

"THE LAWFUL USE OF THE LAW"

I. Introduction

- A. Different tools are intended to be used for different purposes.
 - 1. You wouldn't use a tape measure to cut down a tree.
 - 2. You wouldn't use a chainsaw to paint a house.
 - 3. And you wouldn't use a paintbrush to tighten a bolt.
 - 4. A tool has to be put to its proper use if it is going to be useful.
- B. In this passage, Paul is telling us that the same thing is true of God's law.
 - 1. When the law is put to its intended use, it is good.
 - 2. But when the law is misused, all kinds of problems ensue.
 - 3. As we study this text today, we will see how it teaches us three important things about the lawful use of the law.
 - 4. First, it reminds us that the law is an ethical standard.
 - 5. Second, it tells us that the law exposes sin.
 - 6. And third, it teaches us that the law's proper use is regulated by the gospel.

II. The Law Is an Ethical Standard

- A. The reason why Paul speaks about the law at this point in 1 Timothy is because of what he has just said about the false teachers who were troubling the church in Ephesus.

1. These people were promoting speculations and having vain discussions about the law.
 2. They did this because they did not understand the proper use of the law.
 3. Paul wants to make it clear that he is not opposing these false teachers because he is anti-law.
 4. He affirms that the law is good.
 5. But he also explains that this is only true if one uses the law lawfully.
 6. In other words, the law needs to be used for the purpose intended by God.
- B. This purpose is explained in the statement that is made in verse 9: “the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient.”
1. What does this mean?
 2. It might seem like Paul is saying that Christians are not bound by the law in any sense at all.
 3. But this cannot be what Paul means because it would contradict what he says elsewhere.
 4. For example, Galatians 5:13-14 says, “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”
 5. This and many other passages in Paul’s letters make it clear that he expected Christians to submit to God’s law.

6. While we cannot be saved by works of the law, the law is the rule of life that Christians receive from the hand of Christ our mediator.
- C. If Paul is not saying that Christians are not under the law in any sense at all, perhaps he is speaking of one particular sense in which we are no longer under the law.
1. This would be consistent with how Paul speaks of the law elsewhere.
 2. For example, Romans 3 says, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” (Rom 3:19–22 ESV)
 3. The point being made in those verses is that, in the plan of salvation, the law serves the purpose of making sin known and thereby driving people out of themselves to Christ.
 4. While that idea is not entirely excluded from our passage in 1 Timothy, the context favors seeing something else as Paul’s main point when he says, “the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient.”
- D. We find a similar statement in Luke 5:32, where Jesus says, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”
1. In that verse, Jesus is not speaking of people who are genuinely righteous in the sight of God, but of people who think that they are righteous.
 2. That is, the call of the gospel is not for those who see themselves as righteous, but for those who know themselves to be sinners.

3. Paul seems to be saying something like this in 1 Timothy 1:9.
4. We have to remember that his focus in this context is on the “certain persons” in Ephesus who wanted to be known as “teachers of the law.”
5. He is saying that the law is not intended to be made into a matter of speculation by people who think highly of themselves, as the false teachers did.
6. Rather, the law is to be used as an ethical guide to warn against sin.
7. When the law is used in this way, it performs three basic functions.
8. It drives sinners outside of themselves to Christ.
9. It restrains evil in the world.
10. And it directs believers in how we ought to live as disciples of Christ.

III. The Law Exposes Sin

- A. The second thing that this passage tells us about the lawful use of the law is that the law exposes sin.
 1. Paul makes this point by describing the kinds of sins that the law exposes.
 2. It has been noted by some commentators that the sins listed here seem to be a summary of the ten commandments.
 3. They even follow the order of the Decalogue.
 4. The term “ungodly” relates to the first commandment, where God says that we are to have no other gods before him.

