

Why Everything is Good

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[0 : 00] Well, we're at the halfway point of the book, the letter to Timothy, first Timothy. And at the halfway point, Paul goes back to the heart of what the letter's really been about the whole time.

And that's his concern to protect the church in Ephesus because it is drifting from the good news of the gospel of Jesus. And we saw that especially in chapter one as he started talking about the false teaching that was getting into the hearts of many people in Ephesus.

And so Paul's coming back to that same idea here at the beginning of chapter four. And again here, he's got a very big view of sin and he's got a very big, even bigger view of creation and its power. And he's got an even bigger view here of the mercy of God in the midst of that. And it's a very practical five verses that we've been given by Paul here. So we're going to see two things this morning.

What's wrong with the world? And then how to make it holy. So those are the two things he talks about. What's wrong with the world? And how to make it holy.

[1 : 06] So let's dive into that first. What's wrong with the world? Now what Paul does here is he takes a very specific sin issue in Ephesus and he uses it to talk about a principle.

And it's the principle of answering the question what exactly is wrong with the world. Because that's what's mistaken here in the mouths of the false teacher.

They were getting the question what's wrong, wrong. They didn't understand it correctly. All right, so the specific sin here is apostasy.

Now apostasy is when a person professes faith in Jesus Christ publicly, joins a church, and then later they leave denying the gospel of Jesus Christ, leaving the faith behind.

And if you've been around the church at all, if you've grown up in the church you've probably seen this. And you've seen this play out and you've seen this happen. And it has many forms and many examples.

[2 : 08] It can happen in all sorts of ways. And in every single instance it brings grief, in all sorts of level of grief, depending on how close you are to the person involved.

The question is why does Paul come to apostasy here in the middle of Timothy? And he actually clues us into why and it's in verse one. If you look at four one there's the word in the ESB now, can also be translated but.

And that means he's referencing something that he's just said in chapter three. And at the end of chapter three he says the church is the pillar of truth.

So he says in the church you've got to expect that there's going to be truth spoken, but at the same time also expect that there's going to be apostasy. So that's how he's picking up on the logic here. The church expect truth but also expect apostasy. And then you say well why Paul? Why should we expect it? In verse one he says the spirit expressly states or in other words he's saying the Holy Spirit has told me as an apostle there will be people who join and profess faith in Christ and then leave again and deny the gospel.

[3 : 20] And he's saying here that the Holy Spirit told him that but we shouldn't be surprised at that because we also know that Jesus said the exact same thing multiple times in the gospel.

In the gospel Jesus says in Matthew 24, 10 and 11 that though many will come into the kingdom visibly many will fall away he says before I come again.

And Paul here says that the spirit says many will fall away in the latter times. And that is a special New Testament idea, the latter times, the later times.

And it always refers to the same thing. And in the New Testament later times means the time between Jesus' resurrection and Jesus' return at the end of history.

And so that means right now we're in the latter times. The latter times began in Acts chapter one and they're going to go all the way until Christ comes again. And so he's saying in this age we live in expect apostasy, expect this to happen.

[4 : 20] Jesus very famously in the parable of the sower Luke 8.13 he talks about this. He says that when the gospel, when the message of Christ is preached it's like a seed and it's spread abroad but sometimes it falls on soil and sometimes it's snatched away before it can really take root.

And he's talking about apostasy there. He's saying that apostasy happens, people leave and deny the gospel after believing it whenever there's a visible outward manifestation of faith but there's never really faith on the inside.

That the human heart has never really changed from the inside out. And that's exactly what Paul's bringing up here. Now in Ephesus the specific example he's going to use it to say how does this happen?

And this is a very important question. How does this happen exactly? And he's using what happens in Ephesus to explain that to us in every century to the reader and it happens through two levels of sin and this is where we get at the principle.

Two levels of sin. The first level he tells us is literally diabolical sin. And you see that right here in verse one he says in the later times some will depart from the faith by quote devoting themselves to deceitful spirits in the teaching of demons.

