

Lesson 1 | June 2, 2024

Stand against False Teaching

Study Text: 1 Timothy 1:5–7; 4:1–3; 6:3–6; 2 Timothy 3:1–7; 4:1–5; Titus 3:8–11

Central Truth: Christians learn to detect false doctrine as they are instructed in God’s Word.

Key Verse: 2 Timothy 4:4

They shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables (KJV).

They will reject the truth and chase after myths (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will distinguish between true and false teaching.
- Students will desire to avoid false teaching and false teachers.
- Students will fortify resistance to false teaching.

Introducing the Study

Say: A Bible scholar was once told by an acquaintance that they attended “a real New Testament church.” The scholar’s response surprised her friend: “That’s great! I’d like to come sometime soon and interview the heretics.” As we see in many of the New Testament letters, the dust of revival scarcely settles before heresy or false teaching often crops up.

Opening Activity—The Honeymoon Is Over

Ask. Have you heard the saying, “The honeymoon is over”? In what situations have you experienced the truth of that statement? Examples may include jobs, friendships, hobbies, political alliances, and of course, romantic relationships. Discuss the reasons behind the shift.

Say: Wonderful descriptions in the Book of Acts following the Day of Pentecost might make us think the Early Church community was nearly perfect. They prayed, worshipped, and ate together. They shared to meet everyone’s needs. And they grew through the apostles’ teaching and the Holy Spirit’s presence. However, the New Testament also records the fact that false teaching soon crept into the Church, leading many believers astray. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

We learn from the letters Paul wrote near the end of his ministry that heretical teachers were running rampant in certain churches. He charged both Timothy in Ephesus and Titus on the island of Crete to combat false teaching and oppose its proponents. This context is key when reading 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. From Paul’s instructions to

these Early Church leaders, we can learn how we ought to respond to false teaching we encounter today.

Part 1—Do Not Be Seduced by False Teaching An Era of Deception

1 Timothy 4:1–3

Say: Like Timothy, we are living in an era of deception. The Holy Spirit led Paul to issue clear warnings to God’s people about this reality, and when we look around us, we can see why. The specifics of the deception may be different in the twenty-first century, but the ultimate source is the same: Satan. Jesus called him the “father of lies” (John 8:44, NLT), and Paul did not mince words when denouncing the humans used to spread the enemy’s false messages. (Share your highlights from the following text.) ***(To learn more about the heresies that threatened the Early Church, play the video available at RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult.)*** (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Whether Paul was referring in 1 Timothy 4:1 to a specific message of the Spirit or a more general prophetic theme, his message certainly aligns with Jesus’ own warnings in the Gospels (see Matthew 24:11,24–25). Paul had personally witnessed such abandonment of the true faith in Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Timothy 1:19–20).

Hypocrisy and seared consciences were two characteristics of the false teachers.

- “Speaking lies in hypocrisy” (4:2, KJV): The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word for “actor,” so one might say that these false teachers were playing roles like expert actors.
- “Having their conscience seared with a hot iron” (verse 2, KJV): Theologian George Knight suggests that this vivid description “gives the inner basis for the conduct.” With their consciences deadened, they are self-deceived deceivers.¹

¹ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 109.

Verse 3 describes some of the specific false teaching active in Timothy’s situation: They were forbidding marriage and commanding the avoidance of certain foods. Both characteristics are ascetic in nature. Asceticism is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the practice of strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline.” An exploration of all the passages in the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) indicates that this false teaching was a combination of ascetic, speculative, and argumentative tendencies mixed with a distortion of Jewish elements.

Paul indicated the threat would come in “latter times” (4:1, KJV). This phrase seems to parallel the more common phrase, “last days” (see 2 Timothy 3:1). We can see from the full context that “latter times” included Timothy’s own time. In fact, the Church has

always understood it existed in the “last days” reality, set in motion by God’s redemptive work in Jesus (Acts 2:16–17). Like Timothy, we find ourselves in the era of “latter times” deception.

Discuss

? What factors do you think contributed to Timothy’s church falling prey to false teaching? Are there factors that make certain churches more or less vulnerable?
? What steps can believers take to discern whether teachings they hear align with the New Testament?

Resource Packet Item 1: Warnings against False Teaching

Distribute the worksheet and assign individuals or small groups to read the passages and note the characteristics of false teachers and false teachings. Then discuss your findings together.

The Purveyors of Deception

1 Timothy 6:3–6

Say: Soon after this passage comes a statement we often hear quoted: “The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10, KJV). Isn’t it interesting that this sweeping statement occurs in the context of a discussion of false teachers and their motives? The “unholy trinity” of money, sex, and power often lie behind messages that deviate from the truth of Jesus Christ. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In 1 Timothy 6:2, Paul summed up his instructions in the letter as things Timothy should teach and encourage everyone to obey. Starting in verse 3, he took up the issue of people teaching contradictory things. For Paul, matters relating to the gospel of Jesus Christ were of the utmost importance. He demonstrated great generosity in minor matters not central to salvation, but he vehemently denounced any departure from the true gospel.

