

Week of February 24, 2013

The Truth of the Gospel

Passage Outline:

1. Avoid Distractions to the Truth (1 Tim. 1:3-7)
2. Take Your Stand on the Truth (1 Tim. 1:12-17)
3. Battle for the Truth (1 Tim. 1:18-20)

What's This Lesson About?

The central truth of the gospel is that Christ came to save sinners. This lesson is about grounding our faith in the truth of the gospel of grace.

1. Avoid Distractions to the Truth- 1 Timothy 1:3-7

³ As 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 ⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work--which is by faith. ⁵ The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. 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.

Timothy was the son of a Gentile father and a Jewish Christian mother named Eunice. He was from Lystra (located in today's nation of Turkey). Likely Timothy became a believer in Christ through Paul's ministry when he visited Lystra (Acts 14:6-20), then served alongside the apostle during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-5). Timothy later continued traveling with Paul and was with him at Rome during Paul's imprisonment (Philippians 2:19). After Paul's release he journeyed with Timothy to Ephesus (also in today's Turkey) and discovered the church there was deeply troubled by false teachers. Consequently Paul left Timothy at Ephesus while he traveled to Macedonia, located in the first century north of Greece. From there the apostle wrote 1 Timothy to help his young associate handle the problems with false teachers, organize the church, and encourage him to carry out ministry responsibilities.

Read the articles "Timothy's Ministry Assignments" and "Timothy and Paul" and "The Ephesian Church" contained in the heavy duty preparation packet.

In 1 Timothy 1:3-7 Paul directed Timothy to oppose and prevent the spread of false teaching in the church at Ephesus. His words are strong and direct. False teachers have been around for centuries. They still dreadfully menace God's people.

We see in verse 3, Paul urged Timothy, the young minister to remain in Ephesus, before he (Paul) departed for Macedonia. The word *urged* means Paul entreated, implored, even begged Timothy to stay put in the city, revealing perhaps the young minister was considering leaving and throwing in the towel on further ministry there. Timothy apparently had a timid side (2 Timothy 1:7). He perhaps felt intimidated by church leaders who snubbed him because of his youth. At times Timothy probably didn't feel up to the task Paul laid on his shoulders to instruct certain people not to teach different doctrine and not to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies. The word *instruct* suggests Paul wanted Timothy to give strong orders to those troubling the church with their teachings. Paul wanted Timothy to demand the troublemakers stop teaching error.

The apostle did not explain further the doctrine he described as both myths and genealogies that were only empty speculations, but he knew it contrasted with the doctrine of God's plan, which operates by faith in Christ alone. The false teachings were nothing compared to the good news of Jesus Christ who liberates sinners from

sin's guilt and declares them righteous in His sight. God's revelation in Christ is the centerpiece for believers and churches. In the gospel we have all we need to live and to make sense of our universe. Human speculations, on the other hand, gives rise to strife and useless information contradict God's plan and are poor substitutes for divine revelation. Christians should avoid them as one would step away from a poisonous snake.

False teachers still plague the church today. They love to indulge in mixtures of truth and error and promote them as all-important. They pile up fables and myths, which are only rubbish. Stay away from speculative theological arguments that can sidetrack you from the gospel's central message. Stand firm for the truth about Christ but do so in love.

Paul assessed the infectious false teachings in the church at Ephesus as empty speculations. The teachers of these false doctrines had nothing to show for their work. Paul's teachings about Christ, however, changed people's lives forming in them a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. The gospel never produces emptiness; rather it creates good. The first is a pure heart, which refers to one's will, mind, and emotions. Second, conscience is a person's God-created awareness of right and wrong actions. Third, faith that is sincere is more than talk; it is genuine trust in Christ. Sadly, some in the Ephesian church had turned aside from these qualities to fruitless discussion, but Paul bluntly points out, they didn't even understand what they are saying. These people did not lead anyone to holy living.

