

The Aim of Our Charge is Love: 1 Timothy 1:3-7
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Sunday, March 8th, 2009

False teaching and false teachers will always threaten to destroy the church. Satan loves to distort the truth, and because of our sin and pride we are so prone to distorting the truth for the purpose of selfish gain. And therefore the threat of false teaching lurks in every church. It can happen in very blatant ways as churches explicitly deny the truths of the Gospel – denying the inspiration of the Scriptures, denying the resurrection of Christ, denying that Jesus is our only hope of salvation. Or it can happen in very subtle ways when leaders find themselves not *denying* the Gospel but *ignoring* it. And they ignore it because they have found other things that seem more interesting and captivating. In Paul's instructions to his young friend Timothy, he exhorts him to confront the false teaching that was present in the Ephesian church. The passage we're going to study this morning is the beginning of the body of this first letter that Paul wrote to Timothy, and the issue he deals with right away is false teaching. Last week we looked at the greeting with which Paul opens the letter, and now in verse 3 he somewhat abruptly turns to the danger of false teachers. In most of Paul's letters he follows the greeting with a word of thanksgiving. But not here. He jumps immediately to the urgent matter of false teachers in the church.

The Gravity of the Charge

In this passage I want us to consider Paul's charge to Timothy, and I first want to consider the gravity of the charge and then the aim of the charge. To begin to understand the gravity of this charge, and to see it in light of the situation at Ephesus, we have to go back to Acts 20 where Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders. This was part of Paul's third missionary journey, and was at least a few years before he wrote the letter to Timothy. He called for the elders of the church in Ephesus to come and meet him in Miletus, and his speech to these elders is recorded in verses 18-35 of Acts 20. The relevant section for us this morning is in verses 28-30. Paul says to these elders, "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." And, of course, this is exactly what happened. Among the elders of the church there were men who were fierce wolves, not sparing the flock. They were speaking

twisted things and were leading the disciples astray. This is the situation that is unfolding in Ephesus as Paul pens his first letter to Timothy.

In 1 Timothy 1:3 Paul feels compelled to encourage Timothy again to remain at Ephesus. As we start to understand the situation in Ephesus we can see why this encouragement was needed. Timothy was not in an easy position. So Paul urges him again, “remain at Ephesus.” And here’s why I want you to stay there, “so that you may charge certain persons [those are the fierce wolves among the Ephesian elders] not to teach any different doctrine.”

1) Different Doctrine

This is the first description of the false teachers. We’ll walk through these verses by looking at four descriptions of the false teachers, which will emphasize the gravity of Paul’s charge to Timothy. In verse 3 he tells Timothy to command these individuals not to teach any different doctrine. The word he uses is *heterodidaskalein*, which is a word Paul probably coined himself. It’s a different teaching, a different doctrine. It’s similar to his reference in Galatians 1:6 to a *different* Gospel. At the end of 1 Timothy, in 6:3, Paul uses this word again (*heterodidaskalei*), and provides some more description of what he means by it. “If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.” What we have to understand is that the truth of Christianity has been clearly communicated through Jesus and the apostles and has been recorded for us in this inspired Book which we call the Bible. And to deviate from these truths is to teach a different doctrine. It is to teach something other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is false teaching.

We should pause at this point and just acknowledge what a radical thing it is to say these kinds of things. It was radical for Paul to write this and preach this and enforce this in the first century churches in their cultural context. And it’s radical for us to affirm this in our cultural context—in our postmodern, relativistic age which maintains that all roads lead to heaven and we can all embrace our own truth as long as we don’t impose our beliefs on anyone else or claim that our truth is *the* Truth. You can have your truth and your ethical standards and your religious beliefs, and I’ll have mine, as long as we can agree that there’s no such thing as absolute truth, there’s no absolute standard of right and wrong, and there doesn’t exist one true religion. With these ideas capturing so many minds, it’s a bold move to stand up and say that what the Bible reveals about Jesus Christ is absolutely true, and anything

that contradicts it or diverges from it is false teaching. It's a different doctrine. It's a different Gospel. And therefore it cannot save. It cannot give anyone real hope for eternity.

This is the gravity of the charge that Timothy must deliver to the Ephesian elders who are ravaging the church. And it's the gravity of the charge that comes to us this morning. We must not teach any different doctrine. We must not teach or preach anything that contradicts the Gospel, anything that diverges from the Gospel, anything that minimizes or ignores the Gospel. This is a serious warning, and one that I hope we will not take lightly. As a preacher, I tremble at this. I pray for God's mercy and grace to protect me from error. I'm grateful that He has put men around me who encourage me and will challenge me and correct me if needed. I'm so blessed that God has given me a wife who loves the Gospel and is a student of the Word and is a constant encouragement to me in my walk with the Lord. I'm thankful that God has provided mentors in the ministry to whom I can look for guidance and counsel. So I tremble at this warning, but I'm also filled with great hope that, by God's grace, this church will remain faithful to the truth of the Gospel. If you're a small group leader or a children's Sunday School teacher or a leader of a women's Bible study or a Vacation Bible School teacher, I hope that you will take this to heart. What we teach from God's Word is not a trivial matter. We must study the Word with a view to knowing Christ better. We must ask for the Lord's help and guidance. And we must also be accountable to others who are seeking to be faithful to this same calling.

