

Distraction!

This reading might sound like a lot of things – but its primarily about distraction.

When we take our eye off the main thing, then all the distractions of life can crowd in and suck the life out of us. What is distracting you now?

Now I don't mean, don't be aware of the important things around us. This is not a sermon about being single minded and callous. It is a sermon about identifying and filtering out the true distractions. Life is about Faith, Family, Friends and Firm. But life can also be reduced by Fillers, distractions.

Let's go backwards up that list, work usually has a whole pile of priorities – your priorities, and our boss's priorities, and you're your workmates, and then the clients/patients/students. That's enough to keep most minds busy. Then there's Friends. Family, – keeping track of our parents, kids and grandkids, siblings, cousins, Spouse and then first God, personal devotions time, tithing some of your time for church and Kingdom of God. Life is full. Faith, family, Friends and Firm. So what we don't need is distractions, but our culture is full of distractions, advertising, social media, pornography, endless information, news and other click bait.

Distractions are all the other things that press in on life, the rabbit holes, the red-herrings, the dead ends, the wasted years. There is a lovely proverb from Turkey, no matter how far down the wrong road you are; turn around.

What is distracting you?

I think that Paul is warning timothy, to warn the Ephesians, about distractions. And I think there are four possible contenders; and I think these are helpful for us today.

1. Excessive Asceticism, which is to withdraw from sensual pleasures, food, comfort, sex etc. to concentrate only on spiritual goals. Paul talks about the widows who are not remarrying, and people who are forbidding eating certain foods.
2. The opposite is Libertinism, which is to disconnect our bodies from our spiritual life, drunkenness, gluttony, sexual overdrive – all fine. This could have been an issue in Ephesus also. Paul mentions sexual immortality and slave traders.

Both of these distractions These two come from a dualistic mind-set that says the body is not relevant, it's all about the spirit, it was a very Greek way of seeing the world. Sadly it can be not only harmful for people themselves, but it means that people stop caring about others, their workers, slaves, the poor. This is the great temptation of the virtual age – where our online person is the one we are tempted to care about more than our bodily existence. The Hebrew bible has always maintained that God is interested in our bodies and how we live.

The other two distractions, Myths and Endless Genealogies seem to go together, but may have two interpretations

3. Gnostic myths, these are the distractions of the Greek culture, made up stories, which suggest that the gospel is a type of special knowledge and that if you have that secret knowledge, behaviour doesn't matter.
4. Jewish Genealogies, these could be made up stories going beyond what was in the Torah, speculative stories about Bible characters

So for us distraction 3. The controversies of our current culture, the **obsessions** of them. Let me suggest social media, the virtual world, Endless watching of streaming video

Distraction 4. The rabbit warrens of faith, not the hard questions but the distracting ones, **speculation** in place of faith, Jesus relationship with Mary, could a camel really go through the eye of a needle.

So today 4 distractions. I want to warn you about.

Listen to your body and you will not deny the needs of your body – nor over indulging the desires of your body. Don't get caught up in the obsessions of our culture, being caught up in the speculations of our faith. I believe Paul wanted to help his friend chart away from distractions, and here is the key word. Love.

Love your body and you will not abuse it, love the bodies of others and you will watch porn, nor indulgence in all night drinking. Love your culture and you will not endorse obsessions that debase people, love your faith and you will not tolerate excessive speculation in matters that are side-lines.

What is distracting you at the moment? Pause.

Let's look at the text.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope,

I like this – God is the one who saves us, the emperor Nero was calling himself saviour, and so has Mugabe, Jesus is hope. Remember that when you are in trouble – Jesus is real hope. Paul might have believed this letter would be read out in the church.

To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul actually calls Timothy his child – I love the way that our faith community is a family, God intends us to be family to each other, directing and correcting and loving. Grace mercy and peace. Te atawhai, me te whakaaro, me te maungārogo ki a koutou.

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus

Here's the background to 1st Timothy, Paul visited twice Acts 18.19-21 and then a longer visit recorded in Acts 19. There was much debate in Ephesus, and perhaps the church was at some risk and so Paul urges Timothy to stay. Paul moved on after a time, Timothy stayed, what season are you in?

so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.

