

1 Timothy 1

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Taken together, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are most likely the last three letters that the apostle Paul ever wrote that remain to us today. To see why he wrote them, we don't have to look any farther than 1 Timothy 1:1-2. Here, Paul addresses himself to Timothy, a longtime companion of Paul's, a man who was very close to him, whom Paul considered his son in the faith. Even for us more ordinary mortals, when we feel the time of our deaths drawing near, our thoughts often turn to what we're going to leave behind to our children. Sometimes, this includes whatever words of wisdom we have to pass on, but more normally, it takes the form of a will, a legal document in which we lay out the inheritance that our children can expect to have from us, so that they'll be provided for after we're gone.

In the same way, when we look at these last three epistles together, we see the aged Paul passing on a spiritual inheritance, the things that he knew younger preachers like Timothy and Titus would need to know after Paul had gone on to his reward. Paul knew that the other apostles, like him, were coming to the end of their natural lives, and once the apostles were gone, church officers like elders and deacons were going to become more important. Thus, he spends a great deal of time in these three books telling Titus and Timothy how they can know that a man is qualified to become a church officer. Paul also knew that without the apostles to keep them in check, false teachers would become even more abundant and powerful, so he gives several warnings against various kinds of false doctrine. Finally, though, Paul knew that Titus and Timothy would miss him and his wisdom after he was gone, so the pages of the three epistles are filled with the advice that a man needs to carry out the work of an evangelist. Even though we live thousands of years after Paul wrote these things, they are still as wise and true for us today. Let's study them, beginning with 1 Timothy 1.

False Teachers.

Once Paul has dispensed with the greeting, he addresses himself to one of his main concerns: false teachers. Look at the way he begins this discussion in 1 Timothy 1:3-4. It's significant first of all that Paul is detailing Timothy to deal with this problem. As we learn from Acts and the epistles, Timothy was Paul's right-hand man. As Paul says in Philippians 2, there was no one else whom he could trust like Timothy, because only Timothy could be counted on to keep concern for the brethren as his main focus. If Ephesus is the place where Paul felt Timothy would be most useful, it's because the false teachers there were about to become a serious problem, and Timothy was the troubleshooter.

It's hard to tell precisely what the trouble is that Paul is addressing, but it most likely has to do with the old enemy of Judaizing false teachers. The Jews were the ones who were particularly given to genealogies. At this time, they still had hundreds and hundreds of years of genealogical records, so that Paul, for instance, could trace his ancestry all the way back to Benjamin, who'd lived nearly 2000 years before him. Likewise, the Jews were also given to myths and fables, which had the appearance of being from God, but in reality were profitless. We still have some of these myths among the books of the Apocrypha. In the Apocrypha, for instance, the book of Esther is extended by about half its length because of additional material, and in an apocryphal book called Bel and the Dragon, Daniel is depicted as killing a dragon by feeding it a special kind of cake. Neither in these genealogies nor fables was anything useful for Christians to be found.

However, even though we aren't troubled by these holdovers from Judaism today, there's still a lesson for us here. Just as it was for the Christians of 2000 years ago, it's easy for us to fall into a pattern of study that leads to disputes rather than godly edification. In my own life, I've seen this be a particular problem for Christians who regard themselves, at least, as being brighter than average. They get bored with using the Bible just to learn to be like Jesus, and so they turn to all kinds of abstract speculations to be different and show how smart they are. One might argue that we don't have authority to own church buildings, so we have to meet in houses instead. Another might argue that the second coming already occurred during the destruction of Jerusalem, so that we no longer have a day of judgment to look forward to. Brethren, there's nothing to be gained from going down those roads, or any roads like them. Let's be wise in our study of the Scripture, and turn our focus to learning how to ensure salvation for ourselves and as many others as possible.

Paul focuses in more on what our study should be about in 1 Timothy 1:5-7. Notice just how practical and relevant these objectives are. According to Paul, we should come to the word with three objects in mind: learning the things that build up our faith, learning to live righteously so that we can have a clear conscience, and learning how to love with a pure heart. If we dedicate ourselves to these three goals, we can be assured of eternal life. On the other hand, though, the farther we get away from those things, the more trouble we're likely to end up in. The Bible is very thorough about telling us what we ought to do, but it is much less thorough about telling us the things we don't need to know. For example, the Bible does not contain a thorough depiction of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Bible does not tell us where the devil came from. However, the silence of the Scripture on those subjects has not kept countless people from speculating about them, often at great length and with great self-assurance. Of course, we

have no idea what the truth is, and all of those speculations may well be ridiculously off the mark. As Christians, we will be far better off if we confine ourselves to a study of what has been revealed and leave the unrevealed to God.

