

Heavenly Father, as we open your word this morning, we just ask that what we know not, you would teach us.

What we have not, you would give us.

And what we are not, you would make us.

We pray all this in your son's name.

Amen.

There's been a long-standing cultural fascination, at least since the 80s, but I suspect it goes back further than that, with the supernatural and spiritually dark forces.

It seems like we get a new demon movie or exorcism-themed movie every quarter.

You know, they've got to have one every three months or so.

And these are usually full of highly sensationalized supernatural spectacles, like things flying across the room, possessed little girls floating in the air, speaking in weird voices, stuff like that.

And the spiritual battle in the movie is always hard fought.

You know, otherwise it'd be a very boring movie.

You know, the regular holy water doesn't work, so we've got to try something else.

And then we've got to do some detective work to find out what was really behind all this.

And I think that this, you know, sensationalism has crept into the church in ways.

And I don't want to be totally dismissive of it.

I think there's a kernel of reality and all of the hype and sensationalism.

But it seems like that even in the church, when it comes to spiritual warfare, we tend to gravitate to the sensational.

You know, someone told a prayer group that I was in recently that we all better be ready for when a demon shows up in our churches because if we're not, it's going to mess us up.

And I regularly hear calls for dramatic intercessory prayer and speaking in tongues even over wayward children or going on prayer walks as a form of spiritual warfare, fighting demons located at specific locations within the city.

We sing about this all the time, breaking chains and strongholds and walls and angel armies and taking back what the enemy stole.

And again, don't get me wrong, there's a time and a place for intensity, for specific intensity, especially in fervent intercessory prayer.

But I find it interesting that when Paul talks about spiritual warfare, the few times that Paul talks about spiritual warfare in the New Testament,

it's almost always less dramatic and theatrical than we think it should be practiced today, or we seem to think that it should be practiced today by the way that we talk.

For example, our passage today, Paul says that the way to combat deceitful spirits and demonic teaching is to, get ready, say grace before you eat.

to pray and to thank God for your food.

If you want to fight spiritual warfare and spiritual battles, thank God for your food before you eat it.

It's that simple, and yet there is a profound depth behind the simplicity.

That's what we're going to look at today.

We're gonna see that true godliness.

So Paul's still talking about godliness.

We've been seeing that over the last couple of weeks, continue to see it today.

But true godliness is opposed by spiritual forces.

We don't wanna throw the baby out with the bathwater.

There is a kernel of truth to all of the hype and sensationalism behind this idea of a spiritual battle.

True godliness is opposed by spiritual forces.

It's also objectified by insincere liars.

We'll look at that in these couple of verses that we saw today and observed with thanks to the creator.

All right, so opposed, objectified, observed.

We got three O's today.

I'm very happy.

I hope you are as well.

Let's take a look at them in order.

First, verse one here in chapter four, we see that true godliness is opposed by spiritual forces.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times, some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

The word now, I didn't emphasize it enough, but he says, now the Spirit expressly says.

The word now connects this section back to Paul's description of the mystery of godliness in the passage that we looked at last week.

So he gives this little hymn to summarize the mystery of godliness.

Paul's still talking about godliness here at the beginning of chapter 4, even though there's a shift away from talking about the church generically, and he's now directing his attention specifically to Timothy.

Still has a lot of application for us, as we'll see over the next couple weeks.

But he's kind of talking directly to Timothy now, and there's a shift in focus.

but he really hasn't shifted the subject, right?

He's still talking about godliness.

He's saying that Christ came and the good news of who he is and what he's done is spreading throughout the world.

That's what we saw last week in that hymn.

But while this is good news, right, that Christ won the victory on our behalf, he won the full victory on our behalf,

And that experiencing that victory as God's people throughout the world is inevitable.

It's going to happen.

We still acknowledge that there is resistance or spiritual opposition to the advancement of the gospel and the church as that's worked out and played out in history.

And Paul's saying here in verse one that this was foreseen and shared with us by God, right?

So God's looking ahead through Paul as he writes scripture here, and he's saying there's gonna be opposition.

