Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

How to Treat False Teachers, Part 1
Scripture: 1 Timothy 1:3-6
Code: 54-4

INTRODUCTION

The church at Ephesus had a great beginning. Other churches throughout Asia Minor grew out of it. Yet despite the influence of the apostle Paul's ministry, the church was never impervious to false teachers. As a result, Paul wrote this epistle to Timothy to remind him of his responsibility to stop false teachers and set things in order in the church. He commanded Timothy to maintain pure teaching and set an example for other churches to follow.

Paul speaks of the necessity of stopping false teachers in verses 3-11. Stopping them demands an understanding of four things: their error, their goal, their motive, and their result.

LESSON

I. UNDERSTAND THEIR ERROR (vv. 3-4)

"As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith, so do."

A. The Establishment of the Scene

Paul begins verse 3 by saying, "I besought," a word of exhortation. Paul was pleading for Timothy remain in Ephesus. Timothy was approximately thirty-five years old at the time. He had been with Paul for about twenty years. He was a true replica of Paul, as implied by verse 2: "My own son in the faith." Yet he apparently displayed a certain timidity in his character. In addition, it was no easy task to displace church leaders. Paul might have anticipated Timothy's reluctance and that's why he pleaded for him to stay in Ephesus.

Paul himself started the process of eliminating false teachers. In 1 Timothy 1:20 he mentions Hymenaeus and Alexander, perhaps two of the leading false teachers in Ephesus, whom he "delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme." But Paul had since left for Macedonia (v. 3) to visit the Philippians, and Timothy was faced with the difficult assignment of rebuking false spiritual leaders in the church at Ephesus, and perhaps the sister churches in the surrounding area.

Following the ChronologyPaul's first epistle to Timothy does not fit within the the chronology of the book of Acts. That book ends with Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Many believe Paul was released and then journeyed by ship to Ephesus. On the way he is thought to have visited Colosse, which he promised Philemon he would do (Philemon 22). From Colosse he apparently traveled to Ephesus while Timothy came from Philippi. They met in Ephesus, at which time Paul dealt with Hymenaeus and Alexander. After surveying the situation, Paul seems to have left Timothy behind to go to Philippi (Phil. 2:24). Paul had not been gone very long before he wrote this epistle to strengthen Timothy for the difficult task at hand. He also wanted to establish Timothy's authority with the people who would hear this letter.

B. The Extent of the Command

1. Paul's passionate cry

Although 1 Timothy 1:3-4 is a complete thought, it lacks the grammatical structure to be a complete sentence. The first clause begins with "as" but is never resolved. The translators of the King James Version added "so do" at the end of verse 4 because they felt they were necessary to complete the sentence. Evidently Paul was not concerned with grammar at this point because his heart was exercised over the importance of Timothy's dealing with false teachers. He was making a passionate cry to Timothy to accept his command. He knew Timothy was a genuine child in the faith who would carry out the task through the Spirit's power.

2. Paul's direct command

Further Paul said, "Charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies" (vv. 3-4). Paul was giving Timothy apostolic authority to command those false teachers to stop their teaching. False teachers and their error cannot be dealt with lightly in the church; it must be dealt with immediately and firmly. In actuality Paul was giving Timothy a military command (Gk., parangell[ma]o). Such of command is not an option--it demands a response to one's superior.

According to 1 Timothy 3:14 Paul had hoped to go to Ephesus himself. But his writing a second letter to Timothy indicates he never made it, so he depended on Timothy to protect the church.

Ephesus: A Key to Asia MinorEphesus was a key city--a provincial capital in Asia Minor. It had been declining economically because the river that ran through the city was depositing silt on the shore line where it met the sea. Consequently, the city was being forced inland and was losing some of its trade. Still it remained a significant city during the first century after Christ, primarily because of the Temple of Diana, or Artemis. This particular pagan cult was a fertility cult. Worship consisted of

orgiastic fertility rites. In the midst of such a culture was the church that Paul cared about so passionately.

