**Part A: 1 Timothy 4:1-5**

Every year we devote one Sunday to remembering the reformation in 1517. Next week, on bring-a-friend Sunday, we will talk about the central teaching of the Reformation, that is, justification by faith alone. But I want to start with something that is probably a bit sad for many of you. Can you think of someone you know and care about who has fallen away from the faith? Many of us can. Well, are you tempted to doubt God? How could this happen? Well, don’t:

**The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.** People will abandon the faith. It doesn’t necessarily mean we have done something wrong. It doesn’t mean God is unfaithful to his promises. But people will abandon the faith because they will be led astray by deceiving spirits. This does not mean that they are speaking directly to these spirits, but that these spirits are behind the teachings. You can be standing there listening to a guy speak. He looks and sounds like a normal, healthy human being. Yet he is a mouthpiece for the evil one himself. That is just creepy.

What kind of people would false teachers use to deliver such messages? But where can we expect to find such teachings? **2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.** It comes through people whose consciences have been dulled. The kind of person who you might confront with a sin, and instead of worrying about the sin, they worry about how to cover it up. These people are hypocrites, but please understand, a hypocrite is not always easy to spot. They pretend to be holy. They act as though they are pure as the driven snow. They pretend that they have your best interest at heart. And yet, the truth is, they only have their own personal interest at heart.

This is an important thing to know about our consciences. We can sear our consciences through repeated abuse. What is it that sears our conscience. Unrepentant sin, over and over again, can deaden your conscience. And if done enough, it can totally lose its sensitivity. When we commit sins over and over without repentance, whether they are small sins or big sins, obvious sins or subtle sins, whether we do evil things or we simply do not do the good things we should be doing, it can sear our conscience. This is really dangerous. A person who presents himself as a servant of God. Who is good at pretending to be a good, caring person, but who has no conscience and is actually teaching evil things. This is very dangerous.

This is exactly what Martin Luther encountered when he made what he thought was a very reasonable suggestion. The church in his day was selling something called indulgences. Basically, they were building a giant cathedral in Rome and needed extra cash. And so the pope gave certain men the right to sell indulgences to raise money for the basilica. What is an indulgence? It is a piece of paper that gets your soul out of purgatory. What is purgatory? Well, it is not a real thing, but it was imagined as a place in-between heaven and hell. In Luther’s day, they preached pretty clearly that you are saved by being a good person and going to church. Not by a living faith in Jesus Christ. Not by having your sins washed away. By being a good person, by saying your prayers, going to church, and giving to church to support the priests, bishops, and all that.

Of course, we are saved by faith alone. It is Jesus blood and nothing else that cleanses us from our sins. When we come to church, when we read the Bible, this is not a work we do for God to earn salvation. No, these things are gifts FROM God TO us. So how did they turn God’s gift from a precious gift into a work? How did they make up a whole new place called purgatory when the Bible clearly teaches heaven and hell?

Paul tells Timothy pretty clearly. Some will abandon the faith. Some will listen to false teachings, deceptive teachings that originate in Hell. Satan never stops attacking Christians. He never stops trying to corrupt the church. This is where these false teachings came from.

And in 1517 Luther began to question these false teachings publicly. It took several years to get going, but the reformation had begin. As Luther looked around, he noticed other things wrong with the church of his day. For example, as an Augustinian friar, he was forbidden from marrying a wife. He was encouraged to fast several times a week, and in fact he fasted so much that he had severe stomach problems later in life. Well, as it happens, Paul had warned Timothy about 1400 years before Luther that false teachers would advocate this sort of thing:

**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.**

Marriage is a gift of God, and is not to be rejected. Food is a gift from God, and meant to be enjoyed by believers. As long as we recognize that it is from God and thank him for it, there is no religious reason to stay away from certain foods, although you might have dietary reasons. This would seem so obvious. It’s clearly taught in the Bible. Yet, false teachers ignore the Bible and come up with silly rules.

As we seek to apply this reading today, I think it is important for us to realize that the false teachings around us are vicious, they are persuasive. No false teacher is going to come up to you with a cruel look on his face and say, “Excuse me, I’m a false teacher, and I’m here to lead you Hell.” They are going to smile. They are likely more interesting and charismatic. But Paul says, first of all, they are just in it for themselves. They want to use you for their own glory. But what they tell you are lies. And make no mistake, all evil starts with a lie.

