

How To Tell Truth From Error **1 Timothy 4:1-5**

In Acts 20 Paul is coming to the end of his third missionary journey. It is about AD 60 or 61 and he has been ministering for at least 20 to 25 years. He has traveled throughout the Mediterranean, planted churches and he is headed back to Jerusalem where eventually he will be arrested and taken on to Rome where he will spend at least 2 years in prison. As he is making his way to Rome, he comes to a little port town called Melitus, which is not very far from the city of Ephesus. Paul spent more time in Ephesus than in any other city where he has planted a church. He calls for the elders who are at Ephesus to come down to Melitus, and there you have one of the most touching scenes in all of the Bible. Paul, in essence, says, "I don't expect to see you again." He weeps, they weep, and he shares with them his heart. He gives them a charge, one of the most moving and disconcerting warnings in all of the Bible. He tells them that in the days ahead false teachers are going to come against the church. Tragically, they are even going to arise within you. Listen to Paul speaking in 20:28 ff, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among you which the Holy Spirit made you overseers to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. Therefore watch and remember." In 1 Timothy you see a pastor serving in the city of Ephesus (1:3). Throughout the book we see a steady warning, a steady drumbeat of "be on guard against false teaching and false teachers." In 1:3-6 he says, "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, from a sincere

faith from which some having strayed have turned aside to idle talk.” He provides an example of these kinds of persons at the end of the chapter when he says in verse 18, “This charge I commit to you my son Timothy according to the prophecies previously made concerning you that by them you may wage the good warfare having faith and a good conscience which some, having rejected concerning the faith, have suffered shipwreck of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” And again in chapter 3, when he begins to instruct those who are going to lead the church, the elders, pastors, overseers, one of the non-negotiables of those who lead the church in 3:2 is that, “they must be able to teach.” Then in chapter 3 he gives us the core of this book in verses 14-16 when he says, “These things I write to you thought I hope to come to you shortly, but if I am delayed I write so that you may know who you ought to conduct yourselves in the house of God which is the church of the living God, the pillar and the ground of the truth.” He then gives us what is most likely an early Christian hymn or an early Christian confession that encapsulates the entire career of the Lord Jesus (3:16). Now, Paul writes, in light of all that I have said up to this point and including and specifically taking note of and highlighting this confession about Christ, now here we are in 4:1, “the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.” For example, they will “forbid to marry, commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving and sanctified by the Word of God and prayer.” Paul wants to inform us how it is that we can tell the truth from error. Chuck Swindoll, in describing 1 Tim. 4:1-5, says “This is a test that tells us how to minister among the crazies.” I like that. How do you minister

among people who have gone nuts, who have lost their mind, lost their bearings, have gone crazy when it comes to basic bedrock biblical doctrine that is absolutely non-negotiable if we are to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ? What is it that Paul says? Two overarching ideas drove his argument.

I. Recognize that some will turn from the truth. 4:1-3

Paul begins by telling us that people are not always going to embrace the truth. In fact, some are going to receive the truth and, amazingly, they are going to walk away from the truth. So as a result, we have to always be on guard in terms of what we believe, in terms of what we teach, in terms of who we listen to.

1. Be concerned about false teachers. 4:1

The Greek text says, “Now the Spirit in words says.” It is interesting the *NKJ V* says “the spirit expressly says.” The word “expressly” is not there. Literally it is “the Spirit in words says.” If you work your way through chapter 4 you will see that the idea of the importance and the centrality of the Word of God is highlighted in verse 1, again in verse 5, and again in verse 6 and verse 9. I loved what it says in verse 1, “the Spirit in words says.” That is exactly what the Bible is. It is the word which the Spirit says through men of God divinely inspired by His Spirit. “Latter times.” John will talk about the last hour. Others talk about the last days. Here I believe the phrase “latter times” is simply a biblical way of designating that period of time between the first and second coming of Jesus. They were in the later days in the first century. And they were in the latter days in the 5th and 10th and 19th century. The latter times designates that period of time between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. Now, I believe that perhaps we are in the latter times of the latter times! But, you will not get me to make any predictions about when Jesus is coming again. That is what

