

Walking Away from Myths

2 Timothy 4:1-5

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Real Audio (3 MB)

Every time the New Year rolls around, we find ourselves taking a little inventory of life and asking ourselves how close we have come to accomplishing our goals. But the Bible doesn't care so much about that. It asks us how close we have come to living by the truth.

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When the Apostle Paul wrote his second epistle to the young pastor Timothy, he was near the end of his life. As he says in 2 Timothy 4:6, "The time for my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Paul has spent the last thirty years of his life traveling through the Roman Empire establishing churches. And he has learned quite a bit about church over the years. So the counsel he gives to young Timothy is a great treasure of insight, and it contains the apostle's inspired counsel to the contemporary church as well.

For example, in chapter four, verse three, Paul cautions Timothy that the people in his congregation, like every congregation, won't always put up with sound doctrine, "but having itching ears, they will accumulate (or as a literal translation of the Greek states, pile up) for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths." When the Bible speaks of myths, it is referring to an explanation of life that is not grounded in historical truth.

One of the great competitors of the Early Church, to which Timothy and Paul belonged, were the Hellenistic Mystery Cults. They didn't make any demands on people, but merely offered mythologies for how people could participate in the strength and abundance of the gods. Paul had discovered that people in the church grew weary of following a demanding Christ and were tempted to wander into these mystery cults that promised spirituality without sacrifice, from gods who themselves avoided sacrifice, remaining in a realm above history.

By contrast, the church makes the unique claim that God became a human being. Everything that our faith teaches depends on the historical reality of what we just celebrated at Christmas. In the first verse of chapter four Paul says, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing, I urge you...." All of his teachings, urgings, are in light of the historicity of the incarnation when God made the sacrifice of becoming one of us.

Therefore, we judge whether a teaching is true or mythological, based on its conformity to what we know of God from his revelation in Christ Jesus. That is certainly Paul's criteria for discerning truth. "In view of his appearing," we discern right from wrong. Having said that, I want to devote the rest of the sermon to some contemporary myths in the American Church that are being peddled by the pile up of teachers trying to accommodate itching ears.

The first, and perhaps most dangerous of these myths is that holiness has to be made relevant to people. Relevancy has become the great idol of our day. We live today in a culture that is preoccupied with you. We keep hearing, "You should get the service you deserve" and "You should be fulfilled." They might as well say, "You are the center of all things." It used to be that we expected our political leaders to give us great causes. Now we expect them to make life easier. It used to be that we expected our corporate leaders to build great companies. Now we expect them to make stockholders wealthy. It used to be that we expected our religious leaders to relate our lives to God. Now we expect them to relate God to us. If a sermon doesn't scratch our itch just right, if it doesn't address the problem we came to church to get resolved--straighten out our spouse or our children, or at least entertain us--we leave church saying, "I didn't get anything out of that. That wasn't very relevant."

Now to Jesus' criteria for discerning truth from mythology. One of the things that got Jesus killed was that he wasn't very good at being relevant to people's expectations of him. The Pharisees would have been happier if he had just taken a harder line on sinners. Instead, Jesus exposed their sin of self-righteousness. The Zealots would have been happier if he'd been more relevant to the political issues of Roman occupation. Instead, Jesus insisted on speaking about a new kingdom coming. The hungry and sick would have been happier if he would've just kept taking care of them. Instead, he kept talking about the bread of life and the need to be healed of the sin sick soul.

Jesus wasn't trying to make God relevant to you. He was dying to make you relevant to God.

This is one of the reasons why this congregation worships with so many traditions. We know that there are easier songs to sing than old hymns, and we know that the choir is singing anthems Casey Kasum has never heard. We are aware of the fact that every Sunday we say the same creeds that are centuries old, read prayers that old dead guys wrote, and listen to the same old Bible. It's all because we are trying to make your life relevant to two thousand years of sacred drama. Our worship seeks to give your fleeting life meaning by catching it up into a wonderful story that began before you and will continue long after you're gone.

That is how you find meaning and even fulfillment in life. Not by starting with the longings of the human heart. But by starting with the longing of God to give sacred purpose to your life.

