

## “CHRISTIANS ON HIGH ALERT” 1 Timothy 4:1-10

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Ever since the horrendous terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 our nation has beefed up its security measures.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is responsible for assessing our nation's vulnerabilities.

I checked yesterday, and our national threat level is elevated—yellow, indicating significant risk of terrorist attacks. Orange is higher. It means there's a high risk of terrorist attacks.

That's the threat level for all domestic and international airline flights. If board a plane today, all the people responsible for your safety are on orange alert.

· The section of Paul's letter to Timothy that we're studying today gives a warning at threat level orange.

Paul told Pastor Timothy at Ephesus that the church was at high risk. He told him to watch out because there were people who would infiltrate the church to destroy it.

The warning was specific to that church at that time. But the church today is in the same fallen world, facing the same kinds of threats.

So we must beware of spiritual terrorism in the church.

In America the U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security focuses most of its vigilance on our borders and ports of entry.

It's different in the church. The most serious threats to a church come from inside the church.

The most dangerous threat is people who depart from the faith but stay in the church.

· Listen as I read Paul's warnings:

1. *The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.*
2. *Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. (literally: speaking lies in hypocrisy, having been cauterized as to their own conscience) '*
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 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.*
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.*
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.*
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.*

In 1 Timothy 4:1-10 the Apostle Paul provides some crucial guidelines for maintaining a high level of vigilance in the church.

## **I. ANTICIPATE THE THREAT. 1 Timothy 4:1, 2**

You'd think the church would be the last place on earth where you'd need to be alert to someone mugging you spiritually and robbing you of God's blessings.

But over my many years serving as a pastor I have observed that a church may be the most dangerous place for a Christian.

More people are turned away from Jesus Christ because of the goings-on in some churches, than for any other reason. It hurts deeply to say this.

The Apostle Paul told the Church at Corinth that their meetings did more harm than good. (1 Corinthians 11:17)

- According to Paul, the Spirit of God says we should expect to find people in the church who appear to be sincere Christians, but they are spiritual terrorists.

I'm deeply grateful that not all churches are like that, but it could happen in any church if the believers are not alert.

- Paul warns Timothy to be alert because some will abandon the *'faith'*.

The Greek verb translated *depart from* in v.1 is the word from which we derive the term *apostasy*. It means to deliberately turn away from the truths of Christian faith.

Our enemy the devil packages evil in a most alluring manner and with devilish subtlety. Daniel in the Old Testament had been forcibly immersed into the seductive luxuries of Babylonian society. But he resolved not defile himself.

How did Daniel do it? Three times a day, every day, Daniel got down on his knees and prayed to God, giving thanks.

It was Daniel's priority to maintain a strong relationship with God. He would obey God rather than gratify himself.

- Paul warned Timothy about people in the church who *wandered away* from the faith (1:6).

They neglect God, but they stay in the church. They look fine on the outside, but that's not who they are on the inside

They are "restaurant menu Christians"—the photographer is better than the cook.

Watch out for them. What you see is not what you get.

- About six years before he wrote this letter, Paul addressed the elders of this church at Ephesus where Timothy was now pastor: *'I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from among your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.'* (Acts 20:29-31).

Those who turn away from the faith or "abandon" the faith tend to draw away others with them.

Paul warns Timothy to watch out for hypocritical liars who claim to be true Christians but who distort biblical truth.

Their consciences have been seared (v.2). They have no qualms about destroying the faith of others.

- How can we keep ourselves from drifting away or being led away into this deadly hypocrisy?

In Paul's remarks to those Ephesian elders he also said *'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.'* (Acts 20:28)

The elders/overseers/pastors in a church have a heavy responsibility to our Lord to stop anyone from wreaking havoc on Christ's church. They are accountable to our Lord for this responsibility.

- Hypocrisy is a deadly threat inside a church. The Apostle Paul tells us to watch out for it because it draws others into the deceit.