a) Its audience

Notice in 1 Timothy 1:3 that Paul says to "charge some," referring to certain individuals. That seems to indicate only a few men were having a rather wide influence--no doubt not just in Ephesus, but also in the surrounding areas. It's possible they were all known by name to Paul and Timothy. But if that were the case, why aren't their names mentioned? It may be that the Lord didn't want to give them any publicity. But more importantly, perhaps the Lord didn't want to list some and leave others out, who then might feel themselves impervious to any censure. There is no hint in the text that the false teachers were outsiders, like those in Galatia and Corinth who had come to pollute the churches there (Gal. 2:4; 2 Cor. 11:4).

b) Its specifics

(1) Stop teaching heresy

At the end of verse 3 Paul tells Timothy to command those men "that they teach no other doctrine." That's the translation of a long verb in the Greek language that is used only by Paul in the New Testament. He took the Greek word translated "to teach" (didaskalia) and added the word heteros, which means "of a different kind." The English word heterodoxy means something that is the opposite of orthodoxy. The combination of those two Greek words refered to teaching heresy. Paul wanted those men to stop teaching doctrine that contradicted God's revealed truth.

Apparently the false teachers were using the Word of God as their base, probably the Old and New Testaments. They were twisting and perverting the whole nature of Christian truth.

When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost 3,000 were saved (Acts 2:41). Verse 42 says "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine." Thirty years later everyone knew that the substance of revealed truth came through the apostles' doctrine. In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul said to Timothy, "the things that thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." But some at the church in Ephesus had deviated from the truth and were teaching error.

(2) Stop listening to fables

In 1 Timothy 1:4 Paul elaborates on the nature of their error: "Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies." Timothy was not to occupy his mind with fables or myths (Gk., muthos). In 1 Timothy 4:1 Paul indicates that such legends are in fact "doctrine of demons," manufactured by seducing

spirits. These false teachers in Ephesus were much like the Athenians as described in Acts 17:21: "All the Athenians and strangers who were there [on Mars Hill] spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or hear some new thing." Apparently these men in Ephesus were introducing new things to tantalize the people, passing off demonically contrived falsehoods as divine truth.

It's difficult to identify those fables specifically because we don't have that information revealed to us. We don't know what they may have been reading into the genealogies or how they were interpreting them. It's enough for us to know that what was being taught was contrary to revealed truth. Nevertheless we can systematize their error to some extent by surveying Paul's teaching on the subject in the pastoral epistles.

(a) 1 Timothy 1:4--Paul says the false teachers were giving themselves to "fables and endless genealogies."

(b) 1 Timothy 1:7--The false teachers were promoting error because they were "desiring to be teachers of the law." Somehow the myths and genealogies were connected to Old Testament law. That leads us to believe there was a Jewish orientation to their error.

(c) 1 Timothy 4:2-3--These teachers were advocating celibacy and prohibiting marriage. They also were commanding people to abstain from food. To them true spirituality was found through all kinds of abstinences and self-deprivation.

(d) 1 Timothy 4:7--Here their teaching is referred to as "profane and old wives fables," which do nothing but bring about ungodliness.

(e) 1 Timothy 6:4-5--Here the false teacher is described as "proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and disputes of words ... perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness." You will find that the underlying motive of all false prophets is money.

(f) 2 Timothy 2:14--Paul says, "Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers." Apparently the church was having to deal with those who were taking words out of their context and ascribing legendary, allegorical meanings to them. Commentator, J.N.D. Kelly observed that "much of the rabbinical Haggadah [consists of] a fanciful rewriting of Scripture.... It has also been shown that in post-exilic Judaism there was a keen interest in family-trees, and that these played a part in controversies between Jews and Jewish Christians" (A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles [London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963], pp. 44-45). Those who were striving over words were not "rightly dividing the word of truth" (v. 15). They were doing just the opposite: wrongly interpreting it, and therefore wrongly applying it.

That kind of thing has gone on through the years and is still going on today. The subtlety of false teaching is that it uses the Word of God but corrupts it. False teachers are hucksters. They use the Word of God to make money, making merchandise out of people. They twist and pervert Scripture for their own end.

