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1 Timothy 1:1-20

The Charge to Wage the Good Warfare of the Gospel

When I was in middle and high school, I played on the football team. Every Friday night before a game, our coach would rally us all in the locker room to give us a pep talk; then we'd do something similar when we came back to the locker room during half-time. He would usually reiterate some things he had hammered home to us in practice that week, then remind us how important this game was, and then rally our spirits and prepare us to go out and play hard - usually involving cliché phrases like "give it all you got" or "this is our house" or something like that. Sounds a bit cheesy and clichéd, but it's a common practice for a reason; it's pretty effective; when you're losing at half-time, tired, and feeling discouraged, it's good to be exhorted and encouraged to keep going; we need the pep talk, the rallying cry.

We see something similar in war movies. Think of a scene where you have a group of soldiers just about to storm the beach, or hold down the fort, or charge the enemy lines, maybe even at overwhelming odds; they're dirty, tired, discouraged; what they're doing is difficult and dangerous and they know it. But then the grizzled old veteran steps up and calls them to action; he doesn't just give them orders to fight, he reminds them *why this battle is so important*; he reminds them *what they're fighting for*. Yes, it's risky; but the battle is worth it, because what they're fighting for is even bigger and more important than they are. And so he rallies the troops, he calls them to fight, prepares their spirits for battle, they all start chanting the rallying mantra, and then they rush into glorious battle.

The book of 1 Timothy is a lot like that: Paul, the older, veteran Apostle and missionary writes this letter to Timothy, his younger pastoral and missionary apprentice, to rally Timothy's spirit and resolve to keep fighting the fight of faith. We see this in the opening two verses, where Paul, "an apostle of Christ Jesus" addresses his letter "to Timothy, my true child in the faith" (v.2). Paul commissioned Timothy to oversee the work going on in the church of Ephesus. We don't know exactly when this took place. It's possible this takes place during the book of Acts, or after the close of it. Either way, we know why: there were false teachers that had arisen in the church of Ephesus and were causing others to swerve away from sound doctrine into false teachings, sinful behavior, and ungodly church practices. This is actually exactly what Paul had prophetically warned would happen in Acts 20 when he warned the Ephesian elders that wolves,

false teachers, would arise from within the flock. Now that it's come to pass, Paul commissioned Timothy to go and "wage the good warfare" (v.18) by standing guard against these false teachers and calling the church to instead hold fast to the true gospel, sound doctrine, and the principles of godliness.

Paul writes this letter to Timothy to reinforce the charge of Timothy's ministry and to give clear instructions for confronting these false teachers and restoring the church to sound doctrine and practice. But this doesn't mean that these letters are only for pastors or church leaders; not at all! They are practically relevant and absolutely necessary for *every* Christian to read, not just pastors, missionaries, and church leaders. Yes, this letter is written from Paul to Timothy; but it's clear that the letter was meant to be read out loud, in the hearing of the whole church congregation, just like all of Paul's epistles were. After all, the very last line of the book, the benediction of 1 Tim. 6:11, "Grace be with you," is actually *plural* - "grace be with you *all*." or "y'all." Paul's charge and instructions to Timothy were meant for the whole church to hear.

And so this letter is meant for all of us today, for our good, both as individuals, and as a church. It's just as practically relevant for us today as it was for the church of Ephesus 2,000 years ago. We, too, have a problem with false teachers and their false teachings infecting us and our churches; we are plagued with the epidemic of churches falling away from sound, biblical beliefs; sinful behaviors run rampant among our churches, and are increasingly justified and excused by Christians, and even church leaders.. We, today, face the threat of Christians and churches swerving away from sound, gospel-centered doctrine and practice. We need to heed the charge of 1 Tim. to hold fast to the faith of the gospel, to guard against false teachings and stay committed to sound doctrine, and to be transformed by the gospel in our lives and churches.

