



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Dangerous Distractions” 1 Timothy 4, 6:3-21

Welcome to our Labor Day weekend service. Today I was planning to work with you on what the Bible says about recreation and Sabbath—a good match for this Labor Day, I thought, when we’re supposed to stop work in appreciation of the contributions working people make to our daily lives. But then, I realized I have not finished our study of First Timothy. (Good things usually take longer than you think they will, don’t they?) So I think I’d better bring that study through to a conclusion. We’ll look for another time to listen to God with you on the Sabbath subject.

Alright, let’s dig in to the last portions of Paul’s First letter to Timothy, toward the back of your Bibles. Find First Timothy chapter 4, which I’ll read; then be prepared to flip over to chapter 6, starting with verse 3. This is too much to put on the screen, so please do pick up a text, use the Table of Contents if you need to (that’s why it’s there!) so we can all be “on the same page”. I will warn you now, however, that Paul loops over the same topic a couple of times, so when we get to analyzing the text, I’m going to cut-and-paste, so the passages on the same topic are lined up. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Paul is writing to his young apprentice, Timothy, whom he left in charge of the house churches in the city of Ephesus. We’ve talked about what kind of place Ephesus was then, and the culture of the first Christians there, and some of the problems they brought with them when they had made their commitments to follow Jesus. We’ve mentioned how young Timothy is, and what difficulties that creates for a new church leader. That subject is front and center, today. Let’s pick that up first, and then we’ll move to Paul’s directions on pastoring to a couple of the kinds of people in those little congregations Paul had founded not long before.

We don’t know how old Tim was, but his grandmother seems to have been a big part of his life as a youth, Second Timothy reveals. If people died at about 45 (many men died earlier), then Tim was quite young when he decided to follow Jesus and learn everything he could from Paul. He may have just entered adolescence when Paul left these little churches in his hands—just a ‘kid’. How is he supposed to lead effectively?

“Don’t let anyone make your youth an issue,” Paul writes. Treat everyone with respect (we got that in another passage in the letter). Borrow and use Paul’s authority, when you have to correct error—these letters we have in our Bibles would be very important to show Paul’s confidence in young Tim. But most of all, Tim must have—and continue to live a life of—integrity. You can’t say one thing and do another. You can’t expect people to do something you are not willing to do.

Part of treating others with respect is listening to them. Paul writes, “Be diligent in these matters [using your gifts and teaching the Word]; give yourself wholly to them [he writes], so that everyone may see your progress.” Never believe you cannot learn from others, or that you

have life mastered. Humility like that goes a long way toward earning the respect of others. (Life is for learning; “life-long learning” is not a modern concept.)

But also, Paul writes, value the gifts God GAVE you, and the confidence I have placed IN you. Humility, and security—enough security to be genuinely humble, with courage.

Paul also writes (4:9-10), “Put your hope in the living God, the Savior of all, and especially of those who believe.” “Keeping first things first” is always a challenge. Cling to the core of the good news of the gospel, Paul writes; put your full trust in Jesus.

I was struck by the way Paul wrote this--God is the savior of all, and especially of those who believe. Isn't that just redundant and unnecessary, or both? . . . Here's how I understand this. Jesus died on the cross, a sacrifice that is unique and applies to all. There are two responses to the offer of God's salvation. One group of people does not take this gift God has provided us; some have not heard of this generous offer, some are rigid and arrogant people who hate—or have no need for—God. Jesus is still their Savior, but until they receive God's gift, they aren't saved.

Those who have gotten this message of God's love, and have become followers of Jesus, come to know God from their own experience; they know God is their Savior; for them, more than the rest of humankind, this message is life. The first folks are theoretically saved; but those who follow Jesus are really saved—perhaps this is the best way to say it.

Paul has reminded Tim of what is most important, but he also takes time to discuss some distractions from the Lord that put people in danger of losing touch with the Lord. The first dangerous distraction Paul mentions is, “riches” and “the love of money”—that's one of those famous quotes we've all heard. It's not that money is the root of all evil; it's the love of money that drops a fatal shroud over following Jesus. Jesus said, “You cannot serve God first, and money first. You'll go after one and hate the other [a good Semitic exaggeration], or you'll go after the other and hate the first.” Remember, the first commandment God gave his people was, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Putting money first puts us in spiritual danger.

Another distraction is “theological speculation”. In that time, the Greek culture was fond of philosophy, making sense of the world. They also had inherited a lot of gods and goddesses; Ephesus was known around the world as the site of the “First Church of Artemis”. So one of the speculations was, how do all these gods and goddesses fit together? And when people of this culture became followers of Jesus, they often continued to try to fit Jesus in, along with all these other gods and goddesses. They discovered the genealogies of Genesis and the other 4 books of the Torah, and tried to fit themselves into that line of God's people. Again, a big distraction.

In our day, I see theological speculations popping up in the way a lot of people try to make Jesus fit in with their version of living a good life. They don't make Jesus FIRST in their lives. They want their version of life, and Jesus, too. It doesn't work that way. People who pick at single words in Scripture also fall into this category. Until they get all their questions answered, they keep their distance from the Lord. It's all about “remaining in control”, isn't it? Big distraction, big danger.