## II. IDENTIFY THE THREAT. 1 Timothy 4: 3-5

Back in 1976 there was a national health scare called *Legionnaire's Disease*—so named because an outbreak of this mystery disease was traced to an American Legion Convention in Philadelphia. Before the bacterium was identified, paranoia erupted throughout the land. But as soon as people learned what it was, they were no longer terrified.

People continued to die from it, but the mystery was gone. It wasn't as scary. It had been identified!

To find a cure for it, they had to identify it first.

- Have you ever had the negative experience of being in a church where you sense in your spirit that things aren't right? People seem bitter and unhappy and unfriendly.

Most likely, it's the kind of thing Paul warns against here. People have drifted away from the faith, but they've stayed in the church.

- In Ephesus they promoted silly notions with strange rules.

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 know the truth.*

Marriage is one of God's blessings to the human race.

In the beginning God said it is not good for the man to be alone, so God created a female counterpart for him (Genesis 2:18).

Marriage was good at the beginning and it is still good. Anyone who forbids marriage opposes God.

- A philosophical force was beginning to creep into Greek society about this time. It was later called Gnosticism. It seems that its influence was beginning to be felt in the church at Ephesus.

Gnostics taught that all matter is evil; only spirit is good.

The way to become 'spiritual' was to deny yourself physical pleasures, like marriage and certain foods.

Jesus made it clear to a crowd that had gathered around him that eating certain food does not make a person unclean, It's not what goes into us but what comes out of us that can make us unclean (Mark 7:14, 15).

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.*

God created good things for our enjoyment. Let us not call evil what God created as good.

The 19th century Scottish Evangelist Henry Drummond wrote, *'For Christianity not only encourages whatsoever things are lovely, but wars against the whole theory of life which would exclude them..'* (*The Greatest Thing in the World*. p. 80)

True Christianity is life that is full and joyful. Don't let anything threaten God's good gifts

- We must expose threats that are based on lies.

### III. EXPLAIN THE THREAT. 1 Timothy 4:6

What happens to Christians who drift away from the faith?

In Chapter 1 Paul said their lives are shipwrecked. (1:19)

It's a pastor's responsibility to teach the truth, to help people in the church make sure they are genuine Christians (vis. 2 Corinthians 13:5), so that they don't drift away and become shipwrecked in their faith.

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.*

Timothy must *put these things before* the brothers. That's an idiom for the believers. It includes the sisters.

The language Paul used meant to *place* a firm foundation *under* them (*hupotithemi*).

· Paul says a pastor is a servant of Christ. This means pastors must give account to Christ Jesus.

If Pastor Timothy did exactly what Paul told him to do in this letter, you can count on it that some people in the church would get upset; particularly those who turned away from the faith but stayed in the church.

Only once in my 36-plus years as a pastor have I found it necessary to tell a man in a church that I did not report to him for my preaching, but to my Lord. He tried to order me not to preach on something in the second and third services that he had heard me say in the first service. He said it was too severe.

· It's a pastor's responsibility to expose and explain serious threats to the church—especially if some of those threats are in the church.

### IV. ELIMINATE THE THREAT. 1 Timothy 4:7-8

The best way to deal with a threat is to eliminate it.

If it's a *hypocritical lie*, you don't debate it. You reject it.

7. *Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.*

Paul tells Pastor Titus on Crete the same thing. '*... pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth.*' (Titus 1:14)

When it comes to religious and spiritual matters people can be amazingly susceptible to ridiculous drivel.

A few years ago, somewhere in Tennessee someone noticed a Cinnamon Roll in a bakery that bore a striking resemblance to the face of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. (This was before her death in 1997) So the folks at the bakery shellacked the pastry and put it on display, and the place became an impromptu shrine to Mother Theresa. People made a pilgrimage to the bakery, as if being in the presence of this crusty icon could bring divine favor upon them!

I don't know what happened to the roll. Maybe they sold it on e-bay.

I must confess that I too have made frequent pilgrimages to a bakery, but for an entirely different reason.

· Religious people fall for some silly tales. And some of these tales or myths seem so spiritual.