5. The term “sinners” was often used in Judaism to refer to idolaters, which is the sin forbidden by the second commandment.
 6. The term “unholy” describes those who fail to sanctify God’s name, which is what is required in the third commandment.
 7. The term “profane” relates to the fourth commandment, which prohibits the profaning of the Sabbath day.
 8. Striking one’s father and mother is a clear violation of the fifth commandment.
 9. Murder is what is prohibited by the sixth commandment.
 10. Sexual immorality and homosexuality are violations of the seventh commandment.
 11. The term “enslavers” can also be translated as “menstealers” or “kidnappers,” which is a clear violation of the eighth commandment.
 12. And the terms “liars” and “perjurers” obviously relate to the ninth commandment, which says that we are not to bear false witness.
 13. But what about the tenth commandment?
 14. Well, there are several possibilities for why Paul makes no explicit reference to the prohibition against coveting in this list.
 15. Perhaps the best explanation is to say that he simply assumed that his readers would fill in the list for themselves.
- B. Given our cultural context, I think it is important for us to spend a few moments focusing on one particular sin that is included in this list: the sin of homosexuality.
1. While our culture continues to promote the idea that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, Paul includes homosexuals

among the “lawless and disobedient.”

2. You may be aware that some liberal Bible interpreters have argued that the term that the ESV translates as “men who practice homosexuality” does not rule out committed and consensual same-sex relationships, but only deals with exploitative or excessive expressions of homosexuality.
 3. As numerous biblical scholars have shown, that argument fails.
 4. The main reason why it fails is because the etymology of this Greek word and its roots in the book of Leviticus (Lev. 18:22; 20:13) make it clear that Paul is referring in an all-encompassing sense to men who have sexual relations with men.
 5. The Bible is straightforward and unambiguous in its condemnation of homosexuality as a sin.
- C. I also want to call your attention to the phrase that the ESV uses to translate the Greek word that Paul employs here, a word that Paul may have coined.
1. The ESV says, “men who practice homosexuality.”
 2. In the Greek, it is just one word.
 3. The reason why the ESV translates this word as it does is because the word is a compound of the Greek words ‘man’ and ‘bed.’
 4. The argument is that the focus is upon the activity that such men engage in when they are in bed with each other.
 5. While this is true as far as it goes, I think that we need to be aware of another variable that may be influencing the translators, and us as readers.
 6. Many people in our culture have embraced the notion of sexual orientation as a category of personhood or identity.

7. There are even a number of evangelicals who have adopted this way of thinking, contending that a homosexual orientation is fixed and innate and is therefore not sinful in and of itself, but only if it is acted upon or practiced.
8. This leads them to say that it is legitimate for Christians who struggle with same-sex attraction to view their homosexual orientation as part of their identity, perhaps even using designations like 'gay Christians.'
9. The problem with this is that this is not the way the Bible speaks about sin.
10. The Scriptures not only call us to repent of and mortify sinful practices and behaviors.
11. They also call us to repent of and mortify sinful desires and thoughts.
12. Rather than identify ourselves with our particular struggles against sin, Paul says in Romans 6:11, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."
13. If homosexual practice is sinful, then so is homosexual desire.
14. This means we need to reject the notion of homosexual orientation as a category of identity.
15. As R.C. Sproul once put it, "What we need to do in order to help [homosexuals] is begin with this fundamental thesis: Biologically, essentially, and intrinsically, there is no such thing as a homosexual."
16. The only sense in which there is such a thing as a homosexual is in the ethical sense.
17. Homosexuality is not a matter of identity but a matter of immorality.

- D. Having said that, there are a couple other things that should be added.
1. First, we should certainly have compassion toward those who experience same-sex attraction, especially toward Christians who struggle with those unwanted desires.
 2. We should always remember that such people are divine image-bearers and are thus to be treated with kindness and dignity.
 3. But this does not mean that we should say that homosexuality is morally permissible in the eyes of God.
 4. Even though our society has changed its mind on this matter, God hasn't changed his mind.
 5. It is not compassionate to tell people that sin is not sin.
 6. The only way anyone can be forgiven of their sin and accepted by God is by repenting of their sin and looking to Christ for cleansing and renewal.
 7. Those who assert that homosexuality is acceptable to God are like the prophets and priests who were rebuked by God when he said through the prophet Jeremiah, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jer 6:14 ESV)
- E. The other thing that we need to remember when we are thinking about the matter of homosexuality is that the Bible stresses the importance of sexual chastity for everyone.
1. By "sexual chastity" I mean abstaining from all unlawful expressions of sexuality, anything that goes against God's law.
 2. The seventh commandment forbids all unchaste thoughts, words, and actions.