2. Take Your Stand on the Truth - 1 Timothy 1:12-17

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.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not subjective (coming from within ourselves) but objective (coming from outside ourselves) truth revealed by God and recorded in Scripture. It is a fixed body of knowledge on which believers are to take their stand and use to guard against false teachings. The gospel is also good news because Jesus is all-powerful to change peoples' sinful lifestyles to righteous ones.

History abounds with stories about persons forever transformed from the ugliness of sin into the beauty of righteousness. Billy Sunday was a popular pro baseball player in the early years of the sport. One day in Chicago as Billy sat on a street corner, he heard a street band playing and singing gospel hymns. Billy listened, followed them to a mission, trusted Jesus Christ, and became an evangelist for years. Others whom Christ saved from sin and to eternal life include Martin Luther, John Newton, Charles Colson, and C. S. Lewis. In the Bible we learn of the adulterous Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus, the Ethiopian official, the Gentile jailer at Philippi, and Paul himself, whose hate for Christians Christ converted into love. Beginning with verse 12, the hater turned lover shared his personal testimony with Timothy. Paul's powerful statement contrasts the gospel's glory with the emptiness of false teachings.

In verses 12-14, we have one long sentence where Paul gives thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord for calling him to salvation and ministry. To Paul, God's grace was a marvel, and he never changed his feelings about that. Because of grace alone, Paul was the beneficiary of God's appointing him to ministry. Throughout his years of service, the apostle knew Christ Jesus as the One who kept him strengthened for effective service. Even when Paul was again imprisoned and facing execution at Rome, he wrote to Timothy, "The Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (2 Timothy 4:17). From day one of his salvation and call to ministry, Paul lived in the

strength his gracious Lord provided. God's strength sat on Paul's life like a crown. Today's believers not only experience God's gracious salvation, they too minister by the daily grace of His strength.

Paul described himself as the worst of sinners. In view of his wicked past, the apostle was shocked Christ saved him. First, Paul said he was a blasphemer because he slandered Christ and tried to force others to do so. He was one who dragged Jesus' name through the mud, violating the first three Commandments. Second, Paul said he persecuted Christians, hunting them down as if they were wild animals, and thus broke the rest of the Commandments. Third, Paul described himself as an arrogant man who bullied and bloodied Christians. Yet for Paul, in spite of his sinful life, the Lord's wonderful mercy and grace superabundantly overflowed on his life. But why? we might ask. Paul explained. He acted in ignorance and in unbelief regarding the deity of Jesus Christ. Paul didn't know Jesus was God's Son, so the Lord revealed His true identity when, on the Damascus road, where He opened the eyes of Paul's heart by answering his question, "Who are You, Lord?" (Acts 9:5).

Verse 15 contains the first of the five "trustworthy" sayings that appear in the Pastoral Letters (see also 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8). These sayings were familiar teachings regarding articles of belief deeply cherished and served as confessions in public worship in the first-century church. They provide insights to what matters most for churches and believers today. Paul's trustworthy statement in 1:15 refers to Jesus' incarnation ("Christ Jesus came into the world"), which implies His pre-existence, and His purpose in coming ("to save sinners"), among whom Paul believed he was the worst of them. Why would Christ mercifully save the worst sinner of them all? Paul answered that Christ saved him, the most rotten of the bunch, to showcase the Lord's extraordinary patience toward all sinners. Paul was the model, the living proof, that Christ can deliver from death and darkness *any* sinner. No person is beyond His reach of mercy. Christ can make a murderer a minister and missionary, and transform any persecutor into a preacher of the Lord's utmost kindness to the undeserving.

Paul began his personal testimony with thanksgiving (v. 12) and closed it with a doxology (v. 17). Christ's mercy for Paul, the worst of the worst, filled his heart with praise. He extolled God in four characteristics. First, God is the King eternal, meaning He rules the ages. Second, God is immortal, not subject to weakness, death, decay, and corruption. Third, God is invisible to His people while on earth, but we "see" Him by faith. Fourth, He is the only God. Having no competitors, the Lord is unique in His glory. Because of His excellences, Paul concluded that the one living God is worthy of honor and glory forever and ever.

