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Professor Herman Hanko has labored on behalf of the church of Christ for fifty-five years, serving ten years in the pastoral ministry and another thirty-five years as professor of New Testament and church history at the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches in Grandville, Michigan. He continues to serve the church even in his retirement, preaching and lecturing both in the United States and abroad. Hanko earned an AB degree from Calvin College, an MDiv from the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and a ThM from Calvin Seminary.

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Text: "...which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving." I Timothy 4:3b, 4.

Introduction

The letter in which the text is found was the first of two letters Paul sent to Timothy. Timothy was Paul's spiritual son and minister of the church of Christ in Ephesus. While Paul instructs Timothy concerning many duties and obligations that are Timothy's as a minister of the gospel, in the context of the text Paul takes the time to warn Timothy of grave dangers that arise "in the latter times" (I Tim. 4:1). These latter times are the years of the new dispensation between the ascension of Christ and his return on the clouds of heaven.

Many would depart from the faith and establish apostate churches where "doctrines of devils" are taught (verse 1). Among these doctrines of devils was the teaching that God's gifts, such as marriage and eating meat are evil. Avoiding these things, as well as other things in God's world, is, so they say, true religion (verse 3).

Paul damns such teaching and ascribes it to "seducing spirits" (verse 1). In the text Paul's reason for calling this teaching a "doctrine of devils" is explained. The chief reason why this teaching of abstinence from God's world is so wrong is that it considers God's creation as corrupt and therefore to be avoided. It speaks of the creation that God made and still upholds by his providence as an evil creation. And it denies the salvation and full redemption of the creation in the cross of Christ.

The child of God is urged, even commanded, to make use of God's world, although the things in it must be received with thanksgiving and sanctified by God's word and by prayer.

Contrary Views of Our Use of God's World

The history of the new dispensational church has been characterized by a struggle between two contradictory positions. The one is the sin of worldliness and materialism in which the Christian is free to plunge headlong into the creation, accumulate as many of this world's possessions as he is able and use them to satisfy his own pursuit of pleasure. In our affluent times such a use of God's world is our greatest evil and is a danger that imperils the soul. Earthly possessions become our idols.

The danger present in this view of the world is that we think that what we acquire is really ours to do with as we please, and thus we make the accumulation of earthly possessions and the pleasures they afford our goals in life. Wicked "prosperity gospels" even promote the idea that true religion is to become rich, successful in terms of this world, and to live lives in which our carnal desires are satisfied to the full. Such a view is repeatedly condemned by Scripture.

The other position that has repeatedly appeared in the history of the church is the position of world-flight. Those who hold to this position consider this world to be, in itself, sinful and corrupt. It is dirty, and any contact with it makes one dirty as well. It must be avoided as much as possible. This position is the one practiced by Roman Catholicism for millennia and is still a part of Rome's teachings. For one to practice celibacy and live in poverty is to live on a higher plain of holiness than one who must

descend into the creation in his daily life. It is also a view of some branches of the Amish who will not use modern inventions, TVs, computers, automobiles, etc. These things, some fear, carry with them a power to stain the soul.

Both these positions stand under the condemnation of Scripture. They are serious dangers for the child of God and must be rejected. Especially the latter position is condemned by the apostle in the context of the text. It is a kind of blasphemy of God himself, for, although God created all things, and continues to uphold them, these good creatures are said to be morally evil and spiritually dangerous.

The Hopelessness of Man's life in God's World

When God finished his work of creation he pronounced it "good" (Gen. 1:31). God created man as the head of the creation, under God, with the calling to use the whole creation in God's service and to God's glory.

But everything changed. By sinning as the head of the creation, Adam brought God's curse on himself the creation and all in it.

Now the curse is a powerful word of God. It is the word of God's anger; it is a word that has the power to destroy; when spoken it drives that which is cursed away from God into destruction. The curse rests not only on man, but also on the creation itself and, consequently, on man's use of the creation (Gen. 3:17-19).

