

SESSION 2: GETTING OUR BELIEFS RIGHT

I Timothy 1: 3-20

Warning Against False Teachers of the Law

³As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer ⁴nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. ⁵The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. ⁷They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

⁸We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. ⁹We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine ¹¹that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

The Lord's Grace to Paul

¹²I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. ¹⁴The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. ¹⁷Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

¹⁸Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, ¹⁹holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. ²⁰Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION

1. This section speaks of a visit by Paul to Macedonia and of a stay by Timothy in Ephesus. Since these events do not fit into the Acts narrative, commentators have assumed that Paul was released after those 2 years under house arrest in Rome and resumed his travels (Acts 28:30-31).
2. *“I went to Macedonia...I urged you to stay there in Ephesus”* (v3a). It is unclear if Paul was in Ephesus when he urged Timothy to stay there. But, Paul explains that the reason for Timothy staying in Ephesus was to regulate the affairs of the churches of Ephesus. Here, in chapter 1, Paul talks of 3 groups of teachers in a personal directive to Timothy. With each group of teachers Paul describes, he personalizes his instructions, *‘I urged you’* (v3), *‘I thank Christ Jesus my Lord’* (v12), *‘Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction...’* (v18).

False Teachers:

3. The first order of business is to *“command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies”* (v3).

False teaching is *heterodidaskaleo* (a verb Paul probably coined) or a teaching **different** from the apostles’ teaching. It is **not** primarily to be translated ‘false’ (NIV), ‘strange’ (JB), ‘erroneous’ (REB) or ‘new’ (JBP). In the same vein, Paul rebuked the Galatians for deserting the grace of Christ for *“a different gospel”* (Gal.1:6). He also chided the Corinthians for going to *“a different Jesus”*, *“a different Spirit”* and *“a different gospel”* from what they had first received (2 Cor. 11:1 ff).

To teach a **different** doctrine is to indicate that there is an orthodox doctrine from which the false teachers had deviated. The true doctrine is variously designated in the Pastorals: *‘the faith’* (I Tim.1:3,19; 3:9; 4:1,6,21; 2 Tim.3:8; 4:7; 6:10,12,21; Tit. 3:15); *‘the truth’* (I Tim.2:4,7; 3:15; 4:3; 6:3,5; 2Tim.2:18,25; 3:7-8; 4:4; Tit.1:1,14); *‘the sound doctrine’* (I Tim.1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim.1:13; 4:3; Tit.1:9; 2:1); *‘the teaching’* (Tit.1:9; I Tim.6:1); *‘the good deposit’* (I Tim.6:20).

In each of these expressions, the words are preceded by the definite article, indicating a body of doctrine existed that was an agreed standard by which all teaching could be tested and judged. This was considered the teaching of Christ (I Tim.6:3) and of his apostles (I Tim.1:11; 2:7; 2 Tim.1:13; 2:2; 3:10,14).

4. 3 groups of teachers are addressed in this section (1:3-20). The first group are the false teachers. Some five years earlier, Paul had predicted that *‘savage wolves’* would enter and devastate Christ’s flock in Ephesus (Acts 20:29ff). Now his prediction had come true.

These false teachers are identified as law teachers. In itself, law teachers are legitimate. Scribes who teach the Mosaic law (Lk.5:17) and even Gamaliel (Acts 5:34) were called law teachers. Paul says, *'We know the law is good if one uses it properly'* (1:8). That suggests there is a right and wrong way of using the law.

5. What were the false teachers doing with the law that was wrong?
Timothy was to admonish the false teachers not to *'devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies'* (1:4).

Myths are legends or fables, which Paul categorized as *'godless myths and old wives' tales'* (4:7), as *'Jewish myths'* (Titus 1:14), and as an alternative to *'the truth'* (2 Tim.4:4).

Genealogies refers to the tracing of the descent of the patriarchs in Genesis. Taken together, the two words, *myths* and *genealogies* mean legendary stories about genealogies which were handed down in Jewish or rabbinic tradition.

The Book of Jubilees is an ancient Jewish document dated between 135-105 BC. It retells from a Pharasaic perspective the OT story from the creation of the world to the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. History is divided into *'jubilees'*, i.e. periods of 49 years, and underscores the uniqueness of Israel among the nations.

These traditional literature highlights the indestructibility of Israel and of the law. Their stories are embellished with fanciful additions. Paul could be alluding to these false teachings, primarily a Jewish aberration. These teachers, however, are not the *'Judaizers'* that Paul opposed in Galatians who taught salvation by obedience to the law since there is no hint in the Pastorals of a recurrence of this controversy.

6. These were speculators who scavenged the law to substantiate their conjectures. These false teachers also showed Gnostic tendencies as they asserted their Jewish tendencies. For instance, they were forbidding marriage and enjoining abstinence from certain foods (4:3f). Gnostics rejected matter as evil and so a Supreme God could not have created the world. The false teachings in Ephesus combined Jewish and Gnostic tendencies.
7. Paul indicates there are 2 outcomes of the false teaching. It obstructs both faith and love. *'These promote controversies (or useless speculation) rather than God's work – which is by faith'* (v 4b). God's work refers to God's revealed plan of salvation, of which we are stewards, and to which we must respond by faith. Speculation raises doubts, while revelation evokes faith.
8. False teaching also obstructs love as it leads to *'meaningless talk'* (v6) and *'arguments and quarrels about the law'* (Tit. 3:9). Teaching of the truth would end in *'love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith'* (v5). The motivation to teach the truth is unalloyed and uncontaminated. That *'some have wandered away from these...'* (v6) shows that staying the course to maintain pure motives is difficult.

