

“Everything Created by God Is Good” (1 Timothy 4:1–5)

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When you have young kids in your home, you find yourself saying certain things quite frequently. One of those sayings is, “Knock it off!” That’s a favorite saying of my wife. My most often frequent saying is probably quite simply, “Stop it!” There’s another saying I have: “That’s not a toy!” I might say that whenever my sons start to play with something that catches their eye, like a computer or a hammer or a staple gun. Okay, I’m joking with that last item. My sons are now at an age when they’re naturally curious, and there are times when playing with something that’s not a toy can be destructive and even dangerous.

My wife used to allow our kids to play with some items in a drawer in the kitchen. It’s kind of our culinary junk drawer, where we store anything from measuring cups and measuring spoons to spatulas and other assorted kitchen tools. About three and a half years ago, I found Caleb playing with a crinkle cutter. It’s a little tool that makes crinkle-cut slices of potatoes and cucumbers and other vegetables. It’s designed for a purpose: it makes these crinkle-shaped cuts. It doesn’t do anything else. Caleb was running the edge of it along my nice, black, lacquer-finished piano. Now there is a nice, thin, long scratch made by the end of the crinkle-cutter. I guess I should be thankful that his brother doesn’t have a crinkle-cut finger. But I wasn’t thankful at the time. My boy had used something in a way that didn’t line up with its purpose.

Now, that’s not very serious; there are worse things than a scratch in a piano. But there are times when a tool, when used as a toy, could become quite dangerous. And there are times when things that are not used according to their purposes become very dangerous, even deadly. Think about the drugs we call opioids. Many of us have heard that we’re living in the midst of an opioid crisis or epidemic. Opioids are the kind of drugs that trace their origins back to opium, which is made from the opium poppy, a flowering plant. Opium is what makes morphine, a powerful painkiller. It’s also what can be processed into synthetic opioids, prescription painkillers that help people with acute and/or chronic pain. It’s a good thing to have painkillers. Seven years ago, I had a herniated disc in my lower back. The L5/S1 disc impinged on the sciatic nerve on my right side, which created a great amount of pain in my butt, hip, and leg. I spent the better part of three months lying down on the floor. I also took painkillers for three months. They didn’t eliminate the pain, but they reduced it greatly. When I had surgery, I was given some

morphine afterwards. I have seen people dying on morphine, which eased the pain of their last days, hours, and minutes. Anything that is safe and can reduce this kind of pain is a good thing.

But some people get addicted to prescription painkillers. Millions of people misuse prescription painkillers. Millions in the world are using them illegally. And thousands die from overdoses every year. In 2016, there were 42,249 people who died of opioid overdoses.¹ Of those, 20,145 died from synthetic opioids (other than methadone) and 14,427 died of natural or semi-synthetic opioids. Opium can also be processed into heroine, an illegal drug, which killed 15,446 people in 2016.²

So, something that occurs in nature, the opium poppy, can be produced into chemicals that relieve pain and suffering. Those chemicals, when taken in excess, can also kill. And the same natural thing can be processed into a chemical that is illegal, highly addictive, destructive, and deadly.

This reveals an important biblical truth. Everything that exists in nature can be used for good or for bad purposes. God made these things good. But when they are misused, the result is very bad. We can misuse things by using them in a way contrary to God's design for them. We can misuse things by making an idol of them. And we can also misuse good things by avoiding them and telling others not to use them.

We see all of this in the passage that we'll look at today, 1 Timothy 4:1–5. Three months ago, we started to look at the letter of 1 Timothy, a book of the New Testament. It's a letter written by the apostle Paul to his younger associate, Timothy. Paul left Timothy in the city of Ephesus while he was gone. He wanted Timothy to make sure that the church in Ephesus was healthy. In particular, he wanted Timothy to protect the church from false teaching. In today's passage, we see some of the content of their wrong teaching. So, with that in mind, here's what we're going to do today. I'm going to first read the passage, explain what it means, and then think a bit more deeply about how we can rightly appreciate and use the things that God has created.

