

Understanding the Seducing Spirit

Scripture: 1 Timothy 4:1–3

Code: 54-29

INTRODUCTION

The first five verses of 1 Timothy 4 are a stern warning about apostates. In verse 6 Paul says to Timothy, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ." So to be an excellent servant of Christ, it is important that we have a good understanding of apostasy.

A. An Example of Apostasy

Second Chronicles 25 records the account of Amaziah, king of Judah. He was the son of Joash and the father of Uzziah, who was king during the time of Isaiah the prophet. Amaziah reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. Verse 2 says "he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart." He functioned in accord with the religion of Israel on the outside. He understood it and behaved by its ethics, but not with a willing heart. He practiced a heartless, external religion, not having a personal relationship with the living God. So he was soon lured away into idolatry and began to worship the gods of Edom, to which he bowed down and burned incense (v. 14). His life ended tragically--he was murdered by his own people after turning away from the Lord (v. 27).

B. The Definition of Apostasy

Departing from the faith is nothing new. It happens today just as it did in the Old Testament and in the church at Ephesus, where Timothy was when Paul wrote this epistle. There are always people who understand the faith intellectually and behave externally according to the revelation of God, but have no heart for living to please God. Hebrews 3:12 says that those who depart from God demonstrate an unbelieving heart.

Paul states in 1 Timothy 4:1 that some--like Judas, Demas, or the disciples of John 6 who walked no more with Christ--"shall depart from the faith" (Gk., *aphistemi*, "to remove yourself from the position you originally occupied"). Apostasy isn't an unintentional departure or someone struggling with doubt. It characterizes someone who deliberately abandons truth once affirmed for erroneous teaching. "The faith" refers specifically to the body of Christian doctrine, not the act of believing. Some will depart from "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). People who understand and outwardly affirm Christian doctrine but don't have a heart for God are prime candidates for being seduced by demons to depart from the faith.

An apostate is not someone who never knew the truth but someone who knew it and rejected it. He may have even been involved in various religious activities. But because he never truly knew God, he was lured away by the siren voices of the demons behind idols and false religious systems.

C. The Source of Apostasy

All false religion propagates doctrine energized by seducing spirits. False religion is the playground of demons. Second Corinthians tells us that Satan and his angels disguise themselves as angels of light and become the purveyors of various religions (11:14-15).

1. Leviticus 17:7--The Lord Himself says that whatever men sacrifice to idols is in fact being sacrificed to demons (cf., Deut. 32:17; Ps. 96:5; 106:36-37).

2. 1 Corinthians 10:20-21--Paul said that those who come to the Lord's Table and then go worship at some pagan religious shrine, are fellowshiping with both the Lord and demons. False religious systems and the various idols that accompany them are simply focal points for demonic activity. We should not naively think that a false religion is simply a collection of misguided ideas. Realize that energizing it behind the scenes are dynamic of fallen angels who are seducing people from the truth into an eternal hell.

The Word of God clearly teaches that apostasy is a demonic seduction, that idol worship is actually worship offered to demons, and that false teachers are the agents of demons. The battle is between God and His truth and the devil and his lies. God calls people to Himself through the truth, and Satan tries to lure people away from truth with his hellish lies.

D. The Confrontation of Apostasy

Scripture often exhorts the church to expose false teaching. That kind of confrontation is not a popular thing today. Many churches, in the name of love, want to forget disagreements and avoid being critical at all costs. But nonetheless, there is a biblical mandate to deal with false teaching. The battle lines were drawn in Israel and in the early church, and they must be drawn today too. Like Timothy we must be warned and instructed to understand what is behind false teaching.

While Timothy was pastoring the church at Ephesus, false teachers were teaching contrary doctrines. From 1 Timothy 1 we learn they desired to be teachers of the law but didn't understand what they were teaching (v. 7). Verses 18-20 tell us they had departed from the truth and were delivered to Satan by Paul to learn not to blaspheme. After dealing with false teaching regarding the role of men and women in the church in chapters 2-3, Paul returns to the matter of the false teachers in chapter 4.

First Timothy 3 closes with the theme of truth. Verse 15 states that the church is the pillar and ground of truth and verse 16 says that Christ is the embodiment of truth. That logically leads into Paul's discussion in chapter 4 of the demonic counterattack against the truth. In the first five verses of chapter 4 he describes the apostates and their teaching and from verses 6 to 16 he tells Timothy how to be the kind of man necessary to deal with it.