9. The false teachers *'want to be teachers for the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm'* (v7). They have no basis for their teaching and yet they are so dogmatic (v7 in REB). In contrast, God lays the basis for his teaching: *'...the law is good if one uses it properly'* (v8). *'The law is made...for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts...'* (v9-10).

Paul's statement, *'The law is made...for lawbreakers and rebels...'* does not imply there are people for whom the law is irrelevant. He means that the law is for everyone since we are all lawbreakers and rebels in God's eyes. Jesus means the same when he said, *'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'* (Lk.5:32). The word, 'the righteous' in this context would mean 'the self righteous'.

10. The first 6 groups of people, Paul sets in pairs. They refer to our duty to God, and could parallel the first 5 of the 10 Commandments (v9).
- *Irreligious* = profane in the sense of Sabbath breaking (4th Command)
 - *Unholy* = those who take God's Name in vain (3rd Command)
 - *Sinful* = idolaters (2nd Command)
 - *Ungodly* = those who don't love God exclusively (1st Command)
 - *Lawbreakers and rebels* – introductory to describe those who reject all law and discipline
11. The next 5 sets of people allude to the following 5 commandments (v9c-10):
- *Those who kill their fathers and mothers* = 5th Command
 - *Murderers* = 6th Command
 - *Adulterers and Perverts* = heterosexual and homosexual offenders breaking 7th Command
 - *Slave traders* = 'kidnappers' in RSV are guilty of the most heinous kind of stealing breaching the 8th Command
 - *Liars and perjurers* = break the 9th Command not to bear false witness

The 10th Command prohibiting covetousness is not included in Paul's list as some commentators think it is a sin of thought and desire, not of word and deed.

It is also interesting to note that sins which breach God's commands are also *'contradictory to the sound doctrine that conforms to the...gospel...'* (v10c-11).

Paul the Master Teacher

12. Paul starts and ends this segment with high praise: *'I thank Christ Jesus our Lord...'* (v12) and *'Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.'* (v17). Thanksgiving permeates Paul's life, for God's mercy in extending salvation despite his despicable sins and for the privilege of preaching the gospel as an apostle: *'...appointing me to his service'* (v12).

13. Paul's credentials as a teacher begins with the mercy of God, extended to him *'even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man...because I acted in ignorance and unbelief'* (v13).

As a **blasphemer**, Paul had spoken evil of Jesus Christ. He also tried to force Christ's disciples to blaspheme (Acts 26:9,11). He was a ruthless persecutor of the church as he *'tried to destroy it'* (Gal.1:13), without realizing he was actually persecuting Christ (Acts 9:4).

He was also a **violent** man, a lethal combination of arrogance and insolence which finds satisfaction in insulting and humiliating others. Note the ascending scale of evil from words (blasphemy) to deeds (of persecution) to thoughts (of deep seated hostility).

What hope would there be for someone so malevolent and vicious? But, he was not beyond the mercy of God. Twice, Paul said *'I was shown mercy'* (v13b, 16b). God's mercy was joined by His grace, which like a river *'was poured out abundantly..'* bringing with it the blessings of 'faith' and 'love'. Grace flooded a heart previously filled with unbelief, and love flooded a heart previously polluted with hatred.

14. Paul was so thankful he quotes the first of five 'trustworthy sayings' in the Pastorals (v15; 3:1; 4:9; 2Tim.2:11; Tit.3:8). They are likely to be quotations from an early hymn or creed.

'Here is a trustworthy saying and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst' (v15)

- The statement is trustworthy, as the content of the gospel is trustworthy and true, in distinction from the speculative nonsense of the false teachers.
- The offer of the gospel is universal – the statement deserves full acceptance, i.e. 'completely reliable and should be universally accepted' (JB Phillips).
- The essence of the gospel is that Christ came to save sinners. The gospel *saves* those the law *condemns*. This is a pregnant phrase that alludes to Christ's incarnation, atonement and implies his pre-existence. This message lies at the center of apostolic preaching and teaching and constitutes their 'sound teaching'.
- The application of the gospel is personal. Although the gospel may be universally accepted (deserves full acceptance), but it is quite another thing to accept it personally (of whom I am the worst).

15. The posture of the bearer of God's truth is the constant recognition of personal truth, that s/he is a sinner deserving of judgment and God's wrath. The degree of sin is irrelevant as we all *fall short of the glory of God*. If the conviction of sin is from the Holy Spirit, we would all, like Paul, think we are the 'chief' (AV), the 'foremost' (NRSV), 'the greatest' (JB), or 'the worst' (NIV) of sinners.

Of great significance is Paul's acknowledgment that *'I am' not 'I was'* the worst of sinners (v16).