That's exactly where this letter begins, right here in the first chapter. What we see here is Paul's "pep talk," his "rallying cry" to all of us to wage the fight of faith, to stand firm against false teachings and hold fast to the true gospel. First, Paul warns us of the *threat* that false teachings pose against the gospel. Secondly, Paul reminds us of our dire *need* for the gospel. Third, Paul rallies our spirits by holding up his own life as a testimony to the transformative power and glorious grace of the gospel of Christ, reminding us just how precious the gospel is, that it is worth living and fighting for. And finally, Paul brings the passage full circle by coming back and reiterating his charge to Timothy - and us - to wage the good warfare for the gospel and *fight the fight of faith*, lest we lose it. So first we see *the Threat Against the Gospel...*

I. The Threat Against the Gospel: We Must Guard Against False Teachings that Undermine Sound, Gospel Doctrine (1:1-7)

Paul begins the content of his letter, in verses 3-7, by reminding Timothy why he's in Ephesus, reiterating the charge of his ministry: to guard against false teachings and teachers that are swerving away from sound doctrine and undermining the gospel. We see this in verses 3-4: "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any *different doctrine*, nor to devote themselves to *myths* and *endless genealogies*, which promote *speculations* rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith." By *different doctrine* he means teachings and beliefs about God, the gospel, and theology that *differ* from those clearly taught in the Word of God - the clear doctrines of the Old Testament, of those held and taught by Christ and His Apostles in the New Testament. Rather than teaching sound doctrine, these false teachers are devoting themselves to *myths* and *endless genealogies*. "Myths" are stories that are not true; just think of the Greek myths about pagan gods and supernatural beings, like Zeus and Hercules. "Genealogies" are lists of names and family trees; we see a lot of these in the Old Testament, don't we? Just think of the long lists of descendants in Genesis and Exodus, or in books detailing the history of Israel. We're not told exactly *what* the false teachings being taught were, but we do know that whatever they were *differed* from sound doctrine, and that they got there by promoting "*speculations*" about scripture, rather than focusing on being good steward of what God has revealed in His word - that is, "the stewardship from God that is by faith."

In other words, they are twisting scripture by adding in all their own endless speculations, going beyond what Scripture says by adding in their own myths and false legends, speculating about what might have been the case or speculating about what they think Scripture "was really saying" rather than rightly stewarding and teaching what God revealed and said in His Word. We see this in vv.6-7, too: "Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." It's possible these false teachers were elders - that is, pastors - in the church of Ephesus; in any case, they had some kind of teaching role and influence in the church community. Yet even though they claim to be teachers, Paul says they don't actually understand sound doctrine; they confidently make assertions and claim to teach the Scriptures, but they don't have any idea what they are talking about! Their bad

theology, bad interpretation, and bad teachings have caused them to “swerve” from sound doctrine and “wander away into vain discussion,” focusing on false teachings and things that just don’t matter rather than focusing on the clear teachings of scripture and the gospel of Christ.

So Paul charges Timothy to deal with these false teachers and stop them from teaching false doctrines. But this isn’t because Paul is being mean and harsh, or because he’s jumping to extremes; this is a big deal, since the gospel is at stake! In fact, Paul says, the goal here is *love*. He says, in v.5, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” The desire to confront false teaching comes from a “pure heart” changed by the Holy Spirit, from a “good conscience” that’s been transformed by the gospel; a “sincere faith” does not sit idly by when the clear teachings of God and the gospel are at stake! It is not loving to let people be led away into false teachings; the loving thing to do is to confront those false teachers and hold fast to true gospel doctrine.

This is just as true for us today as it was in Paul and Timothy’s day. We must be on guard against false teachings and hold fast to sound gospel teachings. But how do we spot false teachings that threaten to undermine the gospel and lead people astray? Obvious false teachings are those that deny the gospel, or crucial elements, such as the humanity or deity of Christ, the doctrines of God, Sin, and Creation, Hell, or even the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture itself. All of these are under attack in our day. But there are also far more subtle false teachings, where people seem to be confident and sound Bible teachers, and yet twist the meaning of the Scriptures with fanciful and allegorical speculation, or go beyond the text with their own made-up thoughts and conjectures, swerving from the clear truth of God’s Word. But false teaching always reveals itself by swerving from the clear teachings of Scripture that are necessary for upholding the gospel.