Another distraction Paul names is what we might call “spiritual achievements”. Some people want to really be better than everyone else, in a bad way. They want others' approval, in a bad way. The Pharisees who clashed so often with Jesus were like this, seeking the approval of others for achievements in learning and prayer and piety. Here in Ephesus, some of the early

believers were bringing in a Stoic philosophy and self-denial as if these were competitive contests. They would go without certain foods as an act of devotion to God—and brag about it—and then go on to demand everyone be like them. They would say, “Marriage is a lower spiritual state”, as if God had not created marriage. Under the guise of pious Christian faith, it was all about them and their spiritual achievements. Big distraction, a spiritual sickness.

And another distraction is hypocrisy. When hypocrisy in a Christian is uncovered, it discourages and distracts other believers from their own relationship with God. That’s bad enough, but hypocrisy is usually a symptom of a deep spiritual disease in the one who wants to appear righteous. We had another example of that this week, with Senator Craig of Idaho, who has now resigned. I am not judging whether the charge of misdemeanor solicitation for sex was true or not; perhaps the police needed to justify the extra money and time they were expending on their “sting” operation. But Craig did plead guilty to the charge, so it’s hard to square that with his denials.

But leaving aside the charge itself, when I encounter someone vehemently pursuing, say, “family values”, it always makes me suspicious. I’m for “family values”, but the Bible teaches we are out to win people, not persecute them. And when someone raises their voice to a shrill attack on others, or a shrill defense against a perceived threat, I have to wonder if they are compensating for something that is amiss in their own character. A couple of years ago, it was Pastor Ted Haggard, leader of a mega-church and confidant to President Bush, who confessed to a homosexual affair. Jimmy Swaggart, some years ago—TV personality and leader of hundreds of thousands—who was found out to have been carrying on with a female prostitute. Others have run off with church funds, or abused employees, or—well, it’s a long list. Of course I grieve the spiritual damage such failures create for those who have admired them.

But just as much, I hurt for these people who are so spiritually unbalanced that they seem ever ready to attack others, as if to deflect their own attention from parts of their lives that need to be brought to the Lord for spiritual surgery. To avoid the pain of that spiritual surgery and the embarrassment they fear they will suffer in front of their followers for appearing needy (not perfect), they convert their energy into attacks on others. This is a huge distraction, and often ends up creating a lot of damage well beyond the hypocrite and his immediate circle. Whenever someone is appealing to us to join in a crusade “to defend the truth against evil attack”—it can grab us because we aren’t doing anything very heroic in our lives at the time. Here’s our chance to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to feel better about ourselves! But so often, it’s a big distraction, a big danger, fed by spiritual sickness.

All these distractions deflect our attention from what is most important.

I used to have a bumper sticker on my old car that had a picture of a gal holding her cell phone in the car, and with a panicky look on her face. The words said, “Drive now, talk later.” Nearly a year ago, I sent for a replacement, and it just came on Friday. [show bumper sticker] Like our friend in our theme slide today, eating in our cars (it’s called, “dashboard dining”), having a pet bouncing around in the vehicle, and talking or texting on cell phones all distract us from the business of driving. The State has a compelling interest in maintaining safe driving, so a new law will soon take effect that bans the use of hand-held cell phones for everyone while driving, and there may be an extension of that, to ban all cell phone use by younger drivers. Distractions can be deadly to our physical existence.

Just as deadly to our spiritual health are these distractions we’ve heard Paul mention today. Judging someone by their appearance or age; riches and the love of money; theological

speculations and arguments; spiritual achievements to make us look good in the eyes of others; and fascination or repulsion with other people's sin—all these distract us from a personal relationship with God, faithfully following Jesus and radiating that love to every individual.

What distracts you from fully following Jesus? How much of your days are spent passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ, and radiating that love to every individual? Your spiritual health is at stake, the mission of Christ is at stake. How great it would be for God to tap out a message for everyone's cell phone, "Can you hear me now?"

You may remember the billboard campaign of a few years ago that did a masterful job of bringing awareness of God into mundane driving. I really enjoyed those, because it made me think of God even while I was driving. What a concept!

How might we do a better job of dealing with those distractions that pull our attention away from God?

We can start some new habits, for one thing. Men, how much do you really have to concentrate when you shave your face? I use an electric razor, so I can shave by what I call, "The Braille method". The buzz of the shaver drones on, and it's easy for my mind to wander. And often, it wanders to God, and I find I am listening to God, and sometimes God gives me great ideas or personal words as I shave. True!

What other simple tasks can you redeem, by using that time to listen to God? How about, "folding laundry" *and praying for the wearer of each garment?* How about reading the paper, *and praying for the hurting victims and the violent perpetrators, or cheering for those showing positive love and courage?*

At the end of each day, spend a moment with God going back over that day. How often, how deeply, did you attend to God? How much did you bring Jesus into the interactions of that day? Can you re-imagine one of those incidents, and imagine bringing Jesus into that?

Practice that right now. Remember some incident from yesterday.... Got it? Now, bring Jesus into the picture... How is that similar, or different, from how the incident unrolled yesterday?

See what we're doing? We're "pushing back" the distractions. We're starting to "take every thought captive", as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 10:5. We're putting more and more of our lives under the Lordship of Christ. We are becoming more mindful, so that we can passionately love the Lord Jesus Christ more of the time, and radiate that love to every individual.

How could the rest of this day, the holiday tomorrow, and the rest of this week be different, because you have brought Jesus in?

May God grow us all toward full maturity in loving Him with full hearts, and following Him into the missions He has given us, right in the middle of our own lives!

COMMUNION INTRO

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on September 2, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]