receive them with thanksgiving.

And none of this, Paul says, is guesswork on our part. It's actually clearly revealed in God's Word. Hence, we had that Old Testament reading in Genesis 1 which, let's go back to that because in the context where after each day of creation, God sees what's created and says it's good, we then come to day 6 and we read this.

[14:21] So God created mankind in His own image. In the image of God, He created them male and female. He created them. Why male and female? Well, in particular, so that they can then have sex through marriage to be fruitful and fill the earth.

Because otherwise, no marriages, no procreation, no filling the earth. No you and me, by the way. Right? So God goes on to say, God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase in number.

Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. And then turning to food, God said, I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with its seed in it, they will be yours for food.

Every. Can you see that word? There's no reference here yet to animals, but God makes provision for this when after the flood, he speaks to Noah. But notice then, jumping to verse 31, that God saw all that he had made and it was very good.

Right? Not just good, but very good. And that includes sex within marriage and animals for food. Now Jesus himself makes the point with animals for food when he says in Mark 7, verse 19, he declared all foods to be clean.

[15:46] So the unclean animal, animals which were named in Leviticus, are now clean because when Jesus comes, he fulfills the requirements of the law and so all the Old Testament laws have been superseded in him, as it were.

And the apostle Peter himself, he learned this very lesson because we read in Acts 10 that when God came to him with visions of all kinds of animals coming down from heaven, he initially hesitated and thought these were all unclean animals, but God declared and said, do not call what is clean or do not call what is clean unclean.

Therefore, to teach otherwise, which these false teachers were doing, and say something is bad when God created it for good is to make God out to be a liar, right?

And therefore, it is demonic. It is of the devil. The aim of which was to deny people God's good gifts and then paid God to be mean for doing so.

Now, the problem actually is even worse because it's not just pushing a false view of God as creator by making these prohibition salvation issues, they're also preaching a false gospel and undermining God as Savior.

[17:14] They are denying the sufficiency of Jesus' work on the cross. They're actually saying, oh, you know, you have to believe in Jesus but also do this in order to be saved.

And Christians of all people are to receive these things with thanksgiving because verse 3, they know the truth, they know the gospel and they believe in it. This truth here is a reference to, I believe, none other than the gospel or the mystery from which true godliness brings back in 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 16.

Paul himself confessed, believed in the truth and Jesus in this verse in 1 Timothy 1.16 when he looked at it in the first week, in order to be an example for others to believe in him and receive eternal life.

And then in the second week when Andrew covered chapter 2, in chapter 2 and verse 4, Paul also asked us to pray so that all people can be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

Same word there. And the truth is this, that Jesus alone saves by dying on the cross for our sins.

The gospel says it's not what we do or what we have to do but what Jesus has already done.

[18:38] So, you don't have to abstain from this or that in order to be godly enough to receive eternal life. And teaching such things actually undermines people's faith in Jesus.

and it's a lie that can ultimately cause them their eternal life. Now, in a nutshell, this is simply legalism, isn't it?

Which goes against the gospel. So, point 3, how do we save God against this? Well, by coming back to the gospel and reminding ourselves of it, believing in it and knowing the truth.

that means knowing that God's all-sufficient grace is all we need. That the cross is sufficient alone to pay for our sins, to free us from the penalty of death.

And of course, when it comes to knowing exactly what this truth is, what right is from wrong, well, everything we need is actually before us, isn't it? You're holding on to the Bible, God's complete word authoritative word to us.

[19:50] And I think that's what Paul means when he says at the end there that all these things are consecrated by the word of God and prayer. Because everything good is revealed to us in his word, which defines and therefore makes holy, if you like, that's the idea of consecrated, it defines that which God has created.

And so, we must never put ourselves in the position of God, isn't it? Think we're smarter than his, and therefore we start to invent what's right and what's wrong. No, we come back to what God's word says.

We mustn't treat something as bad when God says it's good. Our only right response, Paul says, is actually to give thanks, to pray, and give thanks to God in particular.

That is, we're actually free to enjoy all these good things that God has created. You know, for any of us who thinks that, oh, God is the kind of God that always likes to say no, well, actually, that's the wrong idea of God because God has created all these things so that we can say yes to them, receive them with thanksgiving, but of course, no right from wrong.

And the best thing to be thankful for, of course, above all, is for his son, Jesus, isn't it? who grounds us in the truth because our temptation is always, instead of sticking to the truth and the gospel, to veer either to have more, that is, to add things to the gospel and become legalistic, or to go less, that is, become careless and say, oh, God's word doesn't matter, I'll just do what I want.

[21 : 36] But Paul says the true godliness that springs from the gospel is neither legalism nor licentiousness, not by creating additional laws to live by or else totally disregarding the word of God for our lives.

