

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HOW NOT TO FALL AWAY

1 Timothy 4:1-5

By

Steven J. Cole

April 10, 1994

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Lesson 12

How Not To Fall Away 1 Timothy 4:1-5

We all know people who have fallen away from the Christian faith. These are people who at one time made a profession of faith in Christ. They may have joined a Bible-believing church. I know some who were seminary graduates, active in ministry. But either they drifted from the Lord or deliberately turned away. They may have become ensnared in a cult or entangled by worldly values or have fallen into moral problems. But they are no longer living as Christians.

If you think such a thing could never happen to you, take heed lest you fall! We're all vulnerable and we are at war with a cunning, deceptive enemy. We need to understand how not to fall away. Paul gives us an answer in 1 Timothy 4:1-5. It is not a complete answer, of course. A complete answer would entail all the New Testament teaching on the spiritual life. But it is nonetheless a solid answer that will help us be on guard so that we do not fall away.

Paul refers to an explicit prophecy by the Holy Spirit that in later times some will fall away from the faith. He may be referring to Jesus' prediction concerning the apostasy during the end times (Mark 13:22), or to other prophecies Paul made (2 Thess. 2:1-12; Acts 20:29). Or Paul may have received a new revelation from the Holy Spirit on this matter as he wrote this letter. "Later times" refers to the entire church age; but there will be a major apostasy just before the Lord's return (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Apparently, some in Ephesus were already turning away from the faith. Paul is telling Timothy these things so that he will be on guard as the problems grow worse. He is saying that ...

To avoid falling away, we must persevere
in God's truth with thankfulness.

First he shows the *problem* of these times—those who fall away from the faith (4:1-3a). Then he reveals the *perspective* for these times—the outlook we need to persevere (4:3b-5).

1. The problem of these times: Apostasy (falling away).

Those whom Paul describes as falling away are people who are not enjoying God and the blessings He provides, but rather have fallen into an outward form of religion in which they deny themselves things, such as marriage and certain foods. In order to see how they got to that point, we need to trace Paul's flow of thought:

A. We are engaged in spiritual warfare.

The Scriptures teach that God not only created the material world, but that He also created spiritual beings. We normally cannot see or hear them, but they are nonetheless real. Some of these beings, called angels, are servants of God. The other beings, demons or evil spirits, are under Satan's leadership. He and they were once angels who served God. But Satan rebelled and a great number of angels followed him. He is now their general and they serve in his army to thwart God's purpose.

Paul says that these false teachers and those who follow them were actually following deceitful spirits and the doctrines of demons. The errors came through men in the church, but behind these professing Christians were demonic forces (see 2 Cor. 11:13-15). We are sometimes surprised when the enemy comes from within the church. We think the enemy is "out there," not in here. But Scripture is clear that men in the church, recognized as leaders, who seem to be men of righteousness, will sometimes rise up to lead God's people astray. Often behind such men are demonic forces.

Scripture shows that demonic influence can be blatant and obvious (for example, the Gerasene demoniac). But also demonic influence can be subtle enough to draw the unsuspecting into its grip. If you've ever been ripped off by a con artist, he didn't walk up and say, "I'm going to steal your money!" He earned your trust, but his intent was to use you for his own selfish ends. That's what was happening in Ephesus, and these deceitful evil spirits continue to work in churches to thwart God's truth by their demonic doctrines.

So often we see things only on the natural plane. But it is crucial that we understand that "our struggle is not against flesh and

blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). We are engaged in spiritual warfare!

B. Spiritual warfare involves the mind.

Apostasy (or falling away) always begins in the mind. These spirits are "deceitful" and they teach doctrines that sound biblical but are just slightly off. They are out to fool you in your thinking. But God's people "believe and know the truth" (4:3).

We need to be careful here. On one extreme, there is a wide movement in the American church that minimizes truth. This side says, "They will know we are Christians by our love," and so they adopt a "peace at any cost" position that dilutes and ultimately destroys essential Christian truth. They emphasize tolerance and doctrinal diversity. If you speak out against error, this side accuses you of being unloving and divisive. But if you go down that road, you end up with the unbiblical view that truth doesn't matter and that there is no such thing as sound doctrine (a major theme in this epistle).

On the other extreme, we can be so zealous for the truth that we shred relationships and end up falling into spiritual pride because we hold to "The Truth." I get a newsletter from a man who attacks and separates himself from many well-known evangelicals because he finds errors in statements they have made in print or in taped messages. If you go far enough down that road, you end up in a church of one member, because you'll never find another person who agrees with you on every minor point of doctrine.

So you have to determine how serious a matter is and what the consequences will be if people follow this teaching. In the situation Paul is correcting, you might think, "What's the big deal about forbidding marriage and the eating of certain foods?" But Paul saw behind these practices to the heart of the teaching, which was to put a relationship with God on an outward basis. This fosters hypocrisy and pride and leads people away from seeking to please God from the heart. So, Satan is out to influence your thinking. Spiritual warfare involves the mind. But it never stops there.