The theme of 1 Timothy 4:1-5 is this: "some shall depart from the faith" (v. 1). Paul warns Timothy to expect apostasy and provides him with six descriptions of apostates so he can be prepared to identify and counteract them.

I. THE PREDICTABILITY OF APOSTATES (v. 1a)

"Now the Spirit speaketh expressly"

We should not be shocked to learn that some people will apostatize. The Spirit of God explicitly says that some will depart from the faith. The first word of verse 1, better translated "but," heightens the contrast of apostasy to the truths mentioned in the previous verses.

A. The Revelation of the Spirit

The Spirit's explicit instruction in the present tense is a reference to divine revelation. All divine revelation comes from the Holy Spirit. Peter tells us that Scripture is not the product of man's ingenuity, but of holy men of God guided by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). As Paul pens his epistle to Timothy, the very words of the Holy Spirit about apostasy come through.

Paul knew there would be apostates at the church in Ephesus because the Holy Spirit had revealed that fact to him earlier. Long before he had written this epistle to Timothy, Paul addressed the Ephesian elders with these words: "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

B. The Revelation in Scripture

Such revelation about apostasy is not anything unique to the New Testament; the Holy Spirit had been warning about apostasy back in the Old Testament. Many Scriptures in the Old Testament talk about Israelites (both individually and nationally) departing from the faith. Although many people belonged to the nation of Israel, that didn't mean they all believed in the God of Israel. Consequently, they were not part of the believing remnant of Israel (cf., Rom. 2:28-29). The Spirit through the centuries of redemptive history has indicated that there would be those who depart from the faith (Deut. 13:12-15; 32:15-18; Dan. 8:23-25).

In the New Testament we find even more mention of those who would depart from the faith in the end times.

1. Matthew 24:5--The Lord said, "Many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many."

2. Mark 13:22--In the same context Jesus said, "False Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall show signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect."

3. 2 Thessalonians 2:3--Paul informed us that before the coming of Christ in glory will be a massive departure from the faith.

4. 2 Peter 3:3--Peter said there will come in the last times scoffers abandoning the faith to pursue their own lusts (cf. Jude 18).

5. 1 John 2:18-19--John said forerunners of the Antichrist will depart from the faith, revealing that they never were not truly Christians to begin with.

It is inevitable that people will make a momentary response to biblical truth, like the seed that went into the rocky ground (Matt. 13:20-21). But because they have no root, no living union with God, they die out. And there are others whose spiritual pursuits who are choked out by the cares of this world and the love of riches. Such kinds of people may hang around a while, but when their heart is not given to God, they are seduced away by demonic spirits through the human agency of false teachers.

II. THE CHRONOLOGY OF APOSTATES (v. 1b)

"In the latter times"

That phrase does not refer to a long time in the future but to the church age, the time between the first and second comings of Christ. The apostle John said, "Little children, it is the last time" (1 John 2:18). Peter said Christ "was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Pet. 1:20). Hebrews 1:2 declares that God has "in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." Hebrews also states that "in the end of the ages [Christ] appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26).

All those verses tell us that the last times began when Christ first appeared and initiated the Messianic era. He is now building His Kingdom in the hearts of men and will return to establish it on the earth and then in the eternal state. So we are now living in the last times. It is in this dispensation or age that the apostasy Paul is referring to will occur.

III. THE SOURCE OF APOSTATES (v. 1c)

"Giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons"

Apostates listen to seducing spirits and the teachings of demons. The source of apostasy is demonic. Paul described the supernatural battle with demonic forces when he said, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12).

People with "an evil heart of unbelief [depart] from the living God" (Heb. 3:12) because they are lured away by demon spirits, even though there is a facade of religion. Such people who cannot be wooed by the Spirit of God because of their hard-hearted unbelief. They therefore fall prey to Satan and his lies transmitted through his demons.

A. The Devotion Described

The term "giving heed" doesn't mean merely "to give attention to"; it means "to give assent to." It conveys the idea of devoting or attaching oneself to a person or thing. Its use in the present tense implies a continual clinging to the seductive doctrines that the spirits disseminate.