But to know what this truth is requires that we know God's word, isn't it? So that we can believe in it and then receive it with thanksgiving. Because that's the point, isn't it?

anything that God creates by definition has to be good. God cannot create evil. He's incapable of creating something that's not good.

So when we know that God has created something, we ought to be giving thanks and then saying, thank you God that I can enjoy what you've given to me. Now, let's see how then as we close we can apply this for our day.

And firstly, there's two sides to things. the first one I want to suggest consider what may be analogous to the false teachings in the passage. That is, teachings that relate to legalism and ascetism.

[22 : 47] Now, the big issues of Paul's day of marriage and food are probably not the big ones today that confronts us in the church. Because apart from, I think, the Catholic church forbidding marriage is no longer a big controversy in the church, neither is the abstinence from certain foods.

but I think the issue of legalism still hangs around, doesn't it? It's whenever we're tempted to say, you know, as Christians, we don't do these things, or we must do these things in order to be saved. So, just probably not in our time anymore, but about 20 or 30 years ago, some churches prohibited certain styles of music in services because it was ungodly.

Okay, so having drums, sorry Mitchell, and modern choruses were a no-no. Some went so far as to say it was actually satanic because of the beat or whatever.

A church must only sing hymns, right? At the same time, around that time, things like dancing, going to rock concerts were frowned upon, you know, going to a pub for a drink with colleagues.

[24 : 01] Good Christians don't do that. Now, let me just say, there are certain dangers with some of these activities, yeah, okay? Drugs, alcohol abuse, these things easily happen in some of these events, and so sometimes it's good to say no if you are susceptible, right?

It's also good to abstain, particularly if you don't want to stumble another brother or sister who is weaker. But that's a very different motivation to thinking that abstaining from these things themselves make us godlier, right?

Or a means to become purer in God's eyes. Because music, dancing, and you might be surprised hearing me say this, even alcohol, they are things that can be received with thanksgiving.

And I say probably things like physical exercise as well, like going to the gym, some of you, using the internet. But again, as I said, as with anything, these things can be abused, can't they?

And the devil is good at turning a good thing which God created into something that entraps us, that we are enslaved to or addicted to. So, whilst we can enjoy these things and use them and give thanks to God for them, we also need to take care that they don't start to become idols, right?

[25 : 23] Or addictive, or things that drag us into sin, temptations that drag us into sin. But, having said that, the solution is not then to say just blanket abandon, because that is to turn to legalism.

That is to take the focus away from saying no. It is actually Jesus that says, and it is Jesus that actually will give us the strength by his spirit for us to say no to these things, if and when they are inappropriate, rather than to say, nobody can do that, because otherwise you are not a good Christian.

Now, these same principles, I think, can also be applied to the other side, isn't it? Because I think those are the issues for our day. We live in a world, rather than saying no, is saying too easily to things that ought to be known.

Because if the devil can turn what's good into something bad, you can bet your bottom dollar that he'll try to turn what is bad into something good as well. wrong. And you only have to think about what the hot button issues of our day are, right?

Those of you who follow the media and the issues that are talked about, the biggest controversies that divide people, the things around abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage, they've all been

made to look like good things, haven't they?

[26 : 49] How can any of these things be wrong, we hear people say, because they're protecting human rights, they're giving dignity to people, they're alleviating suffering, they're encouraging love.

But the converse of what Paul has been warning again still holds, doesn't it? Because if God has not created these things to be good, then we are not to receive them with thanksgiving.

God has taught us through his word what life and marriage is all about. the sanctity of these things, and so we do not then affirm the opposite of what God has defined or created to be good.

Now the world may not understand or choose to accept these things, that's okay in one sense because they don't know the truth. It's not okay in the sense that it doesn't make it right, but you can understand it because they do not have God's word.

But for those of us who do, who believe and know the truth, then all the more reason why we mustn't fall for the lies that imperil our faith, isn't it?

[28 : 00] And that's why I think we need to just keep coming back to what Paul has been teaching us so far, that actually the truth matters. And thus, we want to appoint leaders who safeguard this truth that was in last week's chapter, but ultimately we also want the whole church to display true godliness because they know and understand the gospel.

They believe in it, then they leave it out so that they can then conduct themselves in a manner that is pleasing to God.

So let me end then by praying that God will help us to continue to do that. Let's pray. Father, please guard your church from the tricks of the devil, and in particular against false teaching which either promotes legalism or a rejection of your laws and truth.

But, Lord, help us to know the great gift of your Son Jesus, so that we might live freely in the gospel of grace, to receive all your good gifts with thanksgiving, consecrated by your word, and with us responding in prayer.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.