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When my children were in High School and one in particular was wandering off, as it were, we were warned by professionals, “Don’t try and force your child to drop unhealthy friendships, because at that point in time they will choose their friends over you. So they may comply at home and then when they go away they’ll do what they want to.” We prayed about that. I made this comment to one of my sons. I don’t care who you are a friend with, but I want you to be a good friend, and you and I both know what it means to be good. I believe that that follows a spiritual principle. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he said, “I did not mean that you should separate from the people of the world. If you want to separate from the people of the world, you will have to leave the world. You can’t do that. But what I want you to do is I want you to become holy and righteous and true in your own hearts so that when you deal with the people of the world you deal with them not on their terms, but with the grace of God.”

In 1 Timothy 4:1-10 Paul has completed his description of the qualified man to be an elder or a deacon. He has lifted up, as we have had opportunity to see over the last number of weeks, a remarkable set of qualities. I doubt that anybody but Jesus Christ Himself meets and fulfills all of those qualities. They are the ideal, they stand in front of us, they call to us, they say, “Strengthen yourself, arm yourself inwardly with all of the virtues of God and push on and seek to overcome your weaknesses.” That is what we need to do; we need to be a people who do this, who don’t just give way to what our culture wants us to be and to become.

But Paul is a profound realist because he believes in the Lord God of heaven and he looks with honesty upon people as they truly are. When he met with the Ephesian elders, the very group to which this letter, because Timothy was the pastor at Ephesus, was written, he says to them in his last meeting with them, “I know that in the future not only will wolves come in from the outside, but wolves will come up from the inside of your own group of elders.” He was a realist. I would be a fool if I said to myself or to you that everyone in this room is a committed believer in Jesus Christ. It is unlikely in the extreme. I would be a fool if I were to say that I expect all of us in this room, including myself, will from this day forward walk a steady walk, continually climbing higher and higher, getting closer to the perfections of the character of Jesus Christ, the fullness of the stature of the mature man is what Paul says in Ephesians 4; that none of us will stumble, that none will grow weary and go off the path, that none of us will turn and betray the rest of us: that is going to happen. Paul addresses that in chapter 4 of 1 Timothy. After giving all of those remarkable qualifications, he then says, and I am reading 1 Timothy 4:1-10

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

*(4:6) “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. (4:7) Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; (4:8) for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. (4:9) The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full*

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*acceptance. (4:10) For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the savior of all people, especially of those who believe.”*

When we look at verses 1-5 I think I see a need for a word of clarification. There is a common category error that is made by people. That category error is to confuse a mistake with a lie. I have noticed increasingly that people no longer tend to say “My bad”, but they will say, “Oh I lied” when all they mean is that they made a mistake. We all make mistakes and we all tell lies. Often enough we tell lies based on mistakes regarding the way things really are or might be if we say something. This only makes it more important that we think clearly in the matter. Let me give you an example. If my wife mistakenly says she will meet me at the coffee shop at ten but doesn’t get there until eleven or eleven thirty because she forgot she was going shopping with a friend, she just made a mistake. But if she said she couldn’t meet me until eleven thirty because she was tied up with laundry and house chores while in fact she intended to go shopping, she lied. Those two things are profoundly different. We are likely to regret mistakes. We need to repent of lies. They are just not the same thing. Words make a difference, and we should use them carefully.

I say all this in order that when we take up these verses of what Paul says in 1 Timothy 4, that we recognize not all of those who have counselled against marriage are to be considered liars and particularly that they have not necessarily listened to demons and deceitful spirits: but some have. You know that Paul himself counseled against marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7:32-34 we read this, his sober reasons. He says, *“I want you to be free from anxieties.”* Just as a quick poll, how many of us are married? How many of us are anxious? The rest of you are lying! So Paul says, *“The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.”* [Paul] had already written this in verse 28, *“...if you do marry, you have not sinned...but you will have trouble.”* True? All of those who had a perfectly trouble-free marriage... I won’t even finish the question. That is absurd!