2) Myths and genealogies

The second description of the false teachers is found in verse 4. Timothy is to charge them not "to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies." There's the temptation for teachers to wander off into things that may or may not be true in order to generate greater interest among their listeners. It seems that this was the case for some of the teachers in Ephesus. Some were devoting themselves to myths—ideas that were contrary to the truth. Fanciful ideas and notions that sounded interesting, but led people away from the truth rather than toward it. In Paul's second letter to Timothy we get an additional insight into the motivation for this. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." What a grave danger this is! There are certain things that we naturally like to hear, and there are other things that are difficult to hear. And there are a lot of things that

fall under the category of sound teaching that are difficult to hear—like the biblical truth of our depravity. We are not good people. We are sinners who deserve God’s punishment. That’s not something that we naturally like to hear, and that’s why many people will not listen to it. Instead they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. Ultimately the issue of truth becomes unimportant, and it’s just a matter of what makes a person feel good about the sinful lifestyle they’re leading. That’s a tendency that is alive within each of us, and we need to be on guard so that our itching ears don’t lead us astray.

Some of the teachers in Ephesus were also into genealogies. And this is most likely a reference to fanciful interpretations of the Old Testament genealogies, which were present in Paul’s day. You can read Jewish writings such as *The Book of Jubilees* or *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo*, and find there bizarre embellishments of the Old Testament story. There was certainly an interest in the Scriptures, but that interest led certain people toward unfounded speculation about things. Thus, the focus is shifted *away from* the glorious story of redemption, and the focus is placed on finding hidden and deeper meanings in this or that detail of the story. This kind of thing happens today just as it did then. *The Bible Code*, which you may have heard of, is a perfect example. The claim is that if you analyze the Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament in a particular way, it will predict specific future events. And so the Old Testament loses its importance as God’s revelation of Himself to His people and is turned into a means of fortune telling.

That’s the danger of this kind of speculation. That’s the danger of myths and genealogies. It’s not that people walk away from the Bible. But they miss the whole point of the Bible, and instead use the Bible for other purposes. Instead of reading and studying and teaching the Bible as a revelation of God’s saving work through Christ, so many have used the Bible to entice those with itching ears, to speculate about future world events, to tell people what they naturally want to hear, to entertain, to impress.

Here’s a question we can all ask ourselves. As I study the Bible personally and with others, is the result that I am more and more amazed at the person and work of Jesus Christ? Is that the goal of my study, and is that the result of my study? Or am I studying the Bible as a means to some other goal—like impressing others with my biblical knowledge, or trying to figure out specific details about the future (as in the Bible Code), or even using biblical principles to fix my marriage or fix my kids or improve my job skills or help me better manage my money. Certainly as the Gospel impacts our lives it will affect our marriages and our

children and our work and our money, but my point is that we can't bypass the Gospel and turn the Bible into a manual on these things. That would miss the purpose of Scripture and turn it into a means to our own ends. We must study the Bible for the purpose of knowing Christ better, and then from that will flow real changes in our lives.

May we not be enticed by myths and genealogies. I pray that we will have a growing love for the sound teaching, even when it's difficult to hear. I pray that we'll all be able see how the difficult truth of our sinfulness is an essential part of the story but not the whole story. It is intended to lead us to repentance and faith in Jesus, who died for our sin so that we can be forgiven. And that is far more exciting than figuring out who the Antichrist is going to be, or figuring out how to manage your finances, or how to climb the corporate ladder, or whatever else the Bible might be used for. Let's keep our eyes on Christ, and let's study the Bible as a means of knowing Him.

The last phrase in verse 4 clearly states the danger of this kind of teaching. It promotes speculation rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The stewardship from God is God's plan of salvation, and we have become stewards of this great message—the Gospel message. And, of course, it's a message of Good News that is received by trusting in Jesus Christ. It's by faith. In this we see the stark contrast between false teaching and sound teaching. False teaching will promote speculation rather than promoting a better understanding of God's plan of salvation which is by faith. Sound teaching, on the other hand, will not venture off into myths and genealogies and thus promote speculation about things that don't matter, but instead sound teaching will remain focused on God's great plan of redemption and urging individuals to put their trust in Jesus.

3) Vain Discussion

We'll skip over verse 5 for right now and come back to it at the end to consider the aim of the charge. Moving to verse 6 we see a third description of the false teachers, and that is vain discussion. "Certain persons, by swerving from these [meaning the pure heart and good conscience and sincere faith of verse 5], have wandered away into vain discussion." This includes the things Paul has already mentioned in verse 4: myths and genealogies. And we can also think of this generally in terms of the various things that spiritual teachers might be tempted to employ in their search for an audience. A preacher may find that the clear exposition of God's Word week after week is not drawing the crowd that he would like to see, and therefore he is tempted to wander away from sound teaching into all kinds of vain discussion.

