

INTRODUCTION

The main theme of the sermon last time was the importance of sound doctrine because sound doctrine is so important, false doctrine is so dangerous. So far Paul has been exhorting Timothy to command these false teachers at Ephesus to cease teaching their false doctrines. These false doctrines majored on myths and genealogies; this of course led to false practise (4:3). Although we are unable to know exactly what was taught, although the church at Ephesus would know exactly what Paul means when he talks about myths and genealogies. In all likelihood these false teachers were justifying their ideas from the law of the Old Testament, in particular the first five books of the Old Testament, the Law of Moses.

These teachers really wanted to be teachers of the law like the Jewish Rabbi's, but as Paul clearly points out, they "do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm." In my further studies this past week I have discovered that, that little phrase has the idea of being dogmatic. Verse 7 means that these false teachers were being teachers of the law in the sense that they gave interpretations concerning the law, such interpretations just showed their ignorance but nevertheless they were very dogmatic in the proclamations that they were right. Paul now digresses onto a different subject until verse 18 when he comes back to his subject of the false teachers. But his digression is for a purpose. The abuse of the law of the false teachers leads Paul to give a brief statement about the benefit and purpose of God's law. It's like everything else in life; because something is abused it does not mean that it does not have a useful function. God gave the law and therefore it has a useful function to play. So what does Paul say about the Law.

1. THE LAW IS GOOD (v 8)

Paul says that we know that the law is good. Perhaps because these false teachers were using the law to support their false teaching there may have been some who wondered if the law really is good. But Paul makes a clear statement about the law; but he also qualifies it by saying that it is only good if is used properly the word is "lawfully." Like most things in life, the law could be used for the good of mankind or it can be used in a wrong way and cause great harm and confusion. The false teachers were using the law in a wrong way to support their false teaching and to cause controversy and arguments, confusion and wrong practise. But because something is used wrongly does not mean that it is not good.

Even in our own land generally speaking our civil law is good. We have speed limits on our roads and the reason for those limits is to protect others from people who drive too fast and as a result could do a great deal of harm. Our law tells us to drive on the left hand side of the road and the reason for that is to bring order to our roads. Our law tells us that we have no right to walk into someone's house and help ourselves; it is there to protect us from those who will take advantage of us. So we could go on and say generally speaking the laws of our own land are good. I say generally speaking for not every law in our land is good.

But when we think of God's law then God's law is good in every way. Take for example the 10 commandments, which in the bible are called the law.

Is it for our good that we should have no other gods before the one true God? What about the way we worship God, should we avoid doing so through graven images? What about misusing God's name or the Sabbath day? They are all commandments to do with our relationship with God. They are good for they tell us whom we should worship and how we should worship and what it is that pleases God. The last six commandments are to do with our relationship with one another and as you can see each command is for our own good and for the good of our society. As we look at these six commands are there any that are not good, but are actually harmful? (Exodus 20:3-17).

They are good and wholesome for the law of God is good in every way and just because these false teachers are abusing the law for their own ends does not mean that it is not still good for us. Of course the main reason why God's law is good is because it reflects his will for us as human beings and for those of us who are his people. God who is our creator should know what is best for us and what is harmful for us. So he gives us his law as an expression of his love for us and for our own protection and good. It is such a pity that because we are sinful we think that we know better than God and so we supersede God's law with our own laws.

Every Government in the world today does this. They do what they think is best, fair and just, they do what they believe is good, but often it is not good for us as it goes against God's will and purpose. For example when God pronounced the seventh day as a day of rest, He did so because it was good for us. He knows that it is not good for us individually or for us as families or as a nation to work what is known today as 24/7. It actually has a detrimental effect upon our society and within our families and it affects us personally (health problems). Yet sadly our governments over last couple of decades have sought to do away with Sunday as a day of rest. For them and for many in our land it appears to be a good idea but sadly and I think we have already seen enough to know that such laws are not good for us.

Never mind any spiritual implication that the fourth commandment has for us, physically and mentally it is not good for us. God who is our creator knows what is best for us that is why He gave us his law, to reveal his will for his creatures. His law of course concerns our spiritual condition before God, but it also has implications for our total well being, for our God created us as physical, mental as well as spiritual beings and he is concerned for us as total beings. To ignore God's moral law is to ignore what is best for us individually and collectively as a society.

2. THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW (vs. 9-11)

Paul goes on to give us one purpose of the law. This is not the only purpose of the law mentioned within the New Testament for the law is useful for restraining evil and protecting communities. As people would do more evil if there was no deterrent for their law breaker. The law is necessary for believers for it teaches us day by day what God's will is, so that we may under God and by his grace seek to please Him. But Paul has a different purpose in mind here. Paul first of all tells us whom the law is not for. It is not for those who think they are righteous.

Paul is not saying here that the law is not for those who have been made righteous through Christ, but in the context it is clear that what Paul means is that; it has no purpose for those who think that they are righteous and thereby keepers of the law. No! The law was given for those who are law-breakers, the word describes those who have no commitment to any law or standard, thus it is translated in some bibles as lawless.