fools do. There is a wonderful history of about 2000 years of people again and again and again predicting when Jesus is coming again, and they all have one glorious thing in common. They have all been wrong. The text is telling us that when Jesus came everything changed. We now live in a new expectant era and we have been in the last hour, we have been in the latter times, the last days since the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has appeared, and as a result of that He is being continually assaulted by false teachers. So you need to be concerned. I need to be concerned. We always need to be on guard against the possibility of false teachers ever infiltrating our midst. You need to be concerned about them, but how do you recognize them? We must know the characteristics of false teachers and he gives us no less than four of them in verses 1- 3.

First, they don't believe the truth. He says in verse 1 that, "they will depart from the faith." That word depart is related to our English word "apostasy." It means to move away from. It means you are stepping away from and walking away from something that you once held, something you once embraced, something you once believed. In other words, these false teachers did not start off as false teachers, but they moved away to being false teachers. They walked away from the gospel. They walked away from the full deity and the full humanity and the sinless life of Christ, His death, burial, resurrection and the fact that He and He alone is the Savior. They have departed from the truth. At one time they knew it, but now they have let it go and Jesus is off their radar screen. Notice what the text says, "They depart from the faith." They give heed to deceiving spirits and they give heed to the doctrines of demons. They are deceived. They think they are teaching the truth. They think they have it right. They believe their way is a better way. They believe that new is better than old. They believe that you need a Jesus plus kind of system, and as a result they are deceived by demon

spirits and now embrace what Paul calls the doctrines, the teachings, the doctrines of demons. Satan has his systematic theologies. Satan has his commentaries. Satan has his encyclopedias, his dictionaries. He has his professors, his pastors and his evangelists. Satan has set up a false church right beside the true church and in tragic instance after instance he often is more effective than the true church, what is called “the pillar of the truth of the one true and living God.” I need to be in a default mode of skepticism because false teaching is so ramp and so prevalent. Hang around somebody for a while, listen to who they exalt, listen to what they teach, listen to who, whom, or what they bring themselves under authority, and it will not take you long to figure them out. Listen, study and be diligent. The fact of the matter is if you are lazy, slothful in your thinking, you are a prime candidate for deceiving spirits and the doctrines of demons. They don’t believe the truth.

Secondly, they don’t tell the truth. Verse 2 “speaking lies in hypocrisy.” They are hypocrites. Their lives don’t match up with what they profess. They claim to have a pipeline to God. They claim to be very close to God, when you examine their moral lifestyle both in terms of sexuality, in terms of money, in terms of material things, they contradict the alleged loyalty to God that they profess. I will not give a penny to any ministry that does not have public accountability. I will not give them a half a penny. That is why I never give money on the spot to anyone who tries to pressure me. I can remember several years ago when Charlotte and I were first married, we had the sweetest couple next door to us named Mr. and Mrs. Cantrell. They were in their 80’s. I am 21 and Charlotte is 19. She made the best homemade biscuits with butter and jelly you have eaten in your life. They were really funny. He used to be a Dallas police officer. His claim to fame was that one time he chased Bonnie and Clyde. He informed me that it did not matter how Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway

looked in the movie, they were meaner than snakes and evil! I remember one day when Mrs. Cantrell called me and said I needed to go over to the house, Mr. Cantrell is up in a tree. What in the world is an 87 year old man doing up in the tree? Well, there was something up there he wanted to get, and I begged him to come down so he would not fall and break his neck. Often they invited us to the house to have some jelly biscuits. We are watching TV and getting some jelly biscuits and as I was sitting there I saw all these things on their table about these televangelists that they were sending money to. I was grieved, and I began to say something about one of them and all she said was he just seems like a nice man. And I said yes ma'm, he does seem like a nice man, but you know the devil probably seems like a nice devil too. Now I am 21, and she is 83, and she is not going to pay attention to me! All I am saying tonight is be careful. Just because they are on TV, just because they are on the radio, just because they are big does not mean they are of God. The Bible says they don't believe the truth. The Bible says they don't tell the truth, they lie in hypocritical kinds of way and...

