

Message #8

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1 Timothy

11/29/2020

APOSTASY AND THANKSGIVING

1 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Joshua Harris (PROJECTOR ON--- JOSHUA HARRIS) grew up in a large evangelical family in the Northwest. His parents were leaders in the homeschool movement. While still a teenager, Joshua began producing a magazine for fellow homeschoolers. In 1997, when he was only 22 years old, his book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (I KISSED DATING GOODBYE) was published. In the book Harris argued that young people should pursue Biblical courtship rather than traditional dating. His book eventually sold 1.2 million copies. Speaking opportunities and other books followed.

Also in 1997 Joshua Harris moved from Oregon to Maryland to become a pastoral intern under a charismatic Calvinist pastor by the name of CJ Mahaney. Seven years later Harris became the pastor of this megachurch. He never had any formal theological education. In 2015 he decided that he needed a theological education. So he stepped down from his pastorate and went to seminary at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. Last year he announced that he was separating from his wife. The two of them have three children. (JOSHUA HARRIS FAMILY)

He also apologized in an Instagram post for having opposed marriage equality for LGBTQ+ people. In an earlier interview with *Sojourners Magazine*, Harris described his changing views about human sexuality: **“In a way it’s almost easier for me to contemplate throwing out all of Christianity rather than transforming Christianity or reformulating it in order to develop a new sexual ethic.”** In his Instagram post Harris went on to say, **“By all the measurements I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.”**

That’s a pretty sad story, is it not? The Bible uses the term “apostasy” to describe what happened to Joshua Harris. (PROJECTOR OFF) It is a problem as old as the church of Christ. It is a problem that confronts the church today. It is a problem that confronted the church in the first century. It is a problem that is addressed in the passage before us this morning.

On the last few Sundays we have been looking at the qualifications that the Apostle Paul laid down for church leaders in Chapters 2 & 3 of First Timothy. The reason that Paul got into this discussion was that young Timothy needed help in confronting false teachers who were disturbing the church at Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor. He needed advice in choosing good leaders for the church. Now Timothy's mentor provides a warning and explanation concerning those who appear to be falling away from the true faith.

I.

In #4 the author returns to the subject of false teaching, which was first introduced in #1. At the beginning of v. 1 Paul deals with THE DANGER OF APOSTASY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE DANGER OF APOSTASY)

He writes, **“Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith...”** The key Greek verb here is *apostesontai*, from which we get our English word “apostatize,” or “apostasy.” It literally means “to fall away.” In the New Testament the word means “to willfully turn away from the truth of the Christian faith.”

If you accept the doctrine of eternal security--- the idea that once a person is truly born again as a result of saving faith in Jesus, and is bound for heaven no matter what--- there are two options for understanding what it means to depart from the faith. It could mean that some genuine Christians get messed up in their doctrine and belief system and stray far away from the true faith. They are still genuine Christians, but they may not act or sound like it.

The other option is that these people had some involvement with Christianity. They may have claimed to be Christians. They may have sounded and acted like Christians, but they had never truly exercised saving faith in Jesus. What Paul says here could have application to both kinds of people: genuine Christians who stray from the faith and professing Christians who never were truly saved.

How the Spirit has issued a warning about future apostasy is not specifically identified. Paul envisions this apostasy as happening in “later times.” These later times are also not specifically identified here. There are warnings in other parts of the New Testament about the coming Tribulation, that time just before the return of Christ to earth when there are divine judgments poured out upon the earth. But often in the New Testament, prophetic warnings about bad things which will happen in the future are regarded as having elements already at work in the present.

For example, Paul warns in 2 Thessalonians #2 v. 3 (2 THESSALONIANS 2:3), **“Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day (the day of the Lord) will not come, unless the rebellion (the word is ‘apostasy’) comes first...”** The apostle appears to be envisioning a time in the future. But a few verses later he writes (2 THESSALONIANS 2:7), **“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work.”** Some of the trends and characteristics that will be true of the time of great apostasy in the future are already present to a lesser extent in the current era.

So Paul in our passage is saying that in the future there will be many people who will fall away from true Christianity and will listen to false teachers. The Holy Spirit has indicated this through the prophets of God, perhaps including Paul. Timothy should not be surprised, therefore, that even now at Ephesus some church people are listening to false teachers.