Rebellious, this is the effect of being lawless or a law-breaker. Ungodly, this means one who is without regard for anything spiritual or sacred. The result of being ungodly is that such people are sinners; they live without regard for God's law because they have no regard for God. Unholy means not pure and such a people become irreligious (v 9).

This list is probably thinking about those who break the first four of the 10 commandments, which deal with our relationship with God. What Paul is saying is that the law's purpose is to show sinners their sin, and consequently their need of a Saviour (Romans 3:20 and Galatians 3:24). The law is morally right and good but the law alone is not good news. The law of God forces man to recognise that all are guilty of violating His standards; it therefore condemns everyone and sentences us to hell. However we have to hear and indeed heed the bad news if we are going to do something about it.

The bad news is that as we measure ourselves against God's holy law; we find ourselves falling short of His standards. We find ourselves being like this, sinners, rebellious, ungodly, unholy etc. But once we have seen ourselves in the light of God's law, we can then start looking for answers. The answer is not found in the law; it's not a matter of "O dear I am not keeping the law therefore I have to try harder to do so."

No the answer is with God and with Christ in particular. I realise that I cannot keep the law the harder I try the more I seem to fail. So I have to look away from myself to Christ who came into this world and kept perfectly God's holy law. He died and rose again so that those of us who could not keep the law and therefore were condemned by it could look to Him in faith and receive forgiveness and justification because He was able to keep God's law and died as a perfect man for imperfect people. When He died; He suffered for lawbreakers like us. When in faith we turn to him, God credits His righteousness to our account and He takes our lawlessness and places it upon Christ. So that; when Christ died He was dying for my sin and for the sins of all those who will turn in faith to Jesus Christ for salvation.

Paul goes on to list sins, which match up with commandments 5-9. These deal with our relationship with others. How do we know it is wrong to dishonour our parents? How do we know it is wrong to murder? How do we know it is wrong to commit adultery or to steal or to tell lies? We know all that because God says so. He gives to us His law so that we can know what is right and what is wrong. What is offensive to Him and what is pleasing to Him? But the purpose of the law for such people is to teach us that we are guilty of such sins the law condemns us and we stand condemned. But again the answer is not to try harder but to turn to Jesus as the One who died for lawbreakers like us.

Paul obviously has not mentioned every possible sin that we can or have committed, he makes sure that none are omitted by added the phrase "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." The word "sound" is a very interesting word for we get our English word "hygiene" from this Greek word. It refers to that which is healthy and wholesome. Any teaching that is not in accord with God's word is unhealthy and is therefore offensive to God. These false teachers were promoting unhealthy doctrines and therefore they were clearly sinning against the Lord.

We are encouraged in these days to live healthy lives, to eat properly and exercise well and so on. As is the case with our physical state so it should be with our spiritual state. We should encourage teaching that is healthy for us spiritually, teaching that will help us grow and become godly and frown upon any teaching that is unhealthy and harmful to us. That is why it is imperative that Timothy stamps out this false teaching in Ephesus as soon as possible.

Paul concludes by stating that all sound doctrine must conform to the glorious gospel (v 11) or as it could be translated the gospel that displays God's glory. (There are about 14 possible ways that this Greek phrase could be translated). If the way that we use the law for example is not in accordance with the gospel message then our use of the law is wrong. The law is a very important aspect of the gospel. It shows people their sin; it gives them the bad news so that they can see the good news of Jesus as Saviour in the light of their sinful condition.

It is likely that these false teachers were using the law in a way that was contrary to the gospel message. They probably were using it to teach a salvation by works which obviously cuts against the central message of the gospel. God's law and God's gospel are not in opposite camps, but they are on the same side and any gospel that does not teach the law in order to convict sinners is no gospel at all. Sometimes Christians say that in the Old Testament keeping the law saved the people but in the New Testament they were saved through grace. The gospel preaches grace whereas the law preaches law keeping. Such thinking is seriously flawed and will ultimately lead to a false gospel. People in both Testaments were saved by grace.

But the law has a very important part to play in God's gospel of grace. It reveals sin, it declares God's holiness, and it points people to their desperate need of salvation. When they feel that need and their helplessness and their condemnation, then we are able to tell them the other side of the coin. About Christ who kept perfectly God's law and died for sinners who are guilty and stand condemned before a holy God.

This is the gospel that was entrusted to Paul as an apostle and this is the gospel that is entrusted to us. We are responsible for proclaiming God's moral law, for preaching God's standards. We are responsible for preaching the good news as well, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners who stand as lawbreakers, condemned and rightfully deserving hell, as God's just punishment. Are you going to share this gospel this week? In sharing this gospel do not neglect the part the law plays in bringing people to realise their sin before a holy God. But do not stop there; make sure that you tell people the good news about Christ and his willingness to forgive guilty sinners who turn in true repentance and faith to him.

Amen