What Paul was addressing in 1 Timothy 4:1-5 was not the relative merits of marriage or singleness. That is not what was on his mind as a strategy for living a life of credible witness and effective service as a follower of Christ. That is not what his concern was. Rather Paul was addressing some false teaching, and the false teaching was this: it presented itself as true doctrine for the benefit of living the Christian life and anticipating the joys of heaven. This, by the way is what Paul means when he says that some have departed from the faith. Some people think that he means that they are no longer Christians. That is not what he is talking about. He is probably using the word faith the way Jude in Jude 3 uses it: *“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I find it necessary to write, appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”* In that case the word faith refers to the body of truths or doctrines or teachings which is to be believed. Nobody I know, including myself, remains consistently true to the faith through all of the years that we seek to follow after Christ. We err, and sometimes we rebel; but we are not necessarily thereby truly abandoning the faith as that which sustains us in our spiritual lives. The false teaching that Paul is referring to said that personal holiness could be greatly added by abstaining from sex and various foods, because both, it said, sex and various foods, were inherently sinful. They made one unclean or defiled simply because you either ate that stuff or engaged in sexual behavior. This is a

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perception or understanding that comes dangerously close to what would be called fetishism and magic, that is, the idea that there are inherent forces for good or evil in things, words or actions regardless of the moral condition or intention of the user. Paul address exactly the same perception in Colossians 2:20-23. This is what he said at that point: *“...why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”* This is an extremely significant statement. I can live a life which is outwardly as pure as the driven snow, but what might be the condition of my heart? [It could be] utterly wretched, filled with pride, looking down on those who do not have the same magnificent capabilities of self-control that I have. Indeed I believe there were Pharisees who acted in exactly that manner. “I am so glad that I fast twice a week! I am so glad that I do not engage in unclean activities like this tax gatherer!” Do we remember [the words of Jesus]?

The indulgence which Paul refers to in Colossians 2:20-23 is an indulgence of the mind. It is a mind which prefers its own opinions and speculations to the sober truths revealed in God’s Word or alternately discovered through the methodical study of the natural order of what God has created and which reveals much about Him. There are two kinds of study which bring us into touch with the truth. One is the careful study of the Word of God. The other is the careful study of what God has made. Traditionally that is called special revelation and general revelation. As many can attest, it is pretty exhilarating to sit around and spin out high thoughts and grand schemes of meaning simply by thinking about things. I think I spent a lot of my adolescent years, in fact, sitting around speculating and thinking about things. I ended up thinking my way further and further away from Jesus Christ. I ended up thinking my way into a cesspool of depression. I ended up thinking my way into a universal suspicion of all my fellow man. What began as exhilaration ended as desperation.

The answer to this kind of speculative thinking is to recall that God is the Creator of all things and that He has given us all things to be received with thanksgiving. This does not mean, of course, that all things are equally good for us or good for us in the same way. We are to learn the properties of what we find in the world and use them accordingly. It should be obvious also to anyone that just because something is good because of having been made by God doesn’t mean that it is good for us to eat or drink or anything else. Going beyond that we might consider that just because something holds the potential for satisfying some current need or desire that it directly follows that we should or ought to put it to use. As stewards and students of what God has created, as Christians, we are required to remember that what we call “nature” is in fact what God has created: as Christians we are required therefore as stewards and students of the creation, we increasingly need to understand and at least try to anticipate the often unthought of as well as unintended consequences of what we do with and in the world. Are you following me? Deforestation, polluting rivers and ground-waters, the degradation of fields and grazing lands on the one side and the side-effects of chemicals, whether as insecticides or fertilizer, as growth stimulants or the prevention of disease, or preservatives or color enhancers or the like in process foods: as these things come to light we are responsible before God and our fellow man to learn much and act wisely. I am speaking against the wide-spread evangelical position that says anything free enterprise does is right. I am speaking against the notion that if you can make a profit you should. I am speaking against the notion that we have the liberty to use the world in whatever way

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suits us. We do not. We are responsible to our Creator and ultimately also to our fellow man to use the world wisely for the benefit of all.

Returning to Paul’s more immediate concern when he says in verse 5 that something is made holy by the word of God and prayer, he is not saying the object in mind gains some kind of sanctifying power such that if we eat it or drink it or wear it we will gain in sanctification because we are not sanctified in such a way. Indeed, food and all physical things are in themselves external soul. Let me touch on a very sensitive subject: can we drink alcohol and remain pure? Of course you can! Purity is not a matter of the alcohol. Purity is a matter of...well let me let you hear the words of Jesus, because He spoke to this matter directly.

