

From Beliefs to Behavior



Purpose

To stress the importance of right belief and practice for the faithful service of God's people

The Scripture for this lesson is 1 Timothy 4.

Listen

1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. 3 They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; 5 for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer.

6 If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives' tales. Train yourself in godliness, 8 for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. 9 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance. 10 For to this end we toil and struggle, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

11 These are the things you must insist on and teach. 12 Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. 13 Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. 14 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. 15 Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. 16 Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Key Verse: Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; continue in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:16)

Look

An excellent British television offering is the Inspector Morse series, broadcast on PBS's Mystery! Chief Inspector Morse is a skilled homicide detective, assisted by a younger officer, Sergeant Lewis. Though a brilliant man, Morse is often cranky and insensitive and is scornful of those whose level of comprehension is not as high as his own. Except for Lewis, no one can tolerate working with Inspector Morse. Lewis' personality is such that he can absorb the older man's verbal jabs, think insightfully on his own, and cooperate with the inspector in such a way that the murders are usually solved through the combined work of both men. Certain incidents let viewers know that underneath Morse's condescension and Lewis' exasperation, each values and cares about the other.

The tone with which the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy suggests that their relationship was similar to the Morse-Lewis partnership. Paul addressed Timothy as though the younger man could not direct the church in Ephesus without Paul's help. It likely seemed condescending to Timothy when Paul advised, "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Timothy 4:12). Timothy was in his thirties and had worked with Paul nearly fifteen years! Timothy, however, was mature enough to let his senior colleague have his say, even if Timothy had already arrived at the same conclusions. Thus when Paul urged Timothy to set an example and to present sound Christian teaching, Paul was "preaching to the choir." Nonetheless, Timothy thought enough of his mentor to make the letter available to the church; for in terms of Christian faith and practice, Paul was right on target.

Live

The church in Ephesus sat in the midst of a larger society that was increasingly hostile to Christianity. That threat was never far from Paul's thinking as he wrote to Timothy. In our Bible Lesson, however, Paul wrote about a danger that threatened not the physical well-being of Christians, but their intellectual understanding of Christianity and their spiritual health.

In 1 Timothy 4:1-3, Paul talked of people who not only renounced the faith but also attempted to persuade other believers to follow their ideas. Among those non-Christian ideas were teachings against marriage and in favor of abstinence from certain foods. Paul did not spell out the details of those notions, but they were likely claims that things belonging to the material world were evil and that only those things from the metaphysical realm were worth pursuing. Thus, earthbound matters such as marriage and the regular intake of nourishment belonged to the forces of evil and should be avoided. Paul rejected such teaching by asserting, "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Timothy 4:4).

The language Paul used to describe those who pushed these dissenting ideas is stark. Paul did not say, "We simply have a difference of opinion" or, "Your motives are right, but your ideas are wrong." No, as far as Paul was concerned, these opponents of the faith were motivated by "deceitful spirits" and "demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). They were hypocritical "liars whose consciences [were] seared" (4:2). There was nothing conciliatory in Paul's approach.

To understand this harsh language, remember that Paul identified the time in which he was living as the “later times” (1 Timothy 4:1) preceding the second coming of Christ. Paul and most Christians expected Christ to return within their lifetimes. Jesus had told his followers that an intensification of evil would occur before he came back (Mark 13:6-13). So when the church encountered people teaching ideas other than those the apostles had received from Jesus, they assumed these were later-times events and branded those who promoted them as evildoers teaching the “hypocrisy of liars” (1 Timothy 4:2). Such teachings were not to be tolerated.

The expectation that such discord was an unavoidable preliminary to the Parousia caused the church to take an either-or view of those who presented their ideas. Either their teachings were in line with the received faith and the teachers were fellow Christians or their teachings were evil and the teachers were, in effect, renouncing the faith.

In the church today, we have learned not to judge as evil persons who sincerely tout unorthodox ideas about Christianity. We are more likely to label them as immature, uninformed, misinformed, or argumentative. Occasionally, we even learn better understandings of the faith from these persons—such as when some Christians challenged other Christians about racial prejudice, calling it ungodly.

What is a helpful way to respond to those who argue against the usual understanding of the Christian faith?

Faith That Transcends the Ages

In 1 Timothy 4:6, Paul spoke of Timothy as “a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of faith and of...sound teaching” if he “put these instructions before the brothers and sisters.” What exactly is Christian “sound teaching”?

To answer that question, consider the word catholic. We know that word as the name of a group of churches worldwide that are led by the Pope—the Roman Catholic Church—but we also encounter the word when we recite the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. Both use the word catholic with a lowercase “c.” As printed in The United Methodist Hymnal (880, 881), both creeds include an asterisk beside “catholic,” directing us to a footnote that says the word means “universal.” Thus, when we say, “I believe in...the holy catholic church,” we are saying we believe in the universal church.

