

Once in a while you go to a play, see a film, or you hear a piece of music, and you get to a place in the performance and you think, "This is it!" "What an ending." "What a great piece of art!" And then ... it goes on.

And you leave, thinking, "This writer (or composer), he just doesn't know when to end. It went on far too long."

When I was a disc jockey for a few years in my 20's you came to hate certain records because they had false endings. *Good Lovin'* by The Rascals, *Good Vibrations* by The Beach Boys, *Turn! Turn! Turn!* by the Byrds. Once in a while you'd start the next record before the one before it had really finished. Didn't they know how to end this! Too cute by half!

You could be forgiven for having these thoughts about Paul's first letter to Timothy. It's a letter that starts off with a greeting, and then gets *right* into the conflict. // There are false teachers. Not only are they swerving from the true faith, but since they teach others, many others could soon be falling away.

So Paul then reminds people – this is chapter 1 at verse 12 – what the true teaching is: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And not only that – that this good news is true also for the worst possible people. "Me – Paul – a persecutor and blasphemer and an opponent..." even I get saved. And so, he says in chapter 2, we need to pray for ALL people. Even kings and people in high positions. Then he sets up a structure so that this kind of false teaching doesn't continue. Chapter 3 gives us these offices of deacon and elder. And it's amazing how these offices build into the church the very things that Jesus himself performed when he set up the kingdom – Elders are to teach the word. Jesus told us that he IS the word. And that is the very thing that elders are to teach – the Word. To teach Christ and him crucified – and do it as a shepherd. Elders are shepherds of the truth.

But not only that. Not only did Jesus minister with the truth by *being* the truth, but he also ministered with tears. Jesus wept for the lost and the dying. And so Paul builds this office into the church by appointing deacons. Deacons who come alongside and minister to our felt needs. People who are sensitive to suffering. Jesus knew what it was like to suffer with sin because he bore our sins, and we need people around us who will minister to us in just that way. (What a friend we have in Jesus!)

And that's where it should end. Problem solved. The very model of the ministry of Jesus is built into the church, which should prevent false teaching. And it even looks like it's ended. Paul says in chapter 3, verse 14, I hope to come to see you soon! And he ends with a closing hymn at verse 16 – a confessional hymn that would help anyone memorize the gospel (A great benediction):

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

That's the end, right!?

But no. It's not. In fact, one way to translate the beginning of chapter 4 is the way the NAS does it: "*But ... the Spirit. And it's serious stuff! Let's read it together. What could be so important that Paul had to ruin the perfect ending?*"

1 Timothy 4:1-5

p. 1264

¹ 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, ² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴ For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (ESV)

The theologian N.T Wright tells the story of a woman – a friend who grew up in rural England. It was rural enough that there really was no access to over-the-air television even when it was introduced late in her childhood. But she never felt as though she had missed anything because there was the radio, and all of the board games her family loved to play, like Scrabble, Monopoly and Clue. But best of all, her family loved to play card games around the kitchen table (Hearts, Gin Rummy). They loved the feel of the cards, holding them secretly to their chest, dealing them out after they had learned how to shuffle them like their dad, and even how to disguise whether they had been dealt a good hand or not. They also became familiar with the different faces of the Jack and Queen and King, and aware of the little folds or creases in some of the cards that might tell you whether brother Bobby is holding the Queen of Spades. Wright's friend felt that when she looked back on whatever she may have missed by not connecting to some of the memories that others had of the golden age of television, she more than made up for it with her own memories, and learning to think strategically, developing her math skills to count cards, and literally learning to play the hand you're dealt and not grumbling when someone gets a better a hand.

Now when this woman grew up and met a man and fell in love, she found out that not everybody saw a pack of playing cards the way she did. This man's grandfather had lost his job during the Depression, and the family had to move into a small shack in a bad part of town. In desperation, wanting to provide for his family, he began gambling at cards. But soon, more than a way to make money, it had become an obsession. Over time, a family just hanging on, was left in total ruins. Losses at gambling led to alcohol, and that led to a father who left the family in shame and never came home.

For this grandson, now grown up, the sight of playing cards – the faces of the Jack, Queen and King – was to be filled shame, ridicule and ruin. Something that was good – the ability to play and laugh and think strategically – for another was immoral, irresponsible and ruinous. A game that uses printed faces on thin cardboard, for him, was untouchable, and unthinkable to have in the home.

And that is what sin does. It twists and bends things that are good.

And that is why this letter cannot end. Paul has just finished speaking doxology. The gospel. And it's beautiful. But he knows how this beautiful message has been twisted, and he has to explain to the elders and deacons – here is how this happens: "In later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons."