[5 : 47] And so Paul says that level one of how this happens is actually the work of Satan and the demons. And he comes here and he's not talking about demon possession or something like that like you see in the gospels exactly.

He says when they devote themselves he's talking about teaching or ideas. So he's saying the way this happens is that actually Satan and the demonic powers work into using false ideas, bad ideas, worldviews, ideologies, ideas that deny the gospel and they push them into people's hearts.

They try to massage them in to the heart. And so there's a demonic diabolical sin at the base of what's going on here. Now look we saw this actually in the gospels at the very end of the gospels when Jesus Christ rises from the dead.

It says that Satan and the demons from that moment tried to convince the world that Jesus body had really been stolen, had not risen.

And there's example number one from the very beginning this is exactly what Paul's talking about. All sorts of ideas that come from the outside and try to dissuade the heart from believing in the resurrection of the Son of God.

[7 : 01] And this can happen in all sorts of ways but the point here is that Paul is actually calling on us, Christian, the church to take very seriously the reality of spiritual warfare.

That it's a very real thing and that it's very serious. And as soon as the gospel goes forth and lands on somebody that Satan seeks to kill, still, and destroy who first?

The person that's heard the gospel and the gospel is starting to bed into their lives. He wants to snatch it away from them first. That's what we learn here. Now the second level of sin, it's not only diabolical but it's also we're told human sin because he says that this is being mediated in the Ephesian church by people.

People are the ones that are spreading the ideas that are pulling people away from Christianity and they're denying the faith. False teachers, these are the ones that he was talking about at the beginning of the letter in 1 Timothy 1.

And he calls them quote liars here. And liar is technical. It doesn't mean a person who keeps telling fibs. It's talking about the fact that they're liars because they are directly denying the word of the gospel in what they're teaching.

[8 : 15] And so they're lying about what God has spoken, what God has said in some way, shape, or form. And here's where we get to the heart of it, what they were teaching.

And we learn here that they are forbidding marriage and they're requiring abstinence from food, from certain foods. Okay, so false teaching, bad ideas, things that corrupt, the heart of the message can come in all sorts of ways.

But one of the ways that it has happened every single century from the beginning of time is a message about what's called asceticism.

And asceticism is just a fancy word for saying that to truly be saved, you've got to deny the natural appetites, the natural things that God has given you as a human being, that God has made.

And so here they're saying, look, here's where the corruption is. They're probably teaching that, yes, Jesus is part of the way to salvation, but that to really be saved, you've got to leave a marriage if you're married, because sexuality is fundamentally evil.

[9 : 32] Or you've got to end, I should say, you've got to stop eating certain foods and probably live a lifestyle of very minimal eating, so an ascetic's lifestyle.

And the idea underneath this is that God has come to save the world from the world, that what's really bad is the physical. What's really bad is the world as we know it, and God's come to take you into a higher spirituality.

And it starts with Jesus, but it never ends there. If you really want to be spiritual, if you really want to get in, you've got to live the ascetical lifestyle. You've got to deny yourself of even the most basic appetites.

And that's the issue. You expect Paul to say, look, the false teachers are coming and saying, these guys are trying to get you to worship the demons. And that's not what he does. He says, they're trying to tell you not to eat, and they're trying to tell you to leave your spouses.

And that is diabolical, he says. That is pulling you away from the basics of Christianity. And so look, I think there's three calls here to us today.

[10 : 38] One, protect the gospel, protect the good news of Jesus Christ, that he has died and he has risen. And justification is by faith alone through Christ alone.

And you can't add anything else to that. You can't be justified by adding stuff to some higher spirituality. Protect the gospel. Secondly, protect your heart. And we're going to come back to that in two minutes.

And then thirdly, he's saying, and Christian church take very seriously that spiritual warfare is a reality and that the demonic, the diabolical, seeks to kill and destroy and take the gospel out of, snatch it away.

John Stott, the great commentator, he says that spiritual warfare is the explanation why intelligent and educated people can swallow the fantastic speculations of the cults and the New Age paganisms on the one hand or atheistic philosophies on the other.