In Matthew #24 vv. 10 & 11 (MATTHEW 24:10-11) Jesus Himself spoke of the future and said, **“And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.”** Years before 1 Timothy was written, Paul had warned the elders at Ephesus about a coming problem with false teachers at Ephesus. According to Acts 20:29 (ACTS 20:29-30) he told the Ephesian elders, **“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”**

From our vantage point today we can see how some of these predictions about apostasy have been at least partially fulfilled over the years. Today there are hundreds of denominations around the world which call themselves Christian. Yet many of them--- at least many of their leaders--- have fallen away from the Biblical faith. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A survey was taken a number of years ago of 7400 Protestant ministers in the United States from five mainline denominations. Fifty-one per cent of the Methodist ministers said that they did not believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead. About a third of the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and American Baptists also did not believe in the physical resurrection of Christ. Sixty per cent of the Methodists and about half of the Episcopalians and Presbyterians did not believe in the virgin birth of Christ. This is apostasy. It is a denial of the most basic claims of Christianity. Unfortunately, there are lots of these ministers in the churches around us, leading their people astray. Paul calls such people “fierce wolves.”

There are also the cults. Most of them claim to be Christian, and many of them revere the Bible. But usually they do not accept the deity of Christ. They do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity. Unfortunately, the Mormons and the Moonies and the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Christian Scientists get many of their new members from among the ranks of new Christians and immature Christians. Such is the danger of apostasy.

II.

In the second part of v. 1 in our passage we learn about THE SOURCE OF APOSTASY. (II. THE SOURCE OF APOSTASY) Paul speaks about people departing, or falling away, or apostatizing, from the faith **“by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.”** Many of these cults and false religions and apostate variations of Christianity do not teach people to do bad things or to follow Satan. They typically tell their members to love their neighbors, to have good families, and to help the poor.

That should not be so surprising to us, however. For the Bible tells us that Satan appears as an angel of light. (2 Corinthians 11:14) He and his ideas look good on the outside. He sets out to counterfeit the true faith in God. So his ideas look similar on the outside to Christian beliefs. People who make counterfeit money don't try to make their bills look different than the real thing. They try to make a counterfeit that looks close to the real thing.

So it is with Satan. His most destructive and dangerous religions and philosophies and ideas closely imitate the real faith. Typically they stray into error in regard to the identity of Jesus Christ. For it is worship of the God-man Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that is central to true worship, and Satan does not want that.

Some of you know the name Rob Bell. He was pastor of an evangelical megachurch in Michigan. About nine years ago he wrote a book entitled *Love Wins*, which gained considerable attention in the Christian world. In his book he argues that God is a loving being. Such a loving God could not punish anyone for eternity. We bring temporary suffering upon ourselves, but He does not pour out His wrath upon us. His love always wins in the end.

Such an argument sounds nice. It might be what many wish would be true. But it does not square with what the Bible says or with what Jesus Himself claimed. He actually said more about hell in the Gospels than He did about heaven. He warned about eternal torment for those who reject Him. Bell's argument

reflects the teaching of demons more than it does the true teaching of God. For it promotes a lie, which could provide false comfort for people who are headed for eternal torment.

Some of the books on near death experiences are also the products of deceitful spirits. The most popular one, perhaps, *Embraced by the Light*, was written by a Mormon woman. Her supposed experience reflects Mormon theology, though in some points she is inconsistent with that and contradicts things that she has said in other places. There is still a big market for this spiritualism and New Age stuff. Ultimately the source of it is not God. It is deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.

In 2017 the Pew Research Center surveyed US adults and found that 42% of Americans, including 24% of people who identify as evangelicals, believe spiritual energy can be located in physical things. The survey also found that 41% of Americans, including 33% of evangelicals, believe in psychics. The ultimate source of such thinking is demonic forces of evil.

III.

Verse 2 goes on to describe THE INSTRUMENTS OF APOSTASY. (III. THE INSTRUMENTS OF APOSTASY) Paul writes that this apostasy comes from “...**the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared...**” Some translations have “**consciences seared as with a branding iron.**” Some understand the text to be saying that these false teachers have consciences which have been cauterized. They have been rendered ineffective.