And Paul even told the church at Ephesus, remember Timothy's pastoring at Ephesus, Paul tells the church at Ephesus before he leaves, there's gonna be wolves that creep up that are going to teach you something other, teach you a different gospel than what I've taught you and seek to lead you away

and devour you, right?

So God, through Paul, is sharing with the church, this is gonna happen.

I know it's gonna happen.

That's part of the plan, in a sense, that we overcome that spiritual opposition.

So this spiritual battle, as Paul's pointing out here, isn't just out there, right?

It's not just in the world.

or on the front lines where the church bumps up against the world, he's saying that this spiritual battle is happening right here, even right now, in the pews.

There's a battle for your heart and your mind and your allegiance.

Now, I'll just pause to acknowledge that this does sound strange in a world where secular materialism is the dominant functioning worldview.

Most of us, if you go to work a job that's outside of the church, are going to be generally conducting your business, doing a job, working with other co-workers that are all generally functioning out of a secular, materialistic worldview.

where what you can see, what you can touch, what you can measure is all that exists or at least all that really matters, right?

So if you believe in something beyond what you can see, touch, measure, that's fine.

Just doesn't have any bearing here on what we're doing at work or what we're doing kind of in the common marketplace together.

You know, the general sentiment being that if there is a spiritual side to things, who's to say what it's like?

And it certainly doesn't have any real effect on my day to day.

And we kind of tend to absorb that if we're honest with ourselves.

We absorb that because we're so used to functioning in that, out with other people, that even we as believers absorb that into our home life and sometimes even into our life together as a church.

But I just wanna say, even if that's your worldview today, I would just like you to consider that you don't really have to dig too deep into what you can measure.

So if we're only talking about material stuff here, and what I can see, touch, measure, you don't have to dig too deep into that stuff.

especially in the field of quantum physics, to come back to the idea that Paul and the other ancients already had a grasp on, and it's that we don't really know how all of this is being held together.

I mean, just listen to some of these quantum physicists explain these particles that we can't really measure or quantify, or every time we run a test, they actually give us the result we're looking for as we do the test.

They start trying to explain how all of that works and you get into like multiple galaxies or multiple universes and like Marvel type stuff.

We have no idea how it's being held together.

What we can see, touch, measure is being held together.

And even a spiritual reality behind it is just as plausible as a materialistic worldview where we believe that everything's reducible to tiny little Legos that stack up on top of each other.

Anyways, I'm getting way off subject here.

I'm just saying that a belief or holding to the fact that an unseen spiritual reality resists is reasonable, right?

It is reasonable, given even if you look at what we can measure, see, taste, and touch.

And the Bible tells us, and we believe, right, as believers, that there is an unseen spiritual reality behind what we can see, touch, and the stuff that we take in every day.

And within that realm, right, Paul's saying that within that spiritual realm that's behind what we see, touch, and take in every day, there's a battle going on between God

along with his followers, and the adversary, or devil, and his followers.

Devil's translated literally adversary, right?

The one who set himself up against God.

And in this battle, what Paul's saying, so there's a real spiritual battle, and in this battle, there's no neutral ground.

Look at what he says here in verse 1 again.

The Spirit expressly says that in later times, some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful demons and teachings of demons through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know and reject the truth.

Yeah, so notice that they will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons.

It's going from one thing to another.

No neutral ground.

The implication is that you're on one side or the other.

that there's no like spiritual Switzerland in the spiritual realm.

You either set yourself up, align yourself up with God's adversaries and those who are against him, or you're on his side and numbered among one of his people.

Now, none of us think of ourselves as God's adversaries.

I'm sure these elders in the Ephesian church that Paul has been telling Timothy to put out weren't waking up and thinking that, you know, today I think I'm gonna teach some demonic stuff.

I'm gonna align myself with the devil today.

Rather, it's a slow creep.

It's like a frog being boiled in water, a small step and then another until you find yourself someplace you never thought you'd find yourself saying things you never thought you would say.

Now, that sounds serious, right?

