

Tonight we continue our study in 1 Timothy, and we are looking at chapter 1, verses 3-11. Before we get to that, however, please bow your heads with me as we pray....

Look at the passage, please. 1 Timothy 1:3-11. It clearly divides into two major sections, both of which address the two ways in which God ordinarily deals with error. The first, in verses 3-7, is by means of ministers of the gospel, and the second, in verses 8-11, is by means of the law and the gospel. Look, please, with me at the first part of the passage, verses 3-7. God deals with error in the church by means of gospel ministers. Things at Ephesus are getting serious. There are false teachers infiltrating the church and distorting the truth. So, in verse 3, Paul tells Timothy to remain at Ephesus to address the issue.

Now I want you to notice two things here, first of all. *First*, notice what Timothy's job is at Ephesus. Verse 3, "Charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine." Timothy is to tell them to stop. He is to rebuke error. Part of the ministry of the word committed to the pastors and elders of the church is to silence those who teach different doctrine. That can be hard and painful, sometimes controversial, but it is necessary.

*Secondly*, notice that Paul says Timothy is to charge them not to teach different doctrine. The Greek word there is "heterodidaskalion"—*hetero* meaning other, *didaskalion* meaning doctrine or teaching. The word implies a standard of accepted truth according to which Timothy was to require the Ephesian teachers to conform.

It is common to hear Christians claim that they have no creed but Christ and that they need no other standard to regulate their faith than the Bible. The problem with that point of view is that it is shared by heretics and false teachers. The issue at Ephesus was not that these men had plucked strange ideas from either. It was that these men claimed the authority of the law of God for their doctrines. They would have pointed to the Bible alone. The slogan "no creed but scripture" is as foolish and naive as it is dangerous. It is a cloak for every kind of heresy and false teaching imaginable. It allows the worst kind of individualism, that makes my private interpretation more authoritative than the collected wisdom of the church over the millennia. And it is an idea that Paul roundly rejects. There is a norm, a standard or orthodox and heterodox teaching. He had passed it on to Timothy. Timothy knew it and was to hold these men accountable to it.

We need creeds and confessions that articulate the sense in which we understand the scriptures so that no one can hide behind a simplistic "only the Bible" spirituality. We confess *sola scriptura*, but not *solo scriptura*. We confess that the Bible alone carries final and supreme authority in all matters of faith and life. But we do not believe that the Bible is the only authority. It is the supreme and final authority. It is the *norma normans*, the norming norm. It is the rule that regulates all other authorities. But it is not the *only* authority. We wisely revere the tradition, the creeds and confessions of the orthodox Christian church, hammered out on the anvil of persecution, amidst the furnace of heresy and debate, in careful reflection on scripture for over

2000 years. While we never claim infallibility for those confessions, we do recognize them as faithful summaries of the teaching of scripture, and we use them to help regulate our biblical interpretation, persuaded that if no one in 2000 years of Christian reflection on God's Word has come up with that interpretation, then I am probably not safe to embrace it myself.

So Paul urges Timothy to enforce the rule of faith, the standards of doctrinal orthodoxy derived from Biblical revelation.

And then Paul unmasks for us what lies at the root of theological error. Here is where false teaching invariably stems from. Look at verses 6-7, "Certain persons by swerving from these, have wandered into vain discussions." Their teaching is empty. It is vain. They have strayed from simple godliness into speculative nonsense. And here is why, verse 7, "desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." What is the root of the error these men are spouting? It is *pride*, isn't it? It is the lust for attention and prominence and recognition: desiring to be teachers, without understanding what they are talking about, and yet abounding in confident assertions.

Cocky, self assured men scarcely make faithful gospel ministers or reliable Bible teachers. Their private opinions trump the wisdom of the fathers and brothers who have faithfully labored over the text long before we have. Their opinions and new insights quickly render two millennia of theological reflection and ecclesiastical practice null and void.

Now all of that seems awfully harsh, don't you think? In today's categories a minister, especially a younger man like Timothy, *himself*, runs the risk of seeming arrogant and proud if he insists that certain people who claim to be teachers teach no longer. "Wouldn't it be better, Timothy, to be more loving, to simply look the other way? Don't worry too much about these men. They claim to be Christians, too, after all. The best way to deal with them is to say nothing and teach the truth in a positive manner. Don't be so confrontational. You will lose people. People will leave your church over this."