Man remains the head of the creation, even though he is now a rebel in God's house. But he is now under the curse along with the creation over which he still rules. All that man does as the head of the creation is cursed (Prov. 3:33). He was instructed to subdue the creation, but, although he is still able to perform this work, it is all a cursed thing. There is no benefit in it, no profit from it, no value to what man does. Upon the whole creation and upon man who lives in it comes God's pronouncement through Solomon: Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities; all is vanity (Eccl. 1:2). Everything man touches he makes morally dirty, because he uses sit in the service of sin.

So true is this curse of God upon man and upon the creation that it is all destined by God to be destroyed. Not only man himself will be destroyed, but the creation also will be burned with fire and all that is in it will be consumed in the final conflagration. Jesus even speaks not only of the destruction of man himself, but also all that man does and all he has made from God's world, from its skyscrapers to its medicines II Peter 3:10). Nothing is left, and nothing survives the destruction of the old creation, for no value is to be found in all this sad world. Hospitals, asylums, treasures of gold and silver, palaces and vacation homes, libraries and ancient writings, all the stored up knowledge of mankind along with his poetry and art, scientific achievements and advances in medicine – all are destined to be burned in the fire of God's curse. It is vanity for men under the curse.

This teaching of Scripture seems to validate the idea that one ought to flee the world to attain holiness. God is so disgusted with his world because of what men do to it that he is determined to destroy it. Better it is then to flee from it if God takes such a view of his world.

But man cannot attain to any holiness by turning his back on God's world and pulling up his nose in disgust.

God's Purpose in the Creation

God did not make a mistake in creating the universe; nor did man succeed in spoiling God's purpose and force him to alter his plan. Scripture teaches that God's purpose went far beyond what was revealed in Paradise. God's purpose was to glorify himself in Christ, God's eternal Son. God's purpose from the beginning of time was to glorify himself through a creation and a people redeemed by Christ, saved by the power of his cross, and made far more glorious than the first creation could ever be. Christ was destined to be the head of the true human race, the elect of God, the world God eternally loved, those saved through the power of the atoning sacrifice Christ made on the cross. As the second Adam (Rom. 5:14), Christ was also destined to be the head of all things God made in heaven and on earth (Col. 1:20) and redeemed from the power of the curse by the work of redemption performed at Calvary.

This creation is not abandoned by God. It is still God's world, which he loves. It is upheld by his providence, not uselessly and without purpose, but because God has better things in store for it (Rom. 8:19-23). Its present state is not indefinite. The curse is not to last forever. God's driving from himself that which is accursed is temporary, a step in the right direction when viewed from God's perspective; a move in the better way of redemption in Christ. God is in heaven, and all is well in this world – not in itself, but because of God's purpose with it.

God's people are not, therefore, to rush headlong into this present world under the curse in order to consort with evil men also under the curse. Nor may they bend every effort to remove the curse to make this world curse free, for the curse is God's Word, and no one can stop God's Word from accomplishing that for which God speaks it. Nor are they to get as far away from the world as they are able, fearful lest touching the creation contaminate them. They are not to make poverty an end in itself and practice celibacy as a desirable goal that raises one to a higher level of holiness. They are not to scorn automobiles, refuse to live in houses and to decorate them with works of art. They are not to disdain that which God upholds, for that is a doctrine of devils.

The Christian's View of This Creation

The text teaches us that, in spite of the curse, "every creature of God is good" (verse 3). It is good in itself. The defilement is to be found in man's sinful use of it, because God created it and still upholds it. How can it be that the cursed creation is still "good"? This can be only because the creation belongs to God and God's purpose with the creation is not accomplished in this sin-cursed world. The creation is redeemed by Christ's death and destined for greater glory than it now has.

If the creation itself is good, that is, apart from the curse upon it, then all that is made from it as the earth is subdued by man is also good in itself. TV is good, though the use man puts it to is evil. Medicine is good, but the use of it in abortions is sinful. Telephones are good, but when man uses them, along with cell phones, to sin, they are evil. Even music and art are good, but man corrupts these with hellish music, wicked lyrics and senseless smears of color called art. It is not God's creature in which sin is to be found; it is man's use of God's creation.

