

1 Timothy 1:3-7 **A Sermon**

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If you were with us last week then you will know that we have put aside our study of 1 Corinthians for a little while in order to begin a new teaching series on Paul's First Letter to Timothy. In our introductory study of this letter last week, we did not actually look at the text itself but instead spent some time thinking about the background to this letter - i.e., the events that led to its being written and the relationship between Paul, the author, and Timothy, the recipient. Finally, we spent a couple minutes at the end of our time thinking about the *purpose* of this letter and saw that, based on what Paul says in 3:14-15, and based on the content of the letter itself - the main purposes are to *encourage Timothy and to promote the good order of the church.*

Once you understand that these are Paul's main aims in the letter, then you can see why he spends so much time dealing with the issue of leadership - both negatively as he addresses false teachers and what they are teaching and positively as he instructs Timothy and the Ephesians very carefully as to what sort of persons they ought to be putting into positions of leadership in their congregations.

In the passage before us this morning, chapter 1:3-7, Paul, after a pretty standard sort of greeting, immediately launches into the subject of false teaching and false teachers. The fact that he does so without any opening words of thanksgiving or a prayer or anything like that is a departure from his usual style and it tells you that he must have felt some sense of urgency in writing this letter. He doesn't have any time for pleasantries but instead goes directly into the matter of false teachers right away.

He does this for several reasons - he does it because they were departing from the truths that Paul told them to hang on to, he does it because they were driven by wrong motives, and he does it because the result of their efforts was interfering with the good order and functioning of the Ephesian church. For all those reasons and more, Paul wanted the false teachers stopped - and so he begins this letter. That will be our main subject this morning - before we look at that, let us pray together. (Pray and read 1 Timothy 1:1-7):

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. 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 from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by 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.

Right from the outset of this letter, Paul begins addressing the problems in Ephesus by instructing his disciple Timothy, as we have seen, to stop certain people from teaching “false doctrine” as the NIV says or “different doctrine” if you have the ESV. Now in thinking about this whole matter, I want to draw your attention back to something that happened earlier on in Paul’s life, in the early days of the Ephesian Church Planting Project. Read Acts 20:17-31:

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 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. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.

Isn't that fascinating? Paul *warned* the Ephesians with *tears*, even as he was leaving them, saying that after he left “savage wolves” would come in and not spare the flock. He told them that people from among their own congregation would rise up and distort the truth in order to generate a following and create their own little empires.

Is this not precisely what has happened in the Ephesian congregation? Is this not exactly the problem that Paul now addresses in his letter to Timothy? Paul anticipated

these things and prophetically spoke of the day when they would happen - and now they *are* happening.

However, Paul's preparation of his congregation for this eventuality did not simply consist of his *warning* the Ephesian congregation about these things as he was leaving. Long before he gave them this warning he set apart elders to shepherd and guard the flock. Even before *that* he *instructed* the congregation - explaining to them the Gospel and the things of God in a systematic fashion, entrusting them with a specific set of truths - a *body of doctrine* - a statement of faith, if you will.

If you were to take the time to sit down and read right through the Pastoral Epistles - 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus - then you would easily see this. Nothing could be clearer than the fact that Paul had a certain set of defined beliefs that were to be accepted, taught, guarded, and passed on - from one generation to the next. There was a system of doctrine that defined what was the *content* of their belief, which they were not free to depart from or to modify in any way.

Listen to what Paul says about this in a number of places, starting with a small summary of some of what Paul has passed on to them in this very letter, in chapter 3, verse 16, where he makes some doctrinal statements about the Lord Jesus Christ:

He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory....

Six doctrinal statements about the Lord Jesus Christ...

Or, listen to what he says in 1 Timothy 6:20:

Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith....

Or again, in 2 Timothy 1:13-14:

What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you - guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us....

Or finally, in 2 Timothy 2:2, in a very familiar passage:

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others...

Do you see it? It's like runners in a relay race who must *pass on the baton* - a certain

baton and no other baton will do. There were *certain beliefs* and *particular truths* that Paul wanted to be taught and believed and guarded and passed along. This is where the false teachers had gotten into trouble. Instead of sticking to what Paul had taught, they had wandered off into strange and speculative sorts of teachings - teaching centered upon things that Paul calls “myths” and based upon what Paul refers to as “genealogies.”

Now, the fact that Paul describes these false teachers as those who have “wandered away” seems to indicate that they were once in step with the Ephesian congregation - perhaps in the leadership even. Whatever the case, they were people who were known in the congregation and were once on track, but are no more. Now they have strayed into some strange theology, adopting some weird ideas that were completely foreign to what Paul taught, all the while talking very confidently of things about which they were abysmally ignorant, as Paul indicates in verse 7:

They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.....

