

There are certain things that one can say in our home that will always produce the same reaction: "Aw, that's boring!"

So if I say, "Let's take a walk after dinner," at least two of the members of my household will say, "Aw, boring." If I say, "let's have a contest to see who can clean their rooms the fastest," they see right through my attempt at competitive inspiration, and say "Oh, *boring*." Or how about, "Let's do a little cleaning in the basement?" "Well, *that's* boring."

And that's from my wife!

It's the same in the church. If you bring up certain subjects, it will very often produce the same reaction among the children of God – "*Boring*." Two of those subjects that illicit just this response are doctrine and a proper ordering of the church. And that is what many see when they read this letter from Paul to Timothy – "This is all doctrine and church order stuff....Oh, boring!"

But one indicator that this passage is *not* all about church order, polity, elders and deacons – or even doctrine – is that if it is, it's been a relative failure! Gordon Fee, in his commentary on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy and Titus, has written that "The entire spectrum of church government, from the hierarchical episcopacy of Roman Catholicism, through the mediating expression of Presbyterianism, to the extreme congregationalism of the Plymouth Brethren, *all* find support for *their* polity in these letters."<sup>1</sup>

His point is that *every* denomination can find some support for the way they order their churches in these letters, so that to read 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy and say "This is what this letter is about," is probably wrong, or it would be extremely obvious how we should order our churches.

So if it's not about organization and leadership of the church, then what *is* it about? Is it doctrine? Maybe. You see, at this time, the church in Ephesus was not a in a building like this, but was actually a series of house churches. The church, then, met in various homes, and each group would have an elder or elders. And some of these elders had somehow been led astray from the true doctrine – the doctrine that had been handed down from the apostles – and in being taken off track, they were causing the Christians in those groups to be led off-track.

Timothy, therefore – and you see it in v. 3 – is being urged by Paul to *remain* at Ephesus so that he can make a charge against certain elders not to teach this false doctrine. So that these elders can be restrained from swerving off the path, and reassert sound doctrine.

Ah! But there is one of those words again! Doctrine! Boring!

Maybe. Maybe not.

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<sup>1</sup> As referenced in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, Bruce B. Barton, David R. Veerman, Neil Wilson, p. 37, Tyndale House, 1993

Let me illustrate it this way. If I took my children out to a lonely place where there was a lengthy, 3 mile long path that was in the shape of a circle, and out of the back of the car I pulled out large buckets of white paint and a couple of paintbrushes, and said "Kids, today we are making this pathway a regulation roadway by painting white lines along the sides, and a dotted white line down the middle ... so get started. It's 3 miles long!" what would they say?

That's right. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaw Dad! That's boring! That's kid-code for "I don't want to."

But what if I had said exactly the same thing, but at the end, I said "... so get started. It's 3 miles long! And when you're done (and I jiggle the keys) Daddy is going to let *you* drive!" ... what would happen?

Paint would start to *fly*, right? The Department of Transportation couldn't paint that fast!

And that is what we have here. Paul is not talking about doctrine in a way that asks "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" His doctrinal focus is on what gives life itself. It's on the gospel. It is on the teaching, the power and the reputation of the gospel. (repeat)

Before we look at this morning's text, here are a few places that Paul circles back again and again to these three themes:

1 Timothy 1:11

in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. (ESV)

1 Timothy 1:15

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. (ESV)

1 Timothy 2:3-4

3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (ESV)

1 Timothy 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, (Why? So that the gospel will not be held in contempt). (ESV)

1 Timothy 3:7

Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace (and with him the cause of the gospel). (ESV)

1 Timothy 3:13

For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (ESV)

1 Timothy 4:16

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (ESV)

1 Timothy 5:7

Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. (ESV)

1 Timothy 5:14

14 So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. (ESV)

1 Timothy 6:14

...to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, (ESV)

And the letter ends:

1 Timothy 6:20-21

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge," for by professing it some have swerved from the faith...(ESV)

This isn't doctrine narrowly conceived. It's not just paint on the road. This is about the very gospel of Jesus Christ! It's about what drives your life. It's about the teaching, the power and the reputation of the gospel.

