

Lawful Use of the Law: 1 Timothy 1:8-11
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, March 15, 2009

Last week in our study of verses 3-7 we saw the danger of false teaching and false teachers in the church. False teachers present different doctrine. That is, teaching that is contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They get caught up in myths and genealogies. They pursue vain discussion. And their teaching lacks understanding.

What we're going to examine this morning is the specific nature of their lack of understanding. Verse 7 tells us that they desire "to be teachers of the law, without understanding what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." They want to be teachers of the law. The law is a key component of what they teach. This is a reference to the Old Testament law, and we know that these false teachers had all kinds of fanciful and speculative ideas about the Scriptures. They loved to take the Bible and look for novel ways to captivate their listeners, and in doing so they missed the true intent of the Bible. This was true of their use of the Scriptures as a whole, and it was particularly true in the case of the law. These false teachers, who had infiltrated the eldership of the church at Ephesus, had a detailed knowledge of the law. They knew a lot about the law. They could talk about the law and impress people with their knowledge of all kinds of specific details in the law. But there was a major problem, which Paul points out here. In spite of their broad knowledge of the law, they did not understand it. They had a lot of knowledge, but no understanding. In fact, the disconnect is so severe that Paul says they don't understand "either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." They could speak eloquently and confidently and knowledgably about this and that facet of the law, and yet they were totally missing the point.

My prayer for us this morning is that we will grasp the meaning of this passage so that we don't fall into the same error. There is lawful use of the law, and there is unlawful use of the law. And the false teachers in Ephesus were using the law unlawfully, because they didn't understand it and were using it in ways that were contrary to its intent. But when we understand God's plan of salvation, we can then see the lawful use of the law. Notice the contrast from verse 7 to verses 8 and following. In verse 7 the false teachers have a view of the law that lacks understanding. But then Paul says, "Now we *know* that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this," and then he goes on to explain. So the false teachers lack understanding concerning the law. And

Paul responds, in verses 8-11, with a word of clarification and a word of understanding concerning this important matter of the law. He begins by affirming that the law is good, but then he follows that with a critical qualification, “if one uses it lawfully,” which clearly implies that the false teachers were using it unlawfully. So the law is good if used lawfully, and in order to use it lawfully we need to understand certain things about its intent.

I’ll use three headings as we walk through Paul’s explanation here. The first thing we have to understand is that the law is not for the just. Secondly, we need to understand that the law is for sinners. And thirdly, we need to understand the relationship between the law and the Gospel.

The law is not for the just

In verse 9 Paul says we have to understand that “the law is not laid down for the just.” That word can also be translated “righteous.” It’s the same word that Jesus used when He said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17; also Matthew 9:13, Luke 5:32). When Jesus said that He certainly didn’t mean to imply that the Pharisees were actually righteous, but only that they thought they were righteous. They were self-righteous. I think this is probably the way Paul is using the word in 1 Timothy 1:9. The law is not laid down for those who think they’re already righteous. In that case, the self-righteous person simply uses the law to puff up his or her pride. The law exacerbates the problem of self-righteousness. It makes it worse. For the Pharisees and the false teachers, there was an interest in the law as a means of demonstrating their righteousness. It’s the prideful and deceptive tendency to think that I’m righteous (and I’m more righteous than other people) because I’ve held to this and that rule. That’s not what the law is for. The law is not laid down so that self-righteous people can become even more self-righteous.

The other possibility here is that Paul is referring to believers when he says that the law is not laid down for the just / righteous. It could be that he’s making the point that once a person is declared righteous in God’s sight and given a new heart that desires righteousness, then the external Old Testament law has already served its purpose. The law, as we’re going to see in a moment, convicts us and condemns us and shows us our need for a Savior. But it cannot save us. It is not a means of attaining righteousness. Therefore, in that sense, it is not laid down for believers. I believe both points are true—that the law is not laid down for those who are self-righteous, and it is not laid down for those who are already believers. However, I’m not 100% sure which of the two Paul intended here. Fortunately, I don’t think it

makes a whole lot of difference for our understanding of this section, since in either case it is contrasted with the statement that the law *is* laid down for sinners. And that's where the emphasis lies. The false teachers need to understand that the law is aimed at sinners. It's made to confront sin and to condemn sin. It's not to be a jumping off point for their wild speculations and vain discussions. Nor is it made to be a means of attaining righteousness or a ground for boasting.

Let's think about our own lives for a moment. It's easy to point fingers at the Pharisees and the false teachers. But what about the Pharisee that lurks within each of our hearts? In what ways do we gravitate toward rules and lists and guidelines for the purpose of demonstrating our own righteousness? It's such a subtle and dangerous change that can happen in our thinking when a good desire becomes a reason for boasting. For instance, a Bible reading plan is a good thing. I recommend that you have some kind of disciplined plan for reading and studying the Bible. But when your Bible reading plan becomes a ground for thinking that you're more righteous or more spiritual than others, then you've fallen into the same trap that the Pharisees fell into. Or maybe there are good and godly convictions that you have concerning child-rearing or education or finances or politics or entertainment, but we must never let those convictions become a reason for boasting or a reason to think that we're righteous because we follow these certain guidelines and rules and lists.