Paul’s concern is reflected in his description of the gospel: It is wholesome, centered on Jesus, and godly (verse 3). “Wholesome” translates a Greek word from which we derive our word hygiene. It referred generally to physical health, and in an extended sense it pointed to correct or sound teaching. In these pastoral letters where false teaching was such a pervasive problem, Paul frequently described true teaching in terms related to health (see 1 Timothy 1:10–11; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1–2).

Paul then went on to characterize those who were contradicting godly and wholesome teachings. They were arrogant, ignorant, argumentative, mentally corrupt, and out for their own gain. They exhibited an “unhealthy desire to quibble over the meaning of words” (verse 4, NLT; see 2 Timothy 2:23). Their minds and their motives were corrupt, and they viewed godliness as a means to a financial end.

Paul wrapped up this depiction of false teachers with a corrected framework for our thinking: “True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth” (verse 6, NLT). In the

verses that follow, he continued to warn about focusing one's desires on material possessions, bringing to mind Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: "You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money" (Matthew 6:24, NLT).

Discuss

? How is nourishment of one's spirit comparable to nourishment of one's body? What happens if we routinely consume unhealthy things?

? Some of us have seen prominent ministries brought down by scandal. How has money been a factor in some of these situations? What false teachings (if any) were being perpetuated?

Part 2—Preach and Teach God's Word

Be Prepared

2 Timothy 4:1–2

Say: Between his first and second letters to Timothy, Paul had been arrested (again) and imprisoned in Rome (again). This time, he was facing execution. Because of that, his words in this second letter are particularly moving. Paul intended to pass the mantle to Timothy—his "true son in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2, NLT)—fortifying him for the mission that still lay ahead. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In 2 Timothy 4:1, Paul emphasized the seriousness of his final charge to Timothy: It was made in the presence of God the Father and His Son. There is no higher authority in the universe. To drive that point home, Paul focused on the role of Christ as Judge of the living and the dead. His vivid language draws our attention to the moment we will stand before Jesus when He returns in all His glory.

The charge in verse 2 has five parts: preach, be prepared, correct, rebuke, and encourage. First, "preach the word." This is a foundational requirement for ministry. Earlier in this same letter, Paul reminded Timothy that the Word of God cannot be chained (2:9; although Paul himself was imprisoned) and that a good worker who is approved of God will correctly handle the "word of truth" (verse 15). Proclaiming God's truth is absolutely vital and we must "be prepared" to do so "whether the time is favorable or not" (4:2, NLT; "in season and out of season," KJV; see 1 Peter 3:15).

Resource Packet Item 2: Be Prepared

Distribute the worksheet, and discuss the questions together. Encourage students to take the page home, reflect on their responses, and commit to sharing the gospel whether the timing is convenient or inconvenient.

Timothy was also charged to:

- "Correct" people under his leadership (2 Timothy 4:2, NLT). In view of the false teaching being propagated, substantial correction would have been necessary.

- “Rebuke,” which refers to warning and admonishing people who do not respond to correction.
- “Encourage” (NLT) those who are listening to sound teaching. Everyone needs encouragement in following the right path.

All these tasks are to be done “patiently” and “with good teaching” (NLT). Leadership and cooperation require patience. Correction, rebuke, and encouragement are ongoing tasks of ministry, and the results are never guaranteed.

Discuss

? Do these tasks remind anyone of parenting? Paul often referred to himself as a father in relation to the people he led. How is good ministry like good parenting?

? For those of us who are not in full-time vocational ministry, how do Paul’s instructions apply to us? How should we respond to those who minister to us?

Fulfill Your Ministry

2 Timothy 4:3–5

Say: Following his initial sacred charge, Paul further described the deceptions that caused him to write this letter. This heresy was not a distant, “end-times” threat. It was already happening. In this age between Jesus’ first and second comings—when Jesus is already King but His kingdom is not yet fully come—all believers must keep clear minds and faithfully carry out their ministry. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul described a time when people will not “endure sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:3, KJV) or “listen to sound and wholesome teaching” (NLT). He had clarified in his first letter that “sound doctrine” is “according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:10–11, KJV). This unwillingness to put up with healthy teaching must not deter us from proclaiming the whole gospel. Instead, Paul advised Timothy to “be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth” (2:15, NLT).

Paul also described the response Timothy could expect: “They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3, NLT). Like the Old Testament prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself, Timothy would be rejected by those who were looking for a message more suitable to their tastes. In those days, curious seekers were drawn to the city marketplace for something new; today, they search online.

Paul frequently associated “myths” with false teachers (verse 4; see 1 Timothy 1:3–4; 4:7; Titus 1:14). Some suggest these myths involved the goddess Artemis (see Acts 19:23–34). Regardless, these false teachings appealed to some cultural fascination.

