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RELIGION FOR FUN AND PROFIT

1 Timothy 6:3-5

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Lesson 20

Religion For Fun And Profit 1 Timothy 6:3-5

Religious false teachers down through the centuries have known something in common, namely, that religion can be fun and profitable—for them, at least. They have proved that you can make a good living in the religion business. Some, like Reverend Ike, openly flaunt their materialistic greed. His creed is, “I don’t want pie in the sky when I die; I want cash in the stash here and now!” Asked how much his church is worth, Ike replies, “A lot of money. This is a very successful, prosperous, multimillion-dollar operation, and I’m very happy to say that.” He also claims not to know his personal salary, but explains, “It’s whatever I need.” (*Newsweek*, Dec. 20, 1982.)

Others promoting the so-called “Word of Faith” teaching or “Health and Wealth gospel” tell people that it’s God’s will for all His people to be financially successful. They quote verses to back up their teaching and flaunt their own wealth as proof positive. As you know, Jim Bakker is doing time for defrauding his constituents and illegally using ministry funds to support his lavish lifestyle. But many others are still aggressively promoting this false and damaging teaching.

In our day when false teachers abound perhaps more than at any other time in history, and when, due to the mass media, they have greater access to more people than ever before, how can you be discerning so as not to be led astray? How can you distinguish a false teacher from a true one?

Paul gives an answer in 1 Timothy 6:3-5. It is not a comprehensive answer, of course, which would require developing a thorough understanding of the whole Bible. But it’s an answer that exposed the false teachers in Ephesus; and if they would take heed, it would keep many unsuspecting people in our day from falling into false teaching. Paul is saying that ...

Teachers who promote gain rather than
godliness are not from God.

Sound doctrine—spiritually healthy doctrine—is not focused on personal gain, either for the teacher or the pupil, but on godliness. Of course, godliness is actually a means of great gain, as Paul is quick to point out (v. 6). But in verse 5 Paul is talking about the gain of self-seeking and personal fulfillment. It is using religion for selfish ends.

Have you ever wondered how the cults ensnare so many people? Basically, they identify unmet felt needs that people have and then offer ways to meet those needs apart from the living and true God. They usually prey on people who profess to be Christians, but who are untaught or unstable in their walk with God. For example, in her book, *My Turn* (excerpted in *Newsweek* [10/23/89]), Nancy Reagan tells how she got linked up with astrologer Joan Quigley. Mrs. Reagan was upset over the assassination attempt on her husband's life. To calm her fears, she had tried prayer and had talked with religious leaders, such as Billy Graham and Donn Moomaw (her pastor).

But then one afternoon her friend Merv Griffin mentioned this astrologer, who claimed that she could have warned the Reagans in advance about the fateful March 30th, when the president was shot. Mrs. Reagan called her and the astrologer responded with the warmth and compassion the First Lady needed. This began many months of counsel, which cost Mrs. Reagan dearly—she won't disclose how much, but just says that "it wasn't cheap." When Mr. Reagan found out about it, his response was, "If it makes you feel better, go ahead and do it. But be careful. It might look a little odd if it ever came out." In other words, the bottom line is not whether it conforms you to God's Word of truth, but rather, "How does it make you feel and how does it look to others?"

What Mrs. Reagan did has been done by millions of professing Christians in our country. They have not diligently sought the Lord and judged their own sins in order to grow in godliness. Trials come into their lives and they don't know how to deal with them. All they know is that they are not at peace. Along comes some false teaching that offers them a solution. It mingles enough Bible to make it sound Christian. They buy into it, never realizing that they are seeking personal gain or happiness rather than godliness. That's

how false teachings gain momentum. So Paul's teaching here that teachers who promote gain rather than godliness are not of the Lord is quite relevant in our day, and we would do well to hear him closely.

We aren't sure historically just who these false teachers were. They could have been the Gnostics, who prided themselves on their esoteric "knowledge." They may have been "Sophists," men who charged for giving entertaining, oratorical lectures. But whoever they were, Paul shows four ways that they promoted gain rather than godliness. These errors apply to the false teachers of our day.

