

1 Timothy 4:1-8 – Wednesday Service – Some Will Depart – July 15, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

The world is full of bad theology. YouTube pundits predict a date for the secret rapture of the Church. Television news hosts say all religions are the same—that it is all a matter of preference. Facebook keyboard warriors—who can't write a complete sentence—tell us that love means supporting every corrupt desire. And many who claim the name of Christ are cruel and bitter and harsh—whenever the pastor is not around—and sometimes even when he is. The world is full of bad theology.

Having explained the mystery of godliness in chapter three, Paul now explains the mystery of ungodliness in chapter four. And it begins with bad theology. He tells Timothy to expect false teaching in the world. “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.”

Notice that bad theology is a form of deception. It is destructive. It is even demonic. And it is a departure from the faith. I see it again and again in those who leave the Church. Distance from the Church doesn't mean that catechizing stops. It just means someone else is doing the catechizing—some screen—some friend—some teacher—some coach. And the end result is not only false teaching—but a separation from the life of God.

The Greek word here translated as *depart* gives us the English word *apostasy*. And *apostasy* is the serious situation of abandoning the faith. It is turning away from Christ after you once turned toward Him. It is to separate yourself from the living God. It is to say that you do not need God's Word. You do not need the Gospel.

It is as we hear in Hebrews 6, “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”

Paul tells Timothy here that he is living in later times. The final age has begun. The last days are the time between Christ's Ascension and His final return. It is the whole Christian era. And one of the distinguishing marks of these times is that some who call themselves Christian will forsake the Christ of authentic Christianity. They will leave behind sound doctrine. And they will turn away into myths, conspiracy theories, and false teachings.

And Paul tells Timothy that these false teachings not only come from demonic sources—but they are expressed through false teachers. And these false teachers are “liars whose consciences are seared.” Their consciences are desensitized. Their spiritual clarity is lost through their rebellion against the Gospel. They resist the Word of God. They resist the Spirit's influence.

Now, up to this point, Paul has been speaking about bad theology in general terms. In verse three, he starts to get specific. The false teachers in Ephesus introduced some ideas that would be hard to sell in today's religious landscape. These teachers forbid marriage

and require abstinence from foods—here likely all meat. The purpose seems to be to avoid sexual sin and meat that has been offered to idols.

Imagine if some false teacher today preached that celibacy and vegetarianism were necessary for salvation. In our culture of decadence and indulgence, nearly the whole world would abandon the faith.

These teachers were introducing a form of asceticism—of self-denial—of what would later be called Gnosticism. And here, there is a rejection of anything pleasurable. Now, the Christian Church has always advocated for self-control.

C.S. Lewis calls this temperance—an idea that has been poorly defined over the last two centuries. For him, it is the classic virtue. It is self-control. And it is to use the body and created things as God intended. And then, he goes on to warn us—much like Paul does here—about placing heavy burdens on others—burdens the Scriptures don't require—as is happening in Ephesus.

He says, “Temperance referred not specially to drink, but to all pleasures; and it meant not abstaining, but going the right length and no further...One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting everyone else to give up. That is not the Christian way.”

And so, preaching against marriage sets aside the original creation of God. And preaching against meat—simply because some has been offered to idols—creates an unnecessary hardship that even the Old Covenant did not require.

These kinds of heresies have popped up in history, especially related to marriage. The Essenes—the Dead Sea community—refused marriage. As did the Manicheans. And in American history, the Shakers saw marriage as a sinful depravity.

Again, these are not particularly modern heresies. If anything, we have swung to the other extreme. Instead of insisting on an extra-biblical amount of self-control—we have practiced none. Instead of living disciplined lives—we live undisciplined lives.

We forget that self-control is a biblical virtue. It is a fruit of the Spirit. And even though we find this warning here, Paul will talk about self-control on four separate occasions just in his Timothy Epistles.

Tonight, I would like to talk about a particular form of self-control based on the second half of our reading. And it is all about training. Paul speaks of a pastor and the training he receives. We tend to evaluate our pastors based on how nice they are—if they will do things my way—and if they will listen. But we need pastors to be faithful and steadfast. He must be “sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.” Paul tells us they must be trained in the words of the faith and good doctrine.

And a good pastor must stand against bad theology. He must expose false teachings and false teachers. Paul warns Timothy, “Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.” These are superstitious beliefs and false revelations—some of the kinds of things I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon.