He says spiritual warfare is underneath that to steal, kill and destroy. Now how do you protect the heart just a couple of minutes before we get to the real central point?

[11 : 46] We've got to say something about this, how to protect the heart. Because the question comes up here where you say, well, what about me? What about me? Could this happen to me? And Paul deals with that here in this passage.

And there's a negative way to look at it and a positive way to look at it. And the negative way is when Paul tells you how this happens or why this happens in these particular false teachers' lives. And you see it in verse 2, it says that their, quote, conscience has been seared. And the Greek word for seared right there is literally the word cauterized.

If you read it in Greek, it would look identical to the English. And you know what cauterizing is, you know, the medical professionals here, when you have a terrible wound, you can cauterize it. You can burn it back together or you can cauterize something and it kills the nerve endings, right? It burns to the point of where you can't feel anymore.

[12 : 43] And what he says is that what's happened to bring the human, a person along to denying the gospel after they once believed it, is their conscience has been cauterized.

God has given every single human being that's ever existed a conscience. And that conscience yells at you, screams at you all the time. And it says, don't go this way.

This way is wrong. This way is false. This is bad. This is sinful. That's how God writes the law into the human heart. But over time, the law, the law, the conscience, I should say, is not infallible.

It can be burned. It can be seared. And the way that happens, Paul talks about this in Romans 1, is by slowly, slowly, slowly rejecting the voice of the conscience over time.

You know, how does this happen? Maybe you've had this experience where, you know, you're trying to fight your sin, but there's some particular sin issue in your life and it keeps coming up and it keeps coming up.

[13 : 44] And over time, you've given and you've given and you've given and the fight gets harder to the point where you stop fighting. And that's an example where your conscience is actually being cauterized over time.

And the way we make our decisions and the way we pursue or don't pursue the things of God, the good, the holy, our conscience can either be set free and recovered or cauterized over time. And so he's saying here that the negative way this happens is that the human conscience gets seared by constantly giving in to things that are wrong over and over and over and over again, of not entering the fight, as J.C.

Ryle puts it, the fight for holiness. Now, but the positive way. The positive way. We can only go where Paul goes here and we could do a whole series on this, on how to protect our heart. But let me say three things very quickly because we've got to move on. The first is this, know and be assured that all throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ says, I will not let my people go. [14:48] He says, I save to the uttermost. And he prayed, I will not let those who the Father has given me out of my hand. I will not loosen my grip on them.

Jesus Christ will not let you go. And you say, but what if, could this happen to me? And look, let me, here's the assurance of the New Testament. Jesus Christ will not let you go. And so the question today is only this.

It's simply this. Do you believe on the Lord Jesus? Do you love the Son? Even if it's weak, even if it's feeble, do you believe that Jesus Christ walked out of the grave on the third day?

And if you say yes to that, then you can be assured Jesus Christ will not let you go. That's the promise of the New Testament. The second thing Paul says, now keep the faith.

And as I just mentioned, J.C. Ryle's wonderful book, Holiness, he has a chapter where he says, enter the fight. And that might mean that today is actually the time to enter the fight with the sins that keep coming up in your life in a way that you haven't in the past.

[15:52] And C.S. Lewis has a wonderful section of the screw tape letters where he shows how the demons often work. They're at their best in tricking us and grabbing hold of us through, he says, our apathy, our boredom and our indifference of just ignoring the whole thing.

And so today's the day to protect your heart by being assured of the gospel and entering the fight of saying, where do I need to actually fight for the life of my heart, for the life of my soul against sin? Thirdly and finally, be hopeful because the New Testament leaves us plenty of room to say that people, and this is an empirical reality, people will come and profess faith, they'll leave again, and by God's grace they'll come back.

And this happens all the time, and we can never know. And so there's tons of hope, tons of prayer, and tons of ministry in the midst of this. Now, the main idea, what's wrong with the world?

