

**1 Timothy 4:1-10; 6:17-19**  
**(Joel 2:21-27; Luke 10:21-24)**  
**“If It Is Received with Thanksgiving”**

## **Introduction**

On this final Sunday of the church year, as we approach the celebration of Thanksgiving and the beginning of Advent season, I invite you to turn your thoughts to a text that has become a sort of touchstone for me. I tend to swing between such a celebrative view of life and enjoyment of God’s good gifts that my heart can become insensitive to the reality of sin and brokenness in my own heart and in the lives of those around me, leading then to a swing back to an austere, ascetic view of things, resisting too much enjoyment of things here in this world’s passing show and seeking to set my face like a flint toward eternity. Plenty of Scriptures can be marshaled in support of either view, and so I find myself returning to this text that presents such a sound and balanced view of spiritual maturity.

Here, Paul warns his young friend Timothy against a false understanding of spirituality that has always been with us, and that finds an echo in all the great religions of the world, including Judaism and Christianity. It has the appearance of wisdom and holiness, but in the end misses the mark of true spirituality and leads, not to a rich and full life of loving gratitude to God and generosity to others, but rather to a pinched and cramped view of things that is always critical, never celebrative, always complaining, never rejoicing. It is seductive because it has the appearance of godliness, but in the end it lacks the power to bring health to our souls because it does not flow from loving gratitude to God for his good gifts to us.

Paul describes such a false view of things in the opening verses of 1 Timothy 4, and he then goes on to counter that view with the description of a healthy spirituality that leads to healthy living and to a glad and generous heart.

## **Body**

### **1. An unhealthy spirituality refuses to celebrate and enjoy God’s gifts (4:1-3).**

The particular manifestation of this unhealthy spirituality addressed by Paul in this letter to his young protégé, Timothy, had to do with the denial of two of our most basic hungers: the hunger for food and the hunger for physical intimacy. While the Scriptures warn us repeatedly not to be bound and enslaved by such natural hungers, and not to pursue their gratification in an ungodly manner, it is a false spirituality that says that such desires are themselves unholy and to be denied at all cost. And yet, in every era of church history, there have been those who have taught that true holiness consists in

the denial of all such desires and in living an ascetic life of constant fasting and sexual celibacy. Many throughout the history of the church have spoken of marriage as a sort of necessary evil meant only for the procreation of children, but not for the pleasure and joy of physical intimacy between a husband and wife. Some wrongly trace such views back to the apostle Paul.

At the heart of this deadly spirituality is the failure to see this world as God's creation in which he delights, through which he continues to reveal himself, and which will one day be delivered from its bondage to entropy and made new, along with God's people. In other words, salvation is not merely personal for believers, but is cosmic in scope: new heavens and a new earth. We look forward to an eternity, not as disembodied spirits, but as resurrected, embodied souls, dwelling forever with our Lord, the God-man Jesus, who even now reigns at the Father's side in glorified human flesh.

What then do the Scriptures mean when they seem to say that the world is evil and to be shunned? What does the apostle John mean when he says (1 John 2:15f), "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him"? Well, the verses that immediately follow explain what he means. He is inveighing against what he calls "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life." We are not to lust after the things of this world so as to put our hope and confidence in them, to trust them to give meaning, significance and joy to our lives. We are not to turn God's good gifts into idols.

What then is the antidote to such an unhealthy view of things?

## **2. A healthy spirituality receives and enjoys God's good gifts (4:4).**

The Bible, from beginning to end, and especially our Lord Jesus and his apostles, teach us that we are to enjoy the gifts of our Father God and to receive them with thanksgiving. In fact, both Jesus and Paul were frequently in trouble with religious leaders for not being sufficiently careful about keeping kosher and observing the various rules that surrounded the enjoyment of God's gifts. Jesus even spoke of being called "a wine drinker and glutton" because he went to wedding feasts and ate and drank in public with people known to be sinners.

