

A Dangerous Denial

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder, what do you think is the worst thing that we could deny as Christians? What is the ultimate heresy?

Perhaps denying that God exists, that God is Trinity, perhaps that God the Son came into the world, that he died for our sins, that he rose again on the third day.

There's only number, aren't there, of truths that we might deny that would actually undermine our claim to be Christians at all. But what about this denial that we find in our passage this evening in 1 Timothy?

The particular denial that Paul calls out here in this letter isn't one, I think, that most of us would have on our most dangerous denials or doctrines list.

And yet, Paul puts it right up there with first order heresies. We've noticed as we've gone through this letter together that from the very beginning, Paul's number one concern is the presence and influence of false teachers in this church.

[1 : 16] That's what he commands Timothy to deal with in the first few verses of the letter. But he's not really told us yet what it was the false teachers were teaching.

We've seen the chaos that it's caused in different areas of church life and Paul's teaching to rectify that chaos and to redeem it as Christ has redeemed us, his church.

We've seen the confusion it's caused in the hearts and minds of Christians. We know the epicenter, if you like, of the earthquake is somewhere in the area of how these false teachers twist the law of God.

Paul has said, we know that the law is good if one uses it properly. But what bit of the law are they twisting and how are they twisting it?

Well, our passage this evening is as close as Paul gets to telling us what it was. And at first, we might wonder whether it's really that bad.

[2 : 18] If you glance down at verse three, what is the issue that he calls out there? He says the false teachers forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods.

Now, perhaps we know that that is not biblical teaching, but is it really on the same level as denying Christ? Is it that bad?

Well, Paul says, yes, it is. He calls it demonic in verse one. So why is this so dangerous? And how, as Christians today, might we be taken in by that kind of deception?

Well, we're going to see tonight two truths that false teachers deny. Which are the same two points that Paul wants Timothy to teach. And therefore, the two lessons that he wants us as Christians to learn together.

And the first lesson that Paul wants us to see is the goodness of God's gifts. The goodness of God's gifts. Now, it's always devastating when somebody who once loved Christ, who loved his word, comes to believe lies and deny the truth.

[3 : 36] A friend of mine recently told me about a guy who we both know. This guy is closer to my friend than he was to me. But he's the kind of Christian that we both really would have wanted to be.

We would have loved to be a Christian like this. So this guy, he grew up in a faithful church. He came to faith in Christ at a young age. He served Christian unions after he graduated.

As an evangelist and a missionary. But my friend told me for the past year, this same guy has been in a committed relationship with another man.

And is now aggressively pushing his Christian friends to accept and affirm this new lifestyle. Now I felt really sad on a lot of levels, really.

But mainly, I guess, to hear of somebody who had been so faithful to Christ. Embracing a lifestyle that just doesn't fit with being a Christian. And the hardest bit of all, wanting now to teach others that that is okay.

[4 : 49] I'm sure most, if not all of us, can think of somebody like that. Somebody who has once followed Christ. If not, in fact, then very convincingly.

And then stumbled into sin and turned back and walked the other way. It is hard to watch, isn't it? It's incredibly upsetting.

It could even cause us to question our own faith. If that person can fall away, then is any of it really real?

But we shouldn't be too shaken when we hear of that happening. Because Paul reminds us in verse 1, the Spirit clearly says, In later times, some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.

God said this would happen. And now we don't know what precisely Paul's referring to, where the Spirit says this. But Jesus does teach in Matthew 24 something very similar.

[5 : 50] Speaking about the last days, he says, 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.

So there is a precedent that Paul is drawing on to say to the church, that God told us that this kind of thing would happen. Which might not sound very comforting.

But it is the difference, friends, between feeling like God has lost control. And is he even there? And knowing that God is in control.

That he is there. That he lives. Even when seemingly solid Christians walk away from him. He forewarned is forearmed, as they say.

But again, is this turning away, this denial of the faith, is it really so bad? And what Paul wants us to see, the lifestyle these false teachers are promoting, is only the tip of a shipwrecking iceberg.