Remember what Paul wrote just a few verses earlier, in verse 5. He said, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." The only way that a person becomes righteous is through the inner change that happens when God gives you a new heart. It's not list-keeping and rule-keeping that makes a person righteous, but only the power of God in the Gospel to declare us righteous (which is called justification) and then to gradually make us righteous (which is called sanctification). So our pursuit of holiness has to be rooted in the work God has done in our hearts. As verse 5 makes clear, it's from the new heart that true love flows. Love "issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

So don't try to impress yourself or impress others with your rule-keeping. That's not what the law is for. In a sermon that John Piper preached on this text, he responded to a very practical and specific question. Someone had come to him and said that they were with somebody on Thanksgiving and they were going to watch a movie together, but he wasn't comfortable watching this particular movie that his friend suggested. And the question was, What do I do in that situation? How do I respond in a way that is Gospel-like rather than law-like? Piper said, if you feel like you

shouldn't watch the movie, you could respond—out of the relationship you have with that person—You know, I want to walk closely with Jesus. There's nothing more precious to me than that. And I know that certain things get in the way of that. Certain movies, certain kinds of music—they totally distract me from my walk with the Lord and turn my thoughts to other things. That would be very different than saying, I don't watch those kinds of movies. Or, I don't watch any movies. That would be list-keeping, rule-keeping, law-keeping, and it would communicate a prideful self-righteousness rather than the sweet inner transformation that has been brought about by the Gospel.

Let's be the kind of people who marvel at the work God has done in our hearts. Let's be the kind of people who are trusting in His power to continue changing us and sanctifying us. And let's be on guard against our own legalistic tendencies so that we don't allow good and helpful practices to become grounds for self-righteousness and boasting. For then we would be using the law unlawfully.

The law is for sinners

Secondly, and in contrast to the first statement, we need to understand that the law is for sinners. “The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.” That's quite a list of vices. Paul wants to be clear concerning the law, and therefore he goes into painful detail describing those for whom it is intended. His list resembles the 10 commandments. The first three pairs may be loosely tied to the first four commandments that deal with our relationship to God. And then Paul closely follows the order of commandments five through nine. The fifth commandment is “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12), and Paul refers to those who strike their fathers and mothers. The sixth commandment is “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13), and Paul refers to murderers. The seventh commandment is “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14), and Paul refers to the sexually immoral and men who practice homosexuality. The eighth commandment is “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15), and Paul refers to enslavers, or those who steal persons. The ninth commandment is “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17), and Paul refers to liars and perjurers. He doesn't comment on the tenth commandment that “you shall not covet,” but rather gives an all-encompassing statement condemning anything else that is contrary to sound doctrine.

What we need to realize is that each and every one of us fits into this list. In fact, just a few verses later Paul calls himself the foremost of sinners (verse 15). So we can't read this as Paul's description of how sinful everyone else is. No, he offers himself as the prime example. And therefore he sees himself as someone who has fallen under the condemnation of the law. And you and I should recognize that we, too, fall under the condemnation of the law. We have been lawless and disobedient, meaning we have failed to keep God's laws and have disobeyed Him. We have been ungodly and sinful, turning away from God in our thoughts and actions and attitudes. We have been unholy and profane, scorning the holiness of God. We have not honored God as we ought. Instead we have ignored Him and acted as though other things are more important and more satisfying than Him. We have heaped scorn upon His name in so many ways.

And we have also sinned against God in our relationships with others. We have dishonored our fathers and mothers. Maybe we never struck them—Paul refers specifically here to those who strike their fathers and mothers. But if there was hatred in our hearts and fierce rebellion, then the sin is just the same as if we did strike them. The same is true of the next, more general, statement—murderers. Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount (and this portion was our fighter verse last week) that anger and insult is just as serious as murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

Similarly with sexual immorality—if we have lusted after another individual, it is the same as adultery, Jesus says (Matthew 5:27-28). Therefore we recognize here, too, that this is not just a description of the bad people who are out there. It's a description of each one of us who has fallen short of God's perfect standard of righteousness. Based on this text we do need to say very clearly and boldly that all sexual immorality is sin. That's not a popular thing to say in our culture, because our culture says, If it feels good, do it. But God's Word says that sexual intimacy was created by God for enjoyment only within the covenant of marriage. Therefore any sexual intimacy before marriage or outside of marriage is a grave sin against God.

The other thing Paul mentions alongside sexual immorality is homosexuality. This is another sin that is increasingly in the spotlight of our culture, and there's great pressure to accept the homosexual lifestyle as a legitimate alternate lifestyle. That, of course, would be the easy thing to do. And many would say it's the most loving thing to do. But the reality is that we must speak the truth about sexual immorality and homosexuality, and we must do so in a loving way. How are we loving someone if we hide the truth or ignore the truth? I want to say loud and clear that men and women who are involved in homosexuality are welcome here at

Three Rivers Grace. My aim is that each week in Sunday School classes and in our worship services that we will speak the truth in love, and my hope and prayer is that God will draw all kinds of people to come and hear the Bible taught in a clear and compassionate way and to experience the loving community of believers. I don't say these things to turn anyone away. Rather, I say these things so that individuals might be convicted of their sin and drawn to Christ.

