

INTRODUCTION

In chapter 3:16 we have a summary of the truth, which the church is to be the foundation and pillar off. But now as we move into chapter four Paul comes back to his theme of chapter one and again takes up the subject of false teachers. We saw in chapter one that these false teachers were probably elders of the churches at Ephesus.

1. FALSE TEACHERS SHOULD NOT SURPRISE US (v 1)

Paul says that the false teachers should not surprise us for this is exactly what God said would happen. He did that when he spoke through the Holy Spirit. Paul may be thinking about the occasion when in Acts 20:29 he warned the church about wolves that would come into the church and from their own number men (elders) would arise and distort the word of God. He was given such insight from the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:23). Or it is possible that Paul is thinking of the words of Jesus as the Holy Spirit empowered him. Words like those found in Mark 13:21-23.

When Paul talks about 'later times' he is not thinking of a particular period just before the return of Christ but the term is used in the same way as the term 'last days' is used in the New Testament to refer to the period between Christ first and second comings. We today are living in the last days or the later days. It is referring to every period of history. It may well be that abandoning the faith may be more prevalent in some periods of history than others but you can be assured that in every age people will abandon the faith. Do you not know some in our own age who have done so, I certainly do.

The lesson for us is this, we need to beware that in our own day there will be people even elders who will abandon the faith and we must not be surprised by this. We might be surprised by the person who does it, he may be the most unlikely person to do so in our eyes, but do not be surprised that it will happen. There will always be disappointments in the church; some elders who were entrusted with ministry by the church might one day abandon the faith and the church feels let down, foolish and deceived. But when that happens we need to realise that it is not the church that is deceived; but the individual elder.

Of course it is not just elders who can abandon the faith but Christians in general can and will do this. Although we in our tradition believe in the purity of the church and seek under God to examine each person that we accept into membership and rightly so, we also have to realise that there will be times when sadly we will be deceived by someone who himself is deceived. When a professing Christian abandons the faith it is always sad and heartbreaking for the church but it ought never to surprise us, it is part of living in the later days.

2. WHO IS BEHIND FALSE TEACHING (vs. 1-2)

When someone abandons the faith they always abandon it for something else. In this case they abandon the truth and follow after a demonic teaching. We will look at the content of this teaching in a moment but at the minute I want you to notice that the one who is behind false teaching is no other than the devil himself. O the demonic teaching comes through the lips of people (v 2), people who are actors, who look like the real thing but they are acting and their teaching is nothing but lies.

The question that this raises in my mind is how can they do it, how can people continually put on an act and teach lies. The answer given to us here is because their consciences have been seared which means that they had been numbed or deadened. They can continue to teach false

doctrines because they have no conscience about it, they have totally allowed themselves to be deceived by the demonic lies that come from the lips of actors.

Again there is a very clear lesson for us here. False teaching and false teachers are not just wrong but their teachings are from the pit of hell. We have to see this; otherwise we could be tempted into abandoning the faith for some false teaching. Those nicely dressed young men from America (who call themselves the Church of the Latter Day Saints) who come knocking on your door and are polite in presenting their false doctrines. Remember they are following deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. They don't look to be doing the devil's work, but they are and the fact that they look normal and the fact that their teaching so often sounds normal is what makes them so dangerous.

It's the same with the Jehovah Witnesses, they sound so much like Christians their teaching sounds like something you would hear in a church, but unless we see who is behind such an organisation and behind their teaching then we too could be deceived into abandoning the faith.

But it's not just the cults that are on Satan's mission but the many churches are on his mission too. Those churches that deny what we know as the gospel, salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Those churches are serving Satan.

Another lesson that we need to learn is the danger of allowing our consciences to be seared or deadened. People who teach false doctrines are people who are not aware of it, they believe that they are teaching the truth, that's why they are called hypocrites here, and they are actors although they are not aware of it. They teach lies but think they are teaching the truth. They are able to do this because they allowed their consciences to be deadened. So it is with us. But how do we deaden our conscience? We do so simply by not listening to it and by disobeying it. God gives our conscience to us, it is our constant guide in life (Its like oil light in our cars), but if we ignore it when it speaks then we are in a process of deadening it; so that if we do it enough it will simply stop speaking to us.

You know how it works you do something you know you ought not to have done. O your conscience is pricking you but instead of repenting of your action you ignore it and the next time you do the same thing although it is still wrong, you seem to do it with less of a conscience and if you do it often enough then you will do it with complete ease and will in fact think it is Ok to do. So it is with false teaching, once we entertain any teaching that is false and ignore our conscience on the matter then it will increasingly become easier to believe it and to take on board more false teaching because our conscience has been so deadened by us that it no longer bothers us.