What are the main false teachings today? I think one false teaching, that is really rather unintelligent, is that there is no afterlife, there is probably no God, and even is there is one, we can’t know anything about him, so why bother trying? This makes Jesus irrelevant. I think Christians today, sometimes myself included, essentially live secular lives most of the time, even if we do believe in theory that there is a God. Even if we do not believe in evolution and materialism, it is hard for that not to rub off on us in the amount of time we spend praying, for example. Has it ever happened to you that you went a few days without even really remembering that there is a God, or that we have eternity ahead of us? And yet, when we get to judgement day, there is nothing else that will matter but God.

So remember this the next time you see some celebrity on TV or the computer who is so dead-set against Christianity. Maybe they think Christians are evil because of our moral stances, or maybe they just think we are naive and society has moved on past religion. They may look cool and happy. They might be good actors and make their secular, immoral life look appealing. They might come across as so pious and heartfelt. But its quite likely that in their quest to the top their consciences became seared to the truth of God’s word. If they are preaching something other than faith in Jesus Christ, they are trying to lead you astray, and if you give yourselves over to them, it’s possible that one day you will find yourself in Hell. So be wary of false teachings. In the last days, some will abandon the faith for foolish false teachings. Don’t be one of them. Instead, return to God’s Word as your only guide, which we will consider in our next reading. But first, we meditate…

**Part B: 1 Timothy 4:6-10**

**6 If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed.**

This is what Luther and the other reformers sought to do. They wanted to be good servants of Jesus Christ. That is first, they needed to learn the truths of the faith. They had to be familiar with the good teaching. And then, after they had learned it, it was their responsibility to spread the truth to others.

At the time of the Reformation, they had two directions to go. First, they needed to share what they were learning with the Christian world. They began publishing all sorts of books about the Bible’s true teachings and spreading them all over Europe. They opened up universities for students from all over Europe (who spoke Latin, by the way, so they could all understand each other). Many English priests came to study in Germany, and the reformation took hold all across northern Europe, including places like Poland and the Ukraine, where it was fairly strong until communism took over.

Second, they had to instruct the ignorant masses of their own. It is hard for us to imagine how ignorant the average person was about Christianity at that time. Imagine being an illiterate farmer. You can’t read, you don’t know how to read, you’ve never even heard someone read except in church. But the church service is in a language you don’t understand. When you come to church, you light some candles, say some prayers in front of statues of saints. Sometimes they would read the Bible in Latin and a priest would explain it to you in your language, but that was the best instruction anyone got. But many country priests could not read themselves. So, in cities, some middle class people were ok, but in the countryside ignorance reigned.

So Luther and the reformers came up with a system of education. Boys and girls needed to learn to read so that the Bible could be understood from an early age. They needed to memorize the 10 commandments, Lord’s prayer, and Apostle’s Creed in their own language from an early age. They needed special catechism classes in addition to the regular sermons in order to make sure people understood the very basics of the faith.

All these aspects of the early Lutheran reformation are still with us. We still put an emphasis on education and reading the Bible. We will emphasize teaching the basics of the faith to everyone, which is why we have a catechism class for kids and a Bible Basics class for adults. I hope everyone here understands, God wants you do know his Word. If you have gotten rusty, consider re-taking the Bible Basics Class, also known as Bible Boot Camp. We have a school where you can send your kids, and if that does not work for you for some reason, we offer a free Sunday School. We have a Sunday morning Bible class for adults. There’s nothing stopping you from opening up your Bible at home. When you do not take advantage of these things, you might ask yourself, why not? Do you have good reasons, or are you just being lazy and not taking God’s Word as seriously as you should. And let’s be honest, sometimes we are all spiritually lazy. We deserve God’s anger as much as anyone. If we were saved based on how much we honored and cherished God’s Word, we’d all go to hell. But God’s Word forgives. God wants you to know if for YOUR benefit, not his. And Paul goes on to explain some of the advantages of knowing God’s Word:

**7 Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. 8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.**

Every society has its weird myths. In Paul’s day, the strange myths had to do with angels and pagan gods. There were books and books written on this. There were pagan priests who were experts in it. In Luther’s day it had to do with saints who performed miracles and appearances of the virgin Mary. In our day, what are they myths people believe? Life came from a bunch of chemicals. Fish evolved into lizards. Dinosaurs evolved into birds. Humans came from apes. Myths can consume you. Ancient Greek myths go on, and on, and on. The medieval church had so many saints they revered that no one could name them all. Evolution has thousands of scientists devoted to figuring out exactly how it happened. You can go to websites devoted to showing that the Book of Mormon is true and spend hour after hour reading the supposed evidence. Many people devote their lives to myths. Some people are hooked on the show Ancient Aliens. Look how some people obsess over fictional things like Lord of the Rings or Star Wars. But myths are just fun at best and deadly at worst.