I've known people who don't want to be baptized unless it's in the River Jordan in Israel, where Jesus was baptized. It's perfectly fine to be baptized in the Jordan. But if Christians think it's going to make their baptism more effective, that's pathetic religious

poppycock. They're not ready to be baptized. Being baptized in the Jordan is no better than a church baptistery or a Minnesota lake or in someone's Jacuzzi.

It's not about *where* you are baptized. It's all about *why* you are baptized.

That's a relatively harmless myth. But some silly religious tales are deadly, like threatening little children that if they misbehave, God won't love them anymore. That's a lethal tale; a diabolical myth!

Paul told Timothy to have nothing to do with the tommyrot that reduces Christian faith to fanciful magic.

*7b. 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.*

Physical exercise is of some value—literally, '*of a little value.*'

People can have buffed bodies and sick souls.

Some people spend a fortune that to look buffed and to prevent wrinkles. They don't want their body to look like Buddha or their face like a cinnamon roll.

But it has value only for this earthly life. In my opinion, it's horribly presumptuous for anyone to declare that if someone is not physically fit and trim, he or she has a spiritual problem. In some cases that may be symptomatic of an emotional or spiritual problem. More likely, there is no spiritual issue involved at all.

But some of the most mature, loving, godly people I have ever met have had an ongoing struggle with maintaining a healthy weight. I've known others who devour a prodigious volume of decadent foods and never gain an ounce. Actually I envy them.

Jesus told a story about a man who invested all his affection, time, and energy in temporal things, but he forfeited his own soul (Luke 12:13-21). He attached too much value to things that are only of little value.

When Benjamin Franklin was seven years old a visitor gave him a few coins. Shortly after that Benjamin saw another boy playing with a whistle. He gave the boy all the money for the whistle. He played the whistle all day and enjoyed it until he discovered that he'd given the boy four times as much as the whistle was worth. Instantly the whistle lost its charm.

Later Franklin generalized this principle; when he saw someone neglecting his family for business or political popularity, he'd say, '*He pays too much for his whistle.*'

· Lots of church folk pay too much for their whistle. They profess to belong to Jesus Christ, but their values betray their captivity to things material and temporal. They ignore or reject the eternal in favor of the temporal.

They need to recalibrate their values.

· God's word says we should not allow stuff of little value or no value to captivate our interest and affection. What is valuable and deserves our attention is being godly.

## **V. DEBUNK THE THREAT. 1 Timothy 4:9-10**

De-claw and de-fang the threat. Don't let it intimidate you.

*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.*

Paul uses this formula that we've seen twice already to make an important point. (v.9).

As Christians, our hope is in the living God, and we don't allow the devil's lies to scare us or to stifle our joy.

· Just as athletes spend their energy to win a race, so Paul was giving all his efforts to things of eternal value (v.8).  
As Christians our hope is in God. We don't find security in physical health or fitness, or in material stuff.  
If that's what makes you feel safe, then you go to pieces if you get a pain you didn't have yesterday.

· Paul speaks of God as the Savior of all people? (v.10)  
Does he mean that in the end all will be saved? No!  
God is the Savior of all people, because Jesus Christ died for all people.  
But sinners must believe in Christ alone for salvation. *'And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.'* (Acts 4:12)  
God is the Savior of all, but not all are saved because not all believe.

· The purpose for which Paul and Timothy were toiling and striving was that people all over the world would hear the gospel of salvation, accept it and receive eternal life.  
No hypocritical lie would intimidate them or distract them from what they knew to be true.

The Bible has divine authority for Christ's church.  
The Bible tells us to expect the church to be threatened by the evil one.  
The devil's strategy is to use people to neutralize or to poison the church of the living God from the inside, and to do so with devilish subtlety.  
That's where we must exercise our highest vigilance.  
Christ's church is supposed to be a community that celebrates life and enjoys God's blessings, not a collection of negative people walled into a dark dungeon by their rules and regulations.  
Is it time to re-calibrate and redirect the focus of your life?