Here is 1 Timothy 4:1–5:

¹ 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,
² through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, ³ who forbid

¹ <http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-opioid-overdose-deaths-20180329-htlstory.html>

² <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.³

Paul says that the Holy Spirit has indicated that in “later times” people will depart from the truth faith and teach false things. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the one God; he is the one who empowers some people to speak the word of God. He is the one who led Paul to write this letter. And he spoke through apostles and prophets to indicate that in “later times,” there would be false teachers.

What does Paul mean by “later times”? Well, he means now. And I don’t mean the twenty-first century. I mean the time between Jesus’ first and second comings. If you look carefully at the New Testament, you’ll see this. For example, Paul writes something a bit similar in his second letter to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 3:1–5, he writes,

¹ But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.
² For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³ heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, ⁴ treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ⁵ having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.

I think that people have always been lovers of self and money, they’ve always been proud, and so forth. But if Paul meant that people would only be this way in the period right before Jesus returned to earth, he wouldn’t say, “Avoid such people.” Timothy wouldn’t have to worry about those people, because they would come much later in time. So, the “last days” and the “later times” are the long period between Jesus’ first and last coming.

Now, what prophecy is Paul referring to? Peter and Jude make a reference to prophecies about false teachers (2 Pet. 3:1–3; Jude 17–18). Jesus said that in the time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in the year 70, “many will fall away” and “many false prophets will arise and lead many astray” (Matt. 24:10–11). Paul may also be referring to something he said earlier in time, recorded in the book of Acts. While speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus (the same city where Timothy was located), he said,

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:29–30).

Paul knew that false teachers would come, now they are in this church, and now they are leading people to depart from the faith. Literally, these people have apostatized.⁴ These false teachers are insincere liars, which means that they know they are teaching false things. They're not just making honest mistakes. They have consciences that are seared, which likely means that they are branded. It's possible that their branding means they are marked as belonging to Satan, the devil. That would make sense of the why they are associated with "deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons." That may sound extreme, but it reminds us that all lies ultimately come from Satan, "the father of lies" (John 8:44). The Bible teaches us that there is more to reality than what we can see. There are spirits, both angels and demons, who are at work to either support or fight against God's plans.

False teachers are influenced by Satan, and they can appear to look godly, though their message is wrong. In 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote of other false teachers. About them, he wrote,

¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

So, what was this "teaching of demons" that these false teachers taught? Was it some secret occult practice? Was it teaching people to bow down before some shrine or statue of a god? Was it the first-century equivalent of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll"? No, not at all. These teachers "forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." That's surprising. They were telling people not to get married—and probably to be celibate. They were also telling people not to eat certain foods. They were probably trying to tell people to maintain the dietary laws found in the Old Testament (Leviticus 11). I say that because these same false teachers had an incorrect understanding of the Old Testament law, something Paul mentioned in the first chapter of this letter (1 Tim. 1:3–11).

⁴ The phrase "will depart from" is a translation of ἀποστήσονται (*apostēsontai*).

In short, it seems like they taught that certain practices could lead people astray, that marriage, perhaps because of the issue of sex, might somehow be inherently bad, that eating certain foods might corrupt people. We would think that false teachers would teach people to go have all the sex they want and eat all the foods they want. But this is quite the opposite.

Yet these false teachers were wrong. “God created [food] to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” The problem isn’t marriage or certain foods. The problem, really, is inside of us, not the created things that we find in the world.

To understand this, we need to have a grasp of the story of the Bible, or what we might call a basic biblical worldview. To get a quick handle on that story, we need to remember four words: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

First, there is creation. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). When God made things, he saw that they were good (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). There is no hint of created things, or physical things, being bad. God ordered and designed the material world to function in a good way. Other philosophies or religions teach that material things are somehow worse than so-called “spiritual” or immaterial things. But this isn’t what we see in the Bible. The goal of the biblical story is not to escape from the material world.

Second, there is the fall. Something bad happened, something that distorts us and our experience of this world. The first human beings turned away from God. They didn’t trust him and his word. They didn’t listen to his commandments. They believed the lie that God was keeping good things from them. They didn’t accept God’s design for them and his world. As a result, the power of rebellion that we call sin invaded the world. This created a separation between God and human beings, but it also creates a separation between human beings, and within human beings. There is something broken in us. There is something broken in the material world, too. But that doesn’t mean that the stuff that God created is inherently bad.

