

The sermon

Intro

In my last year of seminary in Maryland I worked at UPS. One of my co-workers had a ton of tattoos. Stuff like the cross and the name Jesus. I said, "I noticed your tattoos, are you a Christian?" He replied, "No. I don't believe in that stuff anymore."

Maybe there was a Christian rock group or YouTubers or even a pastor you enjoyed. At some point they stopped believing the Bible and gave up the faith. How do we process these things? How do we protect ourselves from going down the same road?

READ PASSAGE

Body

Passage Focus

People in the Ephesian church were abandoning the Christian faith because they were embracing false teachers. These deceivers forbid certain foods and marriage. Their teachings were demonically inspired. That's what's going on here. **Reject demonic lies!**

Point 1: Guard your heart against deception (4:1-2) - DECEPTION

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, – 4:1

Later times

The "later times" is today.

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. – 1 John 2:18

It's been "the last hour" since the 1st century.

Falling away?

Timothy speaks of people departing from the faith. The NASB says "some will fall away from the faith." The NIV "some will abandon the faith." That's people in the church abandoning and rejecting the Christian faith.

The buzzword today is "**deconstruction.**" It's when someone who professed faith re-examines their faith and rejects previously held beliefs. Sometimes they call themselves exvangelicals because they've left the evangelical church.

The world celebrates deconstruction. When a well-known Christian announces they've abandoned Christianity on social media they're warmly received for their courage to express doubt and welcome new ideas. Notable examples include Joshua Harris (*I Kissed Dating Goodbye*), Marty Sampson (Hillsong United), and Rhett and Link (YouTubers).

Doctrines of demons

In Timothy's world, people turned away from Jesus because false teachers told them you can't eat certain foods and you can't be married. You're wondering, how was that enticing? It's possible this is what's called overrealized eschatology. **2 Timothy 2:16-18** says:

But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness,¹⁷ and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus,¹⁸ who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.

Some false teachers were "saying that the resurrection has already happened." This was "upsetting the faith of some." In **Matthew 22:30**, Jesus said:

For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

If the resurrection's already happened, marriage is no more they argued.

These were the doctrines of demons: untrue beliefs that led people to abandon Jesus.

1 John 5:19 says "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." John 13:2 speaks of the devil putting betrayal in Judas' heart. John 13:27 speaks of Satan entering into Judas. The false teachers were insincere "**liars whose consciences are seared**" (4:2). Meaning there's a willingness involved. They systematically scorched their sense of right and wrong (their conscience), opening themselves to Satan's influence through hardness of heart. They hardened themselves by rejecting conscience.

Illustration: seared conscience like burned up power cord to a Nintendo Switch. It doesn't work.

*How do we explain Islam, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses? Demons inspired rejection of the Christian faith. Demons inspired the Quran and the Book of Mormon.

In our day, deceitful spirits inspire words like these:

"I have lived in repentance for the past several years — repenting of my self-righteousness, my fear-based approach to life, the teaching of my books, my views of women in the church, and my approach to parenting to name a few. But I specifically want to add to this list now: to the LGBTQ+ community, I want to say that I am sorry for the views that I taught in my books and as a pastor regarding sexuality. I regret standing against marriage equality, for not affirming you and your place in the church, and for any ways that my writing and speaking contributed to a culture of exclusion and bigotry. I hope you can forgive me." (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/joshua-harris-falling-away-from-faith-i-am-not-a-christian.html>)

These are the words of former Christian author and pastor Joshua Harris. He repented of the Christian faith he once championed. Kaitlin and I modeled our dating experience in part on Joshua's book *Boy Meets Girl*. That was my go-to book on dating. Joshua Harris fell away. He abandoned the apostles' doctrine, the gospel, the historic Christian faith by embracing satanically inspired deceptions of our day.

[quote *Humble Orthodoxy* back cover]

Falling away?