Here is just one bizarre interpretation of Scripture. Pope Gregory the Great of the sixth century wrote a study entitled, Morals on the Book of Job (Oxford: J.H. Parker, 1844). He said that the patriarch's three friends represent the heretics; his seven sons are the twelve apostles; his seven thousand sheep are God's faithful people, and his three thousand camels are the depraved Gentiles. That interpretation has no relation to the biblical text. Such interpretations were common in the rabbinical period.

In 2 Timothy 2:16-17 the idea of wrongly dividing the word of truth is further described as "profane and vain babblings; [that will] increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a gangrene. Verse 18 says two of the false teachers had erred from the truth. Then in verse 23 Paul describes their teaching as "foolish and unlearned questions" that "breed strifes."

(g) 2 Timothy 3:8--Paul said false teachers "resist the truth, [are] men of corrupt minds, [and] reprobate concerning the faith."

(h) 2 Timothy 3:13--Paul described false teachers as "evil men and seducers [who] who become worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived."

(i) 2 Timothy 4:3-4--People guided by their lusts " shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" given by false teachers.

(j) Titus 1:10-11, 14, 16--Paul said, "There are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision" (v. 10). The false teaching was inspired by the Judaizers (cf. Acts 15), although it may have contained some elements of Gentile pagan philosophy. In verse 11 Paul says their "mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake." Again, money is the prime motivator. In verse 14 Paul describes their teaching as "Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth." Then in verse 16 Paul says, "They profess that they know God, but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate."

(k) Titus 3:9-11--Paul said, "Avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject, knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."

We can't label the heresy of 1 Timothy 1:4 in any specific way except to say that it was contrary to the truth of God. But one thing we can know from surveying the epistles is that God wants all error to be stopped. It's frightening to look across America today and see church after church full of naive people who will hear false teaching and not be able to recognize it. Apologist Walter Martin once said that the average Jehovah's Witness can take apart the average Christian in thirty minutes because the Christian doesn't know exactly what or why he believes. People are becoming victimized by false teachers because many of the true teachers are not instructing their people how to recognize false doctrine and keep it from intruding into their lives. Sometimes it's as simple as turning off your television or radio, throwing away a book, or walking away from someone who communicates false teaching. Mixing sacred truth with myths corrupts the Word of God. The cults have done it for years, and liberal Christianity does it now. We have to be ready to deal with it.

Teachers who propagate false doctrine are described in the pastoral epistles as ambitious, avaricious, ignorant, hypocritical, prideful, corrupt, bereft of the truth, defiled, unbelieving, disobedient, and abominable. They have turned aside from the truth and have been made shipwreck of the faith.

The Danger Facing the ChurchJohn 8:44 reminds us that Satan is not only a murderer, but also a liar. One of the manifestations of his lying intent is the proliferation of false teachers who besiege the gospel and the church. In addition we can find warning after warning in the Old Testament against those who teach false doctrine. Jeremiah 23-27 alone has many references to false teachers.

Wherever God establishes the truth Satan endeavors to sow lies and error. In Matthew 7:15 our Lord tells us, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing [the garment of a prophet], but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." Later in Matthew 24:11, during the Olivet Discourse regarding His Second Coming, Jesus warned that many false Christs would come in the future. First 1 John 2:18 says, "Even now are there many antichrists." The book of Revelation draws us a clear picture of the consummation of the church age--God's final picture of what will happen on the earth. It is a time characterized by deception and lies, dominated by the False Prophet and the Antichrist.

First Timothy 4:1 reminds us that seducing spirits are loose in the church, teaching demonic doctrines. They speak lies. The apostle Paul warned the Galatian church about false teachers in several verses (1:6-7; 3:1). In writing to the church at Colosse, (2:8, 16, 18, 20-23). Paul rebuked teachings that claimed salvation in Christ alone was insufficient

In a general sense, any student of the Bible is aware that wherever there is truth, there will also be the encroachment of error. That's precisely what had happened to the church in Ephesus. It had known the blessing of God as few churches in history will ever know. For three years the apostle Paul himself ministered there (Acts 20:31). He warned the church elders, saying, "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves

shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.... I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance" (Acts 20:29-30, 32). Paul knew that the church at Ephesus, like any church, would come under attack from lying prophets and teachers. And it happened. Every church that stands strongly for the truth will have to deal with who Paul calls corrupters of the Word of God (2 Cor. 2:17). In 2 Corinthians 4:2 he refers to them as handling the Word of God deceitfully.