A second popular myth today is that you are just an ordinary person living an ordinary life. This myth presents itself in humility. We hear people say, "I'm just a homemaker running errands all day." "I'm just a G-10 working in the bowels of government bureaucracy." "I'm just an old man living in a retirement home." "I'm just a student." Right. But what is presented as humility is

often a disguise for becoming self-absorbed.

In a wonderful old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, the boy and his tiger have just created a snowman when Hobbes remarks, "This snowman doesn't look very happy." Calvin responds, "He's not. He knows it's just a matter of time before he melts. The sun ignores his existence. He feels his life is meaningless." Hobbes asks, "Is it?" And Calvin answers, "Nope, he's about to buy a big screen TV." The easiest way to waste life is to think that it's so ordinary you might as well just be comfortable.

If you are just ordinary, then you're off the hook for making a difference. If you are just ordinary, then it's up to the important people to change the world. But it was ordinary fishermen that Jesus used to turn the world back to God. Jesus spent little time with people society considered important, and most of his time helping ordinary people see the extraordinary importance of their lives.

Every life is being used for either sacred or evil purposes. Every single life. In his memoirs, Inside the Third Reich, Albert Speer tried to claim that he was apolitical. "I was just an ordinary architect," he said. Just a man in a gray flannel suit. But as Speer's life demonstrated, it is always the ordinary people who make it possible for a Hitler, or a bin Laden, to accomplish the most horrific things in the world.

No one can opt out of the great cosmic conflict between good and evil in this world. Either you are working for the kingdom of Christ or you are working against it. Those are your only options.

Maybe you are called to spend your life in a quiet corner of the world. But that doesn't mean you aren't called to make a world of difference there. You will only be able to do that if you believe your life isn't an accident. Nothing about it is accidental. Your skills, talents, personality, and relationships, as well as your hurts, dark pain, and tragedies, all have a sacred use. But it is up to you to see that and use it all for the glory of God.

A final myth that the Apostle Paul wants to caution you against is the one that says, "You don't really have much time for theology, because you have to live in the real world. All you need is a little spirituality." Paul actually says very little about spirituality and a great deal about living out of sound doctrine. I realize that you have pressing concerns about work, children, health, and your future. But don't think for a minute that those aren't all theological issues.

Contemporary society has tried hard to dismantle systematic thinking. It tells us there are no absolute, all-encompassing faith claims. Instead, society says, there are just a series of disconnected experiences that have no eternal meaning. At work you have to make money. At home you have to make dinner, make the bed, and try to make ends meet. At school you have to make the grade. And at church you just have to try to make it on time. But we assume there are no connections between these things. We like it that way. It appeals to our itching ears, because it allows us to make decisions based on pragmatism, rather than living as if God is God over all life.

Jesus was constantly trying to get people to think theologically about their lives. His parables, teaching at the Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plains, his long discourses in the Gospel according to John, and after all his healings, he never missed an opportunity to help people understand the theological significance of ordinary things. Jesus didn't care any more than you do about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but he cared a lot about how we understand money, relationships, and work. And he just hated it when people would go to worship, but not see the significance of their worship to the rest of life.

What I am saying is that you have to live out of a coherent, integrative, understanding of life. You have to live, as the Apostle says, "by the truth." That means your entire Monday to Sunday life needs to be Theo-centric, with every decision and value based on the central affirmation that Jesus is Lord.

Theology is not just for professionals. Please, do this in your homes. It is the calling of every believer to know what we mean by calling Jesus Lord and what the significance of that in every aspect of life. If you need help learning to think theologically, get into a Bible study at the church. Attend an adult Sunday school class. Start reading books about our faith. Do the daily Bible readings we print in the worship bulletin. It may take time, but anyone can learn how to think theologically about life.

You might as well be theologically informed because, whether you realize it or not, all your choices are theological choices. There are good theologies and mythical ones, but every choice is making some claim about God.

O Word of God Incarnate, O Wisdom from on high, draw us to your truth, that we may be relevant to you, that we may see the extraordinary sacred purpose to life, that we may live theologically. Amen.