

**Scripture: 1 Timothy 4:1-16 (specifically: verses 7, 12-13 and 16)**

**Sermon: *The Priority of Godliness, Learned from the Scriptures***

Theme: Godliness is a good minister's discipline as opposed to the apostasy written about

### **Introduction:**

I recently read the following written by a pastor:

Several months ago I was conversing with a man I greatly admire. He is a Christian leader in a position that carries with it heavy and extensive responsibility. He said he was grieved on behalf of a missionary family he and his wife had known for years. The legalism they had encountered again and again on the mission field from fellow missionaries was so petty, so unbelievably small minded, they had returned to the states and no longer planned to remain career missionaries. He said it was over a jar of peanut butter. I thought he was joking, to which he responded, "No, it's no joke at all." I could hardly believe the story.

The particular place they went to serve the Lord did not have access to peanut butter. This particular family happened to enjoy peanut butter a great deal. Rather creatively, they made arrangements with some of their friends in the states to send them peanut butter every now and then so they could enjoy it with their meals. The problem is they didn't know until they started receiving their supply of peanut butter that the other missionaries considered it a mark of spirituality that you not have peanut butter with your meals. I suppose the line went something like this: "We believe since we can't get peanut butter here, we should give it up for the cause of Christ," or some such nonsense. A basis of spirituality was "bearing the cross" of living without peanut butter.

The young family didn't buy into that line of thinking. Their family kept getting regular shipments of peanut butter. They didn't flaunt it, they just enjoyed it in the privacy of their own home. Pressure began to intensify. You would expect adult missionaries to be big enough to let others eat what they pleased, right? Wrong. The legalism was so petty, the pressure got so intense and the exclusive treatment so unfair, it finished them off spiritually. They finally had enough. Unable to continue against the mounting pressure, they packed it in and were soon homeward bound, disillusioned and probably a bit cynical. What we have here is a classic modern-day example of a group of squint-eyed legalists spying out and attacking another's liberty. Not even missionaries are exempted.<sup>1</sup>

Is there something wrong with that story?

How do we get to that point?

Is that what Christianity is about?

Does that type of thing still happen in churches across the country and the world?

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpted from Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*. Read in *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*. Thomas Nelson. Nashville, TN 1998. Page 337-338.

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Well, that is exactly the type of thing that was happening with this false doctrine in 1 Timothy's setting. There was false doctrine creeping into the church at Ephesus. People were backsliding or falling away from the faith.

Today we will look at 1 Timothy 4:1-16 and see that Paul teaches that false doctrine is from the devil and the cure and preventive for false doctrine is in godliness from teaching, studying, and living the Scriptures.

Let's start by reading 1 Timothy 4:1-5:

*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, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.*

- I. These first few verses are about the false doctrine in Ephesus.
  - a. Paul had written about this problem before. In 1 Timothy 1:3-11, Paul wrote about false doctrine. Now he gives more clues as to what this false doctrine is.
  - b. First, notice that Paul says that the Spirit says in the latter days some will abandon the faith... Paul says that the Spirit says this. Or the Spirit, "expressly" says this. Paul has had some experience with God communicating this to him. In fact, Paul knows this for sure. People will fall away from the faith.
  - c. Paul says these people who are abandoning the faith are following "deceiving spirits and things taught by demons." Wow! That is strong. Now, Paul says this about the "last days." But know that Paul is considering this as his time period as well as ours. The Bible calls the last days or the "later times" as the time period from Jesus' resurrection until the time when Jesus brings final judgment on the earth.
  - d. So, this false doctrine that Paul is writing against is all from the devil. This is taught by demons, caused by deceiving Spirits. This comes from people who abandon their faith.
    - i. **Eph 6:12** *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

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- ii. What our churches must be careful of is accommodating the people who abandon the faith. We try to do this when we want to change the message so as not to offend.
  - e. Verses 1-5 tell us what is going on. There is a type of legalism, likely people who thought they should keep the whole Jewish law or people who were part of a Greek form of thought called Gnosticism which taught that matter was all evil.
  - f. But verses 4-5 say that Christ has made all things good. Now, what does this mean? It doesn't mean that drugs and excess is good, no, certain substances are clearly wrong. There are other passages in the Bible that teach us stewardship of the body.
  - g. We must not call sin what the Bible doesn't call sin. We must not forbid what the Bible doesn't forbid.
- II. Verses 6-11 are about discipline: discipline for godliness as opposed to this false asceticism and these false regulations. A key verse in this section is verse 7 and that is what I would like to read right now.