3) They don't even understand the truth. In fact, the Bible says "speaking lies and hypocrisy, having their own consciences seared." The word means cauterize. Their consciences are cauterized with a hot iron. In other words, their consciences have lived and trafficked so long in the lies of their life they believe them. They are no longer able themselves of telling the difference between truth and error. Do I believe Mormon's think they know the truth? Yes, I do. I also think they believe the doctrine of demons. Do I think Jehovah's Witnesses believe they have the truth? Yes, I do. And I believe they are enslaved to the doctrines of demons. I think the same thing about Islam. I think the same thing about Hinduism, Buddhism. Sincerity is never ever the criteria by which you evaluate the truth.

We must help them because their consciences have been seared and made dull and numbed and dead to the truth.

But then they don't live the truth either. Verse 3 does not give us an exhaustive list. Paul is saying let me tell you, for example, some of the things false teachers do. 1) They forbid people to marry. 2) They command people to abstain from certain foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. They tell people they ought not to get married. They affirm the superiority of a celibate lifestyle. You and I know of a very well known denomination that does this for their ministerial leadership. It is called the Roman Catholic Church. Now I am not here to beat up on Catholics. I have some friends that I believe are born again Catholics. But do I think that the Catholic Church, the Roman church, in terms of its theology of celibacy for its priesthood is dead wrong?

Absolutely. And tragically, the fallout from this wrongheaded theology has been tragic in a mammoth nature in America in recent years. The whole pedophile scandal in the Catholic Church; the fact of a rampant homosexuality in the priesthood of the Catholic Church; the fact that others are also unfaithful in a heterosexual kind of way. This doesn't surprise me. It does not surprise me at all that pedophilia and homosexuality and adultery and fornication make its way throughout the leadership of the Catholic Church. You say why do you say that? Because God intended most men to marry. Yes, God gives some people the gift of celibacy for a lifetime, very few; for a season a few more; but by and large God gives most people the gift of marriage. And if you try to argue that somehow a celibate lifestyle, not marrying, is a superior lifestyle to marrying you have bought into a false teaching, and it is going to have all sorts of negative and tragic consequences. They forbid certain foods. They are vegans, probably a group of vegetarians. Now, if you, as a matter of conscience, believe

that all you should eat is lettuce and brussel sprouts and broccoli that is fine. I will pray for you. You need it! But, if that is what you think then go ahead. But, you have no right to look down your condescending noses as if you are more spiritual than others because you don't eat meat. There is nothing in the Bible that forbids that, in fact the Bible says that all of this was made by God, and you should receive it with thanksgiving. Those who believe and know the truth will do so. In fact, here we are now testing the truth. How do we test the truth? First of all, we use the Word of God to gauge the truth. He says again in verse 3, "those who believe and know the truth"; verse 5, "that which is sanctified by the word of God." And so what I do is I come to the Bible and ask, "What does God say about these things?" I go back to Genesis 1-2 and discover everything that God made is good. Sin messes it all up, but that which God made is good. Furthermore, I read in the Bible and I discover that all sorts of things, vegetables, fruits, meats are good as a gift to be received with thanksgiving. So when we give thanks, in essence, we are to thank Him for what the Word tells us is good. So, use the Word to gauge the truth, use the Word to give thanks to God for every creature; v.4, "nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving" for it is sanctified, set apart and given to us as a good gift from a great God. How do I know this? By the Word of God and prayer. In the context prayer is primarily the means whereby we thank Him for the good things that He has given us. Now, we don't live in AD 61-63. So for the most part, outside of Catholicism and maybe a few cultic groups out there, the issue of celibacy is not a real big problem. But as I was thinking about this, I asked myself over the last week or so; what are some of the issues, some of the very important biblical theological issues that we are indeed confronted with? Take your notes and you will see 10 things that I am just going to walk through very quickly.