[6 : 54] Verse 3 tells us, They forbid people to marry, order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving, by those who believe and know the truth.

Now I wonder if we see a kind of familiar shape to this deception. Perhaps a pattern that we may have seen before in our Bibles.

The source of the lies is Paul in verse 1 is deceiving spirits, demons. The lie comes through hypocritical liars, human beings. And the result is denying what God created and says is good.

Now does that remind you of a pattern, perhaps? Another similar great denial made by men and women in the Bible. Perhaps a man and a woman.

Twice Paul speaks of God's good creation in verses 3 and 4. But what was it that the first man and first woman did with God's good creation?

[8 : 00] Well, they followed a deceiving spirit and brought into a lie. And then they shared that lie between them. And so they came to deny in their hearts and their words and their lives the goodness of God's created order.

We read earlier in Genesis, God said to them, you are free to eat from any tree in the garden. Any tree. It's all here for you.

Instead of celebrating that generosity that God showed, feasting on the fruits of the garden, enjoying the tree of life, what did they do? Well, they went straight to the one tree that God had said not to eat from on pain of death.

He said, be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. But when their eyes were opened, what did they see? Well, not the beauty, but the shame of their naked bodies.

And they hid from each other and from God himself. See, it's not simply, friends, that these false teachers are forbidding marriage and ordering people not to eat certain foods.

[9 : 14] You see, it's that they are participating in a rebellion that has existed since the fall. In doing this, they are celebrating reliving the original sin, denying the goodness of God's created gifts and the delusion that they could have created a better world than God himself.

God saw everything that he made, everything, and said it is very good. These teachers look at the world God made and say of some things, it is very wrong.

And that, says Paul, is a demonic thing to say. I've become convinced, personally, as we have gone through this letter together as a church, that the heart of the false teaching in this letter is a twisting of the first part of Genesis and the first three chapters in particular.

Now, I didn't know that when we started. God's word is living and active. It is teaching me, even as I am teaching ye. Much less did I know it in the spring when we went through those chapters of Genesis together as a church.

And if you were here for that series, or even if you heard what we read earlier in our service from Genesis, well, quite how you get from those chapters to the conclusions these false teachers have drawn is really inconceivable, isn't it?

[10 : 37] You cannot really get from Genesis 1 to forbidding marriage and denying people certain foods. It's not just that if you interpret one or two things slightly differently, you can get there.

It is the opposite of what Genesis is teaching. So the only way you can really get from Genesis to these false teachings is by a conscious effort to twist God's word, to turn it in the opposite direction. And it is evil, says Paul. It is evil. And yet, yet, do we not have some sympathy, perhaps, for what these guys are saying?

You know, I think the scary thing, perhaps, for us is that we can understand it, can't we? Now, I'm not saying any of us, I hope none of us, are going around telling people not to get married, okay, not to eat certain foods, not to drink certain drinks.

But it goes like this, doesn't it? Surely it's better to err on the side of caution. We live in an over-the-top age, an age of no restraint, in a hyper-sexualized culture, an over-consuming culture, that glorifies the body.

[11 : 55] So can't we be, as Christians, more distinctive, more spiritual, if we kind of ignore our bodies and look suspiciously on sex, even within marriage, on certain foods, certain drinks, or at least we don't talk about those things, especially not in church.

It's just somehow it is dirty and not godly to think about our bodies and the good things that God has created for our bodies to enjoy.

Isn't that how we might be blindsided by this lie? By responding to the world around us and its lies with an equal and opposite lie of our own.

The world glorifies the body, so we deny the body. A prime example of this, as I was thinking about it, is purity culture.

I don't know if that resonates with anyone here. I don't think purity culture proper ever really took root in the UK. It's kind of an American thing.

[13 : 04] But it crops up in lots of different ways. So this was a teaching that was picked up by conservative churches. Churches like our own some 20 years ago.

