

## 1 TIM 4:1-7A—APOSTASY AND FALSE GODLINESS

**INTRO:** As we have been going through 1 Timothy, we have seen a number of important aspects of what true Christian faith involves. For example, we have talked about the goal of our faith (1:5); we looked at the gospel of salvation by grace in 1:12-17; the centrality of prayer arising out of holy lives in 2:1-10; and we discussed the requirements of all Christians, especially those who lead the church, to have a Christlike character in 3:1-7.

But what of false godliness? What is it? What is behind it? How can we tell? There are some people who may give every appearance of being Christians, but they may not be saved. Several years ago when I was in Kenya a pastor told me of something that happened in his own church [**tell story of the elder in the Presbyterian church in Nairobi**]. This is one reason we need to be involved with people, so we can be aware of their situations and help them in their spiritual journeys.

On the other hand, some people seem to begin well but later fall away from the faith. That may happen for a variety of reasons. Paul mentioned that at the end of chapter 1, where he said that some have not remained faithful **“and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.”** Again, that is why we need to be involved in people’s lives to help them to stay on the right path. Staying faithful may be difficult. We need each other and need to be there for each other.

Then, there is the issue that Jesus and the apostles warned of: false teachers in the church. In 1:3-4 of this book of 1 Timothy Paul talked about that very problem when he said [**READ 1:3-4**]. This is the issue that he now discusses in some detail in 4:1-7a.

In 4:1-7a Paul examines the nature of false teaching and false teachers, false godliness and apostasy, and how to combat them. These verses really give us an entire theological summary of false godliness, including *when* apostasy will occur; *who* will fall away; the *source* of apostasy; the *means* used to cause apostasy; the *effect* on those who pay attention to false teaching; *examples* of false godliness; and the *solution* to apostasy and false godliness. [**READ**]

**PROP:** False teaching that strikes at the heart of the gospel needs to be opposed and exposed.

**O/S:** We are going to go through vv. 1-7a phrase-by-phrase. vv. 1-2 will show us the background, causes, and effects of false teaching and false godliness; the beginning of v. 3 gives us two examples of false teaching and false godliness; and the end of v. 3-v. 7a shows us how to deal with false teaching and false godliness.

### **I. Background, causes, and effects of false teaching and false godliness**

**v. 1** begins: **“But the Spirit explicitly says.”** Paul here is emphasizing the importance of what he is about to say by stating that it is the Holy Spirit who says this.

**v. 1** then says: **“In later times some will fall away from the faith.”** Some people think that the “last days” or “later times” is a period of time way in the future, just before Jesus comes again. That is not the case. Whenever the NT talks about the “later times,” the “last days,” or uses similar expressions, it is referring to the time we are living in *now*. Such expressions denote the entire period of time between Christ’s first coming and his Second Coming. We know that because, on the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples began speaking in other languages, the people said, **“They’re drunk.”** But Peter got up and said, **“They’re not drunk, it’s only 9:00AM,”** IOW, it’s too early to be drunk. Then he explained what was happening by quoting from the prophet Joel, **“‘It shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘that I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind’”** (Acts 2:17). Thus, the “last days” began at least as of the Day of Pentecost. In 1 John 2:18 John twice says that **“it is the last hour.”** We have been in the last days—indeed, in the last hour—for the last 2000 years, and that will continue until Christ comes again.

**Jude 17-18** expresses a thought similar to Paul’s in 1 Tim 4:1. He reminds believers that **“In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts.”** The entire period until Christ returns will be characterized by some people coming to faith and by others making false professions of faith and falling away.

The next phrase in v. 1 is **“Paying attention to.”** In this phrase, Paul tells us *who* will fall away. Those who fall away are those who **“pay attention”** to false teachers and false teaching. At the beginning of the book Paul admonished Timothy *not* to **“pay attention to myths and endless genealogies”** (1:4). On the other hand, in 4:13 Paul exhorts Timothy what he should “pay attention” to: [**READ 4:13**] and in 4:16: [**READ 4:16**].

