

## **Introduction**

I'd like to introduce what I'm preaching about today with a question. What is your favorite part of the Thanksgiving meal? For me, it's the mashed potatoes and cream style corn. What is it for you? Whatever it is, I'd give you this piece of advice. Eat, drink, and be merry! But that advice isn't just for Thanksgiving. It's for the entirety of your life as well. That should be one of its mottos. Eat, drink, and be merry!

I know what some of you are probably thinking. What kind of advice is that for a preacher to give? I'll tell you what kind. It's Biblical advice. God Himself wants us to do that. Turn to Ecclesiastes 8:14-15 and 1 Timothy 4:1-5 and you'll see what I mean.

## **Don't Eat, Drink, and Be Merry**

Let's look first at 1 Timothy 4:1. Paul begins by saying that the Holy Spirit teaches what will happen in "**later times**," meaning in future generations, after Paul's and Timothy's. But what He teaches will happen, Paul implies, is already happening. Some people are falling away from the faith. They believe things that are contrary to the gospel of Jesus. They believe those things, Paul says, because of "**deceitful spirits**" and "**doctrines of demons**." Those two phrases teach us that false doctrines aren't man made. They're demon made. They come straight from the very pit of hell itself.

Now, it may be demons who make these false doctrines but it's human beings who spread them. That's Paul's point in verse 2. Satan is constantly looking for people he can use, like hypocrites and liars. When he finds them, he "**sears their conscience**." The word "**sears**" connotes branding. Satan brands or imprints his image on them. They then become his lackeys who spread the doctrines of demons.

These doctrines of demons are numerous and diverse. It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you sincerely believe it. Be baptized and take communion and you'll be saved. God wants you to live

luxuriously and if you're faithful to Him, you will. Human beings are inherently good not evil. And on it goes. Those are several of the doctrines of demons that hypocrites and liars spread.

There are many more, one of which Paul mentions in verse 3. It's that pleasure is evil. The word "men" refers to a group called "Gnostics." Their foundational belief was that Spirit is altogether good and matter is altogether evil. That belief had many implications one of which is found in verse 3. Notice that these Gnostics did two things. First, they forbade God's gift of marriage because it involved sexual pleasure. Second, they abstained from His gift of good foods because it involved culinary pleasure. That reveals one of the implications of their foundational belief. Pleasure is evil. Pleasure is a consequence of engaging matter. But matter is evil. Pleasure, therefore, is too. So, people shouldn't enjoy it. That's what they believed and taught.

But they aren't the only ones. Many Christians have too. St. Ciaran, for instance, mixed sand with his food so that it wouldn't taste good. He did that because he believed that food is just for living, not enjoying. Many Christians over the centuries have bought into this doctrine of demons. Pleasure is evil and thus we shouldn't enjoy it.

### **Do Eat, Drink, and Be Merry**

But nothing could be further from the truth. The truth is that we should eat, drink, and be merry. Paul teaches us two things here.

The first is in verses 3 and 4. Verse 3 – God created the pleasures of sex in marriage and good foods. Verse – they are, therefore, "**good.**" Do you get what Paul is saying? God invented pleasure and it's good.

In C.S. Lewis' wonderful book *The Screwtape Letters*, a leader demon names Screwtape instructs an underling demon named Wormwood about pleasure in its healthy and normal form. He warns Wormwood that when demons are dealing with that, they're on God's ground. Observing that they've won many souls through pleasure, he goes on to declare: "**All the same, it is His (God's) invention, not ours. He made the**

**pleasures; all our research so far has not enables us to produce one."** He's absolutely right. God invented pleasure and it's good.

So, we should enjoy it. That's the second thing Paul teaches. We should enjoy pleasure. The words "**shared in**" in verse 3 teach us just that. We should share in God's gifts. That means get all the healthy and normal pleasure from them he invented them to give. Or as Solomon says it in Ecclesiastes 8:14, "**eat, drink, and be merry.**" Don't get me wrong. God certainly doesn't want us to be hedonists who live for pleasure. But He doesn't want us to be ascetics either who abstain from it. Pleasure isn't the ultimate good. But it is a superb good. So, we should enjoy it. It isn't wrong to do that. It's wrong in fact not to.

Since Paul mentions food in verse 3, let's think of those two things he teaches in terms of that. Did you know that we have 10,000 taste buds on our tongues? Those taste buds enable us to experience five taste sensations: sweet, bitter, savory, salty, and sour. The one people like the most of course is sweet. Some scientists claim in fact that we're genetically hard-wired to crave sweetness. That's why we enjoy all of those Little Debbies so much. Imagine what our lives would be like if we couldn't taste food. They'd be significantly diminished. The moral is that God invented taste and it's good.

So, we should enjoy it. There's an old saying, "**We shouldn't live to eat; we should eat to live.**" I fully endorse the first half of it. We shouldn't live to eat. We're hedonists if we do. But I just as fully reject the second half of it. We shouldn't eat just to live. We're ascetics if we do. We shouldn't eat food just to exist. We should also eat it to enjoy.

Food illustrates the two things Paul teaches. #1 – God invented pleasure and it's good. #2 – we should enjoy it. We should eat, drink, and be merry.

## **Why?**

That's what we should do. Now let's examine why we should do it. It's because it's essential to our spiritual lives.

