

Living in God's Church Today

The Law Is Good

1 Timothy 1:8-11

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Scripture

About fifteen years after Paul planted the church in Ephesus, some elders, who wanted to style themselves after teachers of the law in Jewish synagogues, were teaching “myths and endless genealogies” (1 Timothy 1:4). This led to speculations and was causing misunderstanding and confusion among the people of God. The false teachers had a complete misunderstanding of the law of God. So, Paul urged Timothy to remain at Ephesus to correct the false doctrine that was being taught.

Let's read about the law that is good in 1 Timothy 1:6-11:

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

⁸Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹understanding 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 murderers, ¹⁰the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. (1 Timothy 1:6-11)

Introduction

Lord of the Flies is a 1954 debut novel by William Golding.

The book focuses on a group of British boys stranded on an uninhabited island and their disastrous attempt to govern themselves. Themes include the tension between group-think and individuality, between rational and emotional reactions, and between morality and immorality. In a sense, the boys demonstrate the law written on their hearts and the great difficulty they have in applying it justly in their situation.

God's law has existed since the Garden of Eden. At that time, God gave just one law, as we read in Genesis 2:16–17, “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” The man, Adam, disobeyed God's law and was cast out of the Garden of Eden and eventually died.

God gave Moses a summary of his moral law when he gave him the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21). All people have disobeyed God's law and either have died or will die. The only one who has ever fully kept God's law is the Second Adam, Jesus. He also died but he did not die for his own sin; he died to pay the penalty for the sins of his elect.

Jesus called Paul to be one of his apostles to take the message of the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul wrote thirteen letters in which he recorded God's truth for God's people.

In his First Letter to Timothy, one of Paul's concerns was about the misunderstanding and misuse of God's law.

Lesson

1 Timothy 1:6-11 teaches us how to use the law of God. Let's use the following outline:

1. The Improper Use of the Law (1:6-7)
2. The Proper Use of the Law (1:8-11)

I. The Improper Use of the Law (1:6-7)

First, I want to begin with the improper use of the law.

As I mentioned, Paul wrote his First Letter to Timothy to charge certain persons not to teach false doctrine. He wrote in 1 Timothy 1:6-7, **“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.”** These **“certain persons”** are the same **“certain persons”** that Paul mentioned in verse 3. They were most likely elders in the church since they were the ones doing the teaching. These **“certain persons”** desired to be **“teachers of the law.”** They apparently wanted to have a role in the Christian Church something equivalent to the role that Jewish teachers had in a Jewish community. The fact that they did not **“understand either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions”** suggests that they were not qualified to teach. They were not able to discern their own errors.

Commentators suggest that the false teachers may have had too much reliance upon *The Book of Jubilees*. It was dated between 135 and 105 BC and it retells from a Pharisaic perspective the Old Testament story from the creation of the world to the giving of the law by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. It divides history into “jubilees” (that is, periods of forty-nine years) and asserts the uniqueness of Israel among the nations. This book supplies us with the names of all of Adam’s children, of Enoch’s family, of Noah’s predecessors and descendants,

and of the seventy people who went with Jacob to Egypt. Regarding, the false teachers, John Stott writes, “They may have been allegorizers. They were certainly speculators. They treated the law (that is, the Old Testament) as a happy hunting-ground for their conjectures. To Paul their whole approach was frivolous; God had given his law to his people for a much more serious purpose.”¹

A few years ago, a subway stop in New York City had two movie posters right next to each other. The first poster was for the film *Extraordinary Measures*, starring Brendan Fraser and Harrison Ford. The tagline for the film was “Don’t Hope for a Miracle: Make One.” The second poster, for the film *The Book of Eli* starring Denzel Washington, had this tagline: “Deliver Us.”

Both films represent two radically different approaches to life. *Extraordinary Measures* summarizes life under the law. The basic message is this: You are on your own, so your salvation, however you define that word, is up to you. The basic message of *The Book of Eli* summarizes the gospel: You are not on your own, so your salvation is a gift from the true deliverer. When you cry for deliverance, he will answer you.²

The false teachers were promoting an improper use of the law of God. They did not understand how God’s law applied to people. And that became a problem that Paul wanted Timothy to correct.