That, however, is not the whole story. In the early church catholic also referred to the standard beliefs and practices of Christianity. “Catholic” meant that what a group believed and practiced was in continuity with the beliefs and practices of Christians from the beginning of the church. In other words, for the Christian faith today to be catholic, it must have historical connections with the Christian faith of the first century. Although our culture, politics, economics, technology, science, and nationality are different from that of those early believers, our faith transcends those differences. The message Christ entrusted to the church is still the message we proclaim.

Theologian Hughes Oliphant Old acknowledges that with the range of Christian beliefs today, it is hard to talk of “exactly what that faith is which has been believed by all Christians, in all places, and at all times.” That may be because “true faith is somehow about attempts to arrive at a precise statement.” He concludes therefore that the church should be “generous in its understanding of the

truth.” That is not permission for the church to give up its catholicity, however; for that would introduce “a form of self-destruction.”¹

We Protestants seldom use the word catholic, but we cannot be an effectual church unless we actually believe in and practice the faith Jesus Christ imparted to the first believers. Without that historic link we may be effective as a social work agency or as a political action unit; we may be a fine self-help group or a fraternal organization; but we will not be the church. We must be ever diligent to examine carefully the arguments that church insiders present that sound out of step with the received faith. In some cases, faithful dissenters are simply urging us to adopt twenty-first-century ways to present the “old, old story.” In other cases, what faithful dissenters urge are misguided deviations from that story. We need prayer and open discussion within the church to tell the one from the other.

Further, we want to be careful not to replace catholicity with inclusivity and tolerance. Inclusiveness is an important virtue. If Jesus is Lord of all, then it is impermissible to withhold the faith from persons on the basis of age, gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, and so forth. At the same time, being inclusive does not mean embracing non-Christian (non-catholic) practices and beliefs in order to include those who hold them.

Catholicity means that we are the inheritors of a message that is life giving. It is life giving because it is from the Giver of life. The message we proclaim is as vital today as when Jesus first shared it almost two thousand years ago. As persons respond in faith to God’s offer of grace, their lives are changed and their minds are renewed and transformed (Romans 12:2). Because our faith is catholic, we read the Bible thoughtfully, worship with other believers regularly, and pray faithfully. We do not want to disconnect ourselves from the “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

What twenty-first-century applications of the old, old story does your church employ?

Practicing Faith

As we have seen, Paul had a lot to say to Timothy about sound teaching and right belief; but Paul did not leave matters at that. He also urged Timothy to “set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). In other words, it was not enough for Timothy to believe the Christian faith; it was also essential for him to put those beliefs into practice.

The same linkage between belief and practice is just as imperative for us who follow Jesus today. In fact, it is as true of other areas of life as it is of our religious commitments. Perhaps we go to the doctor with a physical complaint, hoping she will prescribe a pill. Instead, the physician tells us to diet and exercise. Or perhaps we go to a marriage counselor, wanting him to straighten out our spouse, only to hear the counselor say that we ourselves are part of the problem. Or maybe we are engaging in behavior we know is wrong and about which we feel guilty, but we do not want to stop. So we confide in a friend whom we expect to tell us we are OK. Instead, the friend tells us we must stop the wrongdoing immediately and seek forgiveness both from God and from any person we have hurt. In these cases, the problem is not what we believe but what we are willing to do based on what we believe. Several years ago I participated in a young-adult discussion class. A woman who for financial reasons still lived at home with her mother told the class about the difficulties she was having with her living arrangement because her mother was so demanding. After listening respectfully, several members of the class offered suggestions regarding how she could possibly change the relationship. To each suggestion the

young woman responded by saying, "That won't work because..." After she responded this way to five or six good suggestions, the group leader asked her, "Are you sure you want to solve this problem?" When the woman acted surprised, the leader pointed out that she had discounted every suggestion made. Then he added, "Perhaps you are more interested in the attention you receive by bringing the problem up than you are in solving it." I thought the leader displayed real insight, and the woman agreed to think about it.

But who am I to talk? I do the same thing. God says to me, "Love your neighbor." Then a needy person crosses my path and I say, "But Lord, he's dirty and smelly." Or, "But Lord, I've got an important meeting to attend." Or, "Lord, isn't there a pleasant neighbor I could love instead?" In my heart, of course, I know the answers to those questions; I just do not want to act on them.

We are not talking about a laughable human failing or an excusable psychological defense. We are talking about the need to face up to the truth about ourselves. It is easy to make excuses for our poor behavior, for failing to live up to our Christian ideals, or for not trying to break sinful habits; but our excuses jeopardize our souls.

There are times when we truly do not know how to proceed, but there are many other times when we know what to do; we just do not like the answer. Like little children, we hope that if we stall and play dumb, another option will present itself.

Like most preachers, I occasionally receive a compliment on a sermon. It pleases me when someone says, "That was a wonderful sermon, pastor!" What pleases me even more, however, is when someone says, "That sermon showed me how I need to change my ways."

What has helped you to act on your Christian beliefs?

O God, help us to believe rightly. Let our beliefs lead us not into judgmentalism, but into the faithful practice of what we believe. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.