

Proposition: There are three insights God wants us to know concerning apostasy, as explained in 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

- I. We need to know the source of apostasy (1-2).
 - A. There's an unseen contributor (1).
 1. There are deceiving spirits.
 2. There are demonic doctrines.
 - B. There's a seen contributor (2).
 1. He has a truth problem.
 2. He has a conscience problem.
- II. We need to know the symptoms of apostasy (3).
 - A. Asceticism is pseudo-spiritual.
 - B. Asceticism tries to be stricter than God.
 1. They prohibited marriage.
 2. They prohibited certain foods.
- III. We need to know the solution for apostasy (4-5).
 - A. Remember these guidelines (4).
 1. Everything God made is good.
 2. If you can give thanks to God for it, enjoy!
 - B. Remember these priorities (5).
 1. One is the Word of God.
 2. The other is prayer.

The next five words are unthinkable, yet true. *Some will abandon the faith.* Some--thankfully, not all, and not even many, but some. Will abandon the faith--not simply their faith, but *the* faith, the Christian faith.

Quite frankly, that's hard to fathom. Why would anyone become so dissatisfied with the good news of Jesus Christ that they would abandon it? Yes, some have never heard it, but that's a different problem--you can't abandon what you don't know. But there are some who have heard the good news, who have professed allegiance to Christ, and have even tasted the benefits that accompany a profession of faith in Christ.

But...they weren't satisfied.

You'll see this warning on page after page in the Bible. *Some will abandon the faith.* Like King Amaziah of whom 2 Chronicles 25:2 says, "He did right in the sight of the Lord, yet not with a whole heart." And in the end his epitaph read, "Amaziah turned away from following the Lord (2 Chron. 25:27)."

That's what Judas Iscariot did (John 6:70-71), and Demas (2 Tim. 4:10). So did Hymenaeus and Alexander in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:20). And Philetus who "wandered from the truth (2 Tim. 2:17-18)."

They are called *apostates*, from the Greek word *apostasontai* which we'll see in our text this morning, 1 Timothy 4:1. "The Spirit clearly says that in latter times some will *abandon the faith* and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons."

I took a Greek class in college with a group of people, all heading for some type of ministry. We spent two years together, six quarters under the tutelage of Dr. Gromacki.

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One of my classmates was Steve. He was brilliant, a real thinker with a keen mind and God-given ability to study the Word of God. A few years after college, I ran into another Greek class buddy, and we played catch-up on what was happening with our peers. It was then that I heard that Steve had abandoned the faith.

How can that happen? I'm not talking about the common struggles all believers face as they grow in Christ. I'm talking about someone who knows the truth, and yet throws in the towel on the Christian faith. How can a person who has tasted the good things of God chuck the whole thing for a stale substitute?

That's the subject the Word of God addresses in 1 Timothy 4. I've entitled this study, "A Warning about the Unthinkable."

Be careful, beloved. This is no hypothetical matter. And don't write off the warning with the naive "It couldn't happen to me" notion. This is a very real danger for people who name the name of Christ, hence the numerous warnings given in the New Testament.

Jude wrote (17-23): "But, dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ foretold. They said to you, 'In the last times there will be scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires.' These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear--hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh."

The apostle John wrote (2 John 8-9): "Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son."

Peter offered a similar warning to church members (2 Pet. 3:17-18): "Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Apostasy is a serious threat to the church. But God has given us a good word in 1 Timothy 4 which we'll see today as we return to our series in 1 Timothy. There are three insights God wants us to know concerning apostasy, as explained in 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

I. We need to know the source of apostasy (1-2).

Remember that 1 Timothy is a personal letter written from Paul in Macedonia to Timothy in Ephesus. Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus to help this decade old church get over the hump of some challenges. One of the biggest was an internal problem. There were people in the church who were teaching things other than the Word of God, and they needed to be silenced (1:3).

Paul had already dealt with the ringleaders as he explains in 1:19-20, "Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme."

After dealing with church-life matters such as worship services and roles (in chapter 2) and qualifications for church leaders (in chapter 3), Paul returns to the matter of false teachers in chapter 4.

How does apostasy enter a church anyway? See if you can pinpoint the source of apostasy as you listen to verses 1-2, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron."