We don't have time here to do this – we'll do it some other Sunday – but when the bible says in "later times" or in "latter days," it means now. It means any time between the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus. It means right now. It's what theologians call "inaugurated eschatology" which is just a fancy way of saying that when Jesus was born, the future was now. That everything the Old Testament promised short of the return of Messiah became a "now thing." When the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, that future reality became a now thing for all of us.

So how does this work? It means all of the OT prophecies about wars and rumors of war, and family feuds, and pestilence and even the final apostasy... started right then. For Paul, the end is already casting its shadow, and since we are further down the line than Paul, we see the shadows all the more. All the more will we see people abandoning the faith. We are not to be afraid – after all, He "is proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world!" But at the same time, as Jesus himself said, "many false prophets will arise and lead many astray."¹ This means that heretics – as bad as they are, and they're real bad – fulfill end time prophecies. For the believer they are almost reassuring because we know that this then, must be the end time.

Ah, but some fall away. Some depart from the faith. How does this happen? With the time we have left, let's look at:

- Demons
- Teachers
- Hearers

I know that sounds like Lions and Tigers and Bears, and that's intentional! So let's go:

First, Demons.

Ultimately, false teachers don't do their thing on their own accord, but are doing what they do because they're following – they're devoted to – the teachings of demons. They've departed the faith because they've been led astray by deceitful spirits.

Now I know what this brings to mind. Movies where spirits come howling into a room and scare the pants off you, or a Frank Peretti novel. But I want you to take a step back. When you go to a movie, or you read a novel that contains some sort of artistic capture of what spirits are like, what you get is this powerful, howling, dragon-like, see-through... thing... who is always creating mischief by banging doors, blowing out candles, and inhabiting people for fun. They seem to be absolute powers that are unrecognizable.

But what does the bible say? The bible says that demons or evil spirits are a whole lot simpler.

¹ Matthew 24:11

1st John 4 says this: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God... By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already (*there is that inaugurated eschatology, right? The end is now*). Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

It's simple. And demons are very simple. Do they confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and is from God? Or do they confess something else? Do they confess this hymn at the end of chapter 3, or not? The doctrine of demons *denies* this fact.

Now why would they do that? Demons deny that Christ came in the flesh for this reason. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then we are still in our sins. And when Jesus rose from the dead and was seen in the flesh, he guaranteed that we would rise from the dead. That we would become new because Jesus makes all things new. And this is a gift of God, right?

The demons deny this and they want you to deny it for the same reason: God is never properly worshipped by a denial of his gifts (repeat) The demons want to contrive a kind of holiness that you can have apart from Christ! And if the devil – yes, at this church we do believe in the existence of the devil – if he can get you to think that by self-denial and personal sacrifice you can save yourself, then you will not need the sacrifice and self-denial of Jesus Christ who really came in the flesh to live the life you should have led and to die the death you should die – in the flesh. And if you deny that, then victory for Satan. A demon gets his wings.

And that is all the Satan wants. You don't need to imagine a demon who's green and red, spits fire, and invisibly flaps his wings over your head. All you need is the demonic teaching that Jesus is not God. So demons – that's what they're up to.

Now what of the teachers?

The imagery here is interesting. While the teaching may have demonic origins, it's rooted in the wickedness of humanity. It's *people* that devote themselves to these demonic teachings. And these people, Paul says, are insincere "liars." Some translations call them "hypocritical liars." Think for a moment how scathing this is: Hypocrisy or insincerity is deliberate pretense. It's intentional lying. You know the truth, but you won't speak it. So an insincere liar is a double liar. He lies to himself AND he lies to you! He doesn't believe his own teaching.

Now this happens all the time. The great philosopher and essayist David Hume believed that we cannot understand or trust in things that we have not experienced. We have to have sensory data. Knowledge can only be founded on an empirical basis – we have to check everything with our senses. The only way we come at knowledge is via empirical evidence. It's what he called a radical skepticism – you leave nothing up to chance.

But then, when he needed a break, Hume would relax... by playing a game of chance, backgammon, with his friends!

But these days, it is not just philosophers that speak with forked tongues. There are very popular talk show hosts that work in exactly this way. The host is like a priest or priestess. They now have book groups and book lists that function a lot like a small group bible study, and the subject is nearly always life transformation – these books are never about say, the politics of Malaysia. No, always life change. One of the most popular segments on Oprah's show is the "spirit" segment. In fact, at Oprah.com, the first tab on her website is the "spirit" tab. It's soft. It's soothing. It has pleasant insights. But I can tell you that nothing in the spirit segment has anything to do with, or in any way affirms that Jesus is God who came to save and raise his people. No, Oprah has said that she once thought that "Jesus' being here was about his death dying on the cross, when it really was about his coming to show us how to do it – to show us the Christ consciousness that he had, and that that consciousness abides with all of us."