An apostate in the context of the New Testament is a person who understands the gospel and who may outwardly identify with the Christian faith. But because his heart is not truly God's, he turns from the truth to the lies of the devil and is drawn away from the true faith unto eternal damnation.

The Devil Made Him Do It! I often hear parents say, "Our child was raised in a Christian home, but when he went away to college, he was led astray by atheistic professors or religious cult leaders and now denies the faith." Such students aren't the victims of erudite and persuasive professors, religious leaders, or clever writers who have subtly propagated falsehoods in textbooks. Ungodly philosophies and false religions are not merely human aberrations; they are ultimately the product of Satan himself.

B. The Dangers Declared

We should be immensely cautious before we ever expose ourselves or anyone we love to false teaching. Many Scriptures warn us of the dangers of false teachers.

1. 2 John 7, 10-11--The apostle John gave us a warning about false teachers and how we should respond to them: "Many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh.... If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed; for he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds." Stay away from false teachers.

2. Jude 23--Anytime you get near people who are under the influence of false teachers, you should yank them out of the fire, so to speak, exercising caution that you yourself don't get burned in the process.

3. Deuteronomy 13:12-17--The Lord warned the nation of Israel about false prophets through Moses, saying, "If thou shalt hear a report in one of thy cities, which the Lord thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying, Certain men, worthless fellows, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known, then shalt thou inquire, and make search, and ask diligently; and, behold, if it be truth, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought among you, thou shalt surely smite the inhabitant of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all that is therein, and the cattle thereof, with the edge of the sword. And thou shalt gather all the spoil of it into the midst of the street thereof, and shalt burn with fire the city, and all the spoil thereof every whit, for the Lord thy God, and it shall be an heap forever; it shall not be built again. And there shall cling nothing of the cursed thing to thine hand; that the Lord my turn from the fierceness of his anger, and show upon thee mercy, and have compassion upon thee." You know God is serious about false doctrine since He instructed the Israelites to go to the extreme of burning the city after slaying its inhabitants and cattle so it could never be rebuilt again.

C. The Demons Discussed

The phrase "seducing spirits" refers to the source of false doctrines--supernatural demonic spirit

beings who are fallen angels. "Seducing" is a translation of the Greek term from which we get our word planet. It conveys the idea of wandering and is applied to those spirits who would lead you to wander from the truth by seducing or deceiving you. Whereas the Holy Spirit guides us into truth (John 16:13), these spirits lead people into error. They are the principalities and powers that the church must wrestle against (Eph. 6:11-12).

The history of seducing spirits goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where Satan seduced Eve into believing she was being cheated out of the best thing God had by not being able to eat from the forbidden tree (Gen. 3:1-6). He seduced her to disobey God's instruction to her. Such seductions are chronicled throughout Scripture, all the way to the book of Revelation.

D. The Doctrines Delineated

False teachers seduce people with the "doctrines of demons." The world is full of demonic teaching. Anything that contradicts the Word of God is ultimately a teaching from demons. They're behind it all. False teaching doesn't come from clever men. It comes from demons. That's why exposing yourself to it is more dangerous than you might think.

However not all demonic teaching looks demonic on the surface. Some of it is so subtly disguised that we might not even recognize it as such, unless we look very closely. Many people are trifling with Satanic doctrines without knowing it and will be seduced unless such false teaching is exposed. That, however, is not a popular thing to do.

IV. THE CHARACTER OF APOSTATES (v. 2)

A. Their Hypocrisy (v. 2a)

"Speaking lies in hypocrisy"

The doctrines of demons are dispensed through human agents. Although the source is supernatural, the means of seduction is natural--occurring on the human level. The beginning phrase of verse 2 can best be translated "through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies." Demons use men and women who may appear to be well educated or religious. These individuals may be preachers or priests who are very moral and devout in their appearance. They may give the impression that their motives are pure in their desire to help people. But the facade of religiosity serves only to hide the demonic error behind that mask. Hypocritical teachers may seem like they exalt God, but it is actually Satan whom they exalt. They are deceivers and liars who come masked in religious garb, possibly even teaching at a Christian church or school, or writing a book aimed toward a Christian audience. They will find an audience and propagate their hellish doctrines under the direction of seducing spirits.

