

Law, what is it good for?

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[0 : 0 0] aren't there, where it's a good job that we pray to an omniscient God who already knows what we mean to say. Andy, of course, is in Cumbernauld. In any case, we began our series last week, didn't we, looking at Paul's first letter to Timothy. Sorry, two weeks ago, of course, John Angus was here last week. And to recap briefly on some of that, we have here the Apostle Paul writing to encourage his friend Timothy, who he sent as his trusted lieutenant into this difficult situation in Ephesus. And as we find here in verse 3, Timothy is there in order to command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer.

So Paul is writing ostensibly to Timothy, but as we considered then, it's also very much a letter for the whole church. We see that affirmed in terms of the content as we work our way through the letter, but it's also implied right there in the beginning in verse 1. After all, Timothy is Paul's trusted friend. They've traveled together, they've worked together for many months, they've written letters together. So Paul doesn't need to introduce himself to Timothy as Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God. Timothy already knows this. Timothy doesn't need to be assured of Paul's authority. But of course he is writing not only to Timothy, but for the benefit of the whole church, and maybe especially for the benefit of these false teachers, that they might overhear what he is saying and hear the rebuke of his words. And there his authority as an apostle is worth highlighting.

So in this letter, which we've thought about giving us a blueprint for church life, here we find Paul encouraging Timothy to silence those who have a wrong understanding of what ought to be taught in the church. We find Paul rebuking these false teachers who don't really understand what they're talking about. A reformer, John Calvin, who commented on these verses, he notes the holy anxiety of Paul.

Paul who is no less concerned to preserve the health of this church here that's been established than he is to go and start new churches. Paul, of course, planted churches all around the area. Paul is famous perhaps for his church planting journeys, but he also undertook journeys to go and strengthen those same churches. And he wrote letters like this one in order to strengthen them as well.

Perhaps too often we get excited about the new shiny thing rather than about the preservation of the church. And it's not a good idea of the church. But it's a good thing. That should perhaps impact how we pray for others as well as how we behave in our own lives.

[2 : 48]

Well, after the introductory statements of those first couple of verses, the from and to, the rest of chapter 1 divides into four little sections. We'll look at the first of these two tonight from verses 3 down to 11. In verses 3 to 7 we find a description of the problem at Ephesus and we have instructions as to what Timothy is to do about it. Verses 8 to 11 then moves on to talking about the true intention of God's law, picking up on that idea from verse 7 that the false teachers want to be teachers of the law even though they're not competent to do so. The rest of the chapter then, verses 12 to 17, Paul uses his own conversion as an example of God's grace. And then from verse 18 on he resumes the charge to Timothy as he calls him to the work. So in some ways the whole of verse 8 through to verse 17 is kind of parenthetical. It moves away from the main argument that goes from verse 7 and then is kind of resumed in verse 18. But as is so often the case with Paul, his tangents don't go far from the main point that he's making and are always of great value to consider. So tonight verses 3 to 11, the problem in Ephesus and the true value of the law. What we find in Ephesus here is quite a clear-cut problem and one which on one level has a very straightforward clear-cut solution. The problem, verses 3 and 4, is that people are teaching false doctrines. They're devoting themselves to myths and genealogies and the solution is simple. Timothy is to command them to stop. So then what is it that they are teaching that is so wrong? First and foremost, they are teaching something different. And of course anything that is different to the apostolic gospel, anything different to what Paul himself taught when he was there in Ephesus, anything different to what Paul continues to affirm in his writings, anything different is false. There isn't any such thing as a different gospel that is also true and good. Different always means bad when it comes to the gospel. And perhaps it's statements like this one that we ought to turn to when we're tempted to think that a new understanding of God's Word has come along, that modern science has shown us that the Bible can't really be true because, well, of course, that's just the best understanding they could have back then, but now we know better. And equally, it's here that we should turn when people tell us that all religions are the same because Paul is very clear. There is only one true teaching. Already within the lifetime of people who knew Jesus personally, there is a sufficiently well-established, this is the gospel, the one gospel truth. It's sufficiently clear that Paul can already condemn anyone who teaches anything different. It isn't just a shifting morass of different opinions and eventually the church reaches a conclusion.

No, already they know this is the one truth. And the same is true today, that there is only one gospel and anyone teaching anything else should be instructed in no uncertain terms to stop.

Now, these false teachers seem, in verse 4, to have been particularly interested in myths and in genealogies. Every time the Bible uses this word myths, it's used in this kind of negative sense that it's used here and often linked with genealogies like this. It seems that what the false teachers were doing is taking figures from the Old Testament genealogies that aren't talked about in the rest of the Old Testament, but just kind of there as a name in the line of descent, and just going and making up stories about them, just going and describing things that they think maybe might have happened to this person, and then using that story to justify behaving similarly themselves. A kind of, this guy did it and he's in the Bible, therefore it must be good, that kind of an idea.

