

May 26, 2024

FALSE TEACHERS, THE GOSPEL, AND THE POWER TO TRANSFORM

1 Timothy 1:1-11

(1 of 15 in a series through 1 Timothy)

Revelation 12 gives us a picturesque vision of Satan being dealt a fatal blow as Jesus dies and is raised. We know the promise of Genesis 3:15 is that Jesus would crush Satan's head, which is quite picturesque itself, but perhaps here even more so. This glorious truth is shown with a war taking place in heaven, and finally, as Satan is defeated by the blood of the Lamb, he is thrown down from heaven to earth, no longer able to stand before the Lord and accuse God's people. It is beautiful and a glorious reminder that the ground of Satan's accusations against us have been removed. But then there is one painful word in the midst of this glorious news. John writes, "Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (Rev 12:12).

The devil knows that his final judgment is coming. He will soon be thrown into a lake of fire where he will suffer eternally. So, until then, he is trying to wreak as much havoc as he can. If he can convince a society to mutilate their children or destroy them in the womb, he will. But we'd be crazy to think that his attacks are simply "out there." He is also constantly going after the church, and we could probably tell stories about just how effective he is.

But believers in the twenty-first century are not the only ones who recognize and battle Satan's attacks. Paul was well aware of them as well. In fact, in Acts 20, as Paul was about to go to Jerusalem, be imprisoned, and ultimately martyred, he called the elders in Ephesus together to warn them about Satan's inevitable attacks that would come their way. Specifically he said to them, "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

As Paul writes this first letter to Timothy—a letter we'll look at over the next few months—what he has predicted has become a reality. False teachers have arisen in Ephesus, and Paul has instructed Timothy to stay in Ephesus and deal with the situation while Paul went elsewhere. Some time after they parted, Paul hoped to come and visit Timothy (3:14), no doubt bringing reinforcements with his presence and dealing with some matters personally concerning these false teachers. But in the meantime, seeing that this visit might be delayed, he wrote to Timothy to give him more insight and instruction on how to deal with them. And as we dive into this letter, it allows us to eavesdrop of sorts on what Paul tells Timothy so that we might learn about the nature of this kind of thing in our own setting and how to deal with it. Therefore, as we dive into the letter this morning and over the next several weeks, let me note a few things that we can learn from these opening eleven verses. The first is that we must proclaim and protect sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love.

We must proclaim sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love

I'll admit for those of you who are staring at the biblical text that this is not the first place Paul goes in our text. After his greeting, he speaks of Timothy's task of charging people not to teach any different doctrine than what has been proclaimed to him. But as I worked on explaining this text, I found myself struggling to explain what was going on in the text without noting this first point that I'm making and that Paul stresses more toward the middle of the text. So, I'm going to make these points in the order that helped me most make sense of what Paul was saying, hoping that it's helpful to you as well. And so the first thing that I want us to see is that we must proclaim sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love.

Let me try to show in this text why I'm wording this point as I am. First, I say that we must *proclaim* sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love because Paul speaks of being entrusted with this sound, gospel-rooted doctrine. In verses 10-11, after listing a number of sinful activities that describe the unrighteous, he includes a phrase that means "and everything else that is sinful" by saying, "And whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted."

This idea of being entrusted with the gospel carries the responsibility of proclaiming and protecting this message. For example, you see the idea of being entrusted with the gospel demanding proclamation in 2 Timothy 2:2 as Paul tells Timothy, "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." There, entrusting the message to others means proclaiming it and teaching it to them. That's why I say that we must *proclaim* sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love.

The reason I say, "sound, gospel-rooted doctrine" is also here in verses 10-11 as Paul says, "And whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel." The truths we believe are all in accordance with the gospel, rooted in the truth that God the Son took on flesh, lived, died, and rose for us. One of the things I tell my students in theology courses is that theological issues are not like a marble in a bag of marbles where you can remove one and the others remain unaffected. They're rather like a quilt where if you take a large thread and pull it, you'll see it's affecting other parts of the thread as well. That's how doctrine works. The gospel is at the center, but connected to it is a biblical understanding of God, man, sin, the church, etc. And we'll sum up the teaching of the Bible by simply labelling it, "sound, gospel-rooted doctrine."

And, finally, the reason I say that we must "proclaim sound, gospel-rooted doctrine *that results in love*" is because of how Paul writes in verse 5, as he writes, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." That is what Paul tells us is his goal. He's aiming to create people with pure hearts, good consciences, and sincere faith that shows itself in love. And he knows that the only thing that can bring that about is sound, gospel-rooted doctrine.

This is why false religions don't work. You can assemble a list of rules that call for good, moral things—things that maybe even we see in the Bible. But no mere list of rules can purify the

heart. No mere list of rules creates a good conscience. And no mere list of rules form a genuine love for God and others. That's why the law itself was insufficient to bring about salvation. Only the gospel does that.