Paul's talking about guys who started off in the church, were actually so committed to Christ and his church that the church made them elders, right, that have walked away and are actually a key figure or a key cog in this spiritual battle against God by teaching demonic stuff.

So,

How do we end up there?

That sounds very serious.

What does that look like?

How do we avoid it?

Well, practically speaking, being on the side of deceitful spirits and demons up until this point has looked like manipulatively teaching stuff that isn't true.

But Paul adds a little bit more here in our passage today.

Also, we've been given the positive side of it with all of the requirements for elders and deacons and qualifications for elders and deacons and what that looks like.

But Paul takes a deeper dive into the negative side of things to show us what it looks like beyond just teaching false things.

So Paul tells us that godliness is opposed by spiritual forces, but that looks like godliness being objectified by insincere liars.

He tells us three things about these false teachers that are teaching demonic stuff, that are passing along or propagating lies.

the teaching of demons.

One, he says, that they're deliberately deceptive.

Look at verse two again.

Through the insincerity of liars, whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving.

So first, they're deliberately deceptive, right?

These false teachers, as we've seen before, don't have an understanding or a comprehension problem.

They're not dumb, right?

They don't look at what God has said or they don't hear Paul's gospel directly.

and have a comprehension problem, they understand the truth.

Rather, they are teaching and saying things they know are not true, or at least things that they don't believe themselves.

So they may have some idea of their truth, but they're not fully buying into it or believing it themselves in order to manipulate people for their own selfish gain.

They're more concerned with what they can get out of propagating a lie.

We see later in the book that these false teachers are seducing young widows, right?

And in 2 Timothy and Titus, that they're really after dishonest gain, you know, getting dishonest gain through these young widows and through just the prestige of preaching and sharing God's word.

We would be naive to think that this sort of thing isn't going on in churches today or that it couldn't happen here, right?

That there aren't men who wouldn't try to work their way into eldership or a pastoral role here for their own benefit and selfish gain.

This is why the qualifications that we looked at the last several weeks in chapter 3 are crucial.

Paul gives us some very public-facing qualifications that if you take one or two individually, it may not seem like a big deal, but Paul's saying it is a big deal.

This is what we can see that reveals that there's a spiritual darkness or a spiritual battle that's going on deeper.

It's also why we ought to consider if our leaders are sincere.

Are they practicing what they preach?

Or are they justifying one set of rules or a lifestyle for themselves?

You know, I'm under a lot of pressure.

You don't know what it's like bringing God's word or leading God's church.

So there's one set of rules for me while requiring another set of rules or expectations from God's people.

This doesn't mean that our leaders are perfect.

I'm not saying that any of us on the elder board here at Lakewood are perfect.

But there ought to be a maturity that manifests itself as gospel humility, right?

So a quickness to repent, a quickness to admit sin,

when we're wrong, especially when confronted with wrongs, and the qualifications of chapter three.

At any point that we don't meet those qualifications in chapter three, you ought to be willing to take a step back.

It doesn't necessarily mean a step back indefinitely, but it should at least mean a step back for the time in repentance to take care of the things that are of most importance.

All right, so in this way, godly leaders resemble Christ, but Paul says, so godly leaders resemble Christ in demonstrating gospel humility, qualifications of chapter three, and not being deliberately deceptive, right?

So telling the truth with our words and with our lives.

But also, he says that not only are these false teachers deliberately deceptive, but their morality resembles the devil.

What they've chosen or shown, demonstrated as a moral code, resembles the devil.

So here he says that their consciences are seared.

Seared isn't really a great translation, because we tend to think of searing, a seared conscience,

as being a hardened conscience or a conscience that's not working properly.

You don't feel anything when you do bad stuff.

But really, what Paul's saying is that they know right from wrong.

The problem isn't that their conscience isn't working or that it's not telling them that they're doing wrong things.

The problem is that they are insincere and lying about what they know to be right.

So seared conscience doesn't mean a conscience that's not telling them that what they're doing is wrong.

A better translation would be like branded, meaning that their consciences, their sense of morality is marked or identified with the devil, not God.

So their consciences bear the resemblance of the devil's conscience and his moral code and his priorities as opposed to God.