One still finds today that people do not understand the place of the law of God. It is not uncommon for some to talk about “law and gospel,” by which they mean that the *law* is found in the Old Testament but is replaced by the *gospel* in the

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 44–45.

² Adapted from Tullian Tchividjian, *It Is Finished* (David C. Cook, 2015), n.p.

New Testament. One commentator expressed it this way: “The law is a schoolmaster who leads sinners to Christ. When sinners accept Christ, the schoolmaster is dismissed for he has fulfilled his assignment, Gal. 3:25. He (the schoolmaster, the Jewish moral law and the Jewish ceremonial law) has no part in believers’ sanctification for that is the function of the Holy Spirit, who is possessed by all believers.”³ So, for him, the Christian no longer is in need of the law. He simply follows the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It is vital for Christians to have a clear understanding of the law. If we do not understand its purpose, we will have an improper use of the law.

II. The Proper Use of the Law (1:8-11)

And second, let’s examine the proper use of the law.

Paul wrote in verse 8, “**Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully.**” Paul did not want his condemnation of those “desiring to be teachers of the law” to reflect poorly upon the law itself. He assures Timothy that properly-grounded Christians are well aware of the excellency of the law. Paul says that “**the law is good**” because God gave it. Anything that comes from God is good. Perhaps the false teachers were accusing Paul of teaching that Christians were released from obedience to the law. But Paul points out that the law has not been abrogated. Rather, it has to be properly understood.

According to John Calvin, the law has three “uses.” First, the law is *punitive*, in that it condemns sinners and drives them to Christ. An unbeliever comes under conviction of sin and sees how he has broken God’s law. He cries out to Christ for

³ Roy E. Gingrich, *The Book of 1 Timothy* (Memphis, TN: Riverside Printing, 1998), 12.

forgiveness. Second, the law is a *deterrent*, in that it restrains evildoers. This applies to all people and is best seen when driving down the highway and you see flashing blue and red lights. You immediately check your speed, because the law is a deterrent. And third, the law is *educative*, in that it teaches and guides believers. A believer has received forgiveness for his sin. He wants to know how to please and honor and serve God. And so the law now teaches and guides him.⁴

In this discussion on the law in Paul's letter to Timothy, Paul is primarily referring to the second use of the law. But Paul's words seem to apply to the first and third use of the law as well. Yes, the law serves as a restraint on evildoers. But it also exposes sinners and drives them to Christ for salvation. And then, after they have received his forgiveness, the law now directs them into a life of grateful obedience.

Having just stated that "the law is good, if one uses it lawfully," Paul went on to write in verse 9a, **"understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just."** People who think that they are righteous, that is, **just**, will never be saved. Jesus once said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). If people's hearts are naturally **just**, the law would not be necessary. One purpose of the law is to expose the heart's proclivity to sin.

In all my years as a Christian, I have only met one person who claimed to be perfect. He did not believe that he had ever broken God's moral law. I met him on the streets of Chicago when a bunch of fellow seminarians and I used to preach on the streets of Chicago in the summer. Try as I might, I could not get this young man to admit that he had a blemished legal

⁴ Quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 47-48.

record with God.

This reminds me of Charles Spurgeon who was having lunch with a man who claimed to have arrived at sinless perfection. He had come to that place in his life when he no longer sinned. Spurgeon took a glass of water and threw it in the man's face. The man immediately got angry and, as soon as he had done so, he realized that he was a lawbreaker. The fact is that everyone – apart from Jesus Christ – has broken God's law. Because of the Fall, all people constantly break God's law. God's law exposes our failure to live morally upright lives.

Paul wrote in verses 9b-10, "...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 murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,**" Having stated that the law is not for those who think they are righteous, Paul lists several examples of law-breaking.

The first six words, which are set in three pairs, appear to be more general than specific. So, "the law is," Paul writes, "**for the lawless and disobedient**" ("for sinners who hate God, have rebellious hearts" *The Living Bible*), "**for the ungodly and sinners,**" (who dishonor God and depart from righteousness), and "**for the unholy and profane**" ("for those who are not religious and spiritual" *The Good News Translation*). These three pairs of sins refer to our duty to God.