I am more inclined to think that Paul is saying that these people have been branded to show that they are instruments of Satan. In the first century, criminals, runaway and disobedient slaves, defeated soldiers, and some religious cult members were branded to show their status, their identity, or their ownership. The ineffectiveness of the consciences of false teachers, the fact that they don't seem to feel bad about doing evil, shows that they are instruments of evil spiritual forces.

The word translated here as “insincerity” is *hupokrisei*, from which we indeed get “hypocrisy.” These false teachers have not been duped. They are aware of their falsehood. They are accountable. They just choose to reject correct doctrine.

A typical example of such a false, hypocritical teacher is Joseph Smith (JOSEPH SMITH), the founder of Mormonism. His father was a treasure hunter who took Joseph to look for Captain Kidd's treasure. His

mother dabbled in the occult. In the 1820s Joseph concocted a story about golden plates and a magical stone that allowed him to translate them. Supposedly it was a message from the Angel Moroni about a civilization in North America called the Nephites, archaeological remains of which have never been discovered.

Smith moved from New York to Ohio, where he committed several crimes, culminating in a huge bank fraud. He was run out of town and eventually set up shop in Nauvoo, Illinois. There he justified his lifestyle of sexual immorality by coming up with the Mormon doctrine of polygamy. Joseph Smith was a hypocritical liar. But he became the founder of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We also see this hypocrisy in more subtle forms of apostasy. For some people social causes become the dominating force in life. Indeed there is a Biblical basis for many concerns about justice in our society. Sometimes, however, the involvement of people in such causes is merely a form of hypocritical self-justification.

For example, a Harvard professor by the name of Robert Coles tells a story about a freshman girl who came to talk to him once. It seems that she came from a blue collar family in a small town. She had to do cleaning at the college to help pay for her way through school. She quickly noticed an arrogant attitude that some of the wealthy students had. She felt like she was better respected in the offices of the *Harvard Crimson*, the school newspaper, when she cleaned there.

She told Professor Coles, **“One morning I came into that room and I got to talking to one of those guys. He showed me his latest editorial, and it was wonderful--- a real powerful attack on the State Department. The next thing I knew he was asking me all these personal questions, and then he was propositioning me, and then I tried to stop him and get away--- well, I had a tough time. He was a real skunk... I felt as if I’d been betrayed. I felt as if you can’t trust anyone around here. I thought to myself: Some people around here talk the best line in America, and everyone thinks they’re the best people in America, or the smartest anyway... And then they go and act this way, like snotty animals, out to take what they can get, and who cares how someone else feels about it.”** That is a fine description of a hypocritical liar. Paul says that it is characteristic of apostate teachers. Such is the need, again, for the kind of leaders who are described in #3.

IV.

We have touched on the danger of apostasy, the source of apostasy, and the instruments of apostasy. Consider next THE TEACHING OF APOSTASY (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE TEACHING OF APOSTASY), as described in v. 3. Paul describes the hypocritical liars as those **“who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”**

We don't know exactly what these false teachers were promoting at Ephesus. We know that there was a philosophy of dualism around in the first century that eventually developed into something called Gnosticism. Dualists argued that matter is bad and spirit is good. So some of the dualists said that people should fight bodily urges.

Some commentators look at the reference in v. 4 to the creation of the world as described in Genesis and wonder if these enemies of the gospel at Ephesus were trying to recreate the paradise of the Garden of Eden. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were apparently vegetarians, and these Ephesian teachers may have claimed that there was no marriage. Other commentators wonder if the false teachers were seeking to reimpose Old Testament dietary restrictions. Perhaps they were claiming that certain foods identified in the Old Testament Law as unclean should still be avoided.

Paul in v. 3 focuses on the food restrictions that were being promoted. He says that God intended for all foods to be enjoyed by Christians. We may not eat certain foods for physical reasons or because of personal preferences. We are also warned against gluttony, and the New Testament speaks about not eating anything that would cause a weaker brother to stumble. But there are no longer valid Biblical reasons for avoiding certain foods. Christ had declared all foods to be clean. Peter in the Book of Acts saw a vision in which he was told to eat the meat of animals which were previously regarded as unclean. Here the apostle is confirming that God wants Christians to enjoy the foods which He has created. They are to be received with thanksgiving and appreciation. They are good gifts, provided to us by the Creator, and they are intended to be enjoyed.