Jesus talks this way in John 8.

He's talking about Pharisees who are the religious leaders that he's confronting there in John 8.

Jesus said to them, If God were your father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here.

I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.

Why do you not understand what I say?

It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.

He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

But because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me.

Which one of you convicts me of sin?

If I tell you the truth, why do you not believe me?

Whoever is of God hears the words of God.

The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.

Their conscience and their words resemble the devil.

But they also are like him in that they oppose God's purposes.

You can kind of hear that in John 8 as well.

So these false teachers, they're deliberately deceptive.

Their morality looks like the devil.

And they also look like the devil in that they oppose God's purposes.

Look at the end of verse 3.

So who forbid...

Sorry, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving.

Right, so it's a little unclear as to whether these false teachers were opposing sex slash marriage and indulgent foods in an aesthetic way, which would make them more like Greek opponents to the gospel or,

Or if they're pushing Jewish dietary laws and then some unusual view of marriage that didn't exist in Jewish culture.

I lean towards the fact that they would be like more aesthetic or stoic philosophers that have crept in and are just like saying that the body's bad, right?

So do away with everything with the body.

Go hole up in a monastery somewhere.

Don't have sex even if you're married and don't indulge in food.

Indulgence, bad, you know, just bad.

Eat bread and water and live a life of minimalism and devote yourself spiritually to the Lord.

And you have to do that in order to be godly, right?

Emphasis on everyone else should do this in order to be godly.

Either way, whether we're talking about Jewish false teachers here or Greek false teachers, Paul gets to the root of the problem here in the beginning of verse three, when he says that they're denying God's purposes for marriage, sex, and food, and they're opposing...

their own selfish purposes on these things, right?

So church leaders have continued to do this from the time that Paul wrote his letters, whether it's the Catholic Church forbidding marital intimacy on over half the days of the year, just prior to the Reformation.

I mean, if you're talking about driving forces behind the Reformation, I think the Catholic Church had basically denied married couples sexual intimacy,

on a little over 200 of the days in the calendar, right?

So they were very happy to have the Reformation come and free them from that.

But there are other church fathers that adopted an aesthetic approach to food.

There's always been, in Christianity, this kind of sense that

You know, strict denial and forbidding is the path to godliness.

Again, a kernel of truth there, but we've also seen leaders within the church and whole church denominations take this sense of godliness or this sense of self-denial, you know, and making it equal godliness throughout history to a pharisaical level.

Now listen, gluttony and overindulgence are real things.

Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins listed in Proverbs.

They're real things, and we're told in the New Testament that periods of fasting are necessary, and even Paul commends times of abstinence within marriage as a good thing, potentially a good thing.

But we're told far more often in places like Genesis 1, Proverbs 5 that we looked at last summer, Song of Solomon, Romans 14, that we're to view food and sex and everything that we touch and experience as God views them.

These are good gifts given to us by God, created with a specific purpose.

Now, overeating is a misuse of food, but denying yourself food so that you can feel like your own master, so that you can feel more in control of your life than you actually are, is also a misuse of food.

You know, we use sex to escape reality.

We use sex to control and to manipulate, to buy affection, to please ourselves, and for all kinds of things that God didn't intend sex to be used for.

The devil wanted to be God and he led a mutiny.

We wanna be God, so we take things that he's created and we repurpose them for our own selfish intentions.

We don't ask, God, what did you design this for?

What did you make this for?

And how ought I to use it?

We just say, I like this, this helps me get that, so I'm gonna use it that way.

How do we avoid this?

So how do we find sure footing

and God's purposes for things, the things around us, and keep ourselves from slipping into lies, right?

So these false teachers are preaching lies about what sex and food and marriage ought to be used for, and they're telling people, use them this way, and they're doing that for their own selfish gain.

How do we keep from doing that ourselves?

I guarantee you, you're doing this.

I'm doing this.

I slip into this all the time, knowingly and unknowingly, that I can use food, anything around me for my own selfish gain to get the things that I really want at the time, more than God even.

So lastly, we see that

The way that we fight this is in that true godliness is observed with thanks to the creator.

