

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ² Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³ They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴ For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. (1 Timothy 4:1-5)

Everything God Created is Good!

Do you have any guilty pleasures? You know what I'm talking about, right? Some people consider chocolate to be a guilty pleasure. They like it but they feel a little bit guilty about eating it. Or maybe it would be better to say that society tries to make them feel guilty about it. They eat their chocolate and they enjoy it. Do you have any guilty pleasures? When it comes to chocolate or pop or desserts in general, would we be better people if we ate and drank less of those things? I'm not asking if we'd be more healthy – we probably would be. I'm not asking if we would be happier or better adjusted. I'm asking if we would be more righteous in God's sight if we refrained from all our guilty pleasures and lived like monks. The answer is no. St. Paul tells us why this morning. He says us: **everything God created is good!**

I.

St. Paul tells us, **“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.”** During the first sixty or seventy years that the Christian Church existed, the Holy Spirit revealed things to people like Paul and Peter and also to people that we know less well, people with names like Philip or Agabus. God did that for one simple reason: the New Testament wasn't finished yet but the first generation church needed guidance. So God chose to give instruction in a miraculous way. If you read the book of Acts, you can see examples of this direct revelation.

But if you study that book carefully, you'll notice two things. First of all, God didn't reveal things to everyone like that. God chose specific people to serve as his spokesman. Secondly, as the book goes on, this direct revelation becomes less frequent and even more limited to men like Paul. As more and more of God's Word became available, the need for this kind of revelation decreased. Eventually, it stopped all together. But the teachings that God had given in that way did not in any way disagree with the Bible as we know it. In fact, those things that God wanted preserved, he stated again in the written word, as he does here this morning.

From the very beginning, God warned that the church would face false teachers. Those men would be armed with false teachings that finally come from the devil. Paul says that some people would abandon the faith and follow these teachings of the devil. Now, if I took a poll this morning and asked everyone here if you would ever follow teachings of the devil, do you think very many people would raise their hands? Probably not. None of us wants to follow the devil. None of us wants to wander away from God and suffer the consequences.

But the devil is clever. He makes his lies come from people – people who seem to be concerned about us. They come from people who seem to be spiritual and who have a lot of charisma. So Paul warns us about what they will say. We need to consider the voices we hear in our society and even in our churches and ask if what they're saying fits the description of the teachings of demons. Because people whose consciences have been seared and who are hypocritical liars can be very difficult to spot until you pin them down on what they say and what the Bible says.

What false teachings does Paul warn us about? He says, **“They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.”** Do those seem like “big deal” items? Maybe the marriage thing does, but avoiding certain foods? That's practically an American obsession. Our country is full of vegetarians. There are all kinds of religious groups that avoid all kinds of foods, everything from alcohol to caffeine to pork to beef. Why is God worried about things like this?

Because God is concerned about our hearts. He's concerned about how we make ourselves into Pharisees and about how we enslave other peoples' consciences to things that he hasn't commanded. For two thousand years, some people have said, “Look how many sacrifices I make for God! It's too bad you aren't as

good as I am!” The rest of us feel guilty because we still eat ice cream or meat or drink coffee or alcohol. In the fifth century, a man named Symeon spent 37 years on a six foot square platform on top of a pillar. He starved his body so that you could see his bones. Worms dropped from his rotting flesh. He wouldn’t allow a woman to come near the pillar, not even his own mother. Thousands of people flocked to him because he seemed to be almost holy.

But this is not what Jesus had in mind when he told us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. He wasn’t telling us to torture ourselves. He wasn’t telling us that denying ourselves the blessings of this life earns us something before God. He was telling us to put God first in our lives and to turn away from sin and the pleasures of sin.

Paul said, **“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”** Food is certainly good. Marriage and sexual relations within marriage are blessings from God. But there’s a temptation for us to believe that we’re doing better when we make sacrifices which God has not commanded. Today, we might not be tempted to live on top of a pillar, but how many of us have thought that we’d be better off without a car or a television? You can make arguments that might be valid. Certainly, the more I watch TV, the less value I find on it. But I’m not a better Christian if I decide to get rid of my TV, not even if I’m doing it to avoid the antichristian bias and the sinful emphases that you find on TV. I have no right to pat myself on the back and tell other people what a great Christian I have become since I threw out my television or got rid of my car or got rid of most of my possessions. I have no right to tell people that my children will be better Christians because we’ve given up so much of “the world.” Do you see how clever the devil is? He corrupts our Christian desire to serve God with our sinful pride!