The text itself indicates that the truth is even worse than God's curse on it, for an evil use of the creation has the power to corrupt the things made of the creation. God's world, verse 5 says, must be sanctified. That is, God's world must be made holy – which is the meaning of the verb "to sanctify." And

that which has been made corrupt by reason of sinful uses to which it is put must undergo sanctification. In fact, the text emphatically states that every creature of God is good -- **if** it is received with thanksgiving and sanctified. Only then, when it is sanctified, is it good. All the emphasis falls on the little word "if".

We find a clear example of this in the history of the destruction of Jericho by the nation of Israel when it entered the land of Canaan. As God was giving instructions to Israel concerning the conquest of Jericho, he said, "And the city shall be accursed, even it, and all that are therein, to the Lord....And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto the Lord: they shall come into the treasury of the Lord (Joshua 6:17-19).

The interesting part of this passage is that the word correctly translated "accursed" can also be translated "devoted" or "consecrated." This then is the point the Lord is making to Israel. All of Jericho with all its people and possessions are accursed (except for Rahab and her household). They are accursed because an accursed people took God's creation and used it to make idols, which they worshiped; or they used God's creatures in prostitution and the pursuit of evil pleasure. It had, therefore, to be burned. To refuse to burn Jericho and all in it and to keep some of the things for one's self would not only be disobedience, but would bring that which was accursed into the camp of Israel so that the cursed thing in the camp would bring the curse of God on all the camp -- as happened with Achan's sin.

But what was rescued from the curse and did not carry with it the curse, was the gold, silver, brass and iron -- but only if it was put in the Lord's treasury. That is, it was free from the curse because it was devoted or consecrated to God and was, in fact, used later in Israel's history to build the temple of Solomon. The same thing was both accursed and devoted. But the curse was taken away when it was devoted to God.

God's Creatures are Good to Believers

Only believers are able to take that which is accursed and sanctify it. All creatures of God are good, but they are good only to those "which believe and know the truth" (verse 3).

God's people are described in the text as believers and those who know the truth. That is, these people of God know the truth as it is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and believe what Scripture says.

While in a very general way, God's people know and believe all that the Scriptures teach, in this context the knowledge which the believer has is limited by the main thought of the text. That which Scripture teaches and the elect believe is first of all that God created the heavens and the earth by the Word of his mouth in six days of twenty-four hours. To hold to evolutionism, therefore, will never enable a man to make proper use of God's world, nor will he be able to sanctify the creatures of God's world with prayer and the Word of God, but is cursed with the creation.

Other such doctrines include the fall of man and his total depravity, which makes it impossible for him to use God's world to God's glory. But also all Arminianism makes using God's creation aright impossible for it gives part of the responsibility of salvation to man who is able to do nothing good.

Man's misuse of the creation in the service of Satan and his own carnal pleasure is also condemned by the Scriptures.

Because the creation is God's world and always belongs only to him, man is a steward in God's house, obligated to use what is God's in God's service.

This creation is doomed to be burned with fire so that from the ashes of this cursed creation God may form a new heavens and a new earth free from sin and the curse. This new creation, formed at the return of our Lord, is the goal, the destination of all God's people. For they shall inherit it as the crowning gift of God's grace.

The believer knows all these things and believes them in such a way that he puts them into practice in his daily life. He is convinced that this world is not his home, but that his home is his Father's house of many mansions. He looks at the present form of God's creatures as passing and looks forward to the day when God's purpose in the redemption of all things will take place. The creation itself will be made blessed, free from the curse, fully revealing the glory of the God who formed it, and the believer will live in it without sin, made like unto the glorious body of the Christ who saved him.

To these believers God's creatures are good. To those who do not know and believe the Scriptures, God's creatures are a curse, for the curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked (Prov. 3:33).

How Believers are to Receive Them

Because all the creatures of God's world are good, it is right and proper that the believer possess them. It is not sinful to be rich; to have a large bank account; to have profitable investments. Not in themselves are these things bad. They constitute a grave spiritual danger, as Paul points out in I Timothy 6:9-11: "For they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." But the danger lies not in the riches, but in the sinful and covetous heart of man.