V.

Paul elaborates upon this in vv. 4 & 5. He talks about OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD GOD'S CREATION AND BLESSINGS. (V. OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD...) He writes, **“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.”**

This is a direct rebuke to false teachers at Ephesus who may have said that the material world is inherently evil. Paul says that it is not evil; it is good. Back in Genesis #1 the Bible says that after God completed the creation of the world, He looked at what he had made and saw that it was very good.

We Christians need to have a balanced view of God's creation and blessings. On one hand we sometimes may be inclined to swing toward the direction of the guilt syndrome. As we Christians sat down to enjoy Thanksgiving dinner this past week, someone might have said something like, "We really ought to be more thankful. Think about the poor refugees in many parts of the world who have nothing to eat." Then there is this cloud of guilt which passes over the table as people begin to eat.

Shortly before Jesus was crucified, Mary brought an expensive container of perfume and poured it all over Jesus. Judas Iscariot led objections from the disciples. According to John #12 v. 5 he said, **"Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"** "Jesus, how could You let her spend this money on You when there are poor people outside who are going hungry?" It's the guilt syndrome. Jesus answered Judas (v.7-8): **"Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."**

God wants us to enjoy the blessings of His creation. He gives us good gifts to enjoy. He does also care about the poor and the downtrodden. He does want us to spread the gospel around the world. So we need to avoid the other unhealthy extreme. That extreme has been labeled "the health and wealth gospel." There are some in the Christian community who say that God wants us all to have the biggest and the best of everything. We are sons of the King of the universe. So we ought to live like royalty.

Kenneth Copeland writes, **"If you make up your mind... that you are willing to live in divine prosperity and abundance, Satan cannot stop the flow of God's financial blessings. If you are willing and obedient... divine prosperity will come to pass in your life."** (*BVOV Magazine*, May, 2018) His wife Gloria wrote a book entitled *God's Will Is Prosperity*.

In this view of life the focus shifts to making ourselves the center of the universe and using God to meet our wants and desires. We become gods, and God becomes our servant. The measure of success in the Christian life comes to be our health and material wealth. This is just blasphemy.

By these standards Job, the Apostle Paul, and even Jesus Christ Himself would not have measured up. Jesus said that He had no place to lay His head. He lived in borrowed houses. He rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. He had the Last Supper in a borrowed room. He died on a borrowed cross. He was buried in a borrowed tomb.

There is a balance in all of this. Our motivation in life should not be the accumulation of a lot of stuff. But we should enjoy things when they come our way. When we follow Biblical principles of saving and hard work and frugal living, material blessings often come our way. If all of this comes to us as the result of good fortune and our own hard work, then we have no one to thank but ourselves. Such is the attitude that some have toward Thanksgiving.

But because we have a God who often delights to bless us in tangible, material ways, we can be truly grateful. We understand that it is God who has given us the physical and mental ability to accomplish certain things in life. It is God who put us into this time and place in the world where we are able to benefit from certain freedoms and technological and material advances. In this attitude of gratitude we give thanks to this personal God who delights to bless us. We acknowledge what the Bible says about Him and His blessings. Thus are His gifts, in a sense, sanctified, or made holy. We can therefore enjoy them to the maximum.

Of course, there are other Scriptures which encourage us to be generous with our material blessings toward the poor and needy. Jesus encouraged us to invest in the advance of the kingdom of God. In the parable of the rich fool (LUKE 12:21) Jesus concluded with this warning: **“So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”**

There are two lessons then for us from this passage. First, we must beware the danger of apostasy. Besides the cults, there are also churches who have ministers who use Christian terminology, but do not believe in the Christ portrayed in the Bible. They do not believe the foundational truths of the Christian faith. They may be kind, gracious, and compassionate men and women. But the Bible describes them as apostates. We are to avoid them. Sometimes we may need to confront them.

Then, secondly, we need to enjoy God’s blessing to the full and have thankful hearts toward Him. In Luke #17 vv. 11-19 we encounter this story: **“On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.’ When he saw them he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of**

them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' And he said to him, 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.'"

On this Thanksgiving weekend, let's make sure that we are among those who give thanks and glory to God.