As the list concludes with “enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,” we should continue to see the sin in our own hearts. The desire to steal what someone else has or even to use individuals themselves as a means of getting what we want. In these ways we are thieves and enslavers. The sinful tendency to spin the truth in our favor or to break a promise that we have made, and thus we are liars and perjurers.

We have to recognize that we *all* fall short of God's standard of righteousness. We are all fall under the condemnation of the law. And the point of the law is to bring us to our knees in repentance. That's why it's important that we tell people the truth about God's law, because God uses the law to convict us of sin and show us our desperate need for a Savior. This is how the law is used lawfully, and this leads us to our last point, which is the law and the Gospel.

The law and the Gospel

John MacArthur says, “The law is good, but it is not good news. The law wasn't made for righteous men; it was made for sinners so they could see their sin” (sermon on 1 Timothy 1:7-11, accessed through www.biblebb.com). This is how we use the law lawfully—not by using the law to conjure up all kinds of speculative notions or to impress others with our knowledge of the law or to boast about our adherence to the law. All of those are unlawful uses of the law. But in the plan of salvation the law is used to condemn sin and enable people to see how depraved and wicked they actually are and to realize that they stand under the judgment of God without any hope of saving themselves. That's not good news, as MacArthur says. But it serves a very good purpose, because we must realize that bad news before we can see how great the Gospel is.

As Paul says just a few verses later in verse 15, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” That's the tremendously Good News of the Gospel, that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. But we will never recognize that to be Good News if we never recognize that we are sinners in need of a Savior.

In verse 11 Paul emphasizes that this lawful use of the law is “in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.” I think it’s best to understand that prepositional phrase as being connected to the whole of what Paul has said in verses 8-10. He has responded to the false teachers who seek to teach the law but without understanding, and he has clarified that the law is good if used lawfully. And the lawful use of the law is to recognize the role it plays in condemning sinners. And now he’s saying that the condemning work of the law is in accordance with the gospel. Using the law as fodder for speculative theories is not in accordance with the gospel. And certainly using the law as an attempt to attain one’s own righteousness is not in accordance with the gospel. But viewing the law as God’s revelation of His perfect standard of righteousness which we all fail to attain—that is the painful but precious function that the law must serve in our lives so that we cast ourselves on the mercies of Christ. And in that way the lawful use of the law is in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God. That’s the message that the apostle Paul was entrusted with and was burdened to proclaim and defend. It pained him to see these false teachers using the law for other purposes, and he is here seeking to correct their error.

In closing, and to summarize, let’s just ask the question: What do we do with the Old Testament law? From what we’ve seen concerning the role of the law in convicting people of sin and bringing them to the point of repentance and faith, I think we should look for ways to incorporate the law into our evangelism. As you’re talking with unbelieving co-workers of family members or friends or neighbors, look for ways to speak the truth in love. Look for ways to share what God’s standard of righteousness is, and challenge people to wrestle with the stark reality that they do not measure up. Pray that God will break through their self-righteousness so they can see that Christ is their only hope.

And then as we consider how the law is relevant to our lives as believers, we must understand that we are not under the law, but rather we are led by the Spirit (Galatians 5:8). We are dead to the law (Romans 7:4; Galatians 2:19). So we must not look to the law as the means by which we will be changed. It’s only the inner work of the Gospel that can change us, not the external demands of the law. So we must recognize that we are not under the law. We are dead to the law. But that doesn’t mean we ignore the law. The law is good. It is precious. It is part of God’s revelation to us.

I’ll rely on John Piper’s sermon again to summarize how we as believers should relate to the law. He says, “Read it and meditate on it as those who are dead to it as the ground of your

justification and the power of your sanctification. Read it and meditate on it as those for whom Christ is your righteousness and Christ is your sanctification. Which means read and mediate on it to know Christ better and to treasure him more” (“How to Use the Law Lawfully to Bear Fruit for God,” Nov 25, 2001). So don’t think of the law as a means of earning a right standing before God. That would be to pursue the law as the ground of your justification. And don’t even go back to the law thinking that it can be a means of growing in holiness. That would be to pursue the law as the power of your sanctification. We are dead to the law in both respects. Don’t go to the law thinking that rule-keeping will get you right with God or will make you more holy. Only God’s sovereign work can change you, giving you a new heart and giving you the Spirit to change you day-by-day—that’s our only hope of justification and sanctification. That doesn’t mean, though, that we totally ignore the law. The law is part of God’s wonderful revelation of His character and His plan of salvation. So we should read and meditate on the law, as we should do with the whole of Scripture, in order to know Christ and in order to be more and more in awe of Him. And as we do so, we will use the law lawfully, understanding its role in condemning sinners and compelling us to repent of our sins and trust in Jesus Christ. For this use of the law is, indeed, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God.