Such were the false teachers at Ephesus. Paul says to Timothy, “command these men not to teach false doctrines any longer....”So much for religious tolerance.....

Now, what *were* some of these “false doctrines” or “different doctrines” that these unhelpful teachers were promoting among the Ephesians. What does Paul mean by “myths” and what is all this about “genealogies”, etc? Well, from the very beginning it needs to be acknowledged that there is no consensus on what these words mean amongst bible scholars. Paul simply does not provide us with enough information to be absolutely certain - but there are some clues to go on.

For instance, in Titus 1:10-14, another “pastoral epistle”, Paul is giving a similar warning about false teachers and also brings up the subject of myths, only this time he qualifies it a bit more and says:

...rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to JEWISH myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth....

In Titus, Paul talks about “Jewish” myths and so it is at least possible that he is talking about the same sort of thing in 1 Timothy. When you combine that possibility with the fact that in the Timothy passage, right after talking about myths and genealogies, he starts talking in verse 8 about how the law is good “if one uses it properly” - implying that perhaps there are those around who are not. If you take that information on board then that strengthens the possibility that all this has something to do with Judaism.

Further, when we look outside the Bible, at other sources which talk about the practices of Jewish peoples in various eras, then we find that there was a common practice among some of the Jews in that day with regard to how they would use the Scriptures of

the Old Testament. In short, there had developed over the years this practice of building great and fanciful interpretations out of very little textual information. This even included the use of genealogies - whereby a name was extracted from a long list of names, and from that barest of starting points some Jewish interpreters would, shall we say, engage in a *very imaginative* reconstruction of events and ideas related to that name, with no further texts or information to support their reconstructions.

In other words, instead of trying to derive meaning from the text they were *pouring meaning into the text, much more than was actually there*. Obviously, this sort of approach to interpreting Scriptures would be open to all sorts of abuse.

So, anyway, it is likely that this, or something close to it, is what Paul was referring to in verse 4 when he talks about the false teachers who devoted themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These were probably people who had adopted some un-sound Jewish interpretive practices which were leading them away from the sound doctrine they had received from Paul.

Now, the problem with the false teachers was not only that they had departed from Paul's teaching but their motives were all wrong. And one way of seeing this is to look at what their motives *should* have been, what their goals should have been. We can best see that by seeing what Paul's motives were. In verse 5, Paul says that "...the goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith..."

Here we see Paul giving one summary of his own motivation for what he says and does in ministry, including the motivation for what he is doing at this very moment - which is trying to get Timothy to stop the false teachers. The reason for this command, says Paul, and indeed every other command, is *love*. That is the ultimate goal toward which he is working, it is the one thing that he wants to see manifested in both Timothy and the Ephesian believers - LOVE. And not just any kind of love, but love that comes from hearts that are pure, and consciences that are good - and not consciences that have been "seared" by false teaching, as Paul talks about in chapter 4:2. Further it is love that springs from a *sincere*, genuine faith.

Which is why Paul is so adamant that the false teachers must be stopped. Because Paul knows that false teaching does not produce pure hearts and good consciences and sincere faith. Rather, it produces speculation, doubt, controversy, quarreling, fighting, division, and *faithlessness*. False teaching does not produce the soil from which love naturally springs.

So love was not the false teachers' motivation. Their motivation was something else, part of which we see in the verses before us and another part of which does not surface until later on in the letter - in chapter 6. In the verses before us we see, in verse 7, that while Paul's aim was to see love manifested in the life of the people, the aim of the false teachers wasto be teachers of the law - which could be something driven by pride or a desire for status and power - or both. One thing we can say for certain, their goal

was NOT to see pure hearts and good consciences and sincere faith develop in those they taught - we know this because Paul says so in verse 6 when he comments that these teachers have “wandered away from these” things - meaning that they have wandered away from seeking pure hearts and good consciences and sincere faith. Their goals were more self-centered. They were interested in becoming teachers and, in so doing, gaining a following.

Why are they interested in gaining a following? Well, there may be a whole host of unhealthy reasons for *that* - perhaps vanity, as we have seen, or a lust for power or control. Or, perhaps it was GREED. This, as well as some of the others just mentioned, certainly seems to be the motivation that Paul highlights later on in the letter, in 6:3-5:

If anyone does teach false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain...

And so, the false teachers, with all sorts of wrong motivations, had departed from Paul's teaching and in so doing, were corrupting hearts and searing consciences and working against the faith. The fruit of their labor was not love but controversies and meaningless, pointless discussions and bickering and fighting. It is not hard to understand why Paul was so eager for Timothy to call these teachers out and put a stop to their nonsense.