She's saying that Christ is not about him crucified, but Christ *commoditized*. Christ as a commodity that can help me get what I want. Now that may be what we call today spiritual. And it may even pass as wisdom from the "spirit world." But that's because it *is* demonic. It's false teaching. And I suspect that even Oprah, who grew up in the church, knows that this is not what the bible teaches, even if you read it as a nice story or an allegory.

Now look, Oprah is likeable. *I* like her. So you may ask, "Where do you get off calling her demonic?" Well first, I am not calling her demonic, but her teaching is. And second, the bible says that "Satan is more crafty than any of the animals that the Lord God had made." This means he is the slickest of salesman. Satan doesn't wear obvious, loud plaid suits like a used car salesman. He's not going to come up to you looking very red, and holding a pitchfork, wearing a cape, and say, "Hi, my name is Satan, will you join my bible study? It leads to real transformation. I will take you straight to hell." No! He's going to claim to talk about spiritual things – anything spiritual, as long as it is not about Christ as God. He's going to be as trendy as Oprah, and as sweet as a couple of good-looking guys in white shirts and ties, with white teeth and who act like they are habitually popping serotonin reuptake inhibitors. Satan is crafty.

But not only that, the imagery here is that Satan does his work in the conscience. He sears the conscience. The language there is of a branding. Criminals at this time – like animals – were sometimes branded with the mark of the state. They were under the ownership of the state. And that place on their skin was cauterized with a hot branding iron so that it no longer had a sense of touch.

That's a powerful image. As if the teachers are branded as being owned by someone else, but it sure isn't Jesus. And then they are also branded as a liar who is so callous and unfeeling that he cannot even sense that he is the liar that he is!

Some of you may not be a Christian, but your conscience is not yet seared beyond feeling. I ask you to think about this: do you ever feel guilty? I am not saying you might feel guilty for not living up to God's law – the 10 commandments. No, I am asking if you feel guilty about not living up to your own standards. Can you? Do you live up to your own standards? I don't.

That's when you know your conscience is guilty – when you don't even live up to your *own* low standards.

Now some of you say, "Well, I have flashes of guilt, but then it passes. It's no big deal." But what really has happened is that over time we have shifted our standards to align with our behaviors. We don't do it to be logically consistent. No, we do it to alleviate our guilt. We conform the truth to match our conscience to get out from under the guilt.

Back in the 1920's the great anthropologist, Margaret Mead, went to Somoa.² She went there to study primitive sexuality. The reason was that our culture had noticed how difficult the whole adolescent period was for teens, and she wanted to see if it was the same in a primitive place. She wasn't there long, and only studied 68 girls in a village of 600, but her findings were this: That in Samoa, there is no concept of virginity. In Samoa, there is no concept of monogamy, or rape, or adultery. Her book, called *Coming of Age in Samoa*, became a bestseller, because the main theme was that in other cultures (at least this one), there was no concept of any kind of mores that have to do with sexuality. That people in Somoa do whatever they want with their bodies and their lives are better for it. The takeaway? We Americans should cast off our guilty consciences about all things sexual and adopt the happy primitive consciences of the Somoans.

Put this together with psychology's attempts to relieve guilt – frequently sexual guilt – that was happening with Freud at about the same time, and you had a good foundation for the sexual revolution.

But 50 years later, a couple of things happened. First, her daughter published a memoir about her parents. It turns out that Margaret Mead was married 3 times, and had had multiple affairs with men *and* women. And then another anthropologist, Derek Freeman thought that her research in *Coming of age in Samoa*, which by the way, was a huge bestseller and what earned her a Presidential Medal of Freedom, was flawed. So he studied Somoan culture and he found that virginity was the most prized status in the culture bar-none – that families were set up to guard a young woman's virginity until the time of marriage. He found in the cultural records that adultery was punishable by death. That rape was punishable by death. Freeman's theory? That Margaret Mead heard what she wanted to hear and disregarded the rest – that she conformed the truth - what she knew of Somoa – to her own standard, her own conscience.

And then do you know what happened? Freeman himself was ostracized. Because the anthropological community had long accepted the notion that sexuality and sexual morals don't matter, and they could either embrace his deconstruction of Margaret Mead... or cover their eyes and conform their standards to their own collective conscience.