That's a great danger and a great temptation. And what makes it so dangerous and so tempting is the fact that there seems to be such success among those who have wandered away into vain discussion. Vain discussion can draw a big crowd. It appears to be extremely successful. But our calling is to teach sound doctrine, to expound the Scriptures and point people to Jesus, to be a pillar of the truth.

I could spend a lot of time each week trying to find interesting stories and funny jokes and creative illustrations. And there's nothing inherently wrong with those things. But if stories and jokes became the focus of our worship services then we would fall under the condemnation of this passage. If we came together each week anticipating the next heart-wrenching story that would move us to tears, or the next humorous anecdote that would make us laugh or the next dramatic presentation that would entertain us, then we wouldn't be coming together for the right reasons. As the church of Jesus Christ, we are called to be a pillar of the truth. We don't exist to be a comedy club or a theater or a motivational workshop. And I'm so grateful for that because, first of all, I wouldn't be any good at those other things, but more importantly, because there's such a deep joy in proclaiming the truths of the Gospel week after week. It's only the Gospel that can truly make a difference in our lives. Other things may appear to be successful in different ways, but only the Gospel can produce real and lasting change. And God has called us to be faithful to the truth, to the Bible, to the Gospel. And that's why we're committed to doing these things, whether or not others look at us and call us successful.

4) Teaching that lacks understanding

Fourthly, another description of the false teachers is found in verse 7, that they desire "to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." That's quite a critique. Paul is saying that these characters in Ephesus are getting up on their soapboxes spouting off all kinds of nonsense, and they don't even know what they're talking about. They're ignorant concerning the law. They don't understand the law, they don't understand the meaning or purpose of the law, but they want to be teachers of the law. And as they speak they sound so confident. They appear to be knowledgeable authorities on the subject as they speak eloquently and confidently regarding these spiritual matters. Here we see the pride of wanting an audience, wanting the praise and respect of others, wanting to have authority and power over others—wanting to be a teacher, but not really caring whether the content of the teaching accords with the truth.

The word of warning to teachers in this verse is two-fold. First, we must study diligently and prayerfully as we prepare to teach so that we are not ignorant of the truths we are about to teach. We must be sure that the spiritual truth we are going to teach is something we have wrestled to understand both with our minds and also with our hearts. It must be something that we have sought to apply to ourselves before we try to apply it to anyone else.

And secondly, we have to fight against the pride that makes us want to speak confidently about things we don't understand. Because of our pride, we want to appear wise and knowledgeable and confident in the eyes of others. We don't want to show any of our weaknesses, and therefore we're tempted to babble on about this or that and say all kinds of lofty things that may sound nice but don't ultimately make any sense. Let's seek to be knowledgeable and wise so that we can clearly teach the truth, and let's also seek to be humble so that our desire for the praise of others doesn't get in the way of clearly teaching the truth.

We've seen the gravity of the charge that Timothy is to deliver to the false teachers in the Ephesian church. These leaders in the church have been teaching different doctrine, they have devoted themselves to myths and genealogies, they have wandered away into vain discussion, and their teaching has been characterized by both ignorance and pride. In light of all these things, we see the gravity of the issues that face Timothy in Ephesus. Those teachers pose a tremendous threat to the church, and we can see Paul's urgency in addressing this crisis. After a brief greeting, Paul immediately instructs Timothy to "charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine." False teaching was a problem in the church of Ephesus, and it's something that continues to crouch at our door today.

The Aim of the Charge

In closing, I also want to look at the aim the charge. This is found in verse 5. Right in the middle of these warnings against false teaching, Paul says, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." This is in stark contrast to the fruit of the false teachers. They produced speculations, vain discussion, and ignorant assertions. And as we read toward the end of the letter, Paul says that this kind of teaching produces "envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain" (6:4-5). So false teaching not only has a wrong foundation, but it also produces *bad* fruit. On the other hand, sound teaching is based on the truth of the Gospel revealed in the Bible, and it

produces *good* fruit. It produces love. The reason Paul is so vehement about confronting false teaching is because he is so passionate about Christian love. And he knows that the only way that sinners can become loving people is through the power of the true Gospel, not through speculation or vain discussion or ignorant talk. The truth of the Gospel must come to bear on a person's heart such that they are changed from the inside out. Paul points to these inner realities that are true for those who are new creatures in Christ. We have a pure heart, because we've been forgiven of our sin and have received a new heart and new desires. We have a good conscience in that we know that we're forgiven and we know that, by God's grace, we are fighting against sin and growing in holiness. And we have a sincere faith—a genuine trust in the Lord, not a contrived or superficial emotion. These are the things that happen within us when we're born again, and it's from these things that true love is produced. That's what Paul is saying. "The aim of our charge is love *that issues from* a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

Therefore our goal as a church must be to teach and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the hope and prayer that God will use the proclamation of His truth to change hearts so that envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicion, and constant friction gives way to radical Christian love. That's the power of the Gospel. And that's the importance of sound teaching in the church.