It is important to keep in mind that Paul is not listing what might be construed as a person's self-evaluation of his spiritual condition. It is rather God's evaluation of a person's spiritual condition. I think that if I surveyed people who do not profess to be Christians, they would not regard themselves as **lawless**

and disobedient, ungodly and sinners, or unholy and profane. They would argue that they are not religious and that they try to live good lives. They go about their daily lives, minding their own business, and try to be nice to others. However, God’s view of them is very different than their own view of themselves. And when they stand before God after their deaths, they will be horrified at their own misunderstanding of their spiritual condition. So, let us share the good news of the gospel with unbelievers so that they can come to a correct understanding of their spiritual condition.

After listing three pairs of sins (“for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane”), Paul goes on to list several more examples of sins. These next ones seem to correspond to commandments five through nine of the Ten Commandments. **“For those who strike their fathers and mothers”** is a violation of the fifth commandment. **“For murderers”** is a violation of the sixth commandment. **“The sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality”** is a violation of the seventh commandment. **“Enslavers”** is a reference to the worst kind of stealing, a violation of the eighth commandment. And **“liars, perjurers”** is a violation of the ninth commandment.

Interestingly, Paul does not give an example of the violation of the tenth commandment, perhaps because it is a sin of thought and desire rather than of word and deed. But to make his list comprehensive, he concludes that the law is made for **“whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.”** What is **“sound doctrine”**? The Greek word for **“doctrine”** (*didaskalia*) means “instruction or teaching.” It has to do with the content of what is being taught. The Greek word for **“sound”** (*bugiaino*) is the same word from which we get our English word “hygiene.” It means “to be correct or accurate, conceived

as being free from infirmity or disease.” Of the 12 times it is used in the New Testament, Paul used it 8 times in the Pastoral Letters. Paul’s point is that everything that is said and done that is contrary to the accurate instruction that flows from God’s word leads to spiritual disease. Thus, according to Paul, **“sound doctrine”** is that teaching that is **“in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted”** (1:11).

When I was in elementary school, we had to memorize the Ten Commandments. Most people my age could name the Ten Commandments, if not recite them. Today, however, it is a different story. A decreasing number of people are even able to name half of the Ten Commandments. There is even less commitment to live by them. Is it any wonder that our culture finds itself in as much difficulty as it does?

Tom Brady is arguably the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time) of all football quarterbacks. He is not only talented but also disciplined in his preparation. Apparently, Brady is extremely disciplined about what he eats. His diet is designed to give him maximum performance. The fact that he is 44 years old and is still one of the best quarterbacks in the league says something about his preparation. In the spiritual realm, reading and studying the word of God is like eating food in the physical realm. Many, if not all, Christians want to be spiritual Tom Bradys but do not put in any time reading and studying God’s word. They may attend worship services diligently and if there is any reading of God’s word in the service, that may be the only time they crack open their Bible that week. If we want to grow in healthy doctrine, we need to spend far more time than we do in reading and studying God’s word.

So, the proper use of the law is *punitive* (in that it condemns sinners and drives them to Christ), a *deterrent* (in that it

restrains evildoers), and *educative* (in that it teaches and guides believers).

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the law in 1 Timothy 1:6-11, let us respond correctly to the law.

The Bible teaches that there are only two kinds of people. There are those who belong to God and those who belong to Satan. There are Christians and there are non-Christians.

If you are not a Christian, God's law for you is *punitive*. It is designed to show you that you have broken God's law and that you will face punishment for that violation of God's law. The sentence for breaking God's law is hell for all eternity without the possibility of parole. Let me urge you to see the condemnation that hangs over you and plead with you to turn to Christ. If you believe in Christ, he will pay the penalty for all your sin. He will forgive you. He will give you a new life. And he will guarantee you a place in heaven.

And if you are a Christian, God's law for you is *educative*. Your sins have been forgiven. You have new life in Christ. You want to live in such a way that pleases him. Look to God's law and walk in it. You have already received his grace, mercy, and peace, and so your obedience to his law does not earn you heaven. You already are a citizen of heaven, and you already have his smile upon you. Obey his law for his glory and your good. Amen.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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