But you might be thinking to yourself, “Ok, I understand how denying certain truths about Scripture undermines the gospel; but how about false teachings that twist what the Bible says about *what we should do* - about sin and obedience, right vs. wrong behavior? Can these be considered false teachings as well?” And the answer is: *yes*, these are false teachings. First off, it directly involves twisting the Scriptures and swerving from their clear teaching, often making confident assertions about vain, meaningless talk and speculation that’s either outright defiance or just plain nonsense - just like we see in the false teachers Timothy was dealing with. But secondly, justifying sin or twisting God’s commands or calling for us to ignore or obey God’s

Word *undermines the gospel as well*. How? Because it blinds us to our *need* for the gospel. Which brings us to point number 2...

II. The Need for the Gospel: A Right Understanding of the Law Shows Us our Sin and Need for Grace (1:8-11)

As we saw in verses 4 and 7, the false teachers in Ephesus seemed to be misinterpreting and twisting the Law of the Old Testament - the Law of Moses. If we wrongly interpret God's Word, particularly the Law, in order to either justify sin or teach works-based righteousness, then we strip away our need for the grace of the gospel of Christ. We see this in verses 8-11, where Paul confronts these false teachings regarding the law by addressing the issue of the right versus wrong use of the Law - that is, of the Law of Moses, from the Old Testament. He begins, in v.8, by saying, "Now, we know the law is good," but only "if one uses it lawfully." God gave the Law; it is good, and has a necessary purpose, both in salvation history and for us as Christians today! But only if it's used rightly, or "lawfully."

So the obvious question is: how do we use the Law of Moses lawfully? Paul tells us in verses 9-11: we use the law lawfully by "understanding this, that 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 murders, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted." In other words, he's saying that the Law was not given to those who are just and righteous, but for those who are "lawless and disobedient," "ungodly and sinners," the "unholy and profane" - that is, for those who have sinful, rebellious hearts and want to do bad and evil things! In the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, no one had to tell Adam not to murder his wife, Eve. Of course he wouldn't do that, he loved her! He wouldn't even think of it! But after the Fall, it doesn't take long before Cain kills his brother Abel. So God gave the Law to Israel in order to show His people - and all of humanity, through the revelation of the Law in His Word - that we are *sinners by nature*. One of the chief purposes of the law is for *condemnation*: to show us just how sinful and wicked and rebellious and lawless we truly are, in our hearts, because of our indwelling sin and fallen human nature. Paul says something very similar in Gal. 3:19: "Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions."

The Law helps expose and condemn our indwelling sin, convicting us of our guilt and transgression before God. Paul gives us a taste of that, by moving from general descriptions into condemning specific sins, such as: “striking father and mother” and “murdering” - referencing two of the ten commandments, to honor one’s parents and not murder; he condemns “sexuality immorality” of any kind, any sexual act or relationship outside of marriage between one man and one woman; and just to spell it out for us, he makes it clear that this includes “homosexuality,” whether between men or women, as sinful and wicked, without exception. We’re not told in what ways the false teachers of Ephesus were wrongly using the law, but one clear example of false teachings in our day are those who claim to be Christians but twist or outright ignore Scripture (like this one) in order to say that sexual immorality, homosexuality, and the whole range of LGBTQ+ issues are perfectly acceptable for Christians. That is not in accordance with sound doctrine and the gospel! These are obvious sins that are not compatible with the gospel and need to be repented of. Paul condemns these sins, along with sins like kidnapping people and making them slaves, or lying, or “perjury” and bearing false witness against someone, and “whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine” - that is, anything else that goes against the clear teachings of God’s Word!

In fact, he says this is “in accordance with the gospel.” Now, we know that the gospel promises us grace and forgiveness, declaring us righteous *apart from works of the law*. So how is the Law of Moses and its purpose of condemnation in accordance with the gospel? It’s because the condemning nature of the law *shows us our need for the grace of the gospel!* The Law of God properly shows us the depths of our sin and immorality and our need for God’s grace. We need to be convicted of our sin and guilt in order to truly see our need for Christ; the Law prepares the sinful heart to receive the gospel. We are all born sinners in this world, yet our sin runs so deep that we’re often *blind to it*; we deceive ourselves into thinking we’re not that bad; we justify our sins; we compare ourselves to others in order to be convinced that we’re good people. Friend, if you think you’re a pretty good person, that you’re not really that bad, and that you deserve to be rewarded and blessed by God, not punished, then you are blind to your sin and self-righteous. You need to hear the clear teaching of the Law of God’s Word that you are a sinner, that you could never be righteous enough before God, and that you are *guilty*; that you, just like me and every single one of us, deserve to be punished with the eternal wrath of God in Hell for your sins. Until we understand that, we will never be saved. But when we *do* feel the full

weight and condemnation of our sin and guilt, then we are ready to receive the good news of the gospel of Christ Jesus: that we can be saved *by grace*, because of what Christ has done for us in His life, death, and resurrection!