You see, all this specific sense of apostasy has actually been about leading to a principle that Paul wants to teach of what's wrong with the world. And he gets at it again through the details of this false teaching.

[17:03] The false teachers are saying, sexuality, evil, basically evil. Hunger, it's an appetite you've got to deny to be truly spiritual.

Work, entertainment, film, art, politics, science, all of these things that exist out in the midst of culture. True spirituality is deny, deny, deny.

Pull yourself away from culture and away from the world and deny yourself because the problem is ultimately physical flesh in the things of society. And to truly be spiritual, you've got to get away from that.

And this has been a problem from the early church all the way to today. And you've got to remember that in the first century, as people are coming to believe in the gospel, they're asking questions like, what do I do with my day-to-day life?

If Jesus really walked out of the grave, how am I supposed to live my life today? What does that mean for me? And so we see all over the New Testament, Paul dealing with this. People are saying, you've got to leave your marriage.

[18:04] There were people teaching that. And Paul, 1 Corinthians 7 says, no, no, no, no, no. He doesn't tell you to deny your physicality and leave your spouse. No, stay in your marriage. And people said, you've got to stop working in the midst of the marketplace.

You've got to leave culture behind. And Paul says, no, keep your job, 1 Corinthians 7, 17. Keep your vocation. Get stuck into the work you've already been doing. In all sorts of ways, Paul addresses this over and over and over again.

And how does he get at it? And here it is. He answers. He says, no, creation is good. Everything that God made is good, not evil, not to be rejected.

And we could put it like this to add a little more nuance. It's not that everything in the world is good. It is that everything that God has made is good.

Creation is good. And so here's a little bit of language to help you with this concept. The structure of creation is good.

[19 : 07] But sometimes and often, it's direction, it's moral direction is bad. The structures of creation, society, family, marriage, friendship, food, sexuality, the structure, work, the structures are good.

But because of human sin, the direction, the moral direction is bad. And what these false teachers have done is they've conflated that. And they've said, no, no, no, the structures are evil.

So give up marriage and give up sexuality and deny hunger and stop working and get out of culture and get out of society and don't enjoy film and art and science and politics and reject all technology. And Paul says, no, no, no, creation's good. Stay. Don't leave. The principle comes clearly from Jesus' mouth in John 17, 15.

He prays, I desire that my disciples would be in the midst of the world, all about the world, but not of the world. You see, structure and direction, that they would be stuck into the structures of creation but not carried over into the evil direction that creation often goes.

[20 : 22] Now let's close this long point and just have a very brief point. How do we know, how can you really know today that the structures of creation, that creation is ultimately good, that it's worth sticking with, that it's worth continuing in your day job, that it's worth sticking with your relationships, that it's worth saying that food is good.

How do we know all these things, all these arenas, these spheres of creation? How can we really say that, and how can we know? And here it is. In the middle of history, God became a man.

And when the false teachers are saying, reject the physical life, because true spirituality is utterly spiritual. It's not about the body, it's only about the soul.

God became a man in Jesus Christ. He was incarnated. He took on flesh. He took on physicality.

You say, is it appropriate, is it right to reject the appetite of your basic hunger, and Jesus comes to the crowd, and he says, in my kingdom, people do not go hungry.

And he makes bread and fish to feed 5,000. And you say, am I supposed to reject marriage and sexuality altogether? And Jesus says, marriage is the relationship that best illustrates the true point of history between Jesus Christ, the groom, and the bride, the church.

[21 : 54] No, don't leave your spouse. Stay. Am I to reject work? And Jesus says, no, not absolutely not. God said, take dominion over the land in the very beginning, Genesis 1.

How do you know that creation is good because of Jesus Christ? And it's all in John 3.16, that great memory verse, for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.

Not only that humans may not perish, because if you believe today you will not perish, but also so that the world would not perish, but have everlasting life, that it could be recovered and bought back from the evil of sin.

Sin is like water. And the world is like a sponge. And sin creeps down into every little crevice that is the sponge of the world, and the world soaks it up.