Falling away means they don't believe the gospel anymore. It starts with a few doctrines. Gradually they abandon the gospel altogether. People do fall away from the faith. Paul says this happens.

Joshua Harris put it this way:

“I have undergone a massive shift in regard to my faith in Jesus. The popular phrase for this is ‘deconstruction,’ the biblical phrase is ‘falling away.’ By all the measurements that I have for defining a Christian, I am not a Christian.” (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/joshua-harris-falling-away-from-faith-i-am-not-a-christian.html>)

Am I saying genuine, born again believers can lose their salvation? No. Let’s put the facts together.

Fact: some fall away from the faith (1 Tim 4:1).

Fact: believers cannot lose eternal life once it’s theirs.

*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. – **John 10:27-28***

When Jesus gives a person eternal life, something we can possess today, it’s impossible for that person to perish. To experience the 2nd death, the lake of fire we’re warned of in Revelation.

Fact: believers cannot lose justification once it’s theirs.

*And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. – **Romans 8:30***

Those who are justified (declared righteous and not guilty) will not fail to become glorified (imperishable bodies fit for the kingdom of God). Justified people cannot fail to enter the heavenly city.

Fact: those who fall away experience eternal wrath.

*“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. – **Matthew 24:9-13***

Here Jesus was speaking about events leading up to the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD. “you” are the apostles Jesus was speaking to.

Note some will fall away because of tribulation. Some will fall away because of false prophets. Some will fall away because of lawlessness. Some will endure. Those who endure will be saved. Meaning those who fall away won’t be saved. They’ll experience the 2nd death.

Deduction: genuine believers, born again people, can’t fall away.

Deduction: those who fall away were never born again, they never had saving faith.

What about Joshua Harris? If Joshua was born again, he’ll come back. If he never comes back, he was never born again. David sinned with Bathsheba, but he didn’t fall away. He didn’t “*depart from the faith.*” He repented when confronted by the prophet Nathan.

Peter officially fell away (Jesus said, “*You will all fall away because of me this night.*” - Matt 26:31), but he didn’t fall away in the sense of Matt 24:13 and 1 Timothy 4:1. Peter’s faith didn’t fail, because Jesus prayed that his faith wouldn’t fail (Luke 22:31-32). Yes Peter sinned, but he still believed and loved Jesus (John 21:15-17).

A person can profess faith for a long period of time and never have been born again. It's how they grew up and all they knew. They enjoyed the community and the weekly events. Going to church made them feel like they were right with God. It's possible.

How does a person fall away? (the process)

According to Paul, deceitful, demonic doctrines lead people away from Christ.

According to Jesus (Matthew 24), people fall away because of persecution (slander, family rejection, violence, loss of employment, imprisonment, death). When there's a cost for following Jesus, some inside the church say I'm out. We're seeing this in America. Sometimes people fall away because of societal lawlessness. When a culture normalizes sin, Christians become out of step oddballs. When you don't fit in because you're a Christian, some inside the church say I'm out. We're seeing this in America.

Sometimes people are duped by lies. Joshua Harris believed the lies and concluded he was bigot who contributed to a culture of exclusion and needed the forgiveness of the LGBTQ+ community. Some people fall for television evangelists who say if you give your money to me you'll be healthy and wealthy. How could someone be so numb you ask? Demonic deception!

How should we approach the falling away warnings?

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. – Hebrews 3:12-14

This is for you and me. It's directed at a Christian congregation. Churchgoing people can have an unbelieving heart. Churchgoing people can fall away. Churchgoing people can be hardened by sin's deceit. Churchgoing people need to keep believing.

How do I put these truths together? How do I respond to these truths?

1. I'm confident I'm saved.

1 John 5:13 says:

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

I know I have eternal life because I trust God's promises. And there's evidence of a changed life that's been born again.

2. I'm not worried about falling away.

I can never perish. God will sustain my faith (1 Pet 1:3-5). That's confidence in God's keeping power, not my willpower!