B. Their Consciences

"Having their conscience seared with a hot iron"

Some commentators believe that phrase alludes to the ancient practice of branding slaves on their foreheads, and therefore implies that such hypocrites are the devil's agents. Although that meaning makes sense, I think it is better to understand the phrase as referring to more than just ownership by Satan. The conscience is the part of man that affirms or condemns an action, and thus controls behavior. False teachers can carry on their hypocrisy day after day because their consciences have been scarred beyond the ability to discern right and wrong. They have lost their sensitivity to truth and integrity.

The Greek word for "seared" (kausteriazō) is the medical term Hippocrates used for the cauterizing process--the searing of body tissue or blood vessels with heat. False teachers have been scarred to the point where they can carry on their hypocritical lies with no compunctions.

In my own ministry I am very concerned about my responsibility to speak the truth of God. I regularly pray that every time I teach God's Word I would not utter anything that is untrue. My conscience demands that I deal with truth carefully because it's God's truth and men's souls are at stake. Yet there are some who never investigate the accuracy of what they teach because their consciences have been desensitized to the truth by having been constantly abused. Their apostasy has scarred their consciences.

V. THE TEACHING OF APOSTATES (v. 3a)

"Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods"

Those restrictions are just a sample of their erroneous doctrines. Some false teachers taught that if you wanted to be spiritual you shouldn't get married and you had to abstain from certain kinds of food. It is typical of Satan to take something that may be appropriate for certain people at certain times and make it mandatory for everyone. Paul honors singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, and Jesus acknowledges the place for fasting with the proper motives in Matthew 6. But the apostates Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 4 were requiring ascetic self-denial to attain spirituality. Salvation for them was based on what they denied themselves.

All false religions devise human means by which you become saved, either by things you do or don't do. They are all ultimately based on human achievement. Although ascetic practices may give the impression of spiritual sincerity, they aren't the means of attaining holiness.

As early as 166 B.C. the Essene sect of Judaism was living in an isolated community by the Dead Sea. It emphasized an ascetic life- style of marital and dietary abstinences. Such thinking may have found its way to Ephesus. More likely was that Greek Gnosticism was the direct influence of false religion at Ephesus. It held that spirit is good and matter is evil. So those who adhered to that philosophy denied themselves physical pleasures, such as marital relations and certain foods. They believed such abstinence would please their deities. This erroneous philosophy was probably what influenced the Corinthians on the topics of marriage (1 Cor. 7) and bodily resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

That kind of externalism is typical of false religion. Paul's point at the end of verse 3 is that spirituality is not related to what you accept or deny yourself in terms of things given by God for the enjoyment

of man. In Colossians 2:16-23 he says, "Let no man, therefore, judge you in food, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day, or of the new moon, or of a Sabbath day, which are a shadow of things to come; but the body [reality] is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels ... [or subject you] to ordinances (touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using) after the commandments and doctrines of men." Don't follow the ascetic approach of trying to earning your acceptance before God. As a Christian you are already complete in Christ (Col. 2:10). True religion acknowledges that the Lord alone has accomplished our salvation. False religion says we've got to do it ourselves by self- denial and human achievement.

VI. THE ERROR OF APOSTATES (vv. 3b-5)

A. Failing to Understand the Purpose of God's Creation (v. 3b)

"God hath created [marriage and foods] to be received with thanksgiving by them who believe and know the truth."

God created marriage when He provided a wife for Adam. Both Paul and Peter stressed the importance of a good marriage relationship (1 Cor. 7:1-5; Eph. 5:22-33; 1 Pet. 3:7). God provided a variety of foods for man's nourishment and enjoyment (Gen. 1:29; 9:3). In fact, when God created the earth, He declared that the products of His handiwork were "very good" (Gen. 1:31). It doesn't make sense to deny man what God has created to be received with thanksgiving.

Although God designed the blessings of marriage and food for all men, only those who believe and know the truth give God thanks for what He has provided. God designed marriage and a wide variety of foods so He would be glorified. The world eats the food and enjoys marriage without considering the One who gave those good gifts. Only those who are thankful to God bring Him glory, so in the truest sense marriage, food, and every other good thing God made were designed specially for believers. The world does benefit from God's blessings--He sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45)--but its unbelieving inhabitants were never the ultimate reason God gave good things.

