

"Words For Pastor and People" (Part 6)

In this series of sermons we're continuing to look at the New Testament letter of 1 Timothy. Let's pick it up toward the end of chapter 3: "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these instructions to you so that, if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). This is why the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to Timothy. Paul wants to come to the church in Ephesus to deal directly with problems that had arisen - but in case he doesn't get there, he's giving instructions to the young pastor Timothy "how one ought to behave in the household of God" (verse 15).

Notice, he calls the church, "the household of God". The church is meant to be a *household*, a *family*. Now the good news is when a church is a *family*, it's going to be warm and welcoming, a place of love and acceptance - a spiritual home. The bad news is if the church is a *family*, it won't be perfect! Families aren't perfect, are they? At least mine wasn't when I was growing up, and it isn't now! Comedian George Burns said, "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family – that lives in another city."

People in families have disagreements, and get mad at each other, and hurt each other. That happens in churches, too. No church is perfect. If we're looking for the perfect church, we'll never find it.

The Church is God's household, God's family. And hopefully we here can be a family where the positives far outweigh the negatives, and this can be a place where we not only find God, but learn how to get along with each other in God's household.

Then Paul goes on to say something remarkable about the church. He says it is "the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). It is the *pillar of truth*. Know what a pillar is? It's that upright support that may hold up a roof or another part of the building. It's the *bulwark of the truth*. A bulwark is a defensive wall to protect something. The church is the pillar on which truth rests, and the defensive wall that protects God's truth!

Now a lot of people today don't believe the Church has the truth, or guards the truth. They may even chuckle at the idea! First of all, more and more people today are saying there is no absolute truth. They maintain that truth is found inside of us. You have your truth; I have my truth. I can't lay my truth on someone else. There are no absolute, divine standards by which we are all measured.

When one of our children was looking at colleges, we took a tour of Penn State University. A pleasant young man, an upperclassman, led us around campus. He raved about the university, but at one point he talked about dorm rules, and how he and other students didn't abide by some, but that was OK. Then he told how some students enrolled in the agricultural program (even if they had no interest in that), because there were plenty of scholarships available. He suggested that new students might do this, then change after the first year, and thus have access to some free tuition. To me that sounded a bit unethical, and it bothered me that this young man would say that to a group of prospective students and their parents. But then I thought: his attitude is

probably no different from a lot of people today who just don't believe in any absolute moral standards or truth - you just kind of make the rules to suit the situation.

Secondly, many dismiss the idea that the church is the foundation and guardian of the truth because of the negative view many have of the church today. Modern day church scandals have eroded the church's authority (and that's understood). Then too, many people's perception of church is influenced by the media, that paints the church as being irrelevant or inept. When's the last time you saw the church portrayed in a healthy, positive way on TV or in the movies? (Other than the Hallmark stations!).

The Apostle Paul didn't have this excuse-me-for-living, half-ashamed view of the church: He said we are God's household, "*the church of the living God*" (verse 15). We don't have to apologize for the Church! Yes, the church is very imperfect because it's made up of sinners. But in spite of her terrible faults, we are the church of the *living God*. God dwells among us, and God still uses the church to bless humanity, and to present the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Why can we say that the church is the foundation and guardian of God's truth? *Because at the center of our faith and life is Jesus Christ!* The Bible says God's truth was revealed to us and embodied in the person and life of Jesus. Jesus said, "I *am*... the truth..." (John 14:6). The truth about God, and humans, and the meaning of life was revealed in Jesus. You look at Jesus, and there is Truth! And we've got a responsibility in the church to maintain the purity of God's truth revealed in Scripture and in Christ, and to present that truth to the world!

The Apostle Paul continues: "Without any doubt, the mystery of godliness is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16). This is probably part of an ancient creed or hymn! Probably a *creed* put to music! It's an expression of what these first century Christians believed about Jesus!

The earliest Christians spelled out their belief and doctrines in hymns! And you know what, we've been doing the same ever since! The songs that we sing in church ought to be more than gushy, sentimental expressions of our human feelings - they ought to be sound theology, words that lift up the nature and glory of God!

Even though we move into a new chapter, chapter 4, the train of thought continues. We need to *uphold truth in the church* (where there were false teachers) and hold to *true* doctrines. The next verse says, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). Notice, it says "later times", which could be translated "last times" or "last days".

When are the last days? Are we in the last days? The answer is: *Yes!* The New Testament Book of Hebrews begins: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but *in these last days* he has spoken to us by a Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2a). Since the coming of Jesus into the world, we've been living in the last days! And let's remember that

that Christ can return at any time. That will be the end of this world as we know it - and God's kingdom or rule on earth will be established. Life is not "same-old, same-old", round and round. History is moving towards a climax - the return of Jesus Christ.