3. I'm not worried about failing to enter the kingdom of God.

I can never perish.

So what do I do with the warnings?

4. The promise of the kingdom to come motivates faithfulness.

I'm reminded it's worth it to follow Jesus. The intensity of the pleasures we'll experience in the new heavens and new earth will infinitely surpass the pleasures we experience in this life.

5. The warning of hell motivates faithfulness.

I'm reminded there's horrific consequences for rejecting Jesus.

6. I am worried about being deceived by sin and hardening my heart.

Christian, we can find sin appealing. We can love pornography more than purity. We can love gossip more than God's word. We can kill our reputation. We can kill our gospel witness. We can blaspheme God with our behavior. We can ruin our relationships. We can inflict ourselves with consequences that will stick with us for decades.

I don't want to be okay with pornography or a foul mouth or lying or whatever sin it might be. I don't want to embrace the lies of our age: I'm a bigot for standing against "marriage" equality.

I don't want to justify my sin. I want to weep like Peter did when he denied Christ three times. I want to confess my sin and pray for God's help in temptation. I want to love Jesus, not sin.

What about loved ones who fell away?

Grieve because they're accursed. Long for their salvation. Wisely urge faith and repentance. Pray for their souls. Cry before God. Spend time with them. Love them well. Model godliness. Convict with your conduct. Show them what a true Christian is.

Non-Christian

You're considering Christianity. What does this mean for you? Deception comes in two forms. First, it's okay to sin. Or God isn't holy. Second, it's okay to do religion your own way. Or we can ignore the Bible.

It's never okay to sin because God is holy. But God is merciful to sinners. So he sent his Son Jesus to die so we might be forgiven. Jesus lived a sinless life, making him a worthy sacrifice to take God's wrath in our place. If we trust in Jesus and his finished work on the cross, not in ourselves, we receive God's mercy.

Jesus furnished proof of his claims by healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising dead people. And when he was crucified, he raised himself from the dead. Because he was God.

We've talked some about sin. Believing lies. Spreading lies. Celebrating sin. Hardening our hearts to sin. Is this you? Do you realize you've broken God's word? Do you realize you're messed up, you're broken? Turn to Jesus in faith. He not only forgives sinners. He changes sinners!

Point 2: Receive creation with a thankful heart (4:3-5) - DELIGHT

At times I was taught life is all self-denial, all-spiritual disciplines. If you're a serious Christian, you'll spend your time on church attendance, Bible reading, prayer, fasting, and evangelism. Nothing else.

You'll throw out your video games because you need to redeem the time. You won't go on cruises because that's poor stewardship. You won't watch television because you might get contaminated.

But Paul says, *“everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.*

Thank God for what he made. And enjoy it. Enjoy food. Enjoy marriage. Enjoy the beach. Enjoy the mountains. Enjoy people. Thank God for those things in life he’s given for your enjoyment.

Caution

Does this mean it’s okay to get drunk or high on cocaine if we thank God for them? No. God’s good creation must be used in accord with God’s good word.

How are food and marriage made holy by God’s word and prayer?

The idea of God’s holiness is that he’s separate and distinct from his creation. The creation is common. We’re common. God is holy.

In Exodus 3, the ground Moses was stepping on became holy because God was present. God makes common things holy by his presence.

In 1 Corinthians 7, an unbelieving spouse is made holy by their believing spouse. Same with their children.

In Scripture, things that are common become holy through contact with what is holy. Common pleasures like food and marriage become holy when connected with thanksgiving and prayer. Also, when we use God’s good gifts according to God’s word we use them in a holy way.

Application

So macaroni and cheese and hamburgers and chocolate milk and the lake and snowmobiling become holy when we thank God for them and use them in a biblical way.

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. ¹⁹ Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil- this is the gift of God. – Ecclesiastes 5:18-19

Conclusion

Guard your heart against deception. Receive God’s creation with a thankful heart.