“Keep a clear mind in every situation” (2 Timothy 4:5, NLT) is literally a command to “be sober” (see 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 2:2–4, KJV). This verb indicates someone is keeping

their head rather than succumbing to a mental or spiritual fog. The phrase “endure afflictions” (2 Timothy 4:5, KJV) had already appeared twice before in this letter (1:8, 2:3), emphasizing Paul’s admonition that Timothy endure suffering with him. Writing from prison, Paul was modeling the endurance Timothy would need.

Paul adds, “Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you” (verse 5, NLT). Communicating the gospel means using both actions and words. Each of us should “work at” a consistent lifestyle of sharing the message of Jesus with the people we encounter.

Discuss

? How would you rate the modern-day church’s ability to “endure sound doctrine”?

? How should laypeople go about discovering and developing their God-given ministries (2 Timothy 4:5)?

Part 3—Avoid False Teachers and Their Teachings

False Teachings

Titus 3:8–9

Say: The best strategy for dealing with heresy is to learn to identify it and then keep away from it altogether. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Paul had commissioned Titus to strengthen the churches on the island of Crete and oppose the deception that was being spread there. Having just summarized the good news of Jesus in Titus 3:4–7, Paul now placed special emphasis on the truth of the gospel, demonstrating the stark contrast between what was true and what was false.

Titus was to “insist on these teachings” (verse 8, NLT) or “affirm constantly” (KJV) all the elements of the gospel. Why? “So that all who trust in God will devote themselves to doing good” (NLT). In other words, true teaching promotes good works. Good works sometimes get a “bad rap,” because we know they cannot save us (verse 5). Could Paul make it any plainer than he did in Ephesians 2:8–10? Although they can’t bring salvation, good works are a result of it. The Holy Spirit works through sound teaching to cultivate good works among us.

Paul affirmed that true teachings are “good and beneficial for everyone” (Titus 3:8, NLT). In this one verse, he uses the same adjective (good) to describe the teachings and the actions they produce. These teachings are beneficial, profitable, and advantageous for everyone; they produce good fruit.

The contrast between good teachings (verse 8) and false teachings (verse 9) is stark. False teachings are unprofitable, unbeneficial, and disadvantageous. They are “a waste of time” (NLT; “vain,” KJV) and can take the form of “foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law” (KJV). Bickering and pointless speculation abound. The interest in “genealogies” (KJV) or “spiritual pedigrees” (NLT) Paul mentioned

may be related to branches of Hellenistic Judaism that were concerned with Old Testament lists of ancestry.

Discuss

? Do we sometimes fail to emphasize good works in an effort to avoid “works-based righteousness”? How can we maintain the appropriate balance?

? Why is it harmful to engage in the arguments and speculations of false teachings?

False Teachers

Titus 3:10–11

Say: After warning about the content of false teaching, Paul dealt with those who propagate it. False teachers could not be allowed to continue spreading their unhealthy preoccupations. So Paul instructed Timothy to protect the health of the body of Christ by putting up a barrier between the church and anyone engaged in false teaching. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

The divisiveness of false teachers went beyond honest discussions or minor disagreements about church matters; these people were actively and intentionally undermining the truth of the gospel with their arguments. Titus should give them up to two warnings or admonitions. The offenders could choose to listen to or ignore these good faith efforts at rehabilitation. Paul’s instructions are similar to the pattern Jesus gave for confronting a brother or sister who has sinned (Matthew 18:15–17). In both cases, if someone refused to listen, they were to be rejected. We can see Paul’s pastoral heart in his desire for a redemptive, restorative result. This is the goal of all church discipline. In extreme cases, one prays that separation from the community of believers will somehow cause the offender to turn back to the truth and fellowship they are missing.

Resource Packet Item 3: Dealing with a False Teaching

Distribute the worksheet and discuss its content. Encourage students to talk about ways to apply Paul’s instructions to their lives today.

Discuss

? What steps can be taken to ensure that local church discipline is redemptive rather than punitive?

? What is an appropriate way to voice concern in one’s local church without causing division?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: The best defense against error and falsehood is thorough saturation in the truth of God’s Word. Along with learning and knowing the truth, we must also live out the truth.

Living It Out Ministry in Action

- Read God's Word avidly, training your mind to look for and live out its central truths.
- Expect good deeds to flow from the good teaching you receive and from the lives of those who teach it.
- Identify trustworthy teachers of God's Word and supplement your spiritual diet with their messages.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Speak Only What Comes from God.
Numbers 23:3–12

Tuesday:

Stand against False Prophets.
Jeremiah 23:23–32

Wednesday:

Shepherds Are Held Accountable.
Ezekiel 34:1–10

Thursday:

Jesus Christ Is the Judge.
Matthew 7:15–23

Friday:

Discern the Source of Truth.
Acts 16:16–26

Saturday:

Christians Delivered, False Prophets Condemned.
2 Peter 2:1–9