Pride is the opposite of faith. The more I wallow in pride the farther I am from God. Pride condemns me to hell. This makes the Christian life very complicated, because pride ruins the right actions. When those Victoria’s Secrets models are prancing across the screen in their underwear, I really should turn off the TV. Pride destroys things that could be beneficial in some circumstances. Martin Luther said that fasting is a fine outward custom. It could serve a useful purpose. But when I think that fasting or turning off the TV balances off the sins I committed yesterday or that that’s what makes me a good Christian, well, then I’ve already committed the sin of pride. All the value of what I was doing is lost in my sinful heart.

God sees into our hearts. He knows what we’re thinking and feeling. He knows the pride that corrupts our best efforts. And he treats them the way you would treat a hamburger that fell on the ground. You wouldn’t wipe off the dirt and give it to one of your kids because the dirt only got on part of it and most of it’s still good, would you? You’d throw it away. The truth is, no matter how much we want to think that we’re good people, the sinful pride in our hearts infects even our best efforts. It causes God to condemn us to hell.

So how will we ever reach heaven? The answer is simple: it’s Jesus. Of all the people who ever lived, only one had a perfect heart: Jesus. He had no sinful pride. So he always had the humble attitude that God calls us to have. When he died, he died a death of pain and hell. That death paid for our sin. Jesus took our place. And he set us free. God has forgiven you and me. God has even forgiven the pride in our hearts that thinks that our suffering earns us points with him. Now, in his love, God has given us a world full of blessings to enjoy. In faith, we receive those blessings with thanksgiving. That’s the point Paul is making to us today. **Everything God created is good, so don’t think that denying yourself earns you anything.**

II.

Now, this is kind of sermon you like to hear, right? “Pastor’s telling us it’s OK to do whatever we want to!” Right? Wrong! That’s not what I’m saying at all. Celibacy, fasting, avoiding certain foods or even alcohol does not make us righteous before God. God has set us free. But our actions do matter. Freedom is not a license to do whatever we want to do. God calls many different things and many different attitudes sin. Drunkenness is always a sin, even though it’s not a sin to drink a beer. Getting drunk is always sin even though people who don’t drink are no more righteous than those of us who do. Any activities that damage this body God gave me are sins. Any activities that take control of me and lead me to sin, are sin. Any time I do the things God forbids, I’m sinning, even though I am free.

Paul said, **“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”** All that God created is good – including alcohol and television and everything else of this life. But for me to use it in a way that pleases God, it has to be “consecrated by the word of God and prayer.” The point here is the attitude of my heart when I

receive these things and use these things. The Christian life is not about climbing up onto a pillar and rotting away while people gather around below and pick the worms that fall from our flesh. The Christian life is about living for Christ in all that I do and say and in all that I think and feel. It's about how I do my job and how I care for my children and how I honor my spouse. It's about giving glory to God in the upkeep of my property and in the thankfulness with which I receive my daily bread.

If that is our attitude, then we're not going to use those things to sin. If we consistently view our TV as a gift of God and we thank him for it, then we're going to turn it off when the programming displeases him. If we view food and drink as his blessings, then we won't ruin our health by the way we consume them. If we view marriage as his institution given for our good, then we're going to honor him with our bodies and in our relationships. It's just that simple.

Do we live like that? How many of us do damage to our bodies on a daily basis by eating too much and exercising too little? How many of us treat God's gift of marriage like a burden? How many of us engage in lusts and pursue sinful pleasures? How many of us hurtle through life without even stopping to ask if we're using God's gifts the way he wants us to?

If our life is all about our pleasure, we're just as self-absorbed and full of pride as a person who trusts in the sacrifices he or she has made for God. We are just as much in danger of hell. But we are also just as paid for. Jesus came and he paid for all our sins. No sin is too great for his love or his forgiveness. Jesus is the Savior of all of us proud sinners. He humbles our hearts by condemning our pride and sin. But then he lifts us up in love and restores us by his grace. God calls us his children because Jesus has washed us clean in his blood. He has taken away all the punishment we deserve and he will bring us home to live with him forever. And Jesus teaches us to live a new and holy life now, a life that's no longer controlled by sinful desires. That life never runs wild. It serves God and our neighbor. That's the life you and I have now. It won't be perfect until we see Jesus. But it began already on the day God gave us faith. **Everything God created is good, so don't think you have permission to run wild.**

Guilty pleasures. I don't really like that term, because we use it for things that are sinful and for things our society doesn't like, but which aren't sinful. None of our pleasures in Christ could ever be guilty. God has set us free from human ideas of what is right and wrong. But he hasn't given us a license to run wild. He calls us to live for him and to observe his laws. When we feel guilty, he gives us forgiveness and peace. That gives us the power to live for him. Live for him. Amen.