And it taught young couples that any kind of physical contact, any kind of sexual feeling was wrong, totally out of place in a Christian relationship before the wedding day.

And so up until the wedding night, they said, any thought of sexual intimacy was a sin. But the result was that lots of young people developed an incredible sense of shame of their own bodies and guilt. Because of course, physical attraction is a natural and God-given part of the way that couples get together, that marriages are made. But these people were being taught that physical attraction in and of itself was suspicious and wrong.

And so purity culture was denying the goodness of sexual chemistry. You were best, it was something to be tolerated in marriage, but never celebrated as a good thing.

[14 : 20] And the terrible irony is that far from protecting marriage, which is what it set out to do, this teaching resulted in lots of broken marriages. Is that sense that sex was a shameful and guilt-ridden thing never left the relationship.

Lots of people even left the faith when they realized the consequences of what they were taught. And if you're not yet convinced, the ultimate proof that this was a false teaching is that the guy who wrote the book on purity culture, Joshua Harris, later very publicly denied Christ some years later. And so can you see how a teaching that at first glance perhaps seems godly and good and pure can actually be a teaching of demons?

You know, that sense of shame of the body. Is it not the very first thing that our first parents felt after they first sinned? And yet it was being taught as gospel.

Why? Well, because Christians feared the threat of a world that glorified the body. And so in response, the church denied the body and in so doing denied the goodness of God's creation and his created gifts.

[15 : 43] And the result was people falling away from the faith. So that to say, we have to be on guard, don't we, brothers and sisters, not to try to be more spiritual than God.

God created our bodies. He created marriage. He created sex. He created food. He created and he called it good.

And so it cannot ever be godly for us to say the opposite. These things are good gifts. Sex is designed to knit a man and woman together into a one flesh union.

That is a glorious thing. And so while sex is, of course, reserved for marriage, we must receive it as a gift in the way that God gives it as he has set it apart in his word.

We should not use it as we see fit. Well, we must also say with Paul and the rest of Scripture that sex and marriage are good gifts to give thanks for.

[16:52] Gifts we can look forward to joyfully, receive gladly, speak of honorably. We could say the same about all kinds of things, couldn't we? Different kinds of food, friendship, alcohol, exercise, having kids.

It's four, verse four, everything God created is good. Everything God created is good and nothing is to be rejected. Nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

There's a sense there, isn't there, in which Christians should have the fullest lives and the most thankful hearts because our God who we know created everything and he called it good.

There's a guy I know, he says, in the light of the fullness, the richness of God's creation that it is a sin even to be bored. Now, I wouldn't go that far but you can see his point, can't you?

In a letter to a young man, a Christian writer called Dane Autland says this, think of the glory of your manhood, the capacity of your mind, the range of your emotions, the potential of your career, the beauty of your relationships, the mystery of your sexuality and God wants to squeeze all that down into a tiny prison cell of boring religiosity.

[18:19] That's the God denying craziness that destroys the future you want before it's even had a chance. So, brothers and sisters, Paul warns us against falling into the trap that our first parents fell into, denying the goodness of God's creation and against falling into the trap these false teachers have fallen into and denying the goodness of the body and the physical world that God has made.

Instead, let us readily receive every good and every perfect gift with hearts that overflow with thanks to God. Let us embrace the intrinsic goodness of God's created gifts.

That's the first lesson that Paul teaches us this evening. And the second related lesson that Paul has for us tonight is the value of true godliness.

It's the goodness of God's gifts and now the value of true godliness. If you just glance down with me at verse 6 where Paul writes, if you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching ye have followed.

Now, if you've been following point one, you'll see straight away that the true godliness we're speaking about now is not a different thing to what we've been speaking about already. In fact, Paul says that if Timothy teaches these things, that is point one of our sermon, that he is teaching godliness in the church.

[19:59] But now Paul's taking that lesson about receiving God's gifts rightly and expanding it to cover all of life. He says there in verse 8, true godliness has value not only for our bodily lives, but all of life, and not only for this life, but also the life to come.