Paul raises his next point in 1 Timothy 1:8-11. When problems with vain discussion come up, the problem isn't with the Bible. The problem is with the people having the discussion. In fact, all of God's law is useful for its intended purpose, which is teaching us not to sin. If we were righteous on our own, we wouldn't need Scripture, but because we are unrighteous, we do need it, to warn us against the wicked behavior that will condemn us before God. As with all other lists of sin in Scripture, this one isn't exhaustive. We can't justify our conduct just because it doesn't appear on a sin list. We have to consider the principles of righteousness contained in the sound doctrine of the word, and use those principles to guide our lives. In this way, we gain the most use from God's word and the most wisdom for ourselves.

God's Mercy.

Having addressed false teachers and the usefulness of the law in the first section, Paul moves on to a discussion of what saves us from the harsh judgment of the law: God's mercy. Paul describes the appearance of this mercy in his life in 1 Timothy 1:12-14. Paul's point is that because of his actions, he belonged on the list of sinners he had just recited. He wasn't a kidnapper or a fornicator, but he was a blasphemer and a persecutor of the church. However, even though he was a sinner and a rebel, Jesus granted him grace and allowed Paul to join in the service of the kingdom. This is where all of us are too. All of us have done things contrary to sound doctrine, but despite our sin, we can still find refuge in the grace of Jesus, the grace that is available to everyone. As it was for Paul, this grace is our only hope.

However, there's a caveat to this, just as there was a caveat for Paul. Jesus extended mercy to him only because he had acted ignorantly and in unbelief. If Paul had known and believed the truth about the Christ, but had continued knowingly to persecute the church, nothing could have saved him, because his heart would have been impervious to the gospel. What, then, about us? What if we know the truth and believe in Jesus but refuse to obey Him? The word has reached our hearts, it has sprouted, but instead of producing a harvest of salvation, it has brought forth only defiance. This can be true of people who have never put on Christ, but it can also be true of so-called disciples who aren't willing to order their lives according to the word. Let's ask ourselves, friends: if we know the truth, but the truth isn't enough to get us to obey, what hope do we have? Let's be wise, and soften our hearts to save ourselves before it's too late.

Paul reveals more about God's plan in 1 Timothy 1:15-17. He tells us that the reason why Christ saved us is because that's what He came into the world to do. The salvation of sinners was never a backup plan or an afterthought. It was God's eternal purpose, that salvation should become available to anyone who wanted it. This salvation was great enough to wash away the sins of even so great a sinner as Paul, and Paul says that's precisely why Jesus was merciful.

Let's think about that for a second, brethren. Could there be any greater illustration of the wideness of God's mercy than the life of Paul? Paul, back when he was Saul, was not just a garden-variety sinner. He was a persecutor of the church. He dragged Christians out of their homes to face trial for their beliefs, he cast his vote for them to be executed, he tried to force them to renounce their faith, possibly even through torture, he chased them to other cities, and generally did everything he could think of to be opposed to Jesus. And yet, the power and love of Jesus were great enough to reach out to the bloodstained hands of this blasphemer and murderer, and cause him to be reconciled to his Father in heaven. In short, if Jesus could save Paul, then Jesus can save anybody, and that includes all of us. Whether we are outside of Christ and overwhelmed by the greatness of our sins, or we are disciples, and we can't believe that Jesus really took all of our sins on Himself so that they're gone forever, we need to know and believe that His grace is greater than our sin. That's an amazing thing, so amazing that Paul glorifies God for it here, but it's real, and it can make all the difference.

Timothy's Charge.

The very magnitude of that salvation is the reason why Paul next emphasizes Timothy's charge. It appears in 1 Timothy 1:18-20. Paul has gone through all of this to remind Timothy what he's fighting for. Paul wants him to remember that when he goes back to Ephesus and stands toe to toe with those false teachers, it's the most important thing he could possibly be doing. If the Bible is any witness, this kind of spiritual warfare wasn't Timothy's favorite thing to be doing. In 2 Timothy, in fact, Paul has to get on to Timothy for being too timid and to strive for the gospel even when it involved suffering. Timothy's peaceful disposition didn't matter. The difficult circumstances didn't matter. God still expected Timothy to get up on his hind legs and fight. That was what he was sent to do.

The same thing is true for us. Like Timothy, we live in difficult times. Some of us are natural fighters, but some of us aren't. Either way, it doesn't matter. God still expects us to go to war for the cause of Christ, with our words and with our lives, because the cause is too holy not to fight for. We have to continue in this warfare even if those around us fall away. Timothy evidently knew Hymenaeus and Alexander; I can think of several people in my own life who used to be very dear to me but have suffered the shipwreck of the faith. It's sad to see that happen, but the disastrous decisions that others make don't matter. It's still on us to hold on to our faith, keep a good conscience, and do what's right.