Listen, as we said, God created everything with a good purpose.

Look at the end of verse three through verse five.

It says,

And nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

God created everything with a good purpose, right?

He says everything God created is good.

Those who believe and know the truth receive these things with thankfulness, right?

They receive the things that God created good with thanks.

They know the truth.

that God is a good creator, that he made these things and has the right to give them their purpose and declare them good or not, right?

As the creator, as the one who made them, he gets to tell us what they're made for and then declare them good or not.

They know the truth about the things, right?

So not only do they know that God is good

But those who know the truth, know the truth about the things that God made, right?

About food and about sex and about marriage.

They've done the work of studying God's word for wisdom and insight into why these things were made and how God intended for us to use them, right?

So when we go to the word, primarily the two big questions we ask, you know, if you're doing a principles of Bible study class is what does this teach me about God?

And what does this teach me

about how God views me, right?

Or how I relate to God.

Great questions to ask.

You can add a third one to that, right?

What does this teach me about the world around me and the reasons for which God created these things in the world around me?

So as we use them properly, right?

So as we learn more about these good gifts that God has given us and we use them properly, we experience them all in the goodness of God and for the glory of God

like those good intentions, those good experiences that God has called us to have in those things, which then leads us to thanks and a posture, a humility, where we give thanks to God and praise to God for giving us such good gifts.

All right, that came out all jumbled.

So let me just say that one more time, right?

So as we learn about the world that God's created and the good things that he's given us, we experience them rightly.

And when we experience them rightly, they're great and awesome.

And when we experience that greatness and that awesomeness, we can't help.

but give thanks to God and praise God because we see that he's designed them in a good and beautiful way for our joy and his glory.

That's a wonderful place to be.

That is a good and humble place to be where we're experiencing the world as God intended it to be, giving him praise and thanks back.

And giving thanks is a way to keep us in that humble posture of receiving.

Paul says in verses four to five that everything God created is good, and yet it's made holy by the word of God in prayer.

What does that mean?

So God made it good.

He declared it good.

He's talking about God's proclamation at creation, but also he's made everything in particular good now.

So what does it mean that it's made holy?

Well, I think he's saying that it's made holy

to our mind and our understanding by the word of God and prayer.

Paul says something similar in Romans 14.

Remember in Romans 14, he's talking about the meat offered to idols.

Here's the gist of the argument in Romans 14.

In Romans 14, 5, Paul says, each one should be fully convinced in his own mind whether to eat the meat offered to the idols or to not eat the meat.

Each one should be convinced.

If you're convinced that it's wrong,

It's wrong for you.

If you're convinced that it's right, it's right for you.

He says this in verse 14.

I know and I'm persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it's unclean.

And then a little bit further down in verses 22 to 23, he says, the faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.

Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats because the eating is not from faith.

For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

So Paul's saying, look, it's already assumed God has not condemned this thing that you want to do, right?

There's no clear command against the thing that you want to do.

And eat, drink, eat the meat offered to idols, not eat the meat offered to idols, right?

Be convinced in your own mind.

And he says, blessed is the man who's convinced that it's fine, that it's clean to eat, that it's there to be enjoyed.

That man is blessed.

He doesn't have this weight on his conscience because it's a good thing, right, that God created.

So Paul's saying in our passage here, if we take it all together, right, if we put the Romans 14 in our passage together,

Together, Paul's saying, listen, it's wrong to forbid others from partaking in good things.

Don't tell other people not to partake in or participate in something God has made and called good.

We ourselves ought to aspire to use and enjoy the things that God has created for the purposes for which he created them.

So again, there's ways to misuse food, misuse sex.

We're not talking about that.

We're talking about using those things properly.

People, you and others, ought to be free, clear of conscience to enjoy those things for the purposes that God created them.

If we can't enjoy them rightly or with a clear conscience, we ought not to violate our conscience.

So step one, if you feel guilty doing this good thing that God gave you, don't violate your conscience.

That's not good to do.

But we should work towards a conscience that more closely resembles God through the word of God and prayer.