So what Paul means then by godliness is surely approving what God approves of and rejecting what God rejects, not only in our physical embodied lives, but in every sphere of life.

You, the false teachers have been busy, haven't they, rejecting what God approves and approving what God rejects. And it looked really godly.

I think that is the trap, isn't it? They looked really super spiritual, but is a false godliness, says Paul. It's living in the light of who we imagine God to be, not in the light of who he really is.

True godliness is loving what God loves and hating what God hates, whatever that is, whether physical things for our bodies or any area of life.

[21:14] Now there's a word play in verse 6. It's not obvious in our translations, but I think it makes the connection or helps us make this connection a wee bit. So we've just heard that every food is on the menu for Christians.

So now Paul tells Timothy to serve, set down that truth to the brothers and sisters as one who has been nourished himself on the truths of the faith.

So it's as if God's holding a banquet, okay, Timothy is hosting it, and God has prepared an incredible meal of rich gospel truths, and Timothy is his taste tester.

So Timothy has been in the kitchen feasting on what God has prepared for his people, and he's now to serve the family at the dinner table with those same truths.

So you'll see the connection there. Paul wants the church to eat well physically because they are eating well spiritually. If they're digesting the truths of the faith and good teaching, well, says Paul, you will be saying grace very often at the dinner table, breakfast, brunch, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, supper, because we will be receiving all God's gifts with thankfulness.

[22 : 37] So doing that, receiving God's good gifts, is one fruit of godliness in our lives, isn't it? As we feed the roots of our faith on the truths of the faith.

But there will be other fruits of godliness too. Versailles explains that physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise both for the present life and the life to come.

This is the famous gym verse. Some people see physical training as Paul speaking about exercise, as if he is saying staying fit has some value.

No doubt it does. But in the context here, I think it makes more sense to understand the physical training that he's speaking about in terms of the bodily discipline that the false teachers are urging on the church.

It's that kind of self-control that they're teaching. Isn't wrong in itself, he says. When it's used to deny and forbid God's gifts outright, okay, that is heresy, self-control, bodily discipline, physical training, when it's used to receive God's gifts in the right way, okay, with thankfulness rather than with greed or gluttony or drunkenness, well, that does have some value, he says.

[24 : 06] But godliness goes further than that, further than that bodily discipline, self-control. Godliness has value for all things. So true godliness isn't one or two rules about what to eat or drink or do with our bodies.

It is being in sync with God in every area of life. He's loving what he loves in our work projects, in our family routines, on our computers, on our phones, in the bedroom, our conversations with friends, and of course, hating what he hates in every area too.

And that does take training, doesn't it, says Paul? Train yourself to be godly. That word train is where we get our word for the gym. It's not how many of us see ourselves as Christians, is it? Pumping iron, going to spinning classes, doing yank lengths of the pool. But Christians, says Paul, you are an athlete. When you became a Christian, you got a lifetime gym membership, and God wants you to use it.

Yes, that means sometimes physical training is needed, keeping our bodies under control. But it's also training ourselves, isn't it, to work in the right way, as for the Lord, and not for men.

[25 : 34] Training ourselves to love and care for our families, even when that is really stretching. Training ourselves to embrace all that is good about technology and ignoring the rest.

Training ourselves to speak well to others and about others. Training ourselves to commit to a church family, with all the joys and the complexities that that brings.

I'm sure that you can think of other areas in your life where training in godliness is necessary.

There's plenty of training needed, isn't there, for us to live godly lives in every sphere.

We are not, of course, born with a natural godliness. The Bible tells us we are born in sin. And so it shouldn't surprise us that training in godliness is necessary.

Like every athlete, our diet is going to make that training easy or impossible. If we're well nourished on the truths of the faith and good teaching, if we're eating well, then we will train well.

[26 : 42] If we are eating spiritual junk food, while the training isn't going to happen, either we'll try and not have the strength to see it through, or we just won't be bothered and grow spiritually unfit and increasingly ungodly.