A good pastor is a protector of the faith. He doesn't get caught up in silly heresies or preferred false doctrine or the errors of the moment. His interpretation of Scripture is grounded in the rule of faith—in the interpretative tradition of the one holy Christian and

Apostolic Church. He doesn't secretly disagree with the Scriptures. He isn't a critic of Paul. He defends the testimony of the Apostles concerning Jesus Christ.

And the training extends beyond the pastor. He is to train his congregation. In obvious reference to the efforts of those abstaining from marriage and meat—this false asceticism—Paul then stresses the need for proper training and discipline.

And Paul begins by admitting that bodily training has some value. He is not condemning athletic fitness. And maybe exercise as self-discipline has even more value in a society like ours so given to laziness, gluttony, and excess. Stewardship of the body is something worth talking about.

Lutheran theologian Armin Moelling says, “When man throws the blessing of health away, this is irresponsible ingratitude.” Paul views the body as something united with the soul. It is a real part of our humanity. It deserves care. And there is even a spiritual dimension to what we do with our bodies. Christ intends to save the whole person.

For example, I encouraged fasting back in the Lenten season. This is a bodily discipline. Fasting is about self-control. It is a tool to point us to our greater needs. The Small Catechism even addresses fasting as preparation for the Sacrament, saying, “Fasting and bodily preparation are, indeed, fine outward training.”

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul says, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

But the training Paul speaks to here is training in *godliness*. The word deserves a little attention. I think the meaning of *godliness* is often rather hazy for most of us. And Paul wants it to be much more concrete. *Godliness* is *piety* or *reverence toward God*. It is the kind of religious practice drawn from right theology. The word is used in the New Testament to describe character—and how that character is exhibited in conduct.

Later in this same chapter, Paul will get specific about what this means. He tells Timothy to set an example in “speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” This is the nature of godliness. It is found in the words we use—and the content of these words. And it is found in the life we lead.

And we'll expand this definition of godliness much more next week as we get into the verses that follow. Training in godliness is the kind of training that Paul expects Timothy to take up as a pastor. And this is the kind of training that Paul expects for this congregation in Ephesus. Godliness is God's will for us in Christ Jesus. And this is the life of Christ in us.

And so, physical discipline has a relative value. There is something more important than bodily exercise. Godliness. The benefits of true Christian piety extend over a lifetime—and into eternity. Because our hope in Christ is so real—and our belief in eternal life is so confident—believers are willing to toil and strive in this regard.

We are willing to work at our doctrine and practice. We bring all of life under the Lordship of Christ. We work at knowing the revelation of Christ. We internalize it. We make it our own. It is to this end that we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest God's Word.

There is a lot of bad theology out there. There is a lot of arrogance—especially from the most foolish among us. And some will depart. They will leave the Church to pursue false teachings. They will leave to indulge the sinful nature. We should be saddened by such things. But we are not surprised.

We are reminded of the words of Jesus in Matthew 24, “And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

The remedy for bad theology is, of course, good theology. It is knowing what the Church has confessed for Millenia. It is the Apostles’ Creed. The Nicene Creed. The Athanasian Creed. It is the Book of Concord. It is the Holy Scriptures—rightly handled. And it is making such confessions our own.

The remedy for bad theology is godliness. It is to walk in the steps of Christ. It is careful attention to bring our lives, our thoughts, our words under the Lordship of Christ.

But there is one other remedy to notice. There is one other piece of training worth remembering in our text. As Paul talks about marriage and food, he reminds us to receive such things in gratitude. He says, “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

And if family and food are to be received with gratitude—how much more right theology. If our relationships and meals are made holy with the Word of God and prayer—how much more are we ourselves made holy with the Word of God and prayer. Gratitude is essential to sound theology. We should be grateful for a God who speaks to us in Holy Scripture. Who makes Himself known in Jesus Christ. Thanksgiving is so important to daily life in Christ—Paul tells us here—that anyone who rejects it runs the risk of abandoning the faith altogether.

Good theology. Godliness. Gratitude. This is the path forward for Paul—a path that keeps us from apostasy. These are the kinds of disciplines—these are the exercises he would have us take up. Let’s be grateful for our training in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that we have followed. For such things guide us into godliness. Theology is for living. Theology is for life. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+