3. Battle for the Truth - 1 Timothy 1:18-20

¹⁸ Timothy, 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, ¹⁹ holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. ²⁰ Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

So far, Paul taught Timothy (you and me as well) that God's people ground their faith in the gospel by avoiding distractions to the truth and by taking their stand on the truth. Now we discover a third step—battling for the truth. Living as God desires requires all three actions.

Yes, you read that last step correctly. Sometimes we must strongly engage in battle for God's truth as Paul urged Timothy to do. Americanized Christianity often looks away from spiritual warfare. Many believers focus entirely on positive aspects of Christian living such as love, peace, joy, and "sweet" communion with the Lord Jesus. The "dark" side of battling against evil is often unwelcome and avoided, even denied, but not so with Paul. Spiritual warfare, however, existed in Paul and Timothy's time and is here to stay. The apostle urges Timothy to gear up for the battle.

Paul began with an expression of tenderness toward young Timothy. The older Christian called the younger Christian my son, perhaps not only to show warm-hearted affection but also to remind Timothy that Paul had led him to Christ years before. That reminder surely would have helped encourage Timothy to roll up his

sleeves and thoroughly engage what comes next. Timothy, as a leader of the church in Ephesus, needed to face up to and follow through with spiritual grit and wisdom. The apostle reminds Timothy of his past, specifically certain prophecies previously made about him. Those prophecies likely were favorable statements regarding Timothy's spiritual gifts and service. Recalling these predictions likely would encourage the young Timothy to strongly engage in battle, for that's what living a Christian life often involves. Doing so, however, is not a cakewalk for any believer, whether living in the first century or in the twenty-first century.

Read the article “The Warfare a Christian Wages” contained in the heavy duty preparation packet.

These encouraging comments, joined with faith and a good conscience, would help Timothy face the battles against evil inside and outside the church at Ephesus. Faith here refers to personal faith in Jesus, a heartfelt commitment to Him as the Lord who saves. Conscience is an inner voice that accuses believers when we sin but affirms us for right behavior. Faith in Christ and a good conscience, Paul reminded Timothy, would help him join the battle against sin in the church.

Paul pointed to himself as one who engaged in spiritual warfare to challenge Timothy to join him in battle. The apostle had delivered two church members—Hymenaeus and Alexander—to Satan, so that they may be taught not to blaspheme, to slander or insult God. (See study below on “Delivered Them to Satan.”) Paul removed them from Christian fellowship, hoping to win them back, leaving them in the devil's realm where they experienced his hate as long as they refused to repent of their sins.

Now it's your turn and my turn to roll up our spiritual sleeves and battle for the truth. Let us do so without timidity and with love. What matters most—grounding our faith in the truth of the gospel.

Many people today do not like to associate Christianity with images of war, yet Paul urged Timothy to “strongly engage in battle” for the truth of the gospel. How are you prepared to contend for the truth of the gospel today?

Biblical Truths in Focus

1. Avoid distractions to the truth about Christ such as speculative and pointless theological arguments that sidetrack believers from the central message of the gospel.
2. Take your stand on the truth that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.
3. Recognize the serious danger posed by doctrinal error.
4. Engage in battle for the truth of the gospel even if doing so puts you at risk.
5. Love those without Christ who teach false doctrine. Share Christ with them when given opportunities.

Study: I have handed over to Satan (v. 20, “delivered unto Satan,” KJV)

Paul informed Timothy regarding Hymenaeus and Alexander that he “delivered them to Satan,” meaning the apostle banished these two men from associating with the church at Ephesus. Why? One purpose was to help the church maintain purity of doctrine and behavior. A second reason was to discipline Hymenaeus and Alexander so they would experience Satan's malice, realize the error and seriousness of their beliefs and teachings, repent, and reconnect with the believers in fellowship and sound doctrine.