16. Every trophy of God's grace is an example of God's mercy and patience. Why was Paul shown mercy? So that *'Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life'* (v16). If there is hope for someone as vile as Paul there is hope for the worst lowlife who tests the patience of all. There is no one out of the reach of God's mercy. No wonder Paul bursts into a doxology: *'Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.'* (v17).

17. The spontaneous praise is an eclectic pick of phrases from early liturgical forms, combining liberty with liturgy. He addressed God as the King, characterized by 4 epithets:

- He is *Eternal* – King of the Ages (Rev.15:3), beyond the fluctuations of time.
- He is *Immortal* – beyond the ravages of decay and death.
- He is *Invisible* – beyond the limits of every horizon, since 'nobody has ever seen God' (Jn.1:18; I Jn.4:12) and nobody can see Him (6:16). All that humans have ever glimpsed is his 'glory' which is 'the outward shining of his inward being'.
- He is the *Only God* – He has no rivals. *'I am the Lord, there is no other'* (Isa.45:18).

To Him be *honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

Timothy the Emerging Teacher

18. Paul addresses Timothy now in the context of his special father-son relationship and the circumstances of his ordination. *'Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you...'* (v18). We are not told what these prophecies are. It seems probable Paul was referring to Timothy's ordination when 'a gift' was given to Timothy, 'a prophetic message' was spoken as 'the body of elders laid their hands' on him (4:14). Only if Timothy followed these prophecies would he be able to *'fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience'* (v18b-19a).

In context, Timothy is to defend the faith against false teachers, hence he has to 'fight' and 'hold on to the faith'. He also needs to keep 'a good conscience'. Hence conviction goes hand in glove with conscience, belief with behavior, intellectual with moral. John Calvin wrote, "A bad conscience is the mother of all heresies."

Application

1. There is a contrast between speculation and faith in God's revelation, and between controversy and love for one another. Here are two practical tests for us to apply to all Christian teaching:

Test of Faith:

- Does the teaching come from God?
- Is it in agreement with apostolic doctrine?
- Or is it the product of fertile human imagination?

Test of Love:

- Does it promote unity in the body of Christ?
- Is it irresponsibly divisive?
- Does it promote the glory of God and the good of the church?

2. The Reformers struggled greatly over the purpose of the law. The Formula of Concord (1577) specified in its Sixth Article the 3-fold use of the law. It is a means to the preservation of human society (Rom. 13:1ff), a summons to repentance and faith (Gal.3:24) and a direction for the church (Rom.8:4; 13:8). In short, the law was **to restrain evil, to lead to Christ and to determine the conduct of believers.**

John Calvin agreed but changed the order of the first two. In the *Institutes*, Calvin outlines that the law has a 'punitive' purpose in that it 'renders us inexcusable' and so drives us to despair. Then, 'naked and empty-handed', we 'flee to his mercy, repose entirely in it, hide deep within it, and seize upon it alone for righteousness and merit'. Secondly, the law restrains evil doers, especially 'by fright and shame' so they are deterred from doing evil even when the heart is unchanged, thereby protecting the community. The 'third and principal use' of the law is 'its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns.' The law teaches us God's will, and 'by frequent meditation upon it' believers will 'be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression'. Thus, to Calvin, the purposes of the law are **punitive, deterrent and educative.**

3. There is no contradiction between the moral standards of the gospel and the law. Embracing the gospel does not free us to repudiate the law. While the law is impotent to save us, the gospel frees us from the penalty and power of sin, but puts the Holy Spirit within us so that the righteous requirement of the law may be fulfilled in us (Rom.8:3-4).
4. Timothy as the emerging teacher, has to choose between following the false teachers or Paul. If he follows Paul's instructions, he will have to stand up to the false teachers and silence them. He cannot remain neutral or ignore the threats of wrong teaching. He may be young, inexperienced and impressionable, but truth always demands a verdict.

5. Paul describes the **content** and **posture** of a teacher/preacher of the Word. There is a body of truth that comes from God which the teacher/preacher has no right to change. It is God's truth for all time. This is difficult for the postmodern person who may insist that truth for you may not be truth for me.

The content of truth has eternal significance. It makes the difference between heaven and hell, on earth and beyond. It is centered on the Person of Jesus Christ.

The posture of the teacher is humility brought about by an acknowledgment of God's mercy and patience. There has to be a personal experience of the truth that revolutionizes the teacher's life. The vessel for the truth has to be permeated by the truth. There is a living sensitivity to and conscious need of God's continuing mercy. God's forgiveness is a daily, living experience.

Grace is exuded in the teacher's personality. The most obvious characteristic is an effusion of gratitude. The attitude of gratitude becomes the hallmark of the teacher of God's truth s/he carries. Not comparison with others, or thinking of oneself better than others. The only consciousness is the unsurpassable blessing of grace that has come to "me, *the* sinner."

6. Teaching/Preaching the truth necessitates a verdict. Teaching is not merely to inform or educate. It is not a transference of data or information. It is to effect life transformation. Teaching is not merely dispensing accepted verities. It must drive towards a personal acceptance of and submission to the Person of Jesus Christ, Who is the Truth.