But God encourages us instead to devote ourselves to godliness. And the way to train in godliness is to study the Word of God. Godliness has value for the present life, and it also has value for the life to come. The word translated godliness could also be translated devotion or piety. It just means being devoted to God. When you put this into practice, it really helps you. Ask those who are going through health problems like cancer or chronic pain right now. It’s hard. But they often say, I can’t imagine how hard it would be without knowing Jesus. How could I face the possibility of dying without knowing I have eternity waiting for me? How can I deal with the rejection of friends or family if I don’t know the unfailing love of an eternal God?

Counterfeit money is a real problem. There are experts out there whose job it is to make sure no false currency gets out there into circulation. But counterfeiters are so crafty and have so many different strategies, how can people know what is real and what is not? By studying the real, day and night, constantly, until they know it by feel, they recognize every square millimeter. When you study God’s Word, and you know his truth inside and out, you will see the false beliefs coming, and they will not lead you astray. And what is the key to truth teachings? Paul tells us:

**9 This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance 10 (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.** God is the savior of all men because he has died for them to reconcile them to himself, but at the same time, it is those who believe, those who flee to him for forgiveness, who are ultimately saved. But God is the savior of all. False teachings will offer another path of salvation other than the one offered by the living God. Some false teachings will tell you to put your hope in another God. Others will tell you that the true God will not save you, that you must save yourself by obedience and working hard. But the truth is that God is the savior of all men. We can put our hope in him, because he will never put us to shame. He is living and ruling now, and he will protect us from anything and save us from this sad world once and for all on judgement day. Sicne he has provided us with salvation, we can trust him completely. And it is a joy to serve such a God. This is a God worth learning about, and a God worth sharing.

**Part C: 1 Timothy 4:11-16**

 These instructions are written to Timothy, Paul’s right-hand man. Paul encourages him to stay focused on what really matters, and it is a good reminder for us. **11 Command and teach these things. 12 Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. 13 Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. 14 Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. 15 Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. 16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.**

This was a high bar that Paul set for Timothy. People should see the true God when they look to you. When they see the way you live, the way you treat people, the way you speak, the way you care for others, the way you patiently trust in God, the way you keep yourself pure, they should see what faith in God looks like. That is hard. But this is not just advice for leaders in the church. All Christians are told to live this way. This is hard. How can we possibly live up to this high standard? By devoting ourselves to reading the Bible, to hearing preaching and teaching. This is what builds up our faith. Yes, it’s true, God gives us faith. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes it grow. But he has told us how he does that. He does it though the Word of God.

This was a great realization of the Reformation. It is not just the priests, or in our case, the pastors who are called to live holy lives. We don’t need priests to intercede for us. We can go directly to God through Jesus, and Jesus comes directly to us in his Word. Not intermediate person is necessary. All God’s people are called to live holy lives. We are all called to let our light shine in this sinful world. I am not the slightest bit more holy than any other Christian or any member of this congregation. We are all equally holy through the blood of Christ. And the way to encourage holy living is not to manipulate the people. That is what the church was doing in Luther’s day before the reformation. Make them confess every sin, and they give them penalties. That is what confession was like back then. That is manipulation. No, the way to grow in godliness is by hearing God’s Word and letting it form you. Because in fact, what God tells you is that you are already holy.

Do you realize you are holy? Maybe you do not always act holy. I know I don’t. But I know I’m holy. Because the holy God put his name on me when he baptized me. He said that I am now property of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When I receive the Lord’s Supper, I receive God’s Holy, Precious Body and Blood. And just to make sure I know it’s mine, God tells me to take and eat. Before the reformation, these actions were seen as works that we do for God. If we do them enough, we will earn God’s favor. But at the reformation they went back to the Bible and realized that no, these are not things we do for God. Baptism and the Lord’s supper are things he does for us. Today many churches do not believe that. Just like the medieval Catholic church of Luther’s time, they have turned baptism and the Lord’s supper, which should be the greatest comforts we can ever have, into just one more work we do for God. Work, work, work. But God wants us to have peace, peace, peace because we are saved by grace, grace, grace. God is the one who worked by dying for us, and he works by working faith in our heart as we hear his message in the Bible. The way to know you are holy is not to look at your conduct. It is to look at the holy things God has given you and promised you. These are the things he gives you in his word and sacraments. These are the things false teachers want to take away.

There will always be false teachers, and there will always be those who abandon the faith and follow after them. But God’s Word will always remain, and it is full of grace and blessings for us. May God keep us devoted to the truth of his Word because in it is found salvation. Amen.