3. This is why Paul includes “the sexually immoral” among those who are lawless and disobedient.
4. All forms of sexual immorality - sex before marriage, sex outside of marriage, pornography, sexual fantasizing, etc. — are matters that call for repentance and mortification.
5. The reason why the Bible places such an emphasis on this is not because God has a negative view of sex.
6. God created the human race as good.
7. This means human sexuality is something that God created as good.
8. But as with all other aspects of human nature, sin has corrupted human sexuality.
9. When sex is misused, people are both refusing to submit to God and refusing to take on the lifelong commitment that sex calls for.
10. Sexual sin invokes God’s wrath and brings misery.
11. This is why the Bible has so much to say about it.

IV. The Law’s Proper Use is Regulated by the Gospel

- A. We turn now to the third thing that this passage tells us about the lawful use of the law, which is that the law’s proper use is regulated by the gospel.
 1. Now, to get to this point, we need to look at what Paul says at the end of verse 10 as he concludes his summary of the sins that are condemned by the law.
 2. After the mention of perjurers, Paul says, “and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.”

3. As you can see by the ESV's footnote to the term "sound," this word can also be translated as "healthy."
 4. In other words, true biblical doctrine promotes spiritual health.
 5. False doctrine does the opposite.
 6. Any teaching that excuses or glosses over sin is poison for the soul.
- B. After providing his summary of the sins that are condemned by the law, Paul says in verse 11, "in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted."
1. That is, the use of the law that Paul has set forth in verses 9 and 10 is in accordance with the gospel.
 2. The same could not be said of how the false teachers in Ephesus were using the law.
 3. They swerved from the stewardship from God that is by faith.
 4. Their handling of the law promoted speculation and vain discussions.
 5. That kind of teaching undermines the gospel.
 6. It turns people's focus away from the ethical nature of the law, encouraging foolish speculations and opinions.
 7. The reason why this is such a problem is because if people are not made aware of the verdict that the law pronounces upon their sins, they will not see their need for Christ.
 8. In saying what he does in verse 11, Paul shows us that the gospel is the standard by which any teaching is to be measured and evaluated.

- C. Notice also that Paul cannot help but extol the gospel as he mentions it here.
1. He refers to it as “the gospel of the glory of the blessed God.”
 2. The fact that Paul speaks this way testifies to the fact that he had personally experienced the excellence of the gospel.
 3. When the Lord met him on the road to Damascus and converted him, Paul went from being the foremost of sinners to an apostle of Jesus Christ.
 4. As Paul waged the ongoing battle against his own indwelling sin, he saw the power of the gospel at work in his life.
 5. And as Paul went through his darkest hours and his greatest troubles, he knew the comfort that the gospel provides to believers.
 6. These are experiences that are shared by every believer in Jesus Christ.
 7. This is why the gospel is not merely “the gospel” to us.
 8. As it was to Paul, it is also to us the gospel of the glory of the blessed God.
 9. And the glory of this gospel does not fade as the years go by.
 10. On the contrary, it only becomes more and more precious to us.
 11. In the words of Charles Spurgeon, “After some years of experience; the Christian comes to know better than he did at first how much the gospel suits him. He finds that its simplicity suits his bewilderment; its grace suits his sinfulness; its power is suitable to his weakness; its comfort is suitable to his despondency; and the older he grows the more he loves the gospel of the grace of God. Give it up? Ah, never! We will hold Christ the more firmly because men despise Him. To whom or where should we go if we should turn aside from our Lord Jesus?”