*“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”* (Matthew 15:18-20) The church has not always been wise in the laws and regulations that it lays down, building a house of prescriptions built upon speculations rather than on the Word of God or on the things of nature.

Defilement has to do with what we love, why we love it, and our moral choices. It has to do with whether or not and how these things reflect our beliefs about ultimate reality and the nature of God, and equally it has to do with whether or not we have disciplined our desires so that they along with our behavior are conformed to the revealed will of God.

That may seem like rather a lot to have said. Hopefully I have opened up a number of conversations around the afternoon dinner table. When we began our study of 1 Timothy we saw that Paul’s first concern was with teachings that were troubling the Ephesian congregation. The trouble, you might recall, was of two sorts: there was false doctrine which is teaching as true what contradicts the revealed truth of God. That was the first. The second is that there were teachings that were really just distractions, misleading in that they drew the attention and efforts of people away from the Word of God. This has the effect gradually of undermining people’s confidence in the sufficiency of God’s word for living the Christian life. Now they are not sure. Along this line Paul referenced myths and genealogies, speculations. Returning to 1 Timothy 4:7, we again read the same kind of issue: *“Have nothing to do with irreverent silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for whole bodily training is of some value, godliness is value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”* Paul’s reference here to “silly irreverent myths” looks back to the false spirituality of those who claimed there were hidden spiritual powers, whether positive or negative, in foods or in, for that matter, sexuality. By the way, the notion that sexual behavior had spiritual implications was universal across paganism in ancient times. There is no such power but there is distraction. This was the rationale that Paul had for advising married couples to for a season to abstain from sexual intimacy so they could concentrate on prayer. But it needed to be only for a season and not indefinitely, he says, for fear that you will lose self-control and be deceived by Satan. *“Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a limited time that you may devote yourself to prayer, but then come together again that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”*

What are the things that distract us? In 1 Timothy 4:7-8 Paul warns us regarding another distraction. This is what he says: *“While bodily training is of some value godliness is of value in every way as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”* Greek culture in Paul’s day and for some

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centuries both before and after placed an extremely high value on physical strength, skill and beauty. So do we. And for both cultures that high value can be a serious distraction from godliness. It is important for us to recognize in these comments that Paul is not rejecting care for the body out of hand or appreciation for physical beauty. There is not a slightest hint that that is his concern. He knows that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and are to be honored. Further, we are blood bought servant of Jesus Christ. We are not our own. As good stewards we are obligated to take good care of what belongs to someone else. Again, our service to our master is through and by these marvelous bodies and they are tools for the master to use. Like any tool they are to be kept in good shape. That is manifestly true when it comes to the time, effort and money we can spend to ensure we have the best body possible. This is an American obsession. I meet with a couple of senior citizens, much older than I! Two of them go to the gym on a regular basis. A third senior citizen made this observation. He said, “You know when you go in there with all those machines all you have to do is touch them.” To which my other friends immediately agreed. One doesn’t want to overdo! So they regularly go and touch the machines.

Most of us know it is possible to have too much of a good thing. That is manifestly true when it comes to the time, effort and money we can spend to ensure the best body possible. I wonder sometimes if some people I know are as diligent about their spiritual disciplines of study, worship, prayer, meditation and serving others as they are about the nutritional chart, vitamins, minerals, the latest research in all of these products. Are they as knowledgeable about reading the word of God and the doctrines of the faith as they are focused on what they eat and drink and their exercise schedule?

Some people are distracted from the truth in these matters. But Paul’s opening statement at the beginning of this chapter should open us to the possibility that some people have been misled by deceitful spirits and demons. Have you ever noticed there is a strangely spiritual quality to what appear to be the most ordinary and natural things?