What will happen in the last days? 1 Timothy 4:1-2 gives us a glimpse into that scenario. "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron."

There are a number of places in Scripture where it speaks of a falling away, apostasy, persecution, much evil. 2 Timothy 3:1 says, "You must understand this, that in the last days, perilous times will come." Jesus Himself said, "At that time, many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people" (Matthew 24:10-11). Some, having believed, will fall away from active faith and sound teaching - this was happening in Ephesus, under false teachers. Jesus said it would happen!

Is there any false teaching today? Yes. I've mentioned examples of this in previous messages in this series. *Why will some renounce their faith and fall away?* Because they will pay attention "to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron"(verses 1b-2).

Some will be led astray by liars and deceitful leaders. I've seen some documentaries done on some TV evangelists, and healers, showing how they trick people into believing they are performing miraculous healings.

Some will be led astray by Satan and the demonic forces. "Deceitful spirits and teachings of demons." This sounds strange to our modern ears. But this stuff is real! Bill Cetnar was a man who attended a church I pastored in the Poconos. Bill had been a Jehovah's Witness. He held a prominent national position in that organization, but left it, and had a worldwide ministry teaching people about the false teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses. He was in touch with a Christian in California, working with people involved in séances, where supposedly they got in touch with the spirits of dead loved ones. While some séances are out and out frauds, Bill helped me realize that at times, *evil spirits* can actually sound like the voices of deceased loved ones. It's kind of spooky. When you get into the occult, the spirit world, it can be chilling. And deadly!

A Christian named Ben Alexander tells of traveling with a friend to a Florida town where spiritualism abounds and many homes are occupied by psychic mediums. It was a Sunday afternoon and the town was full of visitors. They asked many of the visitors if they had attended church that morning, and many said they did, but they were in town to try to contact the dead. Before his conversion to Christ, Ben had been a spiritualist medium, involved in the occult. And he said he can attest that there really is something on the "other side", but it wasn't a departed loved one's spirit. It was "something more sinister impersonating our dead loved ones."

We ought to be on guard today that we aren't seduced away from God's truth by lying, deceitful

teachers, or by the influence of Satan or the demonic. The great Christian thinker, author C.S. Lewis once said, "There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan."

The departure from the faith and from the truth happening in Ephesus took a particular form. Verse 3 describes it. "They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."

This is no doubt a reference to a heresy that plagued first century Christians, a heresy called *Gnosticism*. (This heresy is in the background of other New Testament writings too). To put it simply, Gnosticism had one major premise: *only spirit is good; matter, the physical part of life is evil*. This was rooted in *Greek* thinking, not *Hebrew thought*. Our Scriptures are Hebrew writings. And the Hebrews believed physical creation is good. The human body, the physical side of life, is good and a gift of God.

People who sided with the Gnostic view tended to come down at 2 opposite extremes. One was *ascetism*. If the body is evil, if material things are bad, we should deny them. Despise them. Some in the church in Ephesus, influenced by Gnosticism, were forbidding marriage and eating certain foods (verse 4). The other extreme resulting from Gnosticism was *moral license*. If only *spirit* is important, and no matter what you did, the physical aspect of life is evil, then it didn't matter what you did with the body and the flesh. Live as you please and devote yourself to *spirit*. Indulge yourself in the flesh.

Now you may say, "Harry, what in the world does all this have to do with us today?" A lot! Ancient heresies tend to re-surface every generation in a new suit of clothes! Christians today still tend towards these 2 extremes! There are some Christians who tend to look on pleasure and enjoyment in life as bad. Inhibited, somber Christians, who feel guilty as soon as they get close to enjoying themselves. Straight-laced Christians. Christians who may have a very negative view of sex, or have trouble affirming their own bodies, or physical pleasure. But the other extreme is: Christians who advocate a kind of moral license. The rationale here can be: Well, since I'm saved, and since it's my *spiritual* relationship with Christ that's most important, I can have a lot of freedom. Tai Collins was a former Miss Virginia who was allegedly involved in an affair with a U.S. Senator and then posed nude for Playboy. At one point she talked enthusiastically about the Presbyterian church she had recently joined, and said her unpaid work there was "very fulfilling". When asked if it would affect her nude modeling she replied, "I don't think so. I mean there's a lot of people in my church that have been in Playboy."

Against these false teachers, influenced by the Gnostic's disdain for the physical, material side of life, Paul writes this: "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer" (verses 4-5). We can recognize and celebrate the goodness of God's creation, and receive His gifts with thankfulness. God's gifts of creation are "sanctified" or dedicated to God, when we use them prayerfully and in accordance with His will.

So, as we wrap up this segment of 1 Timothy, remember that God intends the Church to guard and defend the Truth. That truth is found in the Person of Jesus Christ.