The only way to counteract such a danger is to act when our conscience speaks. Of course we have to remember that even our conscience has been affected by the fall and therefore it needs to be tested in the light of God's word. But of course if we have tried to keep a clear conscience and to deal with all the issues that we are conscience stricken about then our conscience will normally be reliable.

3. WHAT WAS THEIR FALSE TEACHINGS (v 3?)

We are told their false teaching consisted of not allowing people to marry and abstaining from certain foods. They probably believed in some sort of asceticism that viewed bodily appetites wrong and therefore the only way to be truly spiritual and holy is to willingly abstain from certain things like sex and food. This teaching was developed in the second century with what is known as Gnosticism, which taught that matter is evil, and therefore you must despise the material creation and divorce yourself from it if you want to be spiritual.

In practise it taught that our bodies are evil and therefore we need to reject every physical appetite of our bodies in order to live spiritual lives. Its same sort of thinking that leads people to go into monasteries today, vowing to remain unmarried in order to serve Christ. It gives the impression that such people must be holy, for they claim to be married to Christ, and our world is sadly impressed with such people even if they are considered a little abnormal.

This is the very same way of thinking that has caused some Christians to relate spirituality with speaking in tongues and unless you are given this gift then you are not very spiritual. Its elitism and such a special category of Christian is very appealing for after all every serious Christian is concerned to be spiritual. But Paul tells the church at Ephesus that they are to resist such false teaching and teachers. But how do they resist it?

4. THE ANTIDOTE TO THIS TYPE OF FALSE TEACHING? (vs. 4-5)

Paul gives us the antidote to such teaching and it is very simple.

A) Everything created by God is good (v 4) and therefore it is not to be rejected but accepted with thanksgiving. Those who actually believe and know the truth know that this is the way to counteract such false hellish teaching. God's word says that this is right and proper and therefore everything ought to be accepted with thanksgiving through prayer (v 5). What does this mean in practise? It means marriage is good for it is God ordained, it means sex within marriage is good for it was created by God, it means that all food is good and is given to us by God for our good. All these things ought to be accepted with thankful and prayerful hearts. What lessons can we conclude from this?

i) Any teaching that goes further than God does concerning godliness is to be avoided. I have already given one example of this when I talked about speaking in tongues. Does the Bible teach every Christian is more spiritual if they speak in tongues? No! Likewise Christian teaching that insists that you must not go to the cinema or theatre or that you must not drink if you are going to be godly is to be avoided. Some Christians might come to the conclusion that those things are not helpful and therefore they might choose not to go to such places. That's fine and that stance has to be respected, but when it is insisted that those who do not take such a view are somehow less spiritual then we are in the realm of devilish teaching.

All that God gives to us must be appreciated and accepted not as our right but as God's gift to us as his creatures. Therefore we need to learn to appreciate all the beauty in life. Of course there is natural beauty all around us here in the Dales; we must learn when we admire the beauty to give thanks to God for it. When we sit down to our meals we ought to learn to give thanks, that's why saying grace is a good habit to get into. We need to learn to appreciate music and art as gifts from God.

The jobs that we hold must be seen as coming from God and therefore as we rise in the morning we can thank God for our job. The great lesson is to learn to thank God for everything that is wholesome; we must learn this for our own sinful hearts will not find such an approach easy. Give thanks to God when you watch a good TV programme or have enjoyed some leisure activity. The false teachers deny themselves such pleasures and they become freaks within our society. Christians are to enjoy life, and appreciate life in all its diversity, we are not to be hermits or freaks within our society, but we are to live life with thanksgiving to God.

I know there is a fine line in the Bible that must be walked and not crossed. We are not to be worldly but at the same time we are to enjoy and appreciate all that God gives to us. That line is a very thin one and sometimes we go too far so that we make our own little gods out of all that God gives to us. But we can go too far the other way and in our fear of being worldly we deny ourselves what God wants us to enjoy with thanksgiving, and in so doing we may be living worldly lives. You

see worldliness has to do with our attitude to this world, and it has very little to do with the things of this world. You are not more spiritual by denying yourself a night out at the theatre; you in fact might be more worldly than the person who occasionally enjoys a night out enjoying God's goodness to them.

Christians are not to be seen as freaks in this world we are to be seen as people who actually enjoy and appreciate all the good things of life and are able to do so with our eyes firmly fixed on God as the giver of all.

Of course God's greatest gift to mankind is Jesus Christ and today we have an opportunity through the Lord's Supper to express our thanksgiving to God for the gift of his Son. Our communion is a thanksgiving service as well as a means of grace. We are able to turn our minds to the cross and thank God for his death on our behalf and thank God for his death; for his forgiveness and justification through Christ. So let's be thankful for all that God gives to us, but let's now focus on his greatest gift to sinners the Lord Jesus.

Amen