- 1) The inerrancy and sufficiency of the Bible. That is where it usually starts. There is the question that is raised in your mind just as it was raised in the mind of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 by the evil one, “Has God said, really?” Are you sure? Is it right? Is it best? Is God holding out on you? This afternoon I was talking with a young man that I have known since he was a small boy. I watched him grow up, went on to college, marry a beautiful girl, and after 11 years, she walked away because of an affair with another man. He was on the phone with me today crying, saying he does not even know this woman any more. It is not the same person I married almost 12 years ago. I asked does she profess to be a Christian? He said she professes to be but she has basically set the Bible aside. She basically said that I don’t believe that God wants me to be unhappy. In essence what she is saying is my way is better than God’s way and God’s Word is not true. God’s Word says that adultery is wrong. God’s Word says that divorce is wrong. God’s Word says that when you commit sin like this you should seek the Lord in repentance and contrition. And so the sufficiency of scripture, the inerrancy of scripture, and the truth of scripture has just been set aside. Yes, it is set aside on very lofty theological levels in seminaries, colleges and universities. But it is also set aside in everyday.
- 2) That God is all knowing and that God is also a God of wrath as well as a God of love. People don’t like the God of the Bible. I don’t think they ever have. Today you have people wanting to whittle God down to our level so you have this movement called open theism, finite theism, which says that God cannot know in advance the freewill acts of His creatures. If He did we would not be free, and therefore God is not omniscient, God does not know what you are going to do 5 minutes from now, much less 5 hours or 5 days

from now. He can guess, but He does not really know because He does not know all things. When you come to talk about the character of God, people do not mind at all emphasizing God's love. But when you talk about a God of judgment and a God of wrath and a God of righteousness and a God who actually will judge sinners forever and forever, people get very squeamish. They open the door to the doctrine of demons and deceiving seducing spirits.

- 3) They deny man's inherited sinfulness and his attraction with idolatry. I am amazed how often people will say to me when they look at a little baby "Isn't he, or isn't she so sweet?" No, she is not sweet, she is a little sinner. He is meaner than a snake. My little granddaughter Maddy is beautiful, but inside of little Maddy is a little sinner who is in desperate need of redemption. We don't come into this world with a good nature. We don't come into this world with a neutral nature. We come into this world with a nature bent and inclined toward sin. As soon as we are able to sin we do it and we do it gladly, joyfully, boldly, and continuously. Apart of the grace of God we would keep walking down that evil tract of sin. We create in all of our lives idols, things that are ultimate in our lives rather than God. Things that we believe are most important. Things that we believe will bring us happiness and joy and pleasure. We set God aside and we put those things front and center. Yet we live in a world that wants to speak of the inherent goodness of all persons, and who have no problem setting on the pedestal of their idols their sex, their ambition for wealth, their ambition for prestige. We say there is nothing wrong with that. They are simple seeking self-fulfillment. They are simple trying to find themselves. They are simple trying to, and on and on they go with excuses of putting something in place of God in their lives.

- 4) The real existence of Satan and demons. When I came to Southeastern Seminary in 1992 we still had a couple of theology professors that were around from the old days. I bought both of their class notes just to see how they taught systematic theology and it was a very enlightening experience. One of the interesting things was neither one of them had a section in their notes on Satan, demons or angels. I later discovered the reason they did not have a section in their class notes on Satan, demons and angels is they did not believe in them. They thought they were simply a mythical creation of a pre-scientific world view. We have now outgrown that and therefore, why should we talk about angels? They don't exist. Demons don't exist, Satan doesn't exist. Now we could talk about the demons you have to battle, but all we mean by that are the psychological phobias that you have on the inside of you that need to be corrected either by medication or by psycho-therapy.
- 5) The sinless life of Jesus and His penal substitutionary atonement. Today many who claim to be born again also believe Jesus committed sin while He walked on the earth. We have people today who do not want to speak of Him as a Savior but they don't mind talking of Him as a martyr. Let me tell you something. He wasn't a martyr. He is not like Martin Luther King. He is not like Gandhi. He is not a martyr, He is a Savior. He died in your place and He paid the full penalty of your sin as your Savior, not as a martyr. Paul was a martyr, Peter was a martyr, Stephen was a martyr, James was a martyr, but Jesus is a Savior. He is not a martyr who simple died nobly for some cause He believed in. That is blasphemy. That kind of theology is the doctrine of demons.
- 6) The exclusivity of the gospel. We now live in a world where people believe either 1) everybody is eventually going to be saved or 2) all roads will eventually get you to