The Bible is our ultimate source of truth, and the standard by which we live our lives. Consequently, in **4:13** when he tells Timothy what he should “pay attention” to, he begins with Scripture. He then talks of “teaching” (IOW, what we are to believe), since what we believe will determine how we live. His reference to paying close attention to “yourself” in **4:16** indicates that we need to regularly assess our entire lives (thoughts, words, deeds, emotions, desires, loves, hates, etc.) in the light of the gospel and the Bible. And we need to change and correct those aspects of our lives that do not correspond to the gospel and the Word of God.

**v. 1** concludes by speaking of **“Deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.”** Here Paul tells us the ultimate *source* of the false teaching that will lead people astray. That ultimate source is **“deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.”** Although human beings are the writers and speakers of false doctrine, behind the human mouthpieces are spirits and demons. This is one manifestation of the fact that behind what we can see, there exists a great spiritual world, including great spiritual warfare. Most of the time we are unaware of this, but what we do here on earth has spiritual implications.

For example, Job never knew why all the evil things were happening to him and his family. It was not because he had sinned, as his friends thought. It was because he was righteous; what happened to him was the result of a wager between Satan and God. In **Daniel 10** there was conflict between Satan and Michael the archangel because of what Daniel was praying about. The point is that far more is going on in the heavenly and spiritual realm concerning what we teach and believe than we will ever be able to perceive in this body here on earth.

We need to understand that, here in **1 Timothy 4**, Paul is not attacking every error, misunderstanding, or wrong opinion that people may have or even that they may teach. Rather, Paul is dealing with any teaching that strikes at the heart of the gospel. [PRIMARY vs. SECONDARY vs. MAN-MADE]

Here in **1 Timothy** Paul is telling us that spirits and demons are behind false teaching that goes to the heart of the gospel—the primary matters. We may not realize it, but we are engaged in a great cosmic battle. It is played out here on earth among people, but unseen spiritual forces—angels and demons—are part of this battle. That is why what we teach, what we believe, and how we live are far more important than we realize.

**v. 2** begins **“By means of the hypocrisy of liars.”** Here Paul tells us the *means* that lead people to fall away: **“the hypocrisy of liars.”** In **John 8:44** Jesus said that Satan is the **“father of lies.”** The prepositional phrase **“by means of”** here in **v. 2** indicates that these false teachers are the *instruments* used to mislead those of the faith. This is one reason why Jesus was so harsh with the Pharisees and scribes. For example, in **Mark 7:6** Jesus said, **“Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.’”** He was harsh regarding hypocrisy because he knew both the ultimate source of spiritual hypocrisy, and the great, everlasting harm that hypocrisy and falsehood can bring.

This is also why we need to judge teachers by *what they say* and by *how they live*. Just as Satan himself presents himself as **“an angel of light”** (**2 Cor 11:14**), false teachers typically come as great “Men of God.” They may claim to do, or in fact even do, great signs and wonders. They may take in millions of dollars on television. However, such men usually do not have a humble lifestyle like Jesus but typically live to enrich themselves. They are hypocrites who do not live like Jesus, the apostles, or most Christians down through history have lived. Their hypocrisy is known to the Lord and should be recognized by us. Their use of Jesus’ name does not fool Jesus and should not fool us.

This has always been a problem, even back in the first century. An early church manual called the *Didache* was written between about AD 70-110 to advise church leaders. It stresses the importance of evaluating a person’s motives and lifestyle in order to discern whether or not he is a false prophet or apostle. It says [READ pp. 155-56]. I wonder what they would think of a lot of the TV preachers today.

**v. 2** concludes **“Seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron.”** This clause describes the *effect* of paying attention to false teachers and false teaching. Their own consciences have been seared (i.e., burned and scarred) as if burned with a hot iron (just like cattle are branded with a branding iron). This has three related effects:

(1) Their consciences are affected, so that they now call falsehood truth and no longer have any shame in using the name of Jesus to enrich themselves and lead other people astray.

