

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Timothy 4:1-16 "Be An Example"

Paul has reached the meat of his letter to Timothy about the troubles caused by false teachers in the Ephesian church. He lays out two contrasting descriptions: the people in the church who are falling away and *abandoning* the faith, and Timothy as a leader who must now show an example of *godliness* to the church.

1) *Apostasy*

The Greek word that describes the effects of the false teachers is *apostasia* – literally “standing away” from the truth – from which we get the word *apostasy*. It is abandoning the faith – not just denying its truth, but living in a way that denies God’s claim on a person’s life. Paul says that the Spirit has revealed – whether to him or to others is not said – that “in the last days” people will fall away. That idea has of course fitted every generation of the Church from the 1st century to the 21st century, and is a reminder that “the last days” are all the days after Jesus came and the Holy Spirit descended – reflecting no doubt God’s view of human history. We all think we live in the last days, and we all do!

What does this “falling away” look like in Ephesus in the 1st century? False teachers are deceiving believers by telling lies that are at root demonic – or better, satanic, coming from “the father of lies.” These are controlling teachers who among other things

forbid their followers marrying or eating certain foods. Their rules have an appearance of “holiness” in their self-denial and asceticism. We’re not sure exactly what lay behind these prohibitions, but from Paul’s letters to the churches in Corinth and Colossae, and now to Timothy in Ephesus, it looks as though already in the mid-1st century there were signs of the Gnostic movement that would develop in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

Gnosticism was a strange brew of Greek, Jewish and other ideas; claiming “secret knowledge” that could lead its initiates to the “true god” who was at the top of a very long chain of supernatural beings. Jesus was somewhere along the chain, and so even was the Jewish “God the Creator” – but nowhere near the top. Any supernatural being who had connections with the material world was regarded as inferior: “the spirit” needed to be freed from earth. This meant that everyday human life had no value, but strangely it also meant that it didn’t matter what you did in or with your body, since it was going to be discarded. So ascetic practices went hand in hand with license.

Gnosticism’s origins, said Christian teachers like Paul, were in the lie that God’s material creation was no good, and it came from people who had either no conscience or bad consciences – teachers who knew their teachings were false but used them to sway

people into following them – hypocrites, in other words. Christians, says Paul, should have nothing to do with these “godless myths” and “old wives’ tales.” They were profane and ungodly stories, of the kind that were imagined to circulate among groups of old women sitting around a “witches brew” of gossip and fables and total credulity. If “old wives’ tales” sounds both sexist and “ageist” now, Paul is only using an expression well known in Greek philosophy and polemic writings!

So people in the Ephesian church were trading the Gospel of grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ for a sad mixture of myths and rules. And of course that has been repeated over and over through the ages. I suppose if you had to pick a modern equivalent, it would be something like believing everything that you find on the Internet, but not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are a million diverse “spiritualities” on sale today, and too many Christians buy into them. I am sometimes amazed at the things people believe, and where they get them from! How gullible are we? Does no-one have any discernment any more? Or is that the expected result of “24/7 news coverage,” billions of web pages, tens of thousands of blogs and circulated e-mail letters? Is this overload of information and opinion making us stupid?

I am sure that you receive, as I do, all kinds of e-mails that people so kindly forward to everyone in their address book. Some are such nonsense, some are so clearly false, some are so profane, that the only thing to do is delete them immediately. Others are more subtle, with a veneer of truth that can take you in. It’s wise to make a point of looking some topics up on the “urban legends” sites before forwarding yet another tale of alligators in the sewers, or aliens in the sky in Arizona, or celebrities who are tools of Satan. Christians, of all people, should not be the

ones to fall for and help spread “old wives’ tales” and “godless myths.” But too many people who claim to believe in Jesus Christ, and to read their Bibles, also believe in government conspiracies, homeopathy, and snake oil.

Beware too the controlling teachers who want to dictate your food, your marriage, your social life, in the name of some doubtful spirituality. Don’t be credulous. Check it out. There is a difference between Orthodox Judaism and a cult in Texas, even though both tell you what to do with your life. Pray for some discernment, and don’t believe everything you read in a magazine or newspaper, or see on TV, or download from the Internet. People are being led astray every day, and “fall away” from Christian faith.