1. False teachers promote gain through wrong content.

Note (v. 3), "different doctrine," "sound words," "doctrine conforming to godliness"; (v. 4), "disputes about words"; (v. 5) "the truth." The content of their teaching was in error. As we have seen in 1 Timothy, doctrine matters greatly! Jonathan Edwards observed, "The ideas and images in men's minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them." What you think always affects how you behave. Satan always begins his attacks through wrong thinking. Wrong theology leads to wrong living.

We live in an anti-theological day. Some pastors of successful churches even boast, "We're not into theology!" They emphasize management, methodology, and technique. They analyze their target audience and design church programs to attract this demographically-defined swath of the population by meeting their felt needs. But as seminary professor, James Means, argues, "Every great movement and ministry in Christendom has been fueled—nay, driven—by theology, not by hot new technology or Madison Avenue technique" ("Focal Point," April-June, 1994, p. 8).

You may not even be aware of it, but you have a theology. If I were to ask how many of you have read a theological book in the past year (or in your lifetime), the number would probably be quite small. You may not be able to articulate your theology, and you may even be bored by the subject. But even so, you do have a theology, and your theology, to a large extent, determines your behavior. What you think about God, human nature, sin, salvation,

judgment, and other biblical themes greatly affects how you live each day.

In our day, the prevailing theology is man-centered, heavily subjective and relative. By man-centered, I mean that people conceive of God as the servant of mankind. He is not the sovereign, omnipotent, Creator-God who fashioned man for His purpose. Rather, He is a sort of Cosmic Aladdin's genie who exists to make man happy. "Do you have problems in your life? Try God! He will meet all your needs and give you a happy life!" The emphasis is on man's needs rather than on God's glory.

Here's how this works out in life: You have a guy who has lived a self-centered, sinful life. Then, personal tragedy strikes. His response is, "How could a loving God let this happen to me?" He's saying, "If God exists, He should be there to serve me and make me happy. It doesn't matter that God is sovereign or that I have sinned and deserve His judgment. All that matters is me, and I'm in a jam now, so God, You help me!" God isn't central; man is. And that wrong theology determines how the person reacts when problems hit.

Most American theology is not only man centered, but also subjective and relative. What I mean is that one's experience of God takes precedence over the objective truth about God. God is not seen as an objective, absolute Being with certain unchangeable attributes and with absolute moral laws which stem from His nature. Instead, God is however you experience Him. So professing Christians say things like, "If you're into a God who judges sin, that's okay for you. But my God is a God of grace and love." Personal feelings and experience are central, not objective revealed truth.

Note the two pegs Paul uses to measure sound ("healthy") theology by (v. 3):

A. Sound doctrine centers on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sound doctrine always points to the centrality of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death on the cross. "Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5), "Christ is all" (Col. 3:11), "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23), "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24), "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), "every man complete

in Christ" (Col. 1:28)--the centrality and supremacy of Christ are the themes Paul majored on. Whether he lived or died, Paul's goal was that Christ would be exalted (Phil. 1:20). Sound theology does not center on man, but on God and His eternal purpose in Christ.

B. Sound doctrine conforms to godliness.

That is, it is not subjective and relative, it is not "God, however you may experience Him." "Godliness," a dominant theme in the pastoral epistles, means conduct in line with God and His revealed truth (see Titus 1:1), especially as revealed and taught by the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus whenever you hear someone promoting man-centered theology, where God exists to please man, and subjective, relativistic theology, beware! They are promoting gain, not godliness, through wrong content.

2. False teachers promote gain through wrong motives.

Paul doesn't mince words--he says that these false teachers were motivated by conceit or pride (v. 4). They claimed to have knowledge. They apparently went to great lengths to expound the nuances of various words and to give their insights on controversial questions (v. 4). But Paul says that they acted out of pride and they didn't understand anything. They loved a following. They thrived on being up front and displaying their knowledge. They prided themselves on being the experts.