So Paul's saying, as you dive deep into the word of God, and as you pray, and in context, he's talking about prayers of thanks, giving thanks to God for the good things that he's given us, that that combo, word of God and prayer, can sanctify these things to us or can change our conscience, realign our conscience to be more God-like.

And that's a spiritual battle, right?

To thank God for the things that he's made and to align our view of these things with how God views them, right?

To align our sense of these things' purpose with the purpose that God has given them when he made them.

Because, as we said before, true godliness is opposed by spiritual forces.

objectified by insincere liars and observed with thanks to the Creator.

So listen, just simplify this.

It's kind of philosophical and deep at times, but let's just simplify it because Paul gives some simple instructions here.

Saying thanks to God, even simply and regularly saying thanks for a meal,
is an act of spiritual warfare, right?

It's waging a battle for our hearts and minds.

It's a reminder that God gave me this good thing to accomplish a good purpose.

And I ought to only use this good thing for that good purpose.

Will we humbly receive God's purposes for everything?

Or will we fight to impose our purposes?

Will we fight to use God's good things to get the things that we really want, right?

That are not him.

And it's not just about food and sex and marriage.

G.K.

Chesterton says this, you say grace before meals.

All right.

But I say grace before the play and the opera and grace before I open a book and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing.

Sounds like quite a man, dancing and boxing.

And grace before I dip the pen in the ink.

What if in everything...

We first took the time to consider God and thank him, right?

Before anything that we enjoy or even maybe don't enjoy as much.

What if we took the time to consider God and thank him?

And consider, you know, what good purpose did you make this for?

What good purpose did you give this to me for?

How can I align myself with that good purpose?

You know, I think eventually we would stop mutilating God's good gifts by twisting them to serve our own rebellious purposes, like the false teachers did.

But we might even begin to share

through this process, we might even begin to share God's ability to take the bad things in life and repurpose them for good.

You see, we take God's, in our own sin nature, naturally, we take things that God purposed for good and we repurpose them for bad, right?

Our own selfish ends.

God, however, has the ability to take things that we intend to be bad, words that we intend to be hurtful, actions we intend to be destructive, and he repurposes them for good, just like Joseph told his brothers, right, who sold him into slavery.

You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good.

And God took the greatest evil, the greatest evil purpose ever devised, the murder of his only son, and repurposed it to ensure the final victory for his people.

So as we come to the table today, we're going to take the bread and the cup.

as an act of remembrance, and I hope in light of this sermon, as an act of thankfulness, saying thank you to the Lord for his provision for us.

We're not just thanking him for a cracker and a little bit of juice, but we're thanking him for the provision of his son who said, this is my body broken for you.

And as we do that, we trust that he's realigning our hearts, our purposes, our desires,

with him and his victorious purposes for his people in the world.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we come to your table today, we first just want to say thank you.

Thank you for the provision that you made for us.

Lord, it was a costly provision.

It cost you the only thing that is costly to you,
yourself.

And so, Lord, we thank you for that provision of your only son to rescue us, to save us from the punishment that we incurred from our own sin.

And Lord, we just ask that as we fix our eyes on you again, to see that you gave your son to make us right with you, but to not only make us right with you, to sanctify us, to change us from the inside out, to make us the beautiful creations we were always supposed to be, Lord.

that you would realign our desires and our will to be in tune with that purpose, Lord, that you would give us a new and a fresh desire to walk with you obediently.

to seek after your holiness and your righteousness with all that we are.

Because, Lord, that's the purpose.

That's the purpose of your son's sacrifice, to redeem your people, to bring them back to you and to make them whole.

And, Lord, we just ask that you would help us to use these good gifts of the gospel, of the church, of your word,

For that purpose, Lord, not just a patch of felt need right now or...

to have some company and some good people to be around.

Lord, I don't know, whatever reason that we may come here, whatever secondary reason we may use these gifts to get, Lord, I pray that we would realign ourselves with your glory and your glory just shining through us as we're molded and shaped into your image.

Lord, would you do that now as we come to the table?

We pray all this in Jesus' name, amen.