The Scriptures teach a sacramental view of the universe, where everything God has made, including – and I should say *especially* – the human body, is created to reveal the grace and beauty of God, and to enable us to taste and see that the Lord is good. This creation that God once declared very good, but which has been wounded by our rebellion against him, will once again be made perfect when God makes all things new. God has chosen, quite literally, to make our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit, and to live and walk the earth through us. Through us, he is in the process of reclaiming the world for

himself. We do not know him apart from what he has made, but rather through the stuff of life: his written Word that tells us the story of his mighty acts in history, preeminently culminating in the life of his Son – his life, death, and victory over death. Here is where we meet the living God, not in the mists of speculation and mystical experience.

### **3. A healthy spirituality will lead to a healthy and balanced life (4:6-10).**

Paul describes three aspects of this healthy and balanced life: a trained mind, a trained body, a trained spirit.

*A trained mind:* A healthy spirituality is grateful to God for giving us his Word where we can learn the story of his redeeming love written across the pages of history as seen and interpreted through the lens of the gospel of Christ. As we are “trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine,” we can see how far we have fallen from God’s purposes for us. We can see what God has done to redeem us, what it means to be born of the Spirit and to live as God’s children who have been delivered from what Paul elsewhere calls “this present evil age” and to be delivered into the Kingdom of his Son. Our minds are no longer governed by the latest news. We are not tossed about by the winds of current events or driven by the spirit of the age. We are being made whole and sound by the living and abiding Word of God.

*A trained body:* Paul is briefest on this point and really uses it in contrast to his next point about a trained spirit, but we should not miss the fact that he does admit value to training the body. He does not emphasize this, for natural human vanity and the desire for health and happiness conspire to make most of us place too much value on physical health. So he warns us that bodily training is only “of *some* value,” because it only concerns this present age, and in the end can not help us survive our own death. Nevertheless, because God made our bodies, and because the health of our bodies can affect the health of our minds and emotions, he does give a place in a healthy spirituality to training one’s body. Of course, we must not forget that, for Paul, physical training was not so much about defining one’s abdominal muscles as it was about making one’s body obedient to the pursuit of holiness. In other words, he sought to master the passions and desires of his body so that they would not be able to master him, but would rather serve him in his quest for health and godliness (1 Corinthians 9:27).

*A trained spirit:* The quest is for godliness, of which Paul writes, “godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” And so he writes, “For to this end we toil and strive.” Here is the heart of the matter: we were created in God’s image and likeness, and in salvation it is God’s aim to restore us to that image and likeness. For this he has given us the means of grace, and we are “to toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is Savior of all people, especially of

those who believe.” Is this the longing of your heart? If not, you are doomed to disappointment, because anything else that you seek will in the end fail to satisfy you. You were made for this, and will waste your life pursuing a vapor, an illusion, a chimera that vanishes as you approach it.

#### **4. A healthy spirituality will lead to a generous and grateful heart (6:17-19).**

Finally, if you pursue a healthy spirituality, enjoying God’s good gifts in the ways that he has prescribed, giving him praise, setting your hope, not “on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy,” then your heart will begin to fill with love for God and for others, and you will find yourself desiring to “do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure ... as a good foundation for the future” and enabling you in the present to “take hold of that which is truly life.”

In other words, when you begin to give thanks from the heart to God for his goodness to you, you will want to show his love to others through generosity of your time and gifts and resources. You will realize that you were made for this, and that by trying to hold on to things, you have been losing any possibility of truly enjoying them. The greatest gifts are those we give away, because we were made in the image and likeness of the one who came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

### **Conclusion**

I hope that this coming Thursday each of you will be able to gather with friends around a table laden with food, enjoying one another in a circle of love and laughter, giving thanks to God for the freedom and prosperity that we have so long enjoyed as a nation. But I hope that you also will remember – not just in passing, but continuing into the days ahead – those who spent the holiday alone, hungry for food or for companionship, hungry for meaning, hungry for hope, hungry for love. Remember that Christ came into the world to meet such needs, and has left his ministry to us.

God help us in all the seasons of life to consecrate ourselves anew, giving thanks to God from the heart, resolved to “do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share,” thus taking “hold of that which is truly life.”