Godly teaching always humbles our pride and exalts the Savior. False teaching trifles with God and builds up man. Charles Simeon, a godly Anglican pastor who was used greatly by God almost two centuries ago, had three aims in his preaching: to humble the sinner; to exalt the Savior; and, to promote holiness. I once shared this in a sermon and explained that those were the things I keep in mind as I prepare sermons. They are fairly evident goals, if you read your Bible. But I was taken aback when several people in the church who were in full-time ministry criticized those objectives. They were taken in by the false teaching that says that a main need is to build everyone's self-esteem, so they disagreed that we ought to endeavor to humble sinners!

This wrong motive of pride is tied up with the man-centered theology I mentioned earlier. False teaching starts with man, centers on man, and builds up man. The reason it thrives is that be-

cause of our sin, we are all prone to exalt ourselves against God and to accept any teaching that makes us feel good (subjective theology) without confronting our sin. We don't want to be stripped of our self-reliance, to admit that we are lost and destitute in ourselves unless God is gracious to us.

But biblical theology starts with, centers in, and finishes with the cross of Jesus Christ. And one of the central facts of the cross is "that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Cor. 1:18-31). When we understand the cross, we can only sing with gratitude (Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages"),

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly,
Wash me, Savior or I die!

Thus Paul shows that false teachers promote gain through wrong content and wrong motives.

3. False teachers promote gain through wrong conduct.

Out of the man's wrong content and wrong motives develop wrong conduct. Pride leads to envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth (vv. 4-5a). Their conduct stems from their motives. Since they promote themselves more than Christ, they're competitive towards others. They put down others to build themselves up. They are always engaged in controversy. But their goal is not to build Christ's kingdom, but their own. So they dominate people through intimidation rather than shepherd people out of love.

We would be in error to conclude from verses 4 & 5 that all theological controversy is wrong. Some people are so prone to peace and unity that they condemn as divisive anyone who refutes theological error or exposes false teachers. But that is precisely what Paul is forcefully doing here: refuting error by exposing and attacking these false teachers. Some say, "We shouldn't criticize or bring up negatives; just teach right doctrine." But that's naive and not biblical. Paul not only attacked false teaching and false teachers

(as he does here); he also told Titus (1:9) that a qualification for elders is that they “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”

But the difference between Paul’s methods and those of the false teachers was that Paul’s attacks on false doctrine were not selfishly oriented, whereas the false teachers were promoting self. Paul wasn’t out for personal glory, to make a name for himself (1 Thess. 2:6). He wanted God’s truth, especially as centered on the gospel, to prevail. With John the Baptist, Paul could honestly say, “[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). He had the good of God’s flock in mind whenever he confronted error. Whenever we must correct error or confront false teachers, we need to examine our hearts and root out any pride or self-seeking to make sure that our goal is biblical love.

Thus false teachers promote gain through wrong content, wrong motives, and wrong conduct. Finally,

4. False teachers promote gain through wrong values.

“Who suppose that godliness is a means of gain” (v. 5). (The KJV “gain is godliness” is not correct.) That is, these false teachers were living for material values above spiritual values. They treasured the temporal above the eternal. Instead of being prophets of God, they were making a profit on God. Apparently, they were living well off their “ministries” and flaunting it.

As Paul has just shown (1 Tim. 5:17-18), it is proper for a man who labors in the gospel to be adequately supported by the gospel. But it is wrong for a man in the ministry to focus on money or to profiteer from the gospel. I’ve always been bothered by pastors who negotiate their salary package as those in the world do, or who move to a new church because of a pay increase, unless their current situation does not provide for their needs (not their wants!). It is wrong for all believers to live for this world’s values. “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

In *This Was John Calvin* (Baker, pp. 164-165) Thea Van Halsema tells the story of Cardinal Sadolet, a high-ranking Roman Catholic official who had tried to coax Geneva back to Rome, who passed incognito through Geneva. He wanted to have a look at the

famous Protestant reformer. He stood amazed in front of the simple house on Canon Street. Did the famous Calvin live in this little place? He knocked. Calvin himself, in a plain black robe, answered the door. Sadolet was dumbfounded. Where were the servants who should have been scurrying about to do their master's bidding? Even the bishops of Rome in that day lived in mansions surrounded by wealth and servants. Archbishops and cardinals lived in palaces like kings. And here was the most famous man in the whole Protestant Church, in a little dark house, answering his own door.