(2) In **1:5**, we saw that the goal of our faith is **“love from a good conscience.”** But by paying attention to false teaching, a person’s conscience is *seared*. That means it is no longer a “good conscience.” Consequently, such a person no longer can achieve the goal of our faith, which is love *from a good conscience*. In **3:9**, when discussing the requirements to be a deacon, Paul talked about **“holding to the mystery of the faith**

*with a clear conscience.*” This should warn us not to pay attention to false teaching, because that will disqualify us from serving as a leader in the church, since our conscience no longer will be “clear.”

(3) Even more importantly, the branding mark shows who owns them. African scholar Samuel Ngewa says, “**These teachers carry Satan’s brand on their consciences, indicating that they belong to someone other than the God the believers belong to.**”

What we have seen so far has shown us how deep and important this issue really is. This leads us to **v. 3** which gives us:

## **II. Examples of false teaching and false godliness**

**v. 3** gives two examples, **“Men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods.”** Those who forbid others to marry perhaps approach the issue sounding like “angels of light”: IOW, **“You would like to be more like Jesus, wouldn’t you? Jesus was not married. So if you want to be really spiritual like him, you must not get married either.”** Although such words sound spiritual, they overlook the fact that God created marriage. Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church according to **Ephesians 5**. Although Paul himself was single and thought it better that people remain single, he recognized that marriage is a gift from God. In fact, in **1 Tim 5:14** he advocates that younger women get married and raise families.

The issue of eating (especially eating meat sacrificed to idols) and drinking wine were important issues affecting the early church and are still important issues in many parts of the world. The issue of what to eat goes back to the Mosaic Law. However, Christ freed Christians from the OT Law. In **Mark 7**, Jesus declared all foods to be clean. Paul taught in some detail about the issue of eating and drinking in **Romans 14** and **1 Corinthians 8**. He essentially said, you can eat and drink anything you want. If, for some reason, your conscience bothers you about eating or drinking something, or if your eating or drinking something would stumble someone else, then don’t do it. IOW, you have the right to do it, but other people are more important—so if exercising your right will stumble a weaker brother or sister, then give up your right when you are around them.

On their face, not marrying and abstaining from certain foods, or other similar practices, may seem unimportant. One might think that Paul is overreacting when he calls such things **“doctrines of demons.”** Paul is not overreacting. He knows that the principle behind those examples, when considered deeply enough, *strike at the heart of Christianity, at the heart of the gospel, and at the heart of what Christ has done.* Why is that?

The principle behind the commands that “you cannot get married and you cannot eat certain foods” is fundamentally at odds with Christ for at least two reasons: First, *such man-made commands deny the sufficiency of the work of Christ to save and sanctify people.* What Paul is talking about is *not* an individual believer’s personal decision to remain single or to not eat or drink certain things. Instead, he is talking about *man-made rules or commands by others* that, in effect, say: **“If you want to be saved, or if you want to become spiritual or holy, then you cannot get married or eat certain things.”** Throughout the history of the church, we have seen similar things: you cannot play cards, or go to the movies, or drink alcohol, or wear certain clothes, or go to certain places, or do anything other than go to church and read the Bible on Sunday. In the early church, certain people were saying that, in addition to Christ, you had to get circumcised and obey the Mosaic food laws.

All such rules deny the sufficiency of Christ alone to save and sanctify us. All such rules are not part of the NC. They amount to saying that faith in Christ and obedience to him and his word are not good enough—instead, to such faith and obedience you have to add man’s own rules. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We have been freed from the old law. We are now subject to the law of Christ. The “law of Christ” is the teachings of Jesus and of the NT writers. Jesus said that if we “abide” or “continue in” his word (not the man-made word of a false teacher), then we **“will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32).**

Such man-made commands also are contrary to what Christ has done because they create two distinct “classes” of Christians: the “holy” ones who follow the man-made rules, and the lower, common ones who do not. According to **Ephesians 2**, Christ came to create **“one new man”** in him, not two. All those who are his disciples are his equally. To hold that there are two classes of Christians, first-class Christians and second-class Christians, based on man-made rules not found in the Bible, strikes directly at what Christ has done. It pits one type of Christian against another and amounts to saying that oneness in Christ is not good enough.