So that is our rather lengthy introduction to the letter – let's now read the passage together (p. 1262):

1 Timothy 1:1-7

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

2 To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

3 As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 5 The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. (ESV)

Let's look at those three themes as we see them here:

- the teaching of the gospel
- the power of the gospel
- and the reputation of the gospel

So first, the teaching of the gospel. Even in the greeting of this letter, there are some tell-tale signs of why Paul thinks that the teaching of the church – the specific content of the gospel – will keep God's people on the rails. A few months ago, I had visited a family in the church, and on my way back, I found myself in the middle of a driving rainstorm. It was late in the day and the light turned the highway, along with everything else, a dull, glassy gray. In just a few seconds, the visibility went from being fine, to... impossible. Suddenly the roadway was like a gray mirror, and I couldn't see the lines marking the lanes. At 60 miles per hour, that's not a good thing! Those white lines don't appear to be that interesting – they're "boring" – until they're not there. I felt like I was swerving out of my lane, and that a crash was imminent.

Paul begins his letter with a greeting that communicates lines, linkages and authority structures that are meant to protect us from severe accidents, but also to lead us to blessing.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus *by command* of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy, *my true child* in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Why such strong language? Paul's letters usually start by saying something like, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the *will* of God." Why does Paul have to say that he has been commanded to take this role? And why pull this command-language on Timothy, of all people? He likes Timothy! He calls Timothy his true child.

The reason is that the letter *is* to Timothy, but also all the churches in Ephesus are listening in. If you turn to page 1266 and look at the last sentence – the last 4 words of the letter – you see that it says "Grace be with you." But if you look at the footnote, it says that the Greek actually says "you" plural. In Greek, it's got a southern draw! It's "Grace be with y'all." It's not just to Timothy.

Timothy, you see, is not a pastor like you often think. He is more like an itinerant church planter on a special assignment, rather than a local pastor.

He is an apostolic delegate – something like an auditor from presbytery – not a solo, resident pastor. So Paul is writing this letter to Timothy, but with the knowledge that maybe some don't take this young man too seriously.

It's something like when my wife and I get a night out and let's say there is this new babysitter. If the baby-sitter is a very young-looking 20-year-old, my children look at her like she is a taller, and only slightly older pal, and not like us or their Aunt Judy. But *I* want them to look at her like *she is the law!* Like she is in command!! So I say to my children, "While Mommy and Daddy are out, who is in charge?" And they give the babysitter's name.

Paul is speaking to a church that he started, and which needs oversight, and he is laying down the rails so that the church won't swerve. "I am an apostle. My *teaching* is apostolic. And *you* are to be ruled by the teaching of the apostles."

Now friends, this is just as true for us as it was for these derailed churches in Ephesus. Surely, after 2,000 years of church history we know how easy it is for churches to swerve off the path.

Paul's point is that the church should not have to face these problems alone precisely because Paul's apostleship is rooted in God's command to him, and he assures Timothy (and again, the church listening in) that grace and mercy and peace come from this same God, and his word, and that by submitting to God and his commands, the church can stay on the path, the church will flourish, and we'll reach people with the *true* gospel.

But likewise, this means that if we teach what we teach, and do what we do, and love what we love – not based on God's command, God's word through his apostles – the holy scriptures – then we *will* base all of those things on *some other power*. It could be an extremely strong pastor, a very dominant church or group of churches in our denomination, a modern day apostle, or a theological guru. We have these all up and down our church-landscape and some of these churches, leaders and groups are very good. But they cannot be the ones that set the rules, paint the guidelines, or determine the teaching. It has to be by the command of God, set down in his word, given to the prophets and apostles. The only answer that the bible gives to defend against strong human, and even strong demonic powers, is the word of God and prayer. Jesus, when tempted by Satan to go off the rails, said over and over again, "It is written, it is written...." Even the Son of Man called upon the power of God in his word.