But look at verses 5 again. "The aim," the word there is *telos*—it means objective, end point, the goal the target we're aiming for—"in our charge is *love* that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." The purpose and design of the command is *love*. Paul is saying here that church discipline starts in the pulpit and in the living room. It begins when the pastor of the flock patiently exposes and gently rebukes error. And like all church discipline, the *goal* in the lives of those rebuked and corrected and instructed and trained in righteousness is *love*—love to God and love to the brothers. It is *holiness*—love from a "*pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith*."

It is *not* unloving to challenge wrong thinking and silence error, do you see? It is unloving *not* to. Our problem, in our super-nice, politically-correct, overly polite culture is that we are *not loving enough*. We don't love people enough to overcome our distaste for confrontation and to challenge sin.

But we mustn't deceive ourselves into thinking that theological error is a *victimless crime*, that it hurts no one. *Heresy is profoundly unloving*. It damages the relationship of believing sinners to their Savior, it leads unconverted seekers away from Jesus to trust a false gospel, it damages and divides the fellowship of the body of Christ, and it dishonors His name.

So Paul tells Timothy that if he wants to love his people at Ephesus well, if he wants their best, their holiness as well as their happiness, he must confront as well as comfort them, he must rebuke them as well as relate to them, he must at times stand in the stead of God, as His ordained spokesman, *over against His people* with a word of correction and discipline, as well as stand among them as one of them with words of encouragement and affirmation. The rebukes and corrections of God's word, shattering our errors and re-molding our thinking are necessary gifts of God's love, by which He teaches and guides us.

So first of all, God deals with error in the church by providing us with ministers of the gospel. Then *secondly*, God deals with error in our lives by providing us with the law and gospel. Look at verses 8-11, please.

The false teachers think of themselves as aficionados of the law. They are the law experts. But as verse 7 has shown us, from Paul's perspective, they had not correctly grasped the most basic principles of how best to understand God's law.

But how *ought* we to handle the law of God exactly? Well, says Paul, first we must confess that the law is *good*, verse 8. Some Christians come close to suggesting that God's law is burdensome and restrictive and, therefore, somehow *not good*. That is not Paul's view. The law is *good*. That is the Christian position. I wonder if your language and attitudes about God's commandments reflects that conviction. The law is good. Do you love the law? Is it your meditation day and night? But there's a caution here, too. The law must be used *lawfully*, that is, it must be used as it is intended to be used, in a way consistent with its design and purpose.

And what is that design and purpose? Verse 9: "the law is *not* laid down *for the just* but for *the lawless and disobedient*" and so on. Paul actually summarizes here the Ten Commandments. Look at his language: the law is for the "lawless, disobedient, ungodly and sinners, the unholy and profane." That covers the first table of the law, and the remaining vices, in verses 9-10, cover the second table. And he says that that law is *not* for the just, but for those who live in ways that clearly contradict it. What does he mean, that the law is not for the *just*, or the *righteous*?

It means that Christians are not to look to the law of God to *make* them just. We can't obtain a righteous status before Him by law keeping. Instead, Christians know that the law shows us our sin. The law points out to us the *contours* of a godly life. It tells us what holiness *looks like*. But it is quite *powerless* to generate that holiness in us. Like a radical intervention by some psychologist in the life of a self-deluded over-spender who needs to be made to see that their credit card abuse has left them bankrupt and broken, God gave us the law to expose our spiritual bankruptcy.

And if we are Christians, we really must grasp that this is how to use the law. We *must* understand that the law is good and not despise it and dismiss it or flee from it, but prize and love it. But we must *also* understand that the law can't justify us, and it can't sanctify us. It can't make us right *with* God, and it can't help us live *for* God. It can show us the way. It can *point* to a godly lifestyle. But Christians must understand that the law is best used, and increasingly obeyed, only when it drives us back again and again to the *gospel*.