Herein is the source of apostasy. There are two contributors.

A. There's an unseen contributor (1). There's an enemy you can't see. Who or what is it? Paul uses two revealing phrases to depict the unseen contributor of apostasy.

1. There are deceiving spirits. Let's look at verse 1 phrase by phrase. Paul states, "The Spirit clearly ["expressly"] says [lit. "is saying"]." Says where? Paul doesn't tell us. Perhaps he has in mind a conversation recorded in Acts 20.

It was just six years earlier that Paul met with the Ephesian elders--leaders from the very church Timothy was now in--and gave them this charge (Acts 20:29-30): "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!"

And what the Spirit predicted through Paul took less than six years to occur.

Our text continues, "In later times ["in the latter times," KJV]." In Old Testament thought, there are two time periods. There's "this age," and there's "the age to come." The event that would transition from "this age" to the "age to come" would be the arrival of the Messiah. What the OT didn't clearly distinguish was that Christ would come *twice*. That means we're living with a foot in both ages. At His first coming, Christ ushered in the Messianic era, or "the latter times." We're living in the time period the NT calls the "last times" or the "last days" (see 1 John 2:18; 1 Pet. 1:20; Heb. 1:2).

From His first coming until our Lord returns, throughout this church age apostasy will be a constant threat. And indeed, toward the end it will escalate when "most people's love will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12; MacArthur, 148).

What did the Spirit say would happen in later times? Verse 1 again, "Some will abandon the faith." Some, not all and not even many. But some will *apostasontai*. That's the Greek word for "abandon" ("depart" in the KJV). Some will *apostasize*.¹

The word means "to remove oneself from the position originally occupied to another place." It's a strong term, and refers to a purposeful, deliberate departure from a former position (MacArthur, 147). It's used in a geographical sense of Anna in Luke 2:37, that 84-year-old widow who never "left" the temple in her wait for the Messiah. But, MacArthur observes, "In the spiritual sense, it refers to those who come very close to the truth that saves, only to leave."

Jesus used the verb in His parable of the Soils. When some people hear the Word of God, it's like seed falling on rocky soil. As Jesus said, "They believe for awhile, and in time of temptation *fall away* (Luke 8:13)."

How could that happen? Why do some people abandon the faith? In part, the answer is because they open themselves up to non-biblical teaching. They don't realize there's an unseen contributor. And so they follow "deceiving spirits."

¹North Africa produced some of the greatest Christians in the early centuries of the church: Augustine, Tertullian, and Athanasius, but in time the church there departed from the faith and went off into heresy.

It's a spiritual warfare. Satan does not want you to believe the Word of God. When a person departs from the faith, he does so because he's been hoodwinked by a devilish attack. Paul says he's given heed to "seducing spirits." Secondly...

2. *There are demonic doctrines.* "Doctrines of demons," is how the KJV translates the phrase. "Things taught by demons," is the NIV.

Don't miss this. Apostasy is not merely the result of some person's independent thinking. It's not just the sway of an agnostic university professor. Nor is it simply the pull of a modernist pastor who denies the authority of Scripture with his man-centered teaching. No, the real cause of the problem is unseen to the naked eye. These purveyors of blasphemy are merely pawns in the hands of an aggressive, destructive, unseen spiritual army.

Don't be misled by the phrase "demonic doctrines." Demonic merely indicates the source of the teaching, not its content. The teaching itself may be very appealing, not necessarily vulgar or repulsive. If that were the case, no one would listen to it. Some, even much of demonic doctrine may be true--that's what makes it so believable. And dangerous. But it's twisted truth, and its purpose is to undermine the authority of God and His Word.

Why would anyone abandon the faith in favor of demon-crafted substitutes? It's like driving by a cool, refreshing, artesian spring in order to fill your canteen at the city sewer. Yet it happens, first because there's an unseen contributor. Second...

B. There's a seen contributor (2). False teaching comes from demons, but it's transmitted through people. What kind of people? The kind of person that has two problems, according to verse 2.

1. *He has a truth problem.* "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars." A hypocrite is bad enough. A lying hypocrite is worse! The tool that Satan uses to entice professing Christians to defect from the faith is a teacher who has a truth problem.