The Law shows us our deserved condemnation in order to point us to the grace of the gospel - both in forgiving us our sin and guilt and declaring us righteous, but also the transformative power of the gospel to change our hearts through ongoing repentance and faith. Which brings us to our third point...

III. The Transformative Power and Glorious Grace of the Gospel: God's Glorious Grace Abounds for Sinners in Christ (1:12-17)

Having exposed the *threat* of false teachings against the gospel, and reminded us of our *need* for the gospel, Paul now reminds us of just how *precious* the gospel is by offering up the testimony of his own life as it displays the *transforming power* and *glorious grace* of the one true gospel. We see this in vv.12-14: "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service though I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Don't mistake what he's saying here: when he says God "judged me faithful," he clearly doesn't mean that God thought Paul was righteous and faithful enough on his own to earn salvation or apostleship; by no means! It was purely because Paul "received mercy" in "the faith and love that are in Christ." Far from being righteous, Paul confesses that before Christ, in the ignorance of unbelief, he "was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" to the gospel, even to the point of killing Christians! Paul goes on to put it in even stronger terms in v.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." Did you catch that? Paul says he was *the foremost* among sinners - the chief sinner, the worst of the lot! - and yet Christ is so unbelievably gracious that he had mercy, even on Paul! That Christ came to die in order to save sinners - even the *chief of sinners*! Why? We're told in v.16: "But I received mercy for *this reason*, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." God so publicly displayed the riches of His glorious grace in Christ by saving Paul an obvious enemy of God, in order to show *every sinner*, in all the world,

that Christ came to save sinners just like Paul, just like you and me, so that hear this gospel and believe in Christ, and receive “eternal life” purely as a free gift of His mercy and grace!

Maybe you’re feeling particularly convicted and guilty for your sins. In fact, maybe you’re aware of sins in your life that you’ve never truly repented of. Maybe you’re even so convinced of your sin, that you’re convinced that God wants nothing to do with you, that he would never save someone so vile, broken, and sinful as you. God’s message to you this morning is: Christ came into the world to save sinners *just like you!* That’s why Jesus died on the cross: to take your place and pay the penalty of your sins, so that you don’t have to! Salvation forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life can be yours *no matter how sinful and broken and messed up* you may be! Even if you’re the worst sinner in the world, Paul says he was right up there with you - and God not only saved Him, He made him an apostle! Christ’s grace is sufficient for you, too!

And non-Christians aren’t the only people that need to hear this message today. Maybe you’ve been a Christian for years, even decades, but you’re weighed down by your sin and guilt and shame maybe even more than when you first became a Christian. Maybe Satan keeps telling you that you’re even worse than Paul was because he did those grievous sins *before* he came to faith, and yet you’ve committed unspeakable sins *after* coming to faith! The Puritan Baptist pastor John Bunyan struggled with this very issue for years. In his autobiography, his testimony is page after page of him wrestling in despair over the weight of his sin and the million reasons Satan gave him to doubt that the gospel was really enough to save him! He believed the gospel, alright; he believed it was enough for *other people* - just not enough for a sinner as bad as him! But everytime, he kept coming back to the fact that the mercy of Christ was his only hope; everytime, he gained a deeper and deeper understanding of the endless grace of Christ Jesus! So much so that the name of that book is *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* - taken straight from these very verses.