And that's the point of verses 10-11. The sins condemned here are not only contrary to the law, to the 10 Commandments, but "to sound doctrine, to the glorious *gospel* of the blessed God." The good news (gospel) about Jesus, Paul is saying, is the ultimate enemy of sin, and the source and dynamic that empowers all true obedience. Resting on Christ, driven there by the law, we are enabled to *obey* the law more and more...

Calvin spoke of the three uses of the law. The first use is the pedagogical use. The law is a pedagogue, a school master who brings us to Christ. The law teaches us our sin and points to Christ's obedience and blood. The second use is the civil use. The law of God written in our consciences, even though distorted by sin, still restrains and constrains our actions and curbs the worst excesses of our rebellion, whether as Christians or non-Christians. The third use is evangelical, that is, it serves gospel holiness. Having come to Christ, Christ as it were speaks the Law to us once again, not as a means of *obtaining* life, but as the pattern of our *grateful* lives.

A Christian use of the law is one that always uses all three of Calvin's categories. It is *always* being driven to Christ by the law's ongoing exposure of our sin, *always* having our sins restrained by the law informing our consciences, and *always* being guided in increasing righteousness by Christ Himself, who speaks His law to us as we rest on His grace to keep it. But these false teachers did not get any of that. They understood the law as an end in itself, a repository of mystical speculation and a tool to promote their own ideas. They used the law unlawfully for self aggrandizement rather than penitent Christ dependence. They used the law for self salvation rather than self despair.

I do not think it is an overstatement to say that one of the most urgent needs of today's church, and perhaps of many of us personally, is to grasp how to use the law of God correctly. On the one hand, there are many who continue to think they can obey God on their own steam. Self-justifying legalism is a perpetual problem in the unconverted heart. And our churches are full of people who think they can be good enough for God. But a far more subtle spiritual disease that troubles the body of Christ today is when real believers hear law, law, law all the time from pulpits and in Christian literature: law about parenting, law about prayer, law about evangelistic strategies, law about their whole lives, but no grace, no gospel, no good news.

What *is* the drive for practical preaching really? We hear that all the time. "I don't want doctrinal preaching; give me practical sermons that will really help me live better as a dad, or be

a good witness at work, or pray better, or be a better wife. Give me clear, simple directions on how to do these things well.” What *is* all that? It is all law. It is all detailed ethical and moral instruction and advice on how to do, do, do. The clamor for “practical sermons” really resolves itself, ultimately, do you see, in a failure to cling to the gospel. It resolves itself ultimately in unbelief. It simply does not trust the gospel to generate real holiness in me. It does not believe that the work of Christ for me, not what I must do for Him, but what He has *already done for me*, can change my life and motivate new obedience.

Certainly we need to hear the law. It shows us what a godly life looks like. Certainly we need practical counsel and good advice and sound strategies along the way. The law is *good*, remember? I do not want to disparage that at all. But we need to use the law correctly. If I hear practical advice without gospel and grace, if I hear imperatives without indicatives, if I hear command without the cross, I get *no* help; I get only condemnation, I get only misery and a reminder that I just can’t do what you’re advising me to do. I need a power source outside of me to get it done. Where am I to look for that? It can’t be found in the law itself. I must look to Christ.

God deals with error in the church by sending ministers of the gospel. And he deals with error in our lives by giving his law and his gospel.

Let me conclude with a couple of simple applications:

1. Since God deals with error in the church by ministers of the gospel, pray for your pastors and elders. Pray for their faithfulness to the faith once for all delivered. Pray for courage to love people enough to confront sin.
2. Since ministers of the gospel are to silence “different doctrine,” let’s learn to prize orthodoxy and reject the trend that loves novelty. Novelty in the realm of theology is another name for heresy.
3. Since the aim and design and goal of God in gospel ministry is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith, let’s learn to receive the instruction, correction, and rebuke of Holy Scripture humbly, as the loving discipline of our heavenly father.
4. Since God deals with error in our hearts by law and gospel, let’s make sure that for every legal precept we hear we find a gospel promise to cling to. Whenever we hear legal instruction on how we ought to love, learn to demand gospel instruction on how we are empowered to live it. Demand that the cross be planted in the soil of every command you hear so that we may learn not only what we must do, but what the Savior has done, and find grace to help us do it in grateful response.

Amen.