We see that in Ecclesiastes 8:14-15. Notice what Solomon does in verse 14. He draws our attention to the injustices of life. He implies in doing so that this life is radically unsuited to the human heart. And it will always be no matter how spiritual we become. Consequently, we can't have a robust faith in God and His word without several things, one of which, according to verse 15, is pleasure.

Many of us don't grasp that but C.S. Lewis did, once again in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. In another part of the book Screwtape chastises Wormwood for allowing the Christian to whom he's assigned to enjoy two things. **"In other words,"** he says, **"You allowed him two real positive pleasures. Were you so ignorant as not to see the danger of this."** He then explains the danger, **"I have known a human defended from strong temptations to social ambition by a still stronger taste for tripe and onions."**

Lewis understood a fundamental truth about us. Pleasure is a line of defense against dysfunction, weakness, failure, and sin. It has the effect of weakening the power of temptation over us. It makes sin look not good to us. But its absence is weakness. Lack of it has the effect of strengthening the power of temptation over us. It makes sin look good to us. The bottom line is that pleasure strengthens us and lack of pleasure weakens us in our efforts to do what is right.

Do you realize what that means? Those who abstain from healthy and normal pleasures are more vulnerable to the attacks of Satan, the world, and the flesh. In contrast, those who enjoy healthy and normal pleasures are less vulnerable to their attacks.

And that's why we should eat, drink, and be merry!

### **How?**

Now that we know why we should, let's take a look at how. Paul explains how to eat, drink, and be merry in verses 4 and 5. In verse 4, he tells us not to reject God's gifts like sex in marriage and good food but to receive them. The word "reject" connotes "turn from." The word

“receive” connotes embrace. So, Paul calls us to embrace God’s gifts, to engage them profoundly. He also tells us how to do that. It’s with gratitude. We’re to be thankful for them. A Jewish rabbi identifies the essential element of thankfulness. It’s what he calls “thankfulness.” We have to think about God’s gifts, in detail, in order to be thankful for them. Paul goes on to comment in verse 5 that we are to sanctify God’s gifts. We do that, he says, by means of the word of God and prayer. He’s teaching us here how to make God’s gifts holy. It’s by relating them to Him. It’s by thinking about them in terms of Him.

Now let’s put verses 4 and 5 together. They exhort us to do two things – embrace or engage God’s gifts and think about them. An old slogan captures the essential elements of this. It’s **“Take time to smell the roses.”** Did you ever consider what that slogan means? It’s two things. First, we bring the rose before our senses. We hold it as close to our noses and eyes as we can - breathing in its vitalizing fragrance, gazing at its stunning colors, features, and form. Second, we bring the rose before our minds - reveling in its fragrance and beauty and pondering what they tell us about the God who invented and made it.

That’s illustrated by way of example how we eat, drink, and be merry. It’s by bringing God’s gifts as fully before our senses and minds as we can. Notice I said senses and minds. Enjoying the pleasures of God’s gifts has both a sensual and a mental aspect. Roger Scruton explains this well in an article he wrote for *National Review* magazine titled “A Philosophy of Pleasure”: **“Human pleasure may be sensual, like the pleasure of a hot bath, or intellectual, like the pleasure of mathematical proof. But the pleasures that matter most to us, and shape our lives and personalities, are neither purely sensual nor purely intellectual, but both at once.”** He’s right. The pleasures that matter most to us, that shape us, are both sensual and mental at once.

Take showers, for instance. I don’t know about you but I bring them as fully before my senses and mind as I can. I take in the warmth, smell, and sound of the water and revel in it. I also relate it to God by doing

what Paul says in verse 5. Every time I've taken a shower in the morning for the past two years, I've quoted a verse out loud, Lamentations 3:22: **"The Lord's lovingkindnesses never cease. His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness."** I don't just take showers. I enjoy them. I get from them all the pleasure God made them to give.

It's the same with apples. Our church secretary Sandy Mink, is always giving me snacks – things like cashews, candy bars, Tootsie rolls, and fruit. Two weeks ago, she walked into my office and gave me an apple and we began discussing it. She commented how sweet, juicy, and firm it was, which is how we both like them. I replied by commenting on its appearance. I noted the different shades of red on the apple and how they blended so beautifully together. **"Apples may just be the most beautiful of all fruits,"** I said. It then suddenly dawned on me and I shared it with Sandy: **"That may be why tradition considers the forbidden fruit in Genesis 2 to have been apples – because they're so appealing to the eye."** Sandy and I bring apples as fully before our senses and minds as we can. We don't just eat apples. We enjoy them. We get from them all the pleasure God made them to give

That illustrates well how we eat, drink, and be merry. We bring all God's gifts - like showers, apples, roses, dog fur, sunsets, symphonies, spring rains, and so on - as fully before our senses and mind as we can.

## **Conclusion**

I close with the words of the celebrated poet Henry David Thoreau: **"I wanted to live deliberately, I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, To put to rout all that was not life and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not lived."** Thoreau's words capture one aspect of what Jesus called abundant life. That aspect is sucking all the marrow out of life. It's getting as much healthy and normal pleasure out of God's gifts as we can. So, let's do just that as followers of Jesus. Let's eat, drink, and be merry!