It is not wise for us to take lightly the Word of God. When the Word of God says that there are those who are misled by deceitful spirits and demons, we should not laugh it off or assume it only applies to people in Bangladesh or Indonesia or some other such God forsaken place. Beloved we are increasingly God-forsaken. I do not have a moment’s hesitation in believing there are demons and deceitful spirits that are at work not outside this building only, but inside as well. This is one reason why I high value the group that comes Sunday morning and they start praying about eight-o-clock in the morning over there in room 14. We need to remember that we are engaged in a spiritual war, that the power of the prince of the power of the air is designed at all times to destroy the coherence and consistency and faithfulness of the body of Christ and he will gladly pick us off one by one, distracting us into being preoccupied with things that have nothing to do with God at all, so we don’t think we are in trouble. But we are in trouble.

Obviously what Paul is saying is that we need to have balance in our lives. Balance, however, for Christians is not neutral. Balance for us leans heavily to the heavenly side. That is why Paul says bodily discipline is good for a little, but godly discipline is good for all things. For some the really good news is that we get new bodies at the resurrection. How many anticipate that? Yeah: well the older you are the more you anticipate that. Even though I am extremely young I do have some anticipation. But for others of us what Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians 15 that in a moment in the twinkling of an eye

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we are transformed, we are thinking it relates to our personality structure. We might finally escape from those abiding sins and weaknesses which trip us up on a constant basis. Oh Lord, come quickly! We are warned against the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes and the pride of life. These are available all the time.

Paul’s concluding sentence in 1 Timothy, 1 Timothy 4:10, calls for at least a brief observation. Just notice what he has to say: *“For to this end we toil and strive because we have our hope set on the living God who is the savior of all people, especially of those who believe.”* Did we hear what he said? This is the kind of verse that when you read it you think you know what it says until you go and read it again. By the time we get to the affirmation that God is the savior of all people, we think we’ve got it and we move on to the next verse, missing the last phrase. It raises the question, doesn’t it? What Paul says is that God is the savior of all people, especially of those who believe. Doesn’t that raise a question in your mind? How on earth can God be the savior of people who don’t believe? That is exactly what he says. I want us to think about that for just a moment.

Surely God knows that only those are saved who believe. Our problem here has to do with the word “savior”. To save is broadly to rescue from ruin. That includes every kind of ruin: the ruin of eternal damnation; the ruin of enslavement to sin; the ruin of physical sickness, the ruin of social chaos, the ruin of moral confusion, the ruin of political oppression, the ruin of poverty, ignorance. We might recognize here the various works of the devil. We see here how it is that godliness is good for all things, both for this present life and as well for the next. Godliness reflects the work of the Spirit inculcating the fruit of the Spirit and enabling of these people to be disciplined in the care of the body as well as of the relationships [they have] with others, meeting one’s responsibilities in the world. In the world we are Christ’s body and servants and we perform good works. The dynamic impact of Christianity in a fallen world [is that] we come as the Savior, not [only] for their souls, though we long for it, but just for their well-being. As Christians we are to be like God who lets His rain fall on the just and the unjust. Presently the leadership core of the congregation is challenged to discern the Lord’s direction in ministry for our congregation for the next coming years. It is always the primary as well as the ultimate desire and goal of the ministry to see souls saved through personal faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. We err however if we believe this is God’s whole purpose for the church. We are to proclaim the gospel and extend the kingdom of God’s righteousness. When Jesus announced the beginning of His public ministry he cited these words from Isaiah 61:1-2, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed me to proclaim good news...”* to whom? How many of us know? [It was] *“...for the poor.”* Not the poor in spirit only; for the poor comprehensively. *“He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives...”* Not just liberty from sin; that is true, but also liberty to the captives, those held in jails and prison houses all over the land locked up under oppressive false governments. *“...and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* In the midst of His famous Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared [as recorded] in Matthew 6:25-33, *“Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you.”*

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Good news is what we come with to the world around us, good news. We long and pray that that good news will be salvation through trust in Jesus as the Savior. But short of that there are many forms of goodness that a starving is dying to receive.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father as we prepare to celebrate the confession of faith and the witness which these six individuals what to make of their faith in Jesus Christ, we are reminded of the breadth, the depth, the wonder of Your grace toward humanity. Father you pour out good on those who will never accept You, You do it because You are good. Father may we increasingly be like the Lord Jesus Christ, and may our personal faith in Jesus make us like Him, doing good to all men, that all men might come to see the greatness and the righteousness and the grace of the Living God. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.