C. The mind affects our morals.

These men who gave heed in their thinking to the doctrines of demons ended up being hypocritical liars, seared in their consciences (4:2). When God's truth confronted their guilty consciences, instead of dealing with it through repentance, they put on a good front to others as hypocritical liars. Their wrong thinking led them to wrong morals.

The conscience is not an infallible guide. If you violate your conscience and don't repent, your conscience becomes hardened or callused. If that process continues unchecked, you reach a point where your conscience is seared (the word means "cauterized"). You have grown insensitive to sin. You can lie and not even realize you're doing it, because your conscience is seared.

A person who falls away from the faith can go one of two directions, morally speaking: Legalism or licentiousness. Second Peter and Jude describe men who fell away from the faith into licentiousness. They once made claim to be Christians. But their brand of false teaching led them and their followers into immoral behavior (2 Pet. 2:1-3, 18-20). That's one route apostasy can take.

But the doctrines of demons can also lead to legalism, which Paul is addressing here. These men were forbidding marriage and advocating abstaining from certain foods. This was probably an early form of Gnosticism. The Gnostics claimed to be Christians, but they adopted a number of wrong doctrines, one of which was that all matter is evil and spirit is good. This wrong thinking led them into these two wrong extremes morally of legalism and licentiousness. Some of the Gnostics concluded that since matter is evil, we must control the body through asceticism or denying oneself any physical pleasure. Others concluded that since matter is evil and spirit is good, there is a wide division between the two. What you do with your body doesn't matter, since it's all evil anyway. It's your spirit that counts. This led them into gross immorality and indulgence of the flesh.

Legalism and licentiousness are not opposed to one another, with grace being the balance between the two. Rather, legalism and licentiousness are two sides of the same coin. Both are devoid of a personal relationship with the living God in which all areas of life

are brought under His lordship as a response to His grace. Neither legalism nor licentiousness focus on inner righteousness. The legalism Paul is attacking is as demonic in origin as licentiousness. It is the end result of wrong thinking which stems from deceitful spirits. It leads to pride, not to godliness in the inner person. The attraction of legalism is that it builds up the self.

I say this kindly, but it needs to be said, since the error is so widespread and it is the same error Paul confronts here. I'm referring to the official teaching and common practice of the Roman Catholic Church on the crucial matter of how a person gets right with God. Many Catholics, including some priests, are coming to faith in Christ as Savior. "But according to the most thorough poll of American clergy yet made, over three-quarters of Roman Catholic priests reject the view that our only hope for heaven is through personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They hold instead that 'heaven is a divine reward for those who earn it by their good life.'" (*Christianity Today* [10/23/81], p. 14.)

Those priests are in line with official Catholic dogma as set forth in the Council of Trent (which denied the Reformation teaching of salvation by grace through faith) and the more recent Vatican II, which affirmed the doctrines of Trent. Vatican II teaches that Christ's death was not sufficient for our salvation. We must also keep the sacraments and earn salvation through our suffering and good deeds. Vatican II condemns with anathema those who say that indulgences are useless or that the Church does not have the power to grant them for the task of winning salvation (these and other Catholic teachings are documented by Dave Hunt in "The Berean Call," 4/92.)

Any time a church or an individual teaches that we merit heaven by our good works, they are nullifying Christ's finished work on the cross. Teaching that a person will gain merit with God by abstaining from marriage (as with priests), by following dietary laws, or by keeping man-made rules leads people into outward religion apart from a relationship with the living God. These are the doctrines of demons. Those who follow such teaching fall away from the truth revealed in God's Word.

This is important for you to understand because recently many evangelical churches in Flagstaff met with the Catholics in a

service intended to “proclaim our Christian unity.” I want you to know why I and the elders could not in good conscience join such a service and why I stand opposed to the trend among American evangelicals to minimize any differences between Protestants and Catholics. Until the Catholic Church officially recants the Council of Trent, Vatican II, and many other corrupt doctrines, the differences are irreconcilable.

After presenting the problem of falling away, Paul goes on to give the perspective needed to persevere.

2. The perspective for these times: Perseverance in God’s truth with thankful hearts.

In contrast to falling away, which in the case of the legalists meant outward religion without the living God, the perspective for perseverance is holding to God’s truth with thankfulness. The flavor of verses 3b-5 is that of gratefully enjoying God and His creation. There are several aspects to such perseverance:

- A. Make sure you hold to integrity and truth.

These false teachers had become hypocritical liars (4:2). Hypocrisy means maintaining an outward front to look good while you’re violating your conscience when others aren’t looking. In order to cover your sin, you have to lie, so you let go of truthfulness. To dodge the conviction that comes through God’s Word of truth, you don’t confront your life with Scripture. To salve your guilty conscience, you add certain outward practices that make you seem spiritual. That’s how Satan gets you to fall away.