An apostate will pretend to be very pious and religious. He knows "church talk" and he uses it with great expertise. But it's merely a cover-up for his hidden arrogance.

What would allow anyone to blatantly misrepresent the truth? A second problem...

2. *He has a conscience problem.* "Whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron." Paul uses an unusual Greek participle here (17 letters long) from the root *kauteriazō*. The Greek medical writer Hippocrates used it to speak of cauterization.

That's how a false teacher can spread his or her hypocritical ideas. When your conscience has been seared, you can defy God and not bat an eye.

Several years ago and in another city, I co-officiated a funeral with a highly respected minister. I sat behind him as he stood before the grieving family and announced, "I know you're hearts are heavy, but be encouraged. You'll see your loved one again when we all reach the other side in heaven."

Is that true? Will everyone go to heaven? I happened to know that several in attendance that day did not believe in Jesus Christ. Why would he give people such false assurance then? How could he, with a smile on his face, tell people that which is not true?

John MacArthur is right (151), "To purvey their hellish teachings, demons use human deceivers who speak their lies. They may be religious leaders, and appear outwardly good and devout. They may teach in an ostensibly Christian college or seminary. They

may pastor a church, or write theological books or commentaries. Though they wear the mask of religion (even Christianity) and wear a mask of piety, they do not serve God, but Satan. They blaspheme God."

And what's just as sad as a false teacher is the fact that there are people who will sit under the teaching of that false teacher week after week.

We're not talking about splitting hairs here. We're talking about the fundamentals of *the faith*. Notice carefully again the words "the faith" (1). What is it that some will abandon? Not *their faith* in the subjective sense, but *the faith* in the objective sense. Just what is *the faith*? When you stop and ponder what *the faith* is, you realize just how unthinkable it is to abandon it.

The faith is the objective account of the gospel, the amazing message of Christianity as recorded in the Bible. That God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. Ponder those words line by line.

God so loved the world. God did, the One who made this universe, the Mighty King who is in a class all by Himself. God, the only true God.

God *so loved* the world. Of His own volition, uninfluenced by anything outside of Himself, of His own gracious choosing, God devoted Himself to expressing His love. For whom?

God so loved *the world*. His world, His rebellious world, sinners who did not deserve such love.

That He *gave*. There was no coercion involved. He gave.

His only begotten Son. Not an angel, not ten thousand angels. He gave His priceless Son. Jesus, the God-man, the Messiah who came to become the ransom payment for sin, not His sin for He had none--*our sin*. God gave His only Son to rescue us from our plight. He poured out the wrath we deserved on Him, on the Cross, and then three days later declared the sufficiency of His death with the exclamation point of the empty tomb.

That whosoever believes in Him. No merit here. We are saved by faith alone, by believing in Jesus and His redemptive work.

Shall not perish. Yes, there is a real place the Bible calls "hell." It's what we deserve, and where we'd spend eternity were it not for Christ. But instead...

We have everlasting life. All that Adam forfeited and more is ours! A life of unending paradise, living in perfect fellowship with God forever and ever and ever.

That amazing message is *the faith*. It's the good news. It's God's good news. But some think they can improve on it. And that is unthinkable.

Now a second insight concerning apostasy. First, the source...

II. We need to know the symptoms of apostasy (3).

What are they? In verse 3, Paul identifies the symptoms of the particular brand of false teaching in Ephesus: "They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods."

The heretics in Ephesus promoted what's called asceticism. What's that? We see two traits of asceticism in verse 3.

A. Asceticism is pseudo-spiritual. It's very attractive and appealing to some. Why? Because living by rules seems so spiritual. In reality, it's an attack on *grace*. It's something I can do to make myself become spiritual. A second trait...

B. Asceticism tries to be stricter than God. Notice the two prohibitions Paul mentions here.

1. *They prohibited marriage.* And...
2. *They prohibited certain foods.*

What's wrong with these rules? This. In both cases, they demean something that God says is good. In other words, they are man-made rules that go beyond Scripture.