Pope Pius IV said of John Calvin when he died, "The strength of that heretic came from the fact that money was nothing to him." In the Church of Rome at that time, such an attitude was unheard of (*ibid.*, p. 164). Quite often, you can spot a false teacher by his wrong values. If he is living for the things of this world, it should send up a red flag.

Conclusion

Thus Paul is saying that teachers who promote gain rather than godliness are not from the Lord. They may do it through wrong content, wrong motives, wrong conduct, or wrong values. But in one form or another, they are saying that you should pursue personal gain, not godliness.

There are many false teachers and many forms of false teaching in our day. One widespread heresy goes by different names: "the health and wealth gospel," "the word-faith teaching," "name it and claim it," or, "positive confession." Hank Hanegraaff of the Christian Research Institute says that it may be the greatest threat to the church from within (*Christian Research Journal*, Winter/Spring, 1990, p. 31). I would contend that psychology is by far the greatest threat to the church from within, but the word-faith teaching is certainly dangerous and not sound doctrine.

The main message goes like this: God wills your prosperity and health. All poverty and sickness come from the devil. If you are not wealthy or if you are sick, it's because you have not made a positive confession of faith. When we speak a word in faith, it must come to pass. Since God has promised to answer the prayer of faith, we can virtually command God and He will do it, especially

with regard to physical healing or material prosperity, which are His will.

I don't have time to go into the details of how these false teachers twist the Scriptures. But the heart of their error stems from a man-centered theology. God exists to make everyone be happy and feel good. And man can control God. If you simply ask in faith, God must do it, because He's promised (so they say). They deny what the Bible plainly teaches, that God uses sickness, suffering, and poverty in the lives of some of His most faithful saints. And they make everything dependent on man, because faith, not the sovereign God, is the key. I've heard of people who hold this teaching telling dying Christians that if they just had faith, God would heal them. That's not only cruel; it's hypocritical. I've yet to see any 200 year-old proponents of this teaching! It's emphasis is on personal gain, not godliness.

There are many people who claim to be Christians, but they are simply using God for personal gain. As long as God treats them well, as long as they feel good, as long as life is reasonably comfortable, they come to church and live as Christians. But they aren't judging their sins by Scripture and seeking to grow in godliness. And as soon as some tragedy or trial hits, they fall away. The problem is, God was never central in their lives. They weren't seeking Him and submitting to Jesus as Lord. Rather, God was a convenient means to achieve their goal of personal happiness and success. But self was at the center of their lives.

Maybe you're wondering, "Doesn't God promise to meet our needs?" The answer is a conditional "yes": "Seek first His kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). If you're seeking first personal happiness or gain, then you're deluded if you think you're following Jesus. You're just into religion for fun and profit. We should submit to Him and obey Him because He is the living Lord who gave Himself for our sins. Whether we enjoy a relatively trouble-free life or go through terrible suffering, we persevere because we know that He alone is the living and true God. May we all be on guard against all teaching promoting gain, and may we commit ourselves to enthrone Jesus as Lord and to grow in godliness.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul says the “knowledge puffs up.” How can we know the Bible well (so as to avoid theological errors) and yet avoid spiritual pride?
2. How do you know which theological issues are significant enough to draw swords over and which are not?
3. What are some of the dangers of the “positive confession” teaching?
4. Is it wrong to offer the gospel as the solution to a person's needs? Use Scripture to support your answer.

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