And this takes us to our second point. The power of the gospel. We'll speak more about the content of the gospel in the coming weeks because Paul speaks about it, but if the content of the gospel – what is being taught – is not right, then this gospel is *not* good news, and it will have no power. Look at v. 3:

"As I urged you (Timothy) when I was going to Macedonia, *remain* at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine..." (now down to v. 6) "Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion..." Now what does "these" refer to? It's listed there in v. 5: "love that issues from a *pure heart* and a *good conscience* and a *sincere faith*."

Now think about that for a moment. How do you know – how does anyone, Christian or not – know what makes up a pure heart? You need a standard, do you not? How do you know if you have a *good* conscience? How do you know what's good? What about a sincere faith? You need a standard. A reference point. Do you have a pure heart, or an impure heart? A good conscience or a bad one? A sincere faith or a faith that is insincere?

Dr. Peter Kreeft, a professor of philosophy at Boston College, has a quote on the back of your bulletin that's worth considering: "The *good* news makes no sense unless you believe the *bad* news first. A free (medical) operation is *not* good news if you don't think you have a mortal disease. Once, the main obstacle to believe in Christianity was the good news.

It seemed like a fairy tale; too good to be true. Today, the main obstacle is the *bad* news; people just don't believe in sin even though that is the only Christian doctrine that can be proven by reading daily newspapers. Calling a person sinful is not to deny that his being remains good, any more than calling the statue of Venus de Milo a damaged work of art means denying that its sculptor created a masterpiece. Humanity is a good thing, gone bad; the image of God in rebellion against God, God's beloved in a state of rebellion."

God's beloved, but in a state of rebellion – that was the problem in Ephesus. Swerving, wandering away from what is good, pure and sincere, means wandering off into what is bad, insincere and impure. Now friends, at first it doesn't feel like rebellion. It just seemed like you were following some links that a pal sent you, and you wandered off to see where else it took you. But when you find yourself putting these sites in your favorite places.... Then your motives are compromised. Then you're in rebellion. Then you're starting to redefine the truth. And when we rationalize, the one thing that always gets rationed out is the Lord's truth. And without his standard, you start to speculate. To come up with your own reasoning.

What causes you to wander or swerve? These teachers here in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, as we move through the letter, were pulled away by power, popularity and money. And they began to convince themselves and their congregation that, for instance, marriage was wrong, but that conveniently, sex was okay. And they used the OT genealogies as a way of speculating that they were probably right! They moved progressively away from the teaching of the apostles.

I want you to note – if you were here just a couple of weeks ago as we were wrapping up our series on the psalms – how utterly consistent the bible is. Remember when we were looking at Psalm 81, we spoke about how we start to swerve. At first we find ourselves practicing what we in principle condemn, then move on to approving what we used to condemn, and then, after we've practiced it long enough, we now approve of it "because after all, we've been doing it for so long," and can't even remember why we ever condemned it in principle in the first place! And it is the same here.

As a pastor, what I worry about the most is not the budget, is not how many people are here on a Sunday, is not even how many conversions there have been – verse one says that God is our Savior and Christ Jesus is our hope. No, what I worry about the most is who might be wandering. Who might be swerving away from the truth of the gospel. Who is falling to legalism? Who is sliding the way of license? Who is getting caught up in speculations and meaningless debates?

The reason I worry about this is because it is Paul's worry. Today, our church – and our denomination – have been very focused on church planting. As we should be. That was Paul's task, and that was Timothy's task as well. Paul mentored Timothy so that he could plant churches when he was in chains or when he eventually died. But in verse 3, Paul thinks that maintaining the churches we *have* by keeping them focused on the gospel, is more important than racking up numbers of new churches: "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, **remain at Ephesus**, that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine..."

Why? Because Christianity is more than an idea and more than a teaching, but rather the Christian message is divine power in the form of ideas. On the one hand it has a content. It has ideas that must be submitted to. It has doctrinal teaching. But on the other, it is a power in the form of ideas. Paul says in Colossians 1 that the gospel "comes" to you and "bears fruit" in you. It's living. It's active.

Why does our sign out front say "Christ-centered" and "cross-focused?" Because if we are not, the gospel loses that power. The gospel will be fruitless.