heaven, or at least they potentially could get you there. That is why again more than half of evangelicals who were surveyed say I have had a born again experience and I believe that by putting faith in Jesus I will go to heaven, but I also believe it is possible to get to heaven by doing good works. In other words, Jesus' way is good for me but another way may be good for you. Here is the bottom line: it really comes down to whether or not you believe Jesus is God and Jesus is truthful. He says that He is the way, the truth and the light and no one comes to the Father but by Him. In the secular world, they never want to talk about John 14:6. Eugene Robinson, the homosexual bishop in the northeast said, "I was appalled by the Christian prayers that I have read and been invoked at various inaugurations in the past and I promise you as an Episcopal bishop I will not pray a Christian prayer in the cathedral in Washington when I participate in that prayer service." This man is sadly lost and dying and going to hell apart from a relationship from Jesus. It is interesting; he doesn't want to talk about John 14. He will talk about Jesus loving the outcast, which He did; and Jesus teaching the Sermon on the Mount, which He did. But it is amazing to me that the liberal theologians never ever, ever, ever want to talk about Jesus and John 14:6. They just don't want to get there because He is the reason that you and I believe in the exclusivity of the gospel and there is only one Savior and His name is Jesus.

- 7) Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This is under attack.

People today want to argue and believe that if you are simple good enough and you work at it you should be allowed into heaven in and on the basis of your own merit. In other words, you have the ability, or at least should have the right to, earn your standing before God.

- 8) The reality of an eternal hell. You don't hear hell preached about a lot in our day and time. If you do you are immediately marked as a raving fundamentalist. Again, it is true. Jesus talks about hell more than anybody else. The word is "gehenna." The only time the word "gehenna" is used in the Bible besides Jesus is James 3 where he says, "The tongue is set on fire by "gehenna," by hell. Jesus talks about hell more than anybody else, and the way He describes hell is not annihilation that is you cease to exist. It is not conditional immortality which means if you trust Christ you will then be immortal, and if you don't trust Christ then in your mortality God allows you to disappear, dissipate, and waste away. I will tell you in my sentimentalism, I would like to believe that. I take no delight or no joy in thinking of people suffering consciously forever in a place called hell. I take no joy in that. But again, I don't make the rules, I don't set up the standard, I didn't write the Book. The Bible is crystal clear that there is an eternal heaven and there is an eternal hell. You are conscious in one, and you are conscious in the other. And, there is no evidence at all that somewhere down the road in eternity future God will change His mind and decide to evacuate hell and bring all those demons and all those persons to heaven. There is nothing in the Bible that indicates that that will ever happen.
- 9) The distinctiveness of male/female gender roles. Because we have abolished the distinctiveness of male/female gender roles.
- 10) The sexual parameter set by God for our good and His glory. If we had continued to maintain the high exalted place of biblical marriage just in the church, we would have been hard pressed to get where we are today in terms of the whole homosexual/lesbian sexual agenda. It would have been virtually impossible to get there. But you see, when you and I try to step up to the plate and talk about the sanctity of marriage, our knees are

cut out from underneath us because they point back into the church and say you bunch of hypocrites. You are divorcing at the same rate as the secular culture and you are being just as promiscuous as the secular culture. Look at your teenagers; look at your young single adults. Again, because so many in our churches today are divorced, ministers are very hesitant to address the issue head-on both in a prophetic way, divorce is wrong and God hates it, and in a compassionate way, God will forgive and God can bring healing. We make a mistake if we don't sound both the voice of the prophet as well as the voice of the pastor.

So these are just some of the kinds of doctrines of demons and deceiving seducing spirits that are making themselves known not outside the church, but inside the church. So brothers and sisters, we better be on guard that we might indeed be able to tell by the Word of God that which is true and that which is error.