Plato, the ancient philosopher, he talks about this same kind of mythologizing, and he says it is not only false, but it is also deceptive, in that the stories are being told in order to lend credence to immoral behavior. It's not just being told as a nice story that's entertaining, but rather it's being told to justify something that ought not to be justified. And these practices are being linked, as Plato is talking about them, to ancient stories about the gods, and in this case stories about the patriarchs and the other Old Testament figures. And this is a problem, isn't it? Firstly, because they often seem to be promoting immoral behavior, as we'll come to later in the letter. And if nothing else, verse 4, they are producing speculation. They're turning people to meaningless talk, verse 6.

It's a strategy worthy of screw tape in the letters, isn't it? If you can't turn a Christian's attention away from the Bible, well, make sure he gets stuck in the esoteric minutiae. Make sure he gets distracted into speculations about what might have been. Make sure he focuses on these idle musings things that will result in not advancing God's work, verse 4. The false teachers seem to want to have this focus on myths, myths that are made up in stark contrast to the firm foundation of the gospel that is observed in historical reality. That's one of the things that we've been thinking about as we've been looking at Luke's gospel, isn't it? That the gospel, we believe, is rooted in things that actually physically happened. Now, if it was tempting for the people in Ephesus just a few decades after Christ died to make up stories rather than depending on the historical realities, surely it is all the more tempting for us a couple of thousand years on where even those historical realities, even those things that for them were only a few decades old, that are now for us a couple of thousand years ago and already start to take on that kind of mythological character.

[9 : 26] Surely it is a danger for us that we will be tempted to do likewise. Now, the word command here in verse 3, the strength of that command rightly conveys the strength of the Greek word behind it. There's overtones of military orders, of a captain saying to his men, this is what will happen. This is a serious problem that is being strongly condemned. The word command here stands in contrast to terms like encourage and warn and even rebuke that Timothy is to use with the rest of the congregation later on in the letter. There's a difference between the kind of gentle persuasion and brotherly encouragement that he is to use to correct those who've been led astray versus here, this definitive command, the decisive refutation, the categorical silencing of those who are actively teaching and promoting falsehood. And sadly, it seems very likely that these false teachers were in fact part of the formally acknowledged, the official leadership of the church.

And that accords with Paul's predictions, doesn't it? Acts chapter 20, Paul interrupts his journey to go and speak to the Ephesian elders, not in Ephesus, but along the coast. He invites them to come down.

And that's some years before writing this letter. And he says to these elders in verse 29, Paul saw this coming. Paul saw that there was that danger of false teaching coming from within.

So likely these are the official leaders, but even if not quite that, clearly they have some opportunity for teaching, verse 3. And so given that, Timothy needs to strongly and categorically oppose them. And I guess the question is, what are we to do with this for ourselves? Because if Timothy is to strongly command this false teaching to stop, what does it say to us today? Well, the first step obviously is that we need to be able to spot the false teaching when it comes. We need to be on our guards against the possibility that it might arise. Paul told the Ephesian elders that false teaching would arise from within. Now, I am not making a prophetic declaration that from within the session of Covenant Church, false teaching will arise. I'm not telling you it will arise from within me for that matter. But I am saying, along with Paul in Galatians chapter 1, even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you, let them be under God's curse. It is that serious. Let them be under God's curse. Now, it is the elders' job to watch one another, but it is also your job to watch every one of us. Now, guys, you as a congregation have some experience with this on a national scale of needing to respond to false teaching in the church, and sadly, there is nothing that makes it impossible on a more local scale. Timothy was to stand up and to command them to stop.

Now, for most of you, you don't have that formal position in the church. If you like, Timothy, as the apostolic delegate gets to stand up at the front and command, you will stop doing that. Most of you don't have that opportunity. But I guess it doesn't mean that you do nothing, does it? It means that you use whatever means are at your disposal. Charity, I guess, means you might need to start by going and asking the person, did I really understand properly what you were saying? But there are times when you need to protest what is being said in a more visible way. I've never had to do it yet, but there are times where visiting a church, the right thing to do might be to stand up partway through and walk out, because you cannot sit and listen to the drivel that is being proclaimed as if it were the gospel.

- [13 : 56] If you think there's something wrong that's been said here in the church that you are a part of, well, it is absolutely your responsibility to bring that to the session. And if that doesn't work, to make an appeal to the presbytery. That's why we have these things in place, because the reality is false teaching happens. And if it is not dealt with, then it is deeply wounding to the whole church.

But too often we're content to just sit back and let it wash over us, to let the falsehood be taught, or at most to remove ourselves from the situation, without doing whatever we can to protect others from it. False teaching is a big deal, and we need to take it seriously and respond forcefully.

Now secondly, we see in these verses something of Paul's perspective on the purpose of the law. Paul says of the false teachers 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. He's going to go on to discuss what the law is and isn't good for, but the first problem with these false teachers is their lack of qualification for the job.

They do not know what they are talking about. They presumably have plenty of confidence. They're very happy to assert forcefully, this is correct when they have no justification for doing so.

Too often we mistake confidence for truth, and the reality is it is possible to be confidently, to be sincerely, to be enthusiastically wrong.

- [15 : 38] Now presumably, if these false teachers knew the law better than they do, if they understood it correctly, then they wouldn't believe what they do believe about the law.