The subtlety of false teaching is that it uses the Word of God but misrepresents its teaching. There is no real threat posed to the Christian church by those who teach something explicitly and overtly anti-biblical, anti-Christ, and anti-God. But there is great danger to the church from subtle teaching that appears to be biblical and pulls away unwary souls from the faith.

C. The Effect of the Error

1. An attack of the gospel

First Timothy 1:4 says these false teachers "minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith." They provide speculations instead of truth. They continually stir up useless questions, and that creates confusion. The Greek word translated "edifying" (oikonomia), means "stewardship," "administration," or "dispensation." It refers to a modus operandi--a means of operation. Since it is connected with theos, the Greek word translated "God," it refers to the plan of God. Through their questions these false teachers strike a blow at the gospel of saving faith. Therefore, it is likely they were propagating a system of works righteousness or legalism.

The Two Religions of the WorldBecause of the many religious bodies existing in the world today, people are easily confused about how to differentiate them. But when you think about it, there are really only two religions in the world: the religion of divine accomplishment-- that God in Christ accomplished salvation apart from any effort of man--and the religion of human achievement--that men attain to salvation by something they do. The religion of divine accomplishment is the Christian gospel. Every other religion in the world in one way or another fits into the category of human achievement. Wherever false doctrine strikes a blow at the gospel, it will purport that man in and of himself can please God.

Those who interpret Scripture in light of Jewish legends and fables were propagating a legalistic approach to salvation. That's no different from the Mormons, who claim to believe the Bible. However they try to interpret it in light of The Book of Mormon, Doctrines and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price, which misrepresent, misinterpret, and confuse Scripture. Similarly, the Christian Scientist erroneously evaluates Scripture by using Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures written by Mary Baker Eddy. There are many people who cannot understand the simplicity of the Word of God

unless their particular teacher or system reinterprets it according to their legends and musings, which are both human and demonic.

2. An analysis by Paul

This is what Paul said about anyone preaching another gospel: "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed [Gk., anathema, "devoted to destruction"]" (Gal. 1:8). False teachers are not to be dealt with lightly, especially if you understand their error. Inevitably their error is a blow at the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. That is not a trifling matter.

II. UNDERSTAND THEIR GOAL (vv. 5-6)

A. The Commandment (v. 5)

1. The essence of the church (v. 5a)

"Now the end [Gk., telos, "the objective, the goal"] of the commandment is love."

What God wants to see in the church is love. Jesus said the identifying mark of believers is love (John 13:35). It's essential that the church be marked by people who love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love their neighbor as themselves (Matt. 22:37-39). First John 4:10-11 says, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." The pervasive characteristic of Christians is love.

The Greek word translated "love" is agap[ma]e--the love of choice, of the will. It is self-denying, self-sacrificing love. A person who exemplifies that kind of love will live his life for the benefit of God, for the benefit of other believers, and for the benefit of the lost. Paul wanted Timothy to create love in the fellowship. And that's not the goal of false teachers.

2. The essence of love (v. 5b)

"Love out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned."

a) A pure heart

A pure heart is a magnificent Old Testament concept. In Psalm 51:10 David says, "Create in me a clean heart, O God." First Samuel 16:7 reminds us that God looks at the heart while man looks at the outward appearance. Proverbs 23:7 says that as a man thinks in his heart, so is he. The heart is the

center of man's beliefs, convictions, and moral character. It is the center of his spiritual desires and his longings toward God. When the heart is made pure by the washing of regeneration, and tends toward obedience (Rom. 6:17), it is a pure heart. And out of that pure heart comes love.

b) A good conscience

The Greek word translated "good" (agathos) means, "perfect." A good conscience produces pleasure, satisfaction, and a sense of well being. The conscience is your self-judging faculty. It responds to your mind. Your mind is the engine; your conscience is the flywheel. Whatever is in your mind will activate your conscience. And if you have a pure heart, you'll have a pure conscience because there won't be anything for your conscience to accuse you. Your self-judging faculty will pronounce that all is well. So your conscience will provide you with peace, joy, and freedom from guilt because your heart is pure. Paul affirmed that in his own life when he said, "I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and toward men" (Acts 24:16). That's not the kind of conscience false teachers have. First Timothy 4:2 says theirs has been "seared with a hot iron."

c) A genuine faith

Love also comes out of sincere faith, not the hypocritical faith manifested by false teachers. Faith that has no pretense creates love.