Now, as our time is getting away from us, I simply want to, in closing, draw your attention to a few fairly straightforward implications that Paul's words to Timothy hold for us as we overhear this conversation that God *wanted* us to overhear....

1) Firstly, and this is no great surprise, but it needs to be said, frequently: *false teaching is alive and well today*. The very same things that were being done in Paul's day, within the Ephesian congregation, are happening today in congregations all over the place.

a) People continue to teach things which are opposed to sound doctrine - e.g., the whole “open theism” debate which, if you don't know, is a serious debate going on in some evangelical circles over the issue of whether or not God knows the future. At the end of the day it's a view that sees the sovereignty of the human will as the most important thing in the universe and the thing for which everything else must be sacrificed - including the person of God. Now it's absolute stupidity but it really is *out there* and people really are being taken in by it and the fruit of that sort of thing, let me assure you, will not be love from a pure heart and a sincere faith.....

b) But that is not the only way in which we see false teaching rear its ugly head in the church today. Just as people in Paul's day ignored or opposed his teaching, so too do false teachers today continue to either dismiss or else flatly oppose Paul. This will

become more evident a little later on in the letter - in chapter 2 - but it bears being said here.

c) Further, just as people in Paul's day were engaging in questionable interpretive practices which led them to rely on strange teachings that were more myth than fact, so too do false teachers today engage in the same sort of questionable behaviors. Many examples could be offered, but one that pops readily to mind for me was the whole "Bible Code" thing that came out a few years back.

This was supposedly some elaborate mathematical schema which revealed secret hidden messages in the Bible - provided you arranged the words and letters in certain ways and made a whole truck load of assumptions and allowed for a large number of exceptions and qualifications along the way. I mean, the stuff is breathtakingly ridiculous but it was being taught, *and believed*, all over the place.

d) But perhaps the most important thing to say about false teaching in our own day is that it still has the same effect as it did in Paul's - it leads to meaningless talk, pointless discussions, controversies and fighting. And what happens when people are busy bickering about somebody's crazy, unfounded speculations about God? What happens is that the work of the Gospel is ignored. Controversy takes center stage and not God's work.

Now, don't mis-hear me. I'm not saying that there is no place for theological discussion and debate - there is - as long as it is within the "playing field" of the sound doctrine that Paul is talking about, as long as it is driven by *real exegesis*, and not by myths and legends and people abusing the Scriptures and treating it like an empty canister into which any and every meaning can be poured.

But again, false teaching is alive and well. Yet, so too is the antidote for false teaching. The antidote is what we see in verse 3. Timothy has been commissioned to tell the false teachers NOT to teach false doctrines or, as the ESV puts it, "different doctrines". Different from what? Different from what Paul taught. The antidote to false teaching is *faithful* teaching - and the key word there is FAITHFUL - teaching that is concerned to know and understand from the Bible just what IS this "good deposit" of sound doctrine that Paul wanted to be guarded and passed along.

2) And this leads to the second implication - the fact that faithfulness to God *means* being concerned about doctrine. Not just any doctrine, but the doctrine about God that Paul passed along and which he warned his congregations not to depart from. You can't have faithfulness to God *apart from* a concern for right doctrine. Now saying those sorts of things is not trendy and goes right against the grain of Popular Evangelicalism - which is a kind of "Christianity Lite." However, the implications of Paul's words here are inescapable. People who downplay the importance of doctrine or who want to say that their faithfulness is past that or beyond that or not concerned with that - People who say those things have no idea what they are talking about.

I mean, it might sound very pious and spiritual and holy to say things like “I don’t get all worked up about doctrine” or “I don’t need doctrine, I just need Jesus” - it might sound really spiritual to say those kinds of things but it *isn’t*. If you had said that sort of thing to the Apostle Paul he would have put you over his spiritual knee and given you a verbal spanking. He would have said, “What are you talking about? There is no such thing as a non-doctrinal Gospel or a non-doctrinal Jesus” Faithfulness to God *requires you* to be concerned about right doctrine.

3) Finally, the goal of all these things, the aim for which we should be striving - as Paul was striving - is LOVE. To be sure, doctrine is important but it is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. It is the thing which nurtures and cultivates the pure heart and the good conscience and the sincere faith which become the fertile soil from which the kind of Love that Paul is seeking to see manifested will surely and truly grow. The kind of love that loves God with fullness of heart and mind. The love that loves one’s neighbor as oneself. The love that is the fulfillment of the law. The love that covers a multitude of sins. The love that shows that we are His. The love that exists, because He first loved us.

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