Therefore, one of the tasks that Paul will make clear that has fallen to Timothy is a responsibility to proclaim sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in godly living epitomized by love. That was at the heart of Timothy's role as a pastor. And now it's a responsibility that has fallen to us as well. We must make it our aim to proclaim sound, gospel-rooted doctrine. It's why we take time to look at God's Word carefully each week, proclaiming what it says. But Paul also suggested elsewhere that we proclaim and guard. Why do we need to guard sound, gospel-rooted doctrine? The answer to that question brings us to our second point. People will arise who will challenge sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love.

People will arise who will challenge sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love

As Paul opens this letter, it is clear that there are people at the church in Ephesus who have turned away from the gospel and are teaching something contrary to it. Again, this was not surprising to Paul since he'd warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 that this would happen. We see this in the opening verses. After somewhat of a customary greeting, noting his apostolic authority and personal connection with Timothy (considering him a son in the faith), Paul immediately turns to the pressing issue of these false teachers, whom he identifies as "certain persons."

Paul begins by noting that he'd left Timothy in Ephesus to charge these "certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith" (vv. 3-4). Then, after noting the work of the gospel in verse 5, he returns to this group of false teachers again, saying, "Certain persons, swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions" (vv. 6-7).

We're going to have to piece this together a bit, so let's walk slowly to try to get ourselves on firm footing with what is going on here. Paul notes that there are "certain persons" who are teaching a "different doctrine" (v. 3). Also, when he addresses those "certain persons" again in verse 6 he mentions that they have "swerve[ed] from these." Okay, so what is "these"? In other words, what have they swerved from? The doctrine they're teaching is different than what? The answer, of course, is what we've spent so much time looking at already. They've swerved from the sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that results in love that Paul has referenced verses 5 and 10-11.

Okay, but what is this different doctrine that they're teaching. Again, we're going to have to piece this together because Paul doesn't write it out explicitly for us. But he does provide hints, so let's see if we can follow them. We know from verse 7 that they're desiring to be teachers of the law (though they don't understand the law). This is probably a reference the law of Moses

(which could refer only to the first five books of the OT or the OT as a whole). So, they're wanting to be teachers of what Moses wrote and possibly more (though they're without understanding of what it means).

But it doesn't seem that they're simply teaching the OT poorly. They're also focusing on things that simply aren't there in the text. They're creating things and speculating on things, things that seem to be tied to the genealogies that we find so often occurring in the OT. The reason we can say that is because Paul makes reference to these certain persons "devot[ing] themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations" (v. 4).

In other words, they're reading the OT, and perhaps taking the genealogies and speculating on what they could mean or what might have happened that the Bible simply doesn't speak to. And they seem to be making confident assertions about them (v. 7), though the Bible doesn't speak to these issues they're so confident about at all.

And there's one more thing that we can add to their false teaching in addition to them being based on the law, revolving around genealogies, and even leading to confident assertions about things the Bible doesn't even address. It also seems that they're applying these things they're falsely gathering from the law to apply to the believers at Ephesus, perhaps thinking they'll promote righteous living.

I say that because Paul notes that the law is good if we understand that it's not given for the just but for sinners (a list of which he names in verses 9-10). This must mean that they're taking the law and trying to apply it to believers in hopes of bringing about righteous living. And Paul says that the law doesn't work that way. Rather, the law is for the unjust.

Now, let me tell you what Paul doesn't mean by that and then what I think he does mean. I don't think that means that Paul doesn't want believers to read the law or doesn't think it's profitable for believers. In his very next letter to Timothy, Paul will tell him that all Scripture is profitable for equipping the people of God for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17), and by all Scripture he obviously includes the OT Scriptures (including the law of Moses). Paul will even take a text from the law and apply it later in this letter, quoting from Deuteronomy 25:4 about not muzzling an ox while he treads grain, applying it to the need to financially honor those who labor over us in the Word (1 Tim 5:18). So, Paul isn't saying the law fails to be helpful and provide wisdom to those in Christ who are credited with his righteousness.

Why then does Paul say that the law is "not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners" (v. 9), etc.? I think he means that the law should be used to promote the gospel, and they weren't doing that. Here's what I mean. The law is not—and was never meant to be—an instruction for the just person if you remove it from its fulfillment in Jesus. Rather, it's an instrument to show the ungodly person that he needs Jesus. This is why Paul says in Galatians 3:24, "So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." The law was meant to expose our sin and condemn us when we realize we've fallen short of it so that we might say, "I can't be righteous. I deserve to

die.” And then it points us to the gospel as our hope, saying, “Jesus is righteous for you, and he’s paid the penalty of death that you deserve by dying for you and being raised from the dead.”