Bunyan isn’t unique in this; it’s a part of my own testimony, as well. I believed the gospel early on and was baptized when I was 6; but when I hit middle school, I began to sin in much darker and more grievous ways - and the reality of my sin absolutely terrified me. So much so that I reached a point where I cried on my bed every single night, terrified I would die and go to Hell, begging the Lord to forgive me for my sins and have mercy on me. That was pretty much my entire 6th grade year. Finally, that summer, I told someone what was going on, and with their counsel, I eventually realized that what I needed to do was *truly believe the gospel*: to truly rest

in the grace of God! Assurance of salvation isn't presumptuous or arrogant; it's simply choosing to believe the promise of God, that Jesus Christ came to die and be raised in order to save sinners - anyone who repents and believes in Him! To doubt your salvation is to doubt the gospel and say that God's promises aren't good enough, His grace not sufficient enough! Assurance can be ours by truly resting in the depths of God's glorious grace: by humbly acknowledging our sin and need for grace, and boldly claiming this grace is ours in Christ by believing His gospel promise!

When we truly grasp the gospel and rest in His grace, it changes our hearts! It leads us to worship and praise God as Paul does in v.17: "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." The glorious grace of the gospel leads to doxology and worship! And that necessarily means that the gospel leads to a transformed life; it changes us. Which leads us to *the charge of the gospel*...

IV. The Charge of the Gospel: We Must Wage the War of Faith Or Else We Lose It (1:18-20)

In verses 18-19, after reminding Timothy - and us - of what is at stake, Paul once more reiterates the charge of faithful, gospel ministry to Timothy; we read: "This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a god conscience. The "charge" he entrusts to Timothy here is the same one he began with in v.3: stand firm in the faith and "wage the good warfare" against false teachings. At the end of the letter, in 6:12, he'll reiterate this charge again, with the rallying cry: "Fight the good fight of the faith." That's exactly what he's saying here. He encourages Timothy by reminding him of "the prophecies previously made about you" - possibly referring to what we would consider ordination, or just referring to prophecies pertaining to this very ministry situation. He further encourages Timothy to hold fast to the faith and a good conscience, guarding sound gospel doctrine against false teachings.

Then, in 19-20, he underscores this charge with a warning: "By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme." He calls out two of the false teachers by name, who by swerving from sound doctrine have "made shipwreck of their faith." Departing from sound doctrine is no light thing: it very well might cost you your soul. It's possible to survive a *literal* shipwreck - Paul himself did at least twice - but it's far more likely you want survive it. I think that's the idea here: by all accounts, it appears that these two false

teachers have departed from the faith, denying sound gospel doctrine and proving themselves to never have truly been believers. This is why Paul has “handed [them] over to Satan.” This is the language of the final stage of church discipline, excommunication, since Paul uses it that same phrase in 1 Cor. 5, telling the church to excommunicate a clearly unrepentant member of their church. To be within the church is to be in a spiritually safe place - under spiritual care and protection of the Christ in His flock. To be outside the church is to be in the world, the domain of Satan. Paul is saying these false teachers must be disciplined out of the church, to shown to be of the world, not Christ! Now, that may seem harsh, but remember v.5: the aim of this charge is *love*. If they aren't truly believers, then false assurance does them no good. Furthermore, the purpose of this discipline is so “that they might learn not to blaspheme” in their false teachings; that is, so that they might repent and believe!

This doesn't just apply to pastors, but to *all of us*; we *must* be diligent to guard the church against false teachings and false teachers. But we should be on guard against these tendencies in our own hearts. This is why it is absolutely crucial that we are humble and teachable in our Bible study, interpretation, and theology. We need to do our study and interpretation in dialogue with the Church - both our local church and teachers, as well as in dialogue with other churches, teachers, and theologians elsewhere and throughout church history. We must beware of thinking that we have all the right answers. If we're the first person to come up with a brand new way of interpreting the scriptures, or that we're the only one that rightly understands a part of scripture or theology, there's a very good chance we're wrong and are deceiving ourselves. After all, heretics and false teachers usually don't *decide* to start teaching what is false; they gradually drift into being deceived and thinking that their false views are right. So we must guard against drifting away *ourselves* by being firmly committed to 1. personally knowing and keeping the sound doctrine of the Word of God, and 2. being humble and teachable in our study of the Bible, doing it all in dialogue with fellow Christians, that we might keep each other from going astray.

Most of all, this is a call for each of us to heed the warning against false teachings and to fight the fight of faith: to keep repenting of sin and and keeping holding firm to the sound doctrine of the gospel of Christ, that we might keep resting in His glorious grace! If you have questions about this gospel, about how this grace and assurance can be yours, I would love to speak with you; please come and speak with me after the service. Let us pray.