The antidote is to hold to integrity and truth, both God’s Word of truth and personal truthfulness. If you sin, confess and forsake it, don’t cover it up. Daily be in God’s Word and let it search your heart so that you can confront sin and grow in holiness.

- B. Be alert to the spiritual danger that comes through the mind.

Stay on guard to the fact that Satan and his forces are trying to deceive our minds against God and His truth (2 Cor. 11:3). Satan especially appeals to our pride by getting us to think that we can gain merit with God by keeping man-made rules. We start thinking

we're better than others because we keep such rules. Remember this: any teaching that exalts self is from the enemy. God's Word humbles us by teaching that every good gift we enjoy comes from God's undeserved favor; thus we must be thankful to God for His blessings.

Especially we need to be alert to the danger of doubting God's goodness. In the original temptation, Satan appealed to Eve's mind and got her to doubt God's goodness: "C'mon, Eve! God is trying to hold back something good from you. This fruit will make you like God!" (see Gen. 3:1-6). The serpent was pulling God down ("He's not really good") and building Eve up (exalting self, "you can be like God"). He's still using that false teaching to cause many to fall away.

You must be especially careful to guard yourself from wrong thinking when you're going through a difficult trial. Satan comes along and sows doubts about God's goodness: "If He were really good, He wouldn't let this happen to you. It's okay to be angry at God; He wasn't faithful to you by letting this happen." It's in the context of trials that Peter tells us to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand and then says, "Be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith" (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

- C. Remember that God wants us to enjoy Him and His blessings with thankful hearts.

Christians are the only people who can truly enjoy life, because we're right with the Creator through faith in Jesus Christ. We know that God is for us and is working all things together for good for those who love Him (Rom. 8:31, 28). Thus Paul directs us to give thanks in everything (Eph. 5:20; 1 Thess. 5:18), to be overflowing with gratitude to God because of His great salvation so freely given (Col. 1:12; 2:7).

Paul mentions gratitude twice in our text (4:3, 4). If you're bitter toward God or if you're grumbling about His dealings with you, you're vulnerable to Satan's attacks. Mark it well: The path away from God is the path of ingratitude, of doubting the goodness of God (Rom. 1:21; Jude 16). God's people who persevere

believe in the goodness of God, even in trials, and thus are filled with gratitude.

And we not only can be thankful for spiritual blessings, but also for physical joys. When Paul says that everything created by God is good, he means, in the context for which God created it. God created marriage and the pleasure of the sexual relationship in marriage. He created good food for us to enjoy. (You can say "Amen!") God has created the beauty of this world for us to enjoy. He has made human beings in His image. Although marred by the fall, we can enjoy the unique people of this world. We can enjoy the creative abilities God has given to people, such as literature, art, and music. In all these things, we don't just enjoy the gift, but also we enjoy God who has given them for our enjoyment.

I'm not talking about overindulgence or self-centered living. (Paul deals with the need for discipline in the verses immediately following.) I'm saying that the spiritual is not just a segment of life. Rather, all of life is spiritual and sacred, because we live it in a relationship with the Creator who designed it all for His glory and our enjoyment. The Puritans had it right: "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

We make all of life holy ("sanctified," 4:5) "by means of the word of God and prayer." Paul is referring to prayer before meals. We thank God for His provision. When Paul mentions "the word of God," he is referring to God's pronouncement in the creation that everything He made is good (Genesis 1:31). So this extends beyond table grace to all of God's creation which we are to enjoy. When we hike in the mountains or enjoy the company of family or friends, when we enjoy a concert or a good book, we do it with thankfulness to God, the Creator and giver of every good gift (James 1:17). If we know Him, we can enjoy Him through all that He has made.

Conclusion

To avoid falling away, we must persevere in God's truth with thankful hearts. It's not always easy, but even in times of trial, we need to affirm God's goodness and thank Him for His many blessings.

A number of years ago, a magazine editor's life was saved through a kidney transplant. He commented on the difference between his attitude toward life before and after his operation: "Instead of living life to the fullest, I [formerly] let myself be bothered by things which I just laugh at today. It never occurred to me then to enjoy the coming of spring, a cool drink of water on a hot day, eating good food and all the things that normally we don't notice but let pass by."

I have no reason to think the man knew God. But we do, so we have hope not only in this life, but beyond the grave. Let's commit ourselves to His truth as revealed in His Word. Let's enjoy God and His many gifts to us so that we don't fall away.

Discussion Questions

1. Wrong behavior always begins with wrong thinking. Agree/disagree? Why?
2. How do we find the balance between holding to biblical truth and maintaining unity in love?
3. How would you define legalism? Is it as dangerous spiritually as licentiousness? Why? Why not?
4. What is the difference between asceticism and self-discipline? Between indulgence and proper enjoyment?
5. What are some implications of the truth that all of life is sacred or spiritual?

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