It is ludicrous to deny the right to marriage and certain foods in an attempt to attain holiness because that's to deny God the right to be glorified for the beauty of what He gave us. It would be better to be married and eat everything He provided and praise Him for them than think you're holy by abstaining from those things.

B. Failing to Understand the Nature of God's Creation (vv. 4-5)

1. Its excellence (v. 4)

"Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused, if it is received with thanksgiving"

The Greek word translated "good" (kalos) means "inherently excellent." Marriage and food are inherently good and should not be rejected, but gratefully accepted.

2. Its sanctification (v. 5)

"It is sanctified by the word of God and prayer."

"The word of God" is used in the pastoral epistles to refer to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The message of salvation clarifies that all the dietary laws have been abolished. They were given for a brief time in Israel's history to develop their moral faculty of discernment and to make them distinct from other nations. But once Christ came and fulfilled the sacrificial laws and made Jew and Gentile one in Him, those dietary laws were set aside. They had a limited national purpose. To reimpose them is to manufacture a works-righteousness system and dishonor God by saying He created something evil.

If we understand that the gospel has freed us from dietary laws and if in prayer we offer God thanks, then we can receive any and all of His good gifts. Mandatory celibacy and abstinence from certain foods is demonic teaching--it denies the goodness of God's creation and His desire for thanks and praise.

External self-denial is a severe error that is typical of false religions. The error of apostates is thinking they please God by following and teaching such pharisaical practices. Instead they actually are displeasing God and following the lies of demons. Although King Amaziah of Judah did the right things on the outside, he never had a heart for God. He turned away from the Lord. We need to evaluate the condition of our own hearts.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What kind of religion did Amaziah practice?
2. What is an apostate?
3. What spiritual entities do men actually worship in false religions? Support your answer with Scripture.
4. What phrase constitutes the theme of 1 Timothy 4:1-5 (v. 1)?
5. Why should we not be surprised to learn that some people will apostatize?
6. What had Paul written earlier about the effect of apostasy on the church at Ephesus?
7. Did all Israelites believe in God? Explain, supporting your answer with Scripture.
8. Cite some Scriptures that give evidence of the abundance of false religions and apostates in the end times.
9. What period of time does the phrase "latter times" refer to (1 Tim. 4:1)?

10. What is the source of false teaching?
11. What kind of people fall prey to Satan and his lies (Heb. 3:12)?
12. How do 2 John, Jude, and Deuteronomy convey the serious dangers of apostasy?
13. Whereas the Holy Spirit guides us into _____ (John 16:3), seducing spirits lead people into _____.
14. Why is exposing yourself to false teaching of men so dangerous?
15. How are demonic doctrines dispensed? How have their consciences been seared (1 Tim. 4:2)?
16. What are some of the restrictions false teachers had placed upon their followers (1 Tim. 4:3a)?
17. What means of salvation do false religions devise?
18. Identify and explain the philosophy that probably influenced the false religion at Ephesus.
19. What did the false teachers fail to understand about the purpose of God's creation?
20. What two things did the false teachers fail to understand about the nature of God's creation? Explain each.

Pondering the Principles

1. How do you respond to false teaching? Are you more concerned about avoiding controversy than exposing demonic systems that lead naive souls to eternal damnation? When Jesus encountered religious leaders who were misleading and taking advantage of the unsuspecting, His zeal for the truth led him to confront them with their hypocrisy (Matt. 23; John 2:13-17). When you seek to share Christ with those who have been led astray and snatch them before they fall into the fires of hell, have a healthy fear of the destructiveness and deceptiveness of their erroneous beliefs (Jude 23). Like the firefighter who is injured while putting out the fire, we must take care that the false teaching we are combatting not engulf us by causing us to doubt the truth and stop effectively serving the Lord.

2. What have you been trusting in to secure your place in heaven? Is it self-denial or the good deeds you have done? Is Christianity to you simply a matter of the things you don't do? Have you been deceived into thinking you must do good works to gain and maintain your salvation? The gospel of Jesus Christ offers salvation to all by grace through faith in Him alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Search your heart for the motive that you associate with Christians. Is it to know, love, and serve God better? If you are a Christian, make sure you are thanking Him for our freedom to enjoy the good gifts He has provided. What things in your life that you previously had taken for granted took on new meaning when you became a Christian? Offer Him thanks and praise for them today.

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