And Jesus Christ came not to destroy the sponge. He came to squeeze it. He came to pour the sin and the death and the misery out of the midst of it and recover the ultimacy of the good of creation.

[22 : 59] Above all, and here's the last word before we move on. How do you know? And that's on the third day when Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Do you know what God was saying in that moment?

God the Father, when he raises Jesus Christ up from the dead, he says, physical stuff is eternal.

The day Jesus rose from the dead was the day that God pronounces, I'm keeping the world.

I'm not getting rid of it, because Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God, now has a resurrected physical body that will never leave. His body is now forever.

And so God has so joined himself in Christ to the world that he pronounces creation is good and will be ultimately recovered. So true spirituality is not the life of asceticism.

It's being in the world and not of it. That's what Paul's teaching us here. All right, secondly and finally, and only a couple minutes here. Then he addresses a more practical point.

[24 : 03] How do you make it holy then? Okay, well, he's teaching us. If that's true, if sin has soaked down into the structures of the world like a sponge, can I do something?

Well, first, Jesus Christ has done everything, but then also Paul comes and says there is a way to make things, quote, holy. And you can see it in verse four to five.

Everything created by God is good. Nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the Word of God and by prayer.

Now Paul, one of the most common examples of this idea in the New Testament is when Paul deals with food that's been sacrificed to idols. So in Corinthians especially, he deals with this and he's probably alluding to it in this passage.

Food is sacrificed to idols in the pagan temples, but then it's taken from the temple and it's put in the market in these great Greco-Roman cities. And the Christians were asking in Corinth and all sorts of places, well, what do I do with that?

[25 : 05] Can I eat a piece of meat that was sacrificed to a pagan deity and then used and sold in the market for profit to support the temple, the pagan temple?

And Paul says, if your conscience is clear, eat away. And you see what he's saying, how? Because that can be made holy by the Word of God and prayer.

In other words, making something holy, something being made holy simply means this. When something that was once used for evil is recovered to be used for the good way that God created it to be used.

So he says, a Christian can absolutely eat meat sacrificed to an idol. What do you do? You pray and you give thanks to God for what he's provided you in food. And then you eat it.

And he said, and it's made holy, it's set back to rights, it's made holy, it's consecrated to what it should be, part of creation, part of the good gifts that God's given us.

[26 : 04] And he does this all over the time in the New Testament. Verse five, all things can be made holy by the Word of God and prayer. Now here we've got the twofold way to go about this, how to make things holy.

You need the Word of God and you need prayer. What does that mean? Well this reference to the Word of God is a going back to Genesis one moment. It's not saying that the Bible makes things holy exactly.

He's talking about God's actual speech at creation. The Word of God objectively makes something holy, meaning if God made it, spoke it by his word into existence, it's good.

So objectively you need it to be part of creation. Subjectively you need what he says is three times thanksgiving. And so the idea here is when you come to the table, the food that hits your table has been used in sinful ways by the time it gets to you.

Every time, there's hardly any doubt about that, almost every time food hits our table, there's sin that's happened around it by the time it gets to us. But Paul says, pray and give thanks to God and it's set back to right again.

[27 : 15] Sexuality is the most abused reality in human history probably, the most abused structure of creation. And we know that at so many levels and Paul says it can be redeemed, it can be set back to rights, it can be made holy because it is part of the Word of God, the objectivity of creation and then give thanks to God and use it the way that God has told you to use it and it is now made holy again, consecrated to be the illustration of the marriage between Christ and the bride.

Work, you know that work is by the Word of God, take dominion over the land but you know that in the midst of your workplace all sorts of evils can happen and your job can be twisted to not serve the common good but to serve a common evil.

And Paul says here, with thanksgiving to God and gratitude for work itself, use it for the good and it is made holy again. In other words, he gives the Christian the power to redeem things, to turn them around, not ultimately, not eternally but in the moment of the structure.