But the real key here is to recognize that if you don’t use the law to move to the gospel, then you’re using the law wrongly. Even when we read and obey the law today, as Christians, we only obey it *as fulfilled in Jesus*. Think about all the civil commands in Deuteronomy. Moses would tell the Israelites that if someone is caught in adultery you execute them, or if a child is rebellious, you stone them to death. And when he gave this law, he’d say, “So shall you purge the evil person from among you.” Well, why don’t we execute adulterers or stone rebellious children to death? It’s because Jesus has come, and we’re not under the Old Covenant law any more.

But it doesn’t mean we ignore these laws. Rather, we obey them *as fulfilled in Jesus*. And, interestingly, do you remember when Paul tells the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5 to exercise discipline against the man who was part of their church but was sleeping with his stepmom? Paul told them to remove him from their church, and then he added, “Purge the evil person from among you.” Do you see what Paul was doing? He was saying that the civil laws that governed the people of God under the Old Covenant are applied in Jesus in an ecclesiological (i.e. church) setting.

Again, the key is that the law must lead to the gospel, and only then—as we understand the law as fulfilled in Jesus—do we apply it in its fulfilled and transformed state to believers. Otherwise, it’s simply to show the ungodly man that he needs Christ. But it seemed these false teachers missed precisely this point. They’d turned aside (i.e. swerved) from the gospel and were seeking to apply the law to people—and even extra-biblical rules to people—thinking it would produce godly living. But that’s never how the law was meant to function. It is powerless to transform hearts and produce love. Only the gospel does that. Something like that seems to be what these false teachers were doing.

Now, it may be that we don’t have someone doing this precise thing that these “certain persons” were doing in Ephesus, but we do need to recognize that as long as Satan is active in this world (and he will be active until Christ returns), we can expect false teachers to arise in our churches, and seeming brothers may even swerve from the truth and turn people away from sound doctrine that is rooted in the gospel and results in love toward false doctrine, devoid of the gospel, that results in a lack of love and unholy living. Paul told the Ephesian elders it would happen, and it did. And we’d be quite naïve to think it can’t happen here. And this leads to our final point, namely, that we must confront those who turn away from sound, gospel-rooted doctrine.

We must confront those who turn away from sound, gospel-rooted doctrine

Perhaps this point is obvious, but I want to make it explicit. This is where Paul begins our text. As I’ve noted, after his customary greeting, he writes to Timothy, “As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus, so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any

different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship of God that is by faith” (vv. 3-4).

One reason I wanted to explicitly make this point (in addition to it being in the text) is because I think it can be a point that is missed, even by churches that are walking in relative health. And here’s why. With the recovery of church discipline in recent years—for which I am grateful—there can be a focus *simply* on unbiblical living. In other words, you confront someone if they’re walking in unrepentant sin, and if they don’t repent, you take it to the church, and if they ultimately won’t repent, you remove them from the membership of the church. We’ve practiced that at times, and though terribly sad and painful to do, it is a good and necessary biblical practice.

But with the recovery of that practice, we may well begin to think that it is only a *sinful* lifestyle that needs confrontation. So, we rightly confront the brother who is stealing, or walking in sexual immorality, or practicing drunkenness, or the like. And, again, that is good. But the brother who is teaching something that is not in accord with sound doctrine, rooted in the gospel and displaying itself in love needs to be confronted as well. His teaching of unsound doctrine is just as dangerous and just as corruptible as the person walking in open sin.

Here's why. Not only does this teaching lead others potentially to embrace different doctrine, which is unbiblical, but unbiblical doctrine will ultimately lead to unbiblical practice as well. And the reason this is the case is because it is only sound doctrine, rooted in the gospel, that transforms people’s hearts. And this is why after Paul lists all those sinful practices in verses 9-10, he concludes by saying, “And whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted” (v. 11). Just as biblical doctrine, rooted in the gospel will show itself in love for God and others, so unbiblical doctrine, devoid of the gospel will show itself in harshness, rebellion, and ungoldly living.

And so you and I have been given a gift. We have the Scripture. It tells us what we must believe—sound doctrine, rooted in the good news that Jesus lived, died, and was raised for us. But Satan hates that truth. And he hates the power of that sound, gospel-rooted doctrine to clean consciences, purify hearts, strengthen faith, and produce love. So he will attack it and help ensure that others will rise up to oppose it and teach contrary to it. And when that happens, we must confront it. It is the biblical thing to do and the most loving thing to do for that person and this church. And even when not confronting wrong doctrine directly, we must be constantly proclaiming sound, gospel-rooted doctrine that shows itself in love by making sure that we’re proclaiming God’s Word and rejoicing in his gospel each and every Sunday. Let’s do that now as we come to the table. Amen.