Paul dealt with this same type of problem in Gal 2:11-14. In Galatians the issue was whether Jewish believers could eat with uncircumcised Gentile believers. In **Acts 10** Peter had been shown that God does not show partiality between Jews and Gentiles. After that, Peter had been eating with Gentiles.

But Peter later withdrew himself and stopped eating with them. He may have stopped eating with Gentiles out of good motives (for example, to not offend Jews, or even to win certain Jews to Christ). But Paul knew that such a position was deadly to the gospel. Consequently, Paul confronted Peter publicly; he called him a hypocrite; and in **Gal 2:14** he said that Peter was not being **“straightforward about the truth of the gospel.”**

Peter was denying the very gospel he preached by what he was doing in his private life. He was denying Gentiles complete acceptance by not eating with them, because they were Gentiles. The issue for us may not be who we eat with, but the same type of issue occurs any time a church or an individual Christian denies people membership, positions of leadership, fellowship, or full equality because of tribal, ethnic, socio-economic, or other such reasons.

IOW, the practical implications of the gospel are radical and transformative. The gospel affects—and is designed to affect—our attitudes towards people, our relationships, and all areas of our lives, including who we eat with. The false teaching and false godliness Paul is dealing with here strike at the heart of the gospel, because they deny the *exclusive sufficiency* of Jesus and his death, and they deny the *radical equality* that the gospel gives people.

If some teacher is saying that Christians should not eat or drink certain things, or not associate with certain people, or have to wear certain kinds of clothes, or are not allowed to do certain things, we need to ask such questions as: “Why? Where is that command found in the law of Christ? What is the reason you are demanding this? Why is this necessary? and What effect does it supposedly have on my spiritual state if I do it or if I refuse to do it?”

And there is not necessarily one bright line answer to these questions. Different answers, even opposite answers, might equally be correct depending on the specific circumstances. For example, Paul circumcised Timothy so that he could have ready access to the synagogues. On the other hand, Paul refused to allow Titus to be circumcised, precisely because the demand for his circumcision was being made in a context that jeopardized the gospel. IOW, if someone argues that a Gentile must be circumcised in order to be a true Christian, Paul absolutely forbids it, because that would annihilate the exclusive sufficiency of Christ; but if no one is making that sort of demand, Paul is happy to circumcise a believer if it will advance the interests of the gospel.

Similarly, as we saw in **Romans 14** and **1 Corinthians 8**, Paul said we can eat anything we want, even if it has been sacrificed to idols. But if our eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols causes a weaker believer to stumble in his faith, then he said, **“I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.”** We need to know why we are doing what we are doing. And we need to know the gospel well, so that we do not shackle people under man-made laws of our own.

In the last part of **v. 3** through **v. 7a** Paul concludes his discussion by showing us:

### **III. How to deal with false teaching and false godliness**

After describing how certain teachers were forbidding marriage and saying that you should not eat certain foods, **vv. 3-5** say that God created those things [READ]. Here Paul gives the first part of the *solution* to the problem of false teaching, namely, *know the Word of God*—test everything by means of the Word. Christ is truth and his word is truth. The Bible is the standard by which we should evaluate people’s teachings. A true preacher, teacher, or messenger of God will not contradict God’s written word. If we keep his word and walk closely with God, the Holy Spirit will guide us into the truth. We should therefore evaluate any teaching, and any proposed rule for how we are to live, by means of the Bible and the enlightenment that the Holy Spirit gives us through prayer. This shows the absolute necessity of having a good working knowledge of the Word. It also gives us another reason why prayer out of a holy life, as we saw in chapter 2, is so important.