Now let me say this as we close here, even moments, experiences can be made holy. You know, let's imagine yesterday you were out and you went up Arthur's seat and you looked out from Arthur's seat at the beauty of the land and the beauty of this city which is undoubtedly immense. And you said, thanks be to God, you know, your affection started to stir and you said, look at what the Lord has done. He's given us the gift of beauty and goodness and I can look out in the midst of a corrupted world and see the wonders of architecture and the wonders of the land.

[29 : 02] And that moment was made holy. We have a book at our house that we love that's titled Every Moment Holy that deals with this very specifically. So let me, as we close, let me say this, this passage is written to Christians, to the Christian church very obviously.

And if you're coming today exploring the claims of theism, of religion, of deity, of Jesus Christ and the gospel specifically, let me say in the most loving way that you've got a real problem here.

And the problem is that Paul here gives power to gratitude. That gratitude is so powerful in the light of the Lord that it can make something good again.

And there's a real problem with that without belief. And the problem is this, that without believing in God and especially the Christian God, you have no means, I don't think, of explaining either power, the power of gratitude or the reality of goodness.

Take the example of Arthur's seat. You sit on top of Arthur's seat and all of a sudden you look out and the overwhelming feeling, the affections as they're called start to stir and you realize this place is beautiful, which is a problem in itself.

[30 : 29] And you start to say, I'm thankful for this. Now it's an emotion that happens to you. You don't do it actively, it occurs in you and gratitude rises up in your soul.

And here's where the problem lies. I don't think you have a place to direct it. And you can say, well, look, I can be grateful to another person. And that's absolutely true. An artist can make a piece of art and you say, I'm so thankful for this, to that artist.

But what about beauty in itself? Because no artist makes beauty, they only participate in it. And what about music in itself? No musician makes music, they only make songs.

And what about good things in themselves? Not a great meal, but the fact of food, the fact of the landscape, the fact of the beauty that covers the architecture of Edinburgh.

Let me suggest that if you're exploring Christianity today, without belief in God, you have no explanatory power to say that gratitude is anything but an illusion.

[31 : 36] Because gratitude to be grateful has to be directed at a person. But if you want to be grateful for beauty, you've got nobody to be grateful to. And Christianity comes, Paul comes and says, there is such a thing as the sacred, there is such a thing as beauty in the holy, in the good, and you want it, and we want it, and we can have it.

And the it today is most expressed in the goodness of God, in the grace of Jesus Christ to restore all of creation to its utter beauty.

John 3.16, one more time. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that the world would not perish, that you would not perish, that he can restore you wherever you might be in your walk in relationship to religion today.

He can restore you and he does it through the power of the death and resurrection of the Son of God in the middle of history. And so I'll close with this last word. If you have a heart today for the sacred and for the holy and for the good and for beauty and good food and music, whatever it might be, it all fits together.

They all go together. They come from the same place. The God of creation and you can have the sacred. You can have the holy. Jesus Christ is the holy.

[32 : 54] And so pray to him today, whether you've been a Christian for 50 years or today is day one, pray to him this morning. Ask for him to speak to your heart and to forgive you and to restore your soul and he will.

Let's pray together. Father, we ask now that you would make our souls holy, not through the means of our good works, but through the means of the grace of Jesus.

And in the midst of that, we give thanks, Lord, that you are making all things holy, that you would not leave just the human soul to be saved, but you're going to save us for the whole world.

So we give thanks, Lord. We give thanks this morning for our embodiment and our physicality. We give thanks for good food that will be on our tables today. You could have not only wiped food off the planet after our sin, you could have given us something less than good food, but yet food still tastes good and that's your gift.

And we thank you for it. We thank you for music. We thank you for science and politics and art and society and families. We thank you for the structures of creation.

[34 : 06] We ask now that you would send us out of this place to be ministers that speak the good news and who participate in redeeming and making holy the things that have once been used for evil.

And so work this reality into our relationships. Work this reality into the way we approach our meals. Work this reality into the way we listen to music and the way we turn on Netflix that we would be in the world but not of it.

And so we pray for these hearts in Christ's name this morning. Thank you.