*<sup>7</sup> Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness...*

- a. Do you see the difference? Paul was writing against this asceticism. Asceticism has to do with strict self denial. Paul is now contrasting their self denial. He was saying that the self denial they were doing--- it's really not even in the Bible. It is all from these godless myths. These godless myths are only fit for old wives' tales.
- b. One writer says: the idea of myths: fit only for old women, this was a common saying denoting something fit only for the uneducated and philosophically unsophisticated
- c. So, Paul is writing that they are godless, these ascetic ways they are practicing are not of God. They are not only not of God, they not even sophisticated. Now, they are in Ephesus, this is an important city, they want to be sophisticated, but Paul is saying they aren't.
- d. But the word "discipline" or "train" is an athletic term: this denoted rigorous self sacrificing training as athletics go. So now Paul says that Spiritual discipline is the key to godly living (1 Cor 9:24-27).
- e. Listen to **1 Cor 9:24-27: Paul writes of the Christian life with the idea of athletics:**  
*<sup>24</sup> Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. <sup>25</sup> Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. <sup>27</sup> No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*

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- f. We know what it means to work hard for the purpose of athletics, don't we? We are a sports-saturated society. This passage is saying, "All that work you will do to win the football game, put that effort into living a godly life; all that work you will do to stay in shape and look good; put that effort into your spiritual life; all that work you will do in order to play good basketball or baseball put that effort into your spiritual life.
  - g. We all know how hard it is to deny ourselves good food in order to maintain a weight which pleases us. But many times people do this. It is difficult to maintain an exercise routine, but many times people do this. Nothing wrong with that. Except in this case, they were preaching that certain things were wrong that really weren't wrong. Paul says put that misplaced effort into living godly.
  - h. Discipline or train yourself to be godly.
- III. Now, I want to talk about the last section of these sixteen verses. This is verses 11-16. In verses 11-16 Paul tells Timothy to "command and teach these things." Let me read verses 11-16:

*Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

- a. What does Paul mean, "command and teach these things"? What "things" is Paul talking about? I believe Paul may be talking about the whole letter, but he is minimally talking about the surrounding verses. Paul is telling Timothy to command and teach the people to discipline or train themselves in godliness. Also, in verse 6 Paul had told them something similar.
- b. In verse 13 Paul tells Timothy to devote himself to the public reading and teaching of Scripture.
- c. In verse 16 Paul tells Timothy to watch his life and doctrine closely. Notice that? Notice that life and doctrine go close together. But notice once again the focus on doctrine.
- d. The prevention of false doctrine, the cure for false doctrine, this is the discipline of godliness, learned from the Scriptures. This is discipleship.

**Close:**

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Is forbidding peanut butter in the Bible? No, not at all. There is grave danger when we blur the distinction between personal preference and Scripture. In the case of the missionaries who liked peanut butter, the people had a personal preference against peanut butter. They thought it was sinful to have peanut butter.

We must all be careful of blurring personal preference and Scripture. Personal preferences are good as long as we don't unreasonably impress them on others. In the case in this Scripture passage, they were impressing legalistic unrealistic and unscriptural standards on others. So, Paul gives the antidote—take that discipline people are applying in the wrong way and instead apply that to godliness. This comes through the teaching of the Scriptures. This comes through spiritual disciplines. This comes through discipleship.

So, I encourage you to do the same. Take your Bible off the shelf and read and pray. Maybe you are doing this already, praise God! If not, read John chapter 1 tomorrow and pray that God would teach you and lead you through His Word.

A native of the Congo prayed thus: "Dear Lord, You be the needle and I be the thread. You go first, and I will follow wherever You may lead."<sup>2</sup> Go and follow God's lead.

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<sup>2</sup> Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*. Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.