Well that's a major part of why 1st Timothy was written, - False doctrines and I've suggested they may be Asceticism, or libertinism. Both are wrong, both say that our bodies don't matter to God – our bodies – other peoples bodies. They are the two extremes, one is about too much denial, and the other is about too much excess. These are common temptations, which do you suffer from?

The good news is whichever God can help you. I want to highlight one today, the false teaching that being a Christian should make you feel miserable. Now you may suffer for being a Christian, you may make sacrifices, it may not always be easy – but if your faith is making you feel miserable, something is wrong. God doesn't want us to just push down all our emotions, listen to your bodies. Now it's the opposite, if it's feels good do it? But a Christian faith where we are in touch with our bodies, is vital. Why do we have to go the doctor for that tic, or that muscle pain? Yes Paul talks about denying the flesh, but he means temptation – not failing to read our bodies.

Myths and endless genealogies, possibly some of the Greek myths were being woven into the faith – we want to contextualise our faith, but not let our faith be taken over by the obsessions of our time. Caesar used bread and circus', George Orwell talked about the lottery and sport, whether they are highbrow or

low-brow, let's be careful of the obsessions of our time – media obsessions. How many of you flick onto your phone all the time?

Finally, endless whakapapa, what's that about? probably extended stories about OT characters that aren't in the bible, that started as a story and became a legend. What does that look like today? - Extensive study in revelation, any over focus on a theological extension. – This the is the hard one, this sounds good. But look at the next verse.

Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith.

So my friends don't get caught up in speculative theology – Why, because it's a distraction. Distraction is the enemy of faith.

The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Now this I believe is the solution to distraction in our lives. Love, love means caring for ourselves, caring for our friends, family and faith.

A pure heart, the heart is the source of everything. Jesus commends us to work on our heart, not our physical strength, not our mental acuity, but firstly our heart. Forgiving, and here's a trick, praying for the best for others. Good conscience, knowing that we haven't wronged any one or set a trap for anyone, knowing that we have and are behaving ethically, sincere faith – that's trusting God, trusting God will sort out our problems, will reward those who are unfairly treated, will defend our cause so that we can concentrate on doing good.

Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

So clearly in Ephesus we have a clash with I suspect 2 possible groups, meaningless talk, the gossipers who are talked about later. Gossip is poison, don't do it. Here's the test for gossip, would you say that in front of the person?

Then there are the teachers – perhaps Christians who are of a Jewish background trying to fit the gospel and the Jewish law together.

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly.

Actually Paul says if it is used lawfully. So Paul has a view of how we Christians relate to the OT, especially the first 5 books. He is definitely not into made up stories.

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious.

So Paul sees the law as only useful as a boundary to describe what is wrong, and not as a guide to how to live in faith and love and hope. We struggle with that still today; law constrains people but it cannot make people good. And that's the biggest distraction of them all, if we put all our effort into boundaries, and boundaries are good, then we fail to grow the frail flower of hope, which changes people.

At the heart of the Christian faith – is this incredible good news. People can change. That is love. That is where our energies should go.

for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Ok so Paul comes up with a list of destructive activities that the law is useful in defining as bad, mother and father killers, sexual immoral – now one of the great questions of our time is how do we match our scriptures with the experience of gay and lesbian people. Traditionally the church has seen homosexuality as a sin pure and simple, but a lot of people are questioning that now, and there is a wide spectrum of response, I think we need to be biblically faithful, radically welcoming and respectfully engaged – so I have been wanting for a while to do a series – and maybe it a week night looking at the texts that have formed our Christian views and coming to understand them better. For example the word Paul uses here for homosexuality arsenokoitēs actually has a range of ways it can be translated, and some would argue that the forms of homosexuality banned in the bible are predatory and promiscuous. I don't think the discussion is that simple, but I am interested in having that discussion.

Paul finishes this part with reference to the gospel again. The gospel is the great news that God loves us. And that should change how we live. The offer is that if we become a follower of Jesus, if we ask Jesus into our hearts and agree to follow him. He will come in that's supernatural reality, and he will begin to change us, and not matter how much progress he has made – when we die – he will finish the task and we will go to live with him in glory. That is love.

And that is what we need to keep front and centre and not get overly distracted by anything else. Faith and love.