A false teacher has a dirty heart because it's never been cleansed by the true gospel of faith in Christ. A false teacher has a guilty conscience because his impure heart triggers it. But his conscience may have reached the point where it's so scarred that it's lost its sensitivity. And a false teacher has hypocritical faith. He's a phony--he wears a mask. That kind of life will never produce the love of God. The goal of the false teacher is not to create an environment of love, but to feed his ego and fill his pockets.

B. The Contrast (v. 6)

"From which some, having swerved, have turned aside unto vain jangling."

"Having swerved" and "turned aside" speak of missing the mark and turning off course. False teachers aren't headed for the goal of love; they're headed for the fulfillment of their own lusts. According to 1 Timothy 6:5 their desire is gold. First Timothy 1:7 says they desire to be considered as teachers of the law, even though they don't understand what they're talking about. That's why Paul referred to their teaching as "vain jangling," which is simply irrelevant noise.

Perverted hearts, scarred consciences, and hypocritical faith will never produce love. Genuine love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith comes about only in the life that has been

transformed by Christ. False religions cannot restrain the flesh, reform a life, or transform a heart. They only make a lot of noise--and tragically it is often a damning noise. That's why Titus 1:11 says their "mouths must be stopped."

Focusing on the Facts

1. Who were the first false teachers eliminated from the church at Ephesus?

2. What was Timothy's responsibility in Ephesus?

3. What is significant about the sentence structure of 1 Timothy 1:3-4?

4. What kind of authority did Paul grant Timothy in verses 3-4?

5. Why was Ephesus a key city in Asia Minor?

6. How many false teachers were exerting influence in the church at Ephesus? Why do they go unnamed?

7. Explain the meaning of the Greek verb translated "teach no other doctrine."

8. What were the false teachers using as the basis of their teaching?

9. What was Timothy not to occupy his mind with (1 Tim. 1:4)?

10. How did Paul characterize the teaching of false teachers throughout his pastoral epistles?

11. What does Satan endeavor to do wherever God establishes truth?

12. What did the apostle Paul warn the Ephesian elders about (Acts 20:20- 32)?

13. How is false teaching subtle?

14. What is the effect of questions that false teachers stir up?

15. What are essentially the two religions in the world? What do they teach?

16. What was Paul's analysis of any teaching that is contrary to the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1:8)?

17. What does God desire to see in the church? Support your answer with Scripture.

18. What three things produces love? Explain each one.

19. What is the goal of a false teacher?

Pondering the Principles

1. Do you know what you believe about the Christian faith and why? To be all that God would want us to be, and especially to help us to recognize false doctrine, it is imperative that we understand the basics of the Christian faith. Begin a systematic study of the doctrines of Christianity. Some good books to get you started What Christians Believe (Moody Press), written by a collection of biblical scholars, and Know What You Believe and Know Why You Believe (InterVarsity Press) by Paul E. Little. As you grasp the basics, choose one particular doctrine for further study. When you have a good working knowledge of that, choose another. The idea is to fulfill 2 Timothy 2:15 in your life. Memorize it before you begin: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (NASB).

2. Any true believer desires to fulfill Christ's command in John 15:12, "Love one another, as I have loved you." As we have seen, 1 Timothy 1:5 identifies three essential ingredients that produce love: a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith. If your heart is not pure, ask God to cleanse it for you. Then repent of whatever is making it unclean. If your conscience is accusing you, ask God to help you determine why. As He shows you, confess any sin that becomes clear to you and turn from it. Finally, ask God to show you you're being insincere and hypocritical. As you make your commitment to those three essentials, you will find yourself exhibiting the love of Christ in your life.

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