And there you have it. The seared, branded conscience of one person becomes the seared, numb and unrecognizing conscience of the whole community. That's the way false teaching works.

And this leads us to **our third concern**. Demons and then teachers... *and now hearers*.

² Illustration taken from Rev. Tom Allen.

You see, Margaret Mead had a lot going for her. She was smart, she had a bestseller, and a ton of adolescents all willing to agree with her. But irreligious and the religious are frequently very similar. See Mead removed all standards, but many within the church have *added* to them. They became moralists. And what a moralist says, "Okay, I am no different than anyone else. But that will never make me important or special. So I'll add to these standards.... I will do some things so much better than others that I will have to be recognized.

We've spoken a lot in this series about the false teachers in Ephesus, and the need for what Paul calls sound doctrine. But here is where we get some specifics. These false teachers – as a part of their message – were preaching abstinence toward a number of things. They forbid people to marry. They forbid certain foods. They even advocated harsh treatment against the body. Why? Because a moralist creates a conscience against certain things when none is necessary, and suppresses that same conscience in other places where it should exist!

Now throughout the centuries, we've had many Christian ascetics who abstained from certain things – people who said don't do this, and don't do that, *but then managed this* through oppression, injustice, and favoritism. Our own history as a church – when we were in the Bible Presbyterian Church – that denomination tried to make the case that the Bible prohibited the consumption of alcohol entirely, and that all members should abstain.

And you see, as a result of many, many efforts that different branches of the church have made through the years to add to the law, to be pietistic in ways that go beyond the bible, Christianity has gotten an anti-pleasure reputation.

A reputation that says, "If you're a Christian, you won't enjoy yourself in this life." Paul knows this, and you've seen it: People have rejected Christianity for precisely this reason. All you need to hear is for someone to say, "If your passions get to you, emasculate yourself," and well, that's a recipe for failed evangelism.

That message is not the gospel. The bible actually says it is not what goes into a man that has any effect, but what comes out of the heart. And Paul knew that since the gospel is that Christ himself gives you a new heart that the Christian should lead a life without guilt.

You see, these ascetics in Paul's time... they tried to shift the standards to conform to their conscience, so that a life with God wouldn't cost them a thing. They could earn favor with God without cost. And that can never be the gospel – shifting the standard to lower the cost of grace. Because grace is *free*. It's *unmerited* favor. But for the sinner it does cost something – your own personal lordship over your life. Your own private kingship. You have to get off the throne. Asceticism is attractive because it leaves you in some kind of control, but your lordship will leave you without the eternal pleasures for which you were made.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, has the Devil portray the real God this way: "He's a hedonist at heart. All those fasts and vigils and (nails) and crosses are only a façade. Or only like foam on the sea shore. Out at sea, out in *His* sea, there is pleasure, and more pleasure. He makes no secret of it; at His right hand are "pleasures for evermore." He has a bourgeois mind. He has filled His world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long without His minding in the least—sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying,

working. Everything has to be twisted before it's any use to us. We fight under cruel disadvantages." And the Devil sits back, and says, "Ugh!"³

And the Devil has it right! Christianity is no enemy of pleasure! Christianity is not a pleasure-denying religion. In fact Jesus went to enough banquets – the pleasure festivals of his day – to get the reputation as a glutton and a drunkard. God meant pleasure to be a part of the human condition. Adam and Eve in the Garden knew nothing *but* pleasure. Eden was God's pleasure garden. Only sin brought an end to pleasure and we are told in the Bible that on the day of redemption, that pleasure – total and constant – will be the way of eternity. The book of Revelation puts it this way: "They shall hunger no more, either thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."⁴

Friends, when Paul says that "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," what he means is that the cross of Jesus Christ makes you the freest kind of human there can possibly be. Will you have guilt? Yes! You still sin. But that sin will only drive you to the cross where with a new heart, your conscience conforms to *his* truth. And he sees your sin as sin, and that is the reason he came! He came to take away the sins of the world.

Here is what you need to know. David Hume, Margaret Mead, or our friend who couldn't look at a deck of playing cards... life will control you unless you see it the way the creator made it. And the only way to do that is *not* simply to change your mind so that you can see sex as good, or drink as good or games as good. No, the guilt will not go away until you first recognize the goodness of the one who created all things. Jesus Christ is that one man by which all things were made, and without him nothing has been made that was made. To fight what is false and fight what is demonic, all one need to do is say the one little word that will fell them – Christ. Jesus Christ.

Believe in him. Receive him, and you join him at a banquet with pleasures forever more.

Let's pray.

³ *The Screwtape Letters*, page 9

⁴ Revelation 7:16-17