They wouldn't be so mistaken, they wouldn't be so misleading to other people. And so in verses 8 to 11, we come to this commentary on the use of the law.

Now at first sight, these verses are possibly slightly confusing. If nothing else, it doesn't immediately look like it matches up 100% with the other things that Paul says about the law.

This is one of the reasons why we were thinking last week about people saying, well clearly Paul didn't write this letter. Because it doesn't look immediately like what Paul normally says about the law.

There are a couple of key things to say in response to that. Firstly, Paul is not writing a systematic theology book. Paul is not trying to give everything that he thinks about the law all in one big lump.

- [16 : 42] He isn't saying everything he could possibly say in a nice tidy package. And that's partly because he's writing to Timothy. He's writing to his trusted lieutenant. He's writing to the guy who followed him around for years on end.

Hearing him preach to congregation after congregation. Hearing him explain what his theology of the law is, was, and always has been.

He's writing to a guy who has co-authored letters with him that talk about his understanding of the law. Timothy does not need a comprehensive explanation of Paul's view of the law.

And for that matter, he's writing to a particular situation, to a particular problem. Paul knows more of the details of the heresy that he's addressing than we know ourselves.

And so what he's writing isn't everything that could possibly be said. It is what needs to be said to address that particular situation at that particular time.

[17 : 40] So if, for instance, we were to take these verses to suggest that Paul thinks the law has absolutely no kind of value for those who are justified in Christ Jesus, because he does say the law is not made for the righteous, if we take that to mean that he thinks it has no relevance whatsoever for the Christian, then we are doing violence to the rest of Scripture, to the rest of Paul's writings.

Paul affirms, first of all, in verse 8, that the law is good if one uses it properly. That's because it does indeed reflect the will of God. The law tells us what God thinks.

The law tells us how God says we should behave. The first five books of the Bible, the legal material that's contained within those books, they have value for those who use it lawfully, for those who use it properly.

But also, in accordance with what he says in Galatians, Paul asserts that the law is not for the righteous. Galatians 5.18, If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

[19 : 02] So, in that sense, the righteous do not need the law. We are not under the law. Rather, the law is for lawbreakers and rebels.

As one commentator, a guy called William Mounts, puts it, to use the law lawfully is to apply it to those who oppose it. To use the law the way it is designed is to say to those who are living against the law, this is what the law says, is to go and say, thus says the Lord.

The purpose of the law is to identify sin. And so, therefore, Paul launches into this vice list, as it's called. These lists are common features of ancient literature.

And the list is both sufficiently extreme, talking about things like murder and so on, and sufficiently general, with much of it clearly derived in comparison to the Ten Commandments.

It's sufficiently extreme and sufficiently general that we shouldn't think these list of sins are specifically characteristic of these false teachers, but rather that this is a general list of the things of the people that the law condemns.

[20 : 14] And it starts here with a few attitudes, talking about lawbreakers and rebels and the ungodly and the sinful and the unholy and the irreligious, and continues on into a list of actions, into those who kill their fathers or mothers for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers.

In other words, God's law is concerned both with what is in our hearts and with the things that we do that comes out of that into how we behave. And then the list ends with that catch-all.

The law is for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine. It is pretty all-encompassing, isn't it? This is not a small view of the purpose of the law.

It stands to condemn the unrighteous, to make them recognize their need for salvation. Now, in that final part of verse 10, contrary to the sound doctrine, the definite article there, that little word, the, it's a really helpful word here.

Because once again, Paul is being clear that there is only one true gospel. Consistently in this letter, he refers to the teachings of the false teachers in the plural. He talks about them teaching myths and genealogies and teachings and doctrines.

[21 : 41] And in contrast to that, the truth is consistently referred to in the singular. There is one gospel, one doctrine, one truth. And that gospel, verse 11, concerns the glory of the blessed God.

And so, to use the law rightly will point towards that one gospel, that one doctrine. And so, if our use of God's law is not pointing towards our need for mercy, is not pointing towards the grace that is available in Christ Jesus, if the way that we speak of God's rules, when we speak to our friends about what God says, if the way that we do that doesn't direct them to God, but instead ends up dragging them away from Him, making them think that they are somebody who God would never be interested in, then we do not know what we are talking about.

We do not know what we are so confidently affirming. We are not using the law lawfully and rightly, if that is not its effect to push people towards God.

So, may it never be true of us that we use confidence and bravado as a substitute for actual understanding. Because the gospel of the glory of the blessed God was entrusted to Paul, who entrusted it to Timothy, who entrusted it to reliable men and women, who have entrusted it on through the centuries to us.

The gospel of the blessed God has been entrusted to you. May we all prove worthy of that trust. Let's pray.

[23 : 30] Lord God, we thank you that the law is good if it is used properly. Lord, we pray that you might help us to see your law rightly, that you might help us to see how it shines a light into our own hearts and how it shines a light into the lives of the ungodly.

Lord, would you help us to know how to use it in a way that pushes people towards the gospel and not away from it. Lord, would you give us confidence, yes, in what you have said and not in our own fallible interpretation.

Lord, would you give us that assurance that the blessed gospel has been entrusted to us. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.