Jesus taught us what is wrong with us. He said, “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him” (Mark 7:15). Then he said,

“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him,¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him.

²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:18b–23).

What is wrong with us is our hearts, our disordered desires. Those disordered desires lead us to commit sins, wrong actions. The things that God made have right uses, but we end up using things the wrong way. And because we have fouled up God’s good creation, and because God wants to restore his good creation, God has every right to evict us from his good creation forever. In other words, he has every right to condemn us. That’s bad news.

But there’s good news. And that is redemption. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God sent his unique Son, the second Person of the Trinity, who became a man, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is therefore truly God and truly man. Jesus came to fulfill God’s purposes for humanity. He is the perfect image bearer of God, the perfect representative, the perfect human ruler, the perfect worshiper, the perfect lover of God and lover of other people, the perfect Son of God. The fact that Jesus became a real man shows that the material world is not inherently bad. It shows that created things can be perfect. Though Jesus was and is perfect, he was rejected, betrayed, arrested, tortured, and killed. He never did anything wrong to deserve such treatment. But people hated him and didn’t believe him. And yet this was all God’s plan to put the sins of his people on his Son’s shoulders, and it was the Son’s plan to bear the righteous judgment of sin on behalf of those who trust him. All who believe that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and did what the Bible says he did are forgiven of their sins, adopted as God’s children, and granted eternal life. People who trust Jesus receive the Bible as the word of God and try to live their lives according to what the Bible says we should do in these “last days.”

The end of the is the restoration of the universe. In the end, God’s people won’t live in “heaven.” They will live in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1), a new creation. It will be a physical world, a place where there is real food and there will be a real marriage, though not between mere human beings. The real marriage is between God and his people, Jesus and his church. This is a metaphor, of course; not all that occurs within a human marriage occurs with the divine marriage. But it captures something of the beauty, exclusivity, faithfulness, and love of the relationship that God has with his people.

So, the story of the Bible teaches us that created things aren't inherently bad. Instead, it teaches that sinful people have a way of failing to use the things of God's creation rightly. We fail when we distort God's good gifts, using them for wrong purposes. When God says, "That's not a toy!" we should listen. He knows better than we do. We fail when we make those gifts into an idol, something that is ultimate in our lives, an object of worship. Today, when people take one aspect of creation and build their lives around it, instead of building their lives around God, they don't think they're worshipping. They don't think that thing, whatever it is, is an idol. But that's really what it is. It is the functional object of their worship. Yet we were made to worship God alone. We also fail when we act as though God's good gifts are inherently bad.

We can misuse anything. We can turn anything into an idol. And we can overcorrect by avoiding good things.

It's not likely that we'll do this with food, but it's still possible to make that mistake today. People misuse food by eating too much of it, or by eating too much of things that should be eaten in moderation, like desserts. People can turn food into an idol when their lives revolve around gourmet food, or turn to food for comfort and security and happiness, or when they become obsessed about what they eat (probably for health reasons). I'm not sure that people forbid eating certain foods for religious reasons, though there are orthodox Jews and Muslims who abide by certain dietary codes.

We can do this with alcohol. This is what Psalm 104 says about wine:

- ¹⁴ You [God] cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth
¹⁵ and wine to gladden the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine
and bread to strengthen man's heart (Ps. 104:14–15).

Israelites were allowed to have "strong drink" when they celebrated feasts in Jerusalem (Deut. 14:26). And the new creation is described as being a "feast of well-aged wine" (Isa. 25:6). Jesus ever turned water into wine (John 2), so it can't be inherently bad.

But what do we do with alcohol? Many people drink too much, and this causes great destruction and death. Some people can't live without it. Others then turn around and overreact, saying that all drinking is inherently sinful. Now, it's true that the Bible says that drunkenness is wrong (Eph. 5:18 is but one example). But Scripture doesn't forbid all drinking.