Whatever God may be pleased to give us, we must remember that these gifts are good. They are gifts from God. They are his Fatherly care of us. We may, it is true, pray only for our daily bread; but our heavenly Father daily loads us with benefits and gives us far more besides. When he is pleased to do this, we must receive them at his hand. God gives us many good gifts from his creation; to turn our backs on them is wrong. Our homes and cars, our clothing and food, our furnishings, our cell phones, all these and all the rest of the things God gives us are good gifts.

Even then we must remember that many of our fellow saints, with whom we shall live in heaven, struggle even to find their daily bread. But to say that we are blessed beyond them in their poverty is to make mockery of God's sovereign disposition of all that is his. He gives to each what is pleasing to him and his distribution of his gifts may not be criticized.

But there is an important qualification. All these gifts of God must be received "with thanksgiving" (verse 4). To receive them with thanksgiving means a number of things, for when we are thankful to God for his gifts, we acknowledge that he is alone the Giver. We have not acquired these

gifts by our own efforts and hard work, nor have we received them because we have merited them with God. God is the overflowing fountain of all gifts. He is always full, we are always empty. We can bring nothing to him that is not already his., for the cattle on a thousand hills belong to him. All we can do is seek, with outstretched hands, his gifts, which come out of the fountain of his unmerited favor. And to be content with such things as we have (Heb. 13:5, 6).

Thus, to receive these gifts as good is to acknowledge humbly God's grace towards us in Jesus Christ.

Sanctifying God's Gifts

Because this creation is under the curse and doomed to destruction, the things of the creation must be sanctified – as Jericho's treasures of gold and silver were sanctified by devoting them to the Lord's treasury.

This passage has been the basis for the custom of beginning and ending mealtimes in Christian homes with Bible reading and prayer. Indeed this is why the Lord himself sought God's blessing before he fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fishes (John 6:11).

We sanctify these gifts when we enjoy them. We do not make use of them with a certain distaste for them apparent on our faces. We do not consider them necessary evils. We do not treat them disdainfully as mere creatures, nor in our efforts to impress people with our heavenly-mindedness do we leave the impression with others that we would rather do without them.

To be sanctified means that these creatures that God has made and are given to men are good and to be used for our enjoyment as tokens of God's favor and love.

This sanctification takes place by the Word of God and by prayer because God's Word explains the true nature of all things which God has made and our relation to these gifts. We are instructed in how to use them and why they are given to us. This sanctification also requires prayer. Through prayer we know that God is good and gracious to us and we express our own desire to use these gifts in a way pleasing to him.

And so they are good gifts of God to us while we are here in the world, but on our way to heaven. In a certain sense of the word, we must and do "sit loose" to all these gifts. They are passing and will soon be burned. They will not escape the final judgment of God upon a wicked world that uses God's gifts to sin against him. The Lord gives them, but the Lord also takes them away. We receive marriage as his gift and enjoy it, but do not despair when our spouse is taken from us. We eat the food God gives and enjoy our homes and cars, but we do not miss them when they are taken away. We thank God for enough to feed our children and give to the poor, but we know that God always takes care of all the needs of his people, and to lose these things is no disaster, but for our good.

In this verse is also Scripture's answer to the environmentalism's claims. Their determination to save the world is based on evolutionary ideas of this world going on forever. The believer looks forward to its destruction. The world in its present form is soon to pass away to make room for a more wonderful world where the curse will forever be gone.

Yet, this is God's world and to be received with thanksgiving and sanctified. The believer has nothing but respect and love for the creation. It serves a good purpose now, for it enables the believer to walk his way to glory and fulfill the purpose of God in it. He does not abuse it, mutilate it, rape it for his own carnal pleasure. He enjoys it, revels in its beauty, uses it to glorify God and looks forward to its renewal and glorification.

Thus, when God gives us his good gifts, we are called to use them in our pilgrim's way to lighten the load of the journey, and to walk more easily our pilgrim's path until we reach our everlasting destination. They are means to an end, not ends in themselves. They are to be used for heavenly purposes and spiritual good, and not as tools to indulge in the pleasures of life. They are for a time, for presently we shall inherit the everlasting kingdom of Christ in a redeemed creation.

Such is our calling.