**v. 6** then says [READ]. This is the second part of Paul’s solution to the problem of false teaching, namely, *teach the Word of God*—expose false godliness by means of the Word. It is the responsibility of those who are leading the churches to know the Word of God and to teach it. Knowing the difference between the true and the false has eternal implications for people. Since the stakes are so high, Paul frequently reiterates the importance of faithfulness and “teaching” in **1 Timothy** chapters **1, 3, 4, and 6**. Proclaiming the true and exposing the false from the Word aids *you* as well as others. Paul says that, as we do this, we will be **“constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.”**

This highlights the importance of *living* what we teach. The **“words of the faith”** will only “nourish” us if we have been “following” them, IOW, paying careful attention to them and conforming our own life to them. That will cause us to grow in our faith.

However, if we have *not* been living what we have been saying, then we are hypocrites. That is one of the marks of a *false* teacher. In that case, the WOG will condemn us rather than nourish us. This applies to all Christians, because we are all examples of Christ to everyone we meet.

Being “a good servant of Christ Jesus” also emphasizes that our attitude and manner of life are most important. Many leaders of churches like to think of themselves as great “Men of God” who are superior to those in their congregations. However, in **v. 6** Paul calls Timothy a “servant” of Christ Jesus. If pastors, elders, overseers, and bishops do not realize that they are first *servants*—servants of Christ and servants of Christ’s people—then they will not be properly representing Christ and will not be properly fulfilling their office.

But again, the same thing applies to every Christian, whether or not he or she is in formal church leadership. The reason is because Jesus said “**the greatest among you shall be your servant.**” As with so many other things, it comes down to “**loving God and loving others.**” One does not serve others or demonstrate love by having an attitude of superiority over other people. Christ loves his people and wants us to be his instruments to show them how much he loves them. If we truly “**love our neighbor as ourself**” then we will have the same concern and expend the same effort, energy, and expense to insure our neighbor’s well-being as we do for our own. Christ did. He calls us to do the same.

**v. 7a** summarizes everything Paul has been talking about by saying, **[READ]**. Paul is saying two things here. First, one should “**have nothing to do**” with the false. The reason is that even a little poison or filth is enough to spoil a container full of clean water. So even if there are only a few people whose doctrine will pollute the church, every effort must be made to correct them.

Second, Paul *mocks* false teaching by saying that false teaching is nothing but “**fables fit only for old women.**” IOW, only gullible and foolish people pay attention to them. However, if we are not properly taught, if we are not men and women of the Word—who study it, understand it, take it deeply into us, and live it out—we will be the prey of the “**false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves**” as Jesus said in **Matt 7:15**.

**CONCL: 1 Tim 4:1-7a** gives us a complete theological summary of false teaching and false godliness. These verses tell us that false teaching and false godliness take place now. They describe who falls away, what is behind false teaching, the means false teachers use, and the effects of false teaching. It gives us examples of false teaching and false godliness; and concludes by telling us how to deal with false teaching and false godliness. False teaching that strikes at the heart of the gospel needs to be opposed and exposed.

This passage is showing us how important it is to have *true teaching* and a *life of true godliness*. That means we all need to be men and women of the Word. We need to be like the Bereans in **Acts 17:11**, who “**examined the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.**” Since they did that with respect to the teaching of the apostle Paul’s himself, we need to do that for every teaching we read or hear—including what I am saying to you now—since no one of the status of the apostle Paul is teaching us today.

This passage is also pulling back the curtain, so to say, and showing us that spiritual forces—spirits, angels, and demons—are behind the scenes and are actively involved in the ministry, the teaching, and the lives of the people in the church. Our lives—what we teach, what we believe, and how we live—are more profound and more far-reaching than we can perceive with our five senses or our mind. In light of that, let us be particularly faithful to do what Jude counseled, namely, “**contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.**”