We can do this with marriage. Marriage is a good gift created by God. But we misuse it in many ways. God designed marriage to be a lifelong union of one man and one woman. Yet we redefine marriage; many ancient societies had polygamy: one man had many wives. Marriage is meant to be exclusive, so that the husband and wife do not have sex with anyone else; many people have committed adultery. Of course, there is the problem of divorce. And now there is the problem of redefining marriage, so that it's not necessarily a union of one man and one woman.

Some people create an idol of marriage. They believe that their spouse will complete them. They believe their spouse will fulfill all their desires and dreams. Spoiler alert: the best spouse will never, ever do that.

Very few people forbid marriage for religious reasons. One group, the Shakers, did. But it's hard to keep a religious movement growing when you don't have marriages that produce babies. The last remaining Shaker community in America is located in New Gloucester, Maine, and it has only two members.

We certainly do misuse sex. It is a good gift, meant to be experienced only within marriage. Yet we have it outside of marriage. We reduce other human beings to "sex objects," as things to be consumed. We turn sex into an idol, the ultimate pleasure or experience. And some people can give the impression that sex is somehow inherently bad, though it's not.

We can do the same thing with work. We misuse work when we don't work, or when we mistreat people who work for us. Work is distorted wherever slavery exists. Work becomes an idol for some people; they find their identity and satisfaction in life through work. Some people act as if work is a necessary evil, something that only exists because sin exists. But work existed before sin entered into the world. God gave Adam a job to do (Gen. 2:15). So, work is not inherently bad.

The same could be said of money or possessions. We misuse money by spending it on the wrong things, or by stealing. We're supposed to use things and love people, but we turn this around and use people and love things. Wealth is a great idol. It makes the false promise to us that if only we were rich, we would be happy and secure. Some people then act as if having money, or owning anything, is evil. But possessions are gifts from God. They can be appreciated. They can be used for God's glory. We use money to fund ministry. Any church, any missionary endeavor needs some level of funding. We can use our possessions to bless others. For example, we can use our homes to house guests, to have people over to get to know them, to provide a safe

place for our family. A home can become an idol when we put too much money into it, when all our thoughts and energies and desires are wrapped up in having the perfect house. But a house is a good thing if used rightly.

As you can see, we can misuse anything. We take the good things that God has made and use them wrongly, or turn them into ultimate things, which then become the center of our lives. That place should be reserved for God alone. If we overreact and then refuse to use the gifts that God has given to us, or if we refuse to enjoy good things, we're committing another error. We are denying the good things that God has given to us. When we reject the gift, we're rejecting the Giver.

Our only hope is redemption. Our only hope is turning to Jesus for our salvation. Only Jesus can reconcile us to God. Only Jesus provides forgiveness of sins. And only Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit, who starts to change our distorted desires. The Spirit can rearrange our loves so that we enjoy God's gifts and use them rightly, the way that God designed them to be used. Without God's help, we turn tools into toys, and toys into tools. Without the Spirit, we turn people into things, and things into idols. But when we come to Jesus, and when we rely on the Holy Spirit and seek to obey God's instructions for life, we can begin to use the things that God has made in a right way. We can then enjoy a meal and not only think, "This steak is great!" Instead, we'll also think, "How great is the God who made cows that we can turn into steak!" That may seem silly, but it's not. The difference is big. If we see all of reality as designed by God, we can thank God for his good gifts and use them rightly.

If you're here today and you don't know Jesus, I urge you turn to him. Only he makes us right with God. And when we have a relationship with him, our vision of life starts to change. We start to see things rightly. We start to see everything with reference to God. He alone gives us eyes to see the truth and the power to live according to the truth.

Christians, remember that Paul says that "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer." Let's thank God for those good things. They were made good, so let's not call God a liar by believing they're not. And they're made holy through God's word and prayer. That is, the gospel message—this message of Jesus that we talk about—shows us how all things can be holy, consecrated to God. And when we pray to God, thanking him, asking him to help us to use his gifts wisely, all things can be enjoyed in the right way. Everything, even enjoying a meal, can be

an act of worship. Elsewhere, Paul says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Our final hope is the restoration of the world, the transformation of the creation. It will be a feast, a world of good gifts, the greatest of which is God—his presence and his blessing. The prophet Isaiah said,

- ⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
- ⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
- ⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
- ⁹ It will be said on that day,
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (Isa. 25:6–9).