Remember too Paul’s statement that “all God made is good” and can be enjoyed with gratitude and prayer. Some people think he may be referring here to thanksgiving for food before a meal – the ancient and honorable tradition of “saying grace” – which still deserves our attention. It is right and good to stop on occasion and “bless God” for the ways he has blessed us.

2) *Be An Example*

What’s to be done about false teaching and people being led astray? Paul’s answer to Timothy has two parts. Restrain the false teachers and *instruct people in the truth* of the Gospel; and *yourself be an example* of truly Godly living! “Talk the talk and also walk the walk.”

So there is much emphasis on teaching and preaching and public reading and exposition of Scripture – meaning primarily the Hebrew Bible, but also letters from the Apostles circulated among the churches in the 1st century (remember that nobody had yet

compiled a "New Testament," or even written some of it, but already some of Paul's letters were being referred to as "Scripture"). So Timothy needs to "nourish himself" on the "truths of the faith" and the "good teaching" he has followed all his life - he was raised by a Christian mother and grandmother.

Timothy is to "use his gift," which he received when the elders laid their hands on him. This reminds us that we're not exactly sure what Timothy's "position" was in the church in Ephesus. He seems to be not only Paul's personal representative there, but also as an "overseer" appointed by "the council of elders." Given that Ephesus was a large city, some interpreters think there were multiple Christian "house churches," each with its own overseer (*episkopos*, in English *bishop*), and that Timothy was acting in a city-wide role that would by the 2nd century become a "presiding" or "monarchic" bishop overseeing an area.

The problem that haunts Timothy in this position is that he is a young man, probably in his early 30s. In a culture that reveres and is ruled by "elders," it is hard to be the "presiding bishop," even if you carry Paul's authority! "Don't let anyone look down on you because of your youth," says Paul. "Show them what a Godly Christian looks like" ... "*be an example to the believers.*" Remember how the last chapter dealt with leaders having a *good reputation with outsiders... for the sake of the Gospel*; here Paul wants Timothy to be a *good example to believers for the sake of those being led astray* inside the church.

So Timothy should show by his faith, his love, his speech, his purity, his life, what it means to be truly "Godly." Here is the contrast: godliness vs. apostasy. Timothy should model the one in order to combat the other. If you don't want people to fall away

under false teaching, *show them* what real Christianity looks like! By all means teach them the Scriptures and instruct them in the truth, but also show them that even a young man can be an inspiring example of godliness. So Timothy will have to "train himself," just as an athlete would, to become visibly better in his speech, faith, love, purity - in his *life!* He will have to "watch his life and doctrine closely," then he will be able to save not only himself but his wavering listeners in Ephesus.

You will perhaps remember that I have used this text a number of times in sermons to our teenagers on Confirmation Sunday. "Don't let anyone look down on your youth... be an example to the believers." I still believe there are young people in our midst who are living examples of Christian faith. Some of our teens know more about the Bible, are more clear-minded about their faith in Jesus, and are more likely to give their time and energy to serving other people, than their parents' generation. Christianity is not first and foremost about years of service to the church, but about true faith in Jesus Christ that shows itself in a godly life.

We all have something to learn from young people who are good examples of faith. I think of two young brothers who stood here last summer to be baptized; one of them had come through very serious illness, and had already faced issues of life and death and the meaning of faith. He *wanted* to be baptized and to show his faith publicly! I think of a high schooler who has served on a church committee for two years, and not simply added to a resume, but has been present at every meeting and done real work that makes a difference. I think of children who went on a hospital visit to see and bring joy to someone who is very ill, even though one of them fainted while they were there!

Young people often dare to do things that we older, more cautious people don't. We need to watch and learn, and maybe recapture a bit of that spirit, even if we can't recapture the energy! And we need to grasp that - like it or not, for good or ill - *we are all examples to other believers*. Someone today will get another glance at what Christianity looks like from you, and from me. That is a huge responsibility. People have told me what a difference it made to their social lives when they realized they were now known to be "Deacons at the Congregational Church."

So we all need to *"train ourselves in godliness"* for the sake of those in the church who are seeking a vision of Christian life, and for people outside the church who are judging the claims of Christianity by the behavior of people they know to be Christians. That is something we should all take seriously, and pray for God's grace to be good examples.

Let us pray...