

## *The Good Life*

Sunday 14 February 2010 – Rev Lance Thomas

1 Timothy 4:1-10

A mother said to her son in the middle of one of those parent/teenager conversations, 'do you know the difference between being conscious and having a conscience?' 'Sure I do' said the boy, 'conscious is when you are aware of something and conscience is when you wish you weren't'.

There is a programme playing on television 9:30pm Tuesdays, at the moment. It's presented by Nigel Latta, a clinical psychologist and author of the Politically Incorrect Parenting show. It's not that show but the Beyond the Darklands series I am referring to. This is most uncomfortable television. It looks at the lives of New Zealand's most horrendous murderers. One of the common denominators pretty well across all the stories Latta presents is a staggering lack of conscience and compassion.

Today's scripture is taken from Paul's first letter to Timothy and in this part of the letter he is instructing Timothy on false teaching, the reason for it, how to discern it and how to counter it. Maybe a little surprisingly, conscience is at the heart of Paul's words on the destructive power of false teaching. He starts by saying 'the Spirit clearly says', by that he means the word of God as the Spirit illuminates it, tells us, 'that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits'.

The last days or the latter times, is the time between Jesus Resurrection and his coming again. The time between what was and the Golden age to come. Some look for indications of end times, wars, rumours of wars, famines etc as signs of end times coming, but generally speaking end times is a season and we are in that season. And have been for 2000 years. The characteristic of end times is strife, struggle and conflict between good and evil.

Paul is telling Timothy that his (Timothy's) struggle with false teachers in Ephesus is a spiritual struggle.

As we grow in our journey with Christ we become more and more aware of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that gives us peace in times of conflict or confusion, comfort in times of grief, words to say, often powerful words that come not from us, and sometimes even the wisdom to know when to say nothing. The Spirit that brings the words of scripture alive to us and through them reveals the heart of God to us. This powerful Spirit working for good, even through us. The good of the world. What we less often articulate is that there is a spiritual dimension that seeks not the promotion of good, but in fact the destruction of good. Deceiving spirits and things taught by demons, in the language of Paul's day. 'Some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.'

Paul is pretty angry about these people. I mentioned the Darklands stories. The impression I get is that Paul puts false teachers in the same category as those who qualify for the Darklands programme. Our first reaction may be to say that's a bit tough. But if you think about it, false teachers are denying people access to eternal life. They are demons, controlled by deceiving spirits, hypocritical liars.

If we work backwards through this part of Paul's teaching we can see the cause, the process that leads to, in this case, a teacher becoming the agent of evil rather than good.

And the starting place is the conscience. Paul refers to the seared conscience. This has sometimes been interpreted as the branded conscience, like the practise of branding slaves and animals, having the mark of Satan burned, seared into the conscience. The stamp of ownership so to speak. I don't think Paul's reference here is to searing in the sense of branding. I think there is more sense in the medical context of the day, where wounds were seared, cauterised. When skin, a nerve or a superficial tumour is cauterised it is destroyed by burning and so becomes insensitive. In the same way Paul is saying a cauterised conscience has been anaesthetised, even deadened. This is not an instant process

however. One writer puts it in this way. 'By constantly arguing with conscience, stifling its warnings and muffling its bell, its voice is smothered and eventually silenced.'

There is a progression from the highly active conscience to the dead conscience of Nigel Latta's subjects or Paul's false teachers.

On Tuesday we had a man come looking for someone with jumper leads. I usually have a set on my car, Anna White was in the office, she usually has leads in her car, a lady that had an appointment with me, usually has jumper leads in her car. None of us had leads. I thought what the heck. I took the guy down to the Warehouse and bought a set of leads. We went around to his place, started the car and I gave him the jumper leads. On Wednesday his partner comes into the Church and grabs a food parcel. A little time later he comes asking for a parcel. The ladies on the food bank said, sorry, you guys have already had one, but they gave him some bread anyway. He happened to come in just as the food bank team were unloading food. There was a tray of eggs put aside for someone else in genuine need. Without anyone noticing, the gentleman helped himself to a whole tray of eggs on the way out. When they realised it the food bank ladies tried to catch up with him. Perhaps luckily for him they didn't find him. I suspect even if they had caught up with him, he would have genuinely experienced no sense of guilt. A conscience on the way to being anaesthetised. We know that the battle with conscience starts at a much less dramatic level. It's only a little lie, not much exaggeration. No one will notice. It's not hurting anyone else. They deserved it. And so on as we enter into debate with, and often dismiss, the voice of conscience.