Before we move on to our last point, we're starting Sunday school in just 2 weeks here at Hope. THIS is why we need good teachers. This is why we must express thankfulness and gratitude to our Sunday school teachers. Because they are setting the path. They are teaching the children that they ARE far more sinful than they ever thought they were – a guardrail on one side – but that they are far more loved than they ever dared hope – the other guardrail – at the same time. And it's those guardrails on both sides that maintain the shape, the power, the momentum of the gospel. It's law and grace, together. It's the bad news AND the good, that reveal what God has done.

If you think you are able to teach, see Fred. If your children are in Sunday school and children's church, get to know and pray for their teachers.

### **Now finally, the reputation of the gospel.**

Verses 3 and 4, lay out one of Paul's concerns. If we get the gospel wrong, then the reputation of the gospel in the world will be wrong. If the teaching is wrong, it will *promote other things*, and not what God has done, which is through faith. Reputations matter, precisely because reputations are based on what is reputed to be true.

A pastor I know was home one night with his 7 and 5 year old. His wife was out that evening at a doll-making class where she was learning how to make and assemble porcelain dolls. The pastor was out on his porch talking to a neighbor when the phone rang, and his son ran in to pick it up. The pastor was so proud – he said to the neighbor, "He does this so well!" The neighbor and pastor smiled as they listened to the 5-year old boy say "hello" so politely. But the pastor's pride vanished pretty quickly when he hears his son say, "No, my mom's not here. She's out making a baby. But my dad is here if you want to talk to him."

Of course, the call was from an elder in the church.

You can just see the pastor rushing to the phone to correct what his son had said because he knew that without all the information – without adding the phrase "doll class" – the elder might believe something that wasn't true. And ruin his reputation!

What does the cross mean? If you are a true Christian, it means everything. If it means very little, you don't understand it all yet. You only have a piece of it.

In verse 7 – and we'll look at this more next week – it mentions that there are these "teachers of the law," who "without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions," are like little boys on the phone. They are leading people astray by destroying what the cross is reputed to be about. Remember when we were in Galatians a year ago? Paul said, "I am astonished that so quickly you are changing over from the One who called you in the grace of Christ, to another – *a different* — gospel."

Why should Paul be so concerned about the reputation of the gospel? Can't God take care of that? And that is the whole point! Paul, is an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior. And God has commanded Paul to send out this singular message – Our God is a saving God and he does it through his only son Jesus Christ, alone.

Do you see how relevant this is? There is only *one way* that God has reputed to save sinners. Some people are ever anxious to welcome whatever is *new* or *different*. Like the Athenians of old in Acts 17 who devoted "time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."

Friends, in every other religion, and deeply rooted in every other single heart – in this room and throughout the world – is the conviction that the purpose of religion is to develop a righteousness, is to weave a righteousness, a record of moral decency, and give it to God. Maybe it is a mythic record. Maybe it is through being from a good family – your genealogy – you see. Everybody believes that and every religion besides Christianity puts it forth: "there is something about me that makes me acceptable." And while that isn't Christianity, that is exactly what people criticize about Christians because Christianity is *reputedly* about being moral. What is the purpose of religion, the world asks? It is to live this moral life, a righteous life, help other people, be faithful to your family, tell the truth... and you weave all these things together, and you present them to God, and when you do, God favors you and listens to your prayers, and your saved. You've secured his love.

Is that not the reputation of Christianity? It must be, because every time a famous Christian falls into sin, the world says, "Those *Christians!*" And there goes the reputation.

But Christianity is not a "to-do" religion. Christianity is receiving what God did *for* you. It's there in v. 4: it's "the stewardship from God that is by faith." It's not what you give him, but what he has given you that is yours by faith. Do you see that? The gospel is a receiving, not a doing. It's why Paul starts his letter out with "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." It's grace! It's *unmerited* favor.

The gospel is that Jesus Christ came to do for you what you could never do for yourself. He laid down the guidelines, the white lines, the rails that lead to salvation, because they all lead to the cross. If you add, you end up subtracting from the gospel. If you add to it, you end up subtracting. No, it is finished. Trust in him. It's yours! You can have that perfect righteousness by faith in him. Alone.

Let's pray.