First, the false teachers asserted that single life was more spiritual than married life. But that contradicts the Scriptures. In God's own words recorded in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone." No, there's nothing wrong with singleness (indeed, 1 Cor. 7:25-35 commends singleness in certain situations). But there's something very wrong--very unscriptural--with prohibiting marriage.

As well as with creating food laws. Granted, fasting is good (Matt. 6:16-17). It's an expression of self-denial and an acknowledgment of the biblical truth, "Man shall not live by bread alone." But legislating food rules is an violation of Scripture. Mark 7:19 explicitly says that "Jesus declared all foods clean."

Did you notice something? The false teaching Paul confronts here is not what we would consider "blatant heresy," is it? We might expect him to say that demon doctrine is an attack on the doctrine of the trinity, or the substitutionary atonement of Jesus. Which is true. But Satan is clever. He'll seek a foothold wherever he can get it.

Compared with eternal issues, these are relatively *minor* issues--rules about marriage and food--aren't they? But that's how Satan works. He attacks the foundation by getting people to add to the Word of God. And once they do that, once they get used to adding to the Scriptures, they're ripe for Satan's picking.

That's been the devil's pattern all along--to convince people to be stricter than God. Historian William Barclay says that Irenaeus faced it in the second century when some followers of Saturninus declared "that marriage and generation are from Satan. Many likewise abstain from animal food, and draw away multitudes by a feigned temperance of this kind."

Barclay continues (94), "This kind of thing came to a head in the monks and hermits of the fourth century. They went away and lived in the Egyptian desert, entirely cut off from men. They spent their lives mortifying the flesh. One never ate cooked food and was famous for his 'fleshlessness.' Another stood all night by a jutting crag so that it was impossible for him to sleep. Another was famous because he allowed his body to become so dirty and neglected that vermin dropped from him as he walked. Another deliberately ate salt in midsummer and then abstained from drinking water. 'A clean body,' they said, 'necessarily means an unclean soul.'"

Were the men zealous? Yes. Were they religious? Yes. Were they biblical? No. They took their cue from the Gnostic notion that the physical is bad. Is that true? No, but why not? That's insight #3...

III. We need to know the solution for apostasy (4-5).

The solution is to remember two things. First...

A. Remember these guidelines (4). Two, to be specific...

1. *Everything God made is good.* Verse 3 ends, "Which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." Verse 4 continues, "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving."

The verb "refused" (*apobletos*, 4) occurs nowhere else in the Bible. It means literally "to be thrown away," and here communicates the sense of "tabooed." Many religions have long lists of taboos. It's part of the process of earning divine approval.

But not so biblical Christianity. True Christianity is built on grace, not works. The Bible teaches that everything God made is good. Which leads to guideline #2...

2. *If you can give thanks to God for it, enjoy!* We're talking about the things God made, not the things man perverted. Like the man who says, "There's nothing wrong with pornography. I'm just enjoying God's creation." No. To use this verse to justify sinful behavior is to yank it from its context. To violate a biblical command is always wrong. That's not the issue here. Giving non-biblical rules biblical authority *is*.

So remember these guidelines. In fact, if you want to know whether something is appropriate or not, turn these guidelines into questions. One, ask yourself, did God make it? And two, can you thank God for it? If so, enjoy, to the glory of God!

So the solution for dealing with apostasy is, first, remember these guidelines.

B. Remember these priorities (5). "Because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." The verb "consecrated" ["sanctified" in the KJV] literally means "to be made holy." Some people try to impose holiness by man-made rules. That's what asceticism does, not biblical Christianity. What is the standard for holiness according to Paul? Something is consecrated "by the word of God and prayer."

When God finished the week of creation, what signature did He affix to His handiwork? Genesis 1:31, "God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*."

Barclay says it well, "The true Christian does not serve God by enslaving himself with rules and regulations and insulting his creation; he serves him by gratefully accepting his good gifts and remembering this is a world where God made all things well and by never forgetting to share God's gifts with others."

So rather than living with man-made rules, we need to remember two priorities.

1. *One is the Word of God.*

2. *The other is prayer.*

Dear friend, this isn't a story tale. Apostasy is a real danger to any church. If you want to protect yourself and this church from it, devote yourself to these two priorities: to the Word of God and prayer.