Paul's argument is that the searing of the conscience is the first step, the doorway to opening oneself up to captivity by a spiritual dimension, a demon, that deals in destruction and death rather than growth and life. And Paul says, these people know what they are doing but they have no conscience. They are not murderers, rapists, robbers – they are teachers, but they are teaching a doctrine that violates, steals from and ultimately extinguishes the life of the Spirit.

Paul then moves on to 'how'. How do we discern what is false teaching? In Ephesus the conflict which Timothy faced was with a group we would call pre-Gnostics. Greatly influenced by Greek philosophy, they argued a separation between the physical and the spiritual. The physical world was grubby and evil, the spiritual was pure and good. The physical was to be denied and subdued and the spiritual to be embraced and released in fullness.

This belief had all sorts of theological outcomes, the denial of the humanity of Christ for example, but also heaps of practical expression. Sex was evil, marriage just encouraged sexual activity, therefore it was forbidden. Food just literally fed the body, there was great spiritual benefit in denying the body or anything physical. This led to some of the extreme ascetic practises of hermits who lived alone in the desert, denying any physical indulgence they could. Just enough to keep alive. It certainly led to the elevation of vegetarianism and virginity as high spiritual callings. Paul's argument is not with the stupidity of all this, rather the denial of what is plainly true in scripture. God created all, physical and spiritual and it is all good. To be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. How can we despise marriage let alone forbid it, when God instituted it? How can anybody command abstinence from certain foods, when God created them to be received with thanksgiving?

This is not a blanket statement that everything is good. There is much that has come into a fallen world that is not of God. The drug P is not good, it's a creation, not of God, but of a fallen world. Much that passes as morally okay is not ordained by God but is the product of a conscience seared world.

Nevertheless, one sure sign of false teaching is the denial of what God ordains is good. I was given a copy of two very good Herald articles that draw into question the scientific support behind the plans to copy, in New Zealand, the bus advert campaign with the message, there is probably no God, is false teaching.

Claims that there is no such thing as truth – false.

Claims that all paths lead to God – false.

Claims of spiritual power and personal authority beyond the authority of scripture – false.

The test of any teaching is, is this consistent with the Word of God conveyed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

The other test is in the life of the teacher. Paul is addressing Timothy, but it is a message that applies to us all. You have been brought up in the truths of the faith, good teaching, express these truths in the way you live. The old wives tales, the godless myths he refers to, is a practise by some in the early church of studying and creating stories and myths around the ancient biblical characters. Not so much harmful but a waste of time in terms of gospel living. Use your time well. Become a living expression of the true teaching. How is that done? By training and discipline. 'Train yourself to be godly. 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'.

Sandra and I spent a week at Orewa in our holidays. Every evening hundreds and hundreds of people go walking on the beach, looking after their health. You too may be among those who get out early morning to run or walk for fitness. Heaps of people go to the gym. I believe some people are even careful about what they eat. Physical discipline is of some value, says Paul. But nothing compared to training in godliness.

We are talking about being familiar with God's word in Scripture (E100)

We are talking about prayer.

We are talking about fellowshiping together .

We are talking about deliberate effort. Sometimes as hard as getting out of bed on a frosty morning and going for a run.

But the results are a fullness of living, that testifies to the truth of the Gospel we believe. Protect your conscience, it is the tool the Spirit of God uses to guide your steps on a godly path. When the conscience is ignored, seared, anaesthetised, the spirit of this world finds a useable subject. The Gospel is clear, in these end times, we are in a struggle between good and evil.

The opposition to good is often very subtle. It's not just manifest in the Darklands selection, it often comes in the form of false teaching.

False teaching can be discerned by the Scripture test, is it consistent with the nature of the God knowable in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

The evidence of both false and true teaching is in the lives of those who believe. You are recipients of the truth, train yourself up in that truth.

And the good life, the God life you manifest, above all else, will bear witness to the truth.