But Paul says we should want as a church to eat well spiritually, and train well spiritually. Why? Because this godliness holds promise both in the present life and the life to come.

There is here and now blessing, friends, in living a godly life. This should be intuitive, isn't it? Living in the world that God made in the way that God wants works.

It brings his blessing. But of course there is the blessing of the life to come in heaven, in the new creation. And in lots of ways that is the world that we are training ourselves in godliness to live in, a world where righteousness dwells, a world where godliness is at home because God is at home

with us there.

A friend of mine who lived in London for a time compared this to going to an incredibly fancy dinner on the tube. he said, getting on the tube in your finest dress, in your best tux, while you would get funny looks, people would comment, maybe it would feel uncomfortable.

[28 : 12] You would need to steel yourself for that journey perhaps, but when you arrive you step out of the underground and walk into a room full of people who are dressed just like you.

happy. And there you feel quite natural and at home. Well friends, I think that is a good illustration of what godliness feels like now and what it will feel like then.

Now it requires discipline, training, focus. Then it will be natural. It will simply be our nature. And it's the value of that godliness, the eternal value of it, that should prompt us to do this training.

It's a trustworthy saying, says Paul. It's worthy of our full acceptance. And as we finish then, Paul closes with a final reminder of where this godliness comes from.

He says, that is why we labor and strive. This is why we do it, because we have put our hope in the living God who is the savior of all people and especially of those who believe.

[29 : 22] Our hope is not in a god of our own imaginations, is it? To serve a god in the way that we imagine he wants to be served. Our hope is in the living God, says Paul, to serve him in the way he says he wants to be served.

And serving a god who lives makes all the difference, doesn't it? Serving the living god who reveals himself to us, who speaks to us, who helps us to listen, to follow him.

And he is our savior, says Paul, the only savior that there is for anyone. That's what he's getting at there, the savior of all people. God is the only savior for any person to be saved.

And he is the savior in particular of those who believe. And I think he says this at the end because of course this way of life is a saved way of life, a redeemed way of life, a life that God designed and created us for, a life of embracing all his good gifts, of knowing God our good creator, a life of godliness in every way.

This is the life that God made us for and it is the life that he has saved us for. And so the living God is our God and our savior if we are in Christ tonight.

[30 : 47] He is the one who conforms us to his own character, who redeems our wills, who leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake, who gives us all that we need, says Peter, for life and for godliness.

He is the one who forgives us our sins, who cleanses our hearts, who renews our right spirit within us. He redeems our lives, body, mind, and spirit to walk with him in this world and the next.

And so brothers and sisters, let us embrace then this life of godliness. Let us receive his every good gift with thankfulness, not rejecting anything that God's word sets apart for our enjoyment.

And let us live with our hope fixed on the living God our savior in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray together. good and gracious father, we praise you and we thank you for your every good and perfect gift.

Father, we thank you for all that we have enjoyed today, for the food that you've provided and the drink, for friendship and fellowship, for our church family, for homes to be in, families to be part of, for friendships to enjoy.

[32 : 17] Father, how we thank you for these and for so many gifts of which we are even unaware. We thank you for your sovereign care over us, that you know even the number of hairs on each of our heads.

And we pray, Father, then that you would help us as we go from here, not to be suspicious of any good thing that you would give us. Father, we pray that you would grant us strength by your spirit to be trained in true godliness.

Lord, that you would renew our desire to be like you in your character, to love what you love, to hate what you hate, to approve what your word approves of, and to reject what your word rejects.

Father, we confess that so often in our hearts we lack the compass that tells us that. Lord, we need you to speak. We need your guidance. We need your renewal.

And so, Lord, we pray that you would redeem us and that you would renew us by your word, by your spirit, and lead us to Christ each day. For this we pray and ask in his name.

[33 : 27] Amen. We're going to close. Let's pray.

We're going to end.