

Timothy No. 2

1 Timothy 1:8-11

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We are just getting started in 1 Timothy, having taken the first seven verses of chapter one last time by way of introduction. But, as you can see from the way the editors of both the NIV and the ESV have divided chapter one, the four verses we are about to read belong to the opening paragraph of the letter. They too are part of the introduction. But they deal with a subject so fundamental that they deserve a closer look.

Text Comment

v.8 Paul never condemns the law of God, however often he attacks those who misuse it. He says that the law is good also in Romans 7. There he says not only that it is good but “holy, righteous, and good.” By the way, “good” is a common term in the Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. One common Greek term meaning good (*kalos*) is used 24 times and the other common Greek word for good (*agathos*) ten more. That’s thirty-four times you will come across the word “good” in these three short letters. Paul is telling us in a variety of ways that if we want what is good we need to stick with the apostolic gospel!

Now remember the historical context. The false teachers, Jewish in origin or orientation, that were troubling the church in Ephesus, as we read last time in v. 7, advertised themselves as “teachers of the law.” But the fact is, Paul says, they don’t know what they are talking about, however confidently they talk about it. So this comment about the law proceeds from that fact. Indeed, the ESV’s “Now we know” with which v. 8 begins, should really be “*But* we know...” Paul is going to expose the ignorance of the false teachers mentioned in the previous verse. He is going to assert that what is needed is a right understanding of the law, not the falsehoods these teachers were pedaling. What the law is, what it is for, and what it means by what it says had become a point of contention. These teachers were presumably arguing that Paul had misunderstood the law or that he didn’t grasp the deeper meaning of the law and that they could explain its meaning better than the apostle. But, says Paul, the law must be used *lawfully*; it must be used according to its proper purpose. And this was not what these teachers were doing with the law. They were *misusing* it.

v.9 The problem here is that Paul doesn’t explain himself. What does he mean by saying that the law is not valid *for the just* but for the lawless? Timothy, fully aware of the context of these remarks, would have known precisely what Paul meant *and what he did not mean*.

But we have to work that out. Obviously this statement is bound up with the false teaching then spreading in the Ephesian church. Part of that misunderstanding was a false view of the law of God.

Given that, as we know, Paul often rings the changes on the important role of the law in leading men and women to faith in Christ, how from the law we learn what sin is and how much of it there is in our lives, how we depend upon it to leave us with no hope save the cross, and since he just as often talks about the law as a guide for Christian living, Paul obviously didn't mean by what he said here that the law had no place in a Christian's thought and life. So, though some have drawn this conclusion, we cannot conclude that Paul thought that the Christian had nothing more to do with the law of God.

In v. 9 it appears that the word "just" is used in its ethical sense. Paul is saying that the law is not for those who are living righteously. He is not talking specifically about Christians insofar as they are justified, are forgiven, and so are righteous or "just" in their standing before God. He is talking about Christians as those who live in obedience to God's commandments. Proof of that is that immediately the "just" are contrasted with "the ungodly and profane, those who strike their parents, murderers," and so on. *Paul is talking about behavior, not status.*

What Paul seems then to be saying is that the law is concerned with morality, not with the speculative myths and esoteric teachings that the false teachers had brought to Ephesus. The law is about human sin and about righteous living. As we are going to see as we go further into 1 Timothy that the false teachers were encouraging lax living, this makes all the more sense. That Christians are first forgiven and granted a righteous standing before God and that this comes to them apart from and before their obedience to God's law will also be emphatically taught in these letters, indeed, in the very next paragraph. But here the contrast is between two ways of life and the use of the law to condemn sinful behavior. [Knight, 82-83]

- v.10 Lists of vices are common in the writings of the Apostle Paul and, interestingly, no list is the same as any other. Some vices appear in more than one list, but no vice appears in all of them. The lists are a way of illustrating the sort of sins that condemn men before God. This list, as you see, looks back to the Ten Commandments. "Unholy and profane" describes violators of the first three commandments, "those who strike their fathers and mothers" violators of the fifth, "murderers" of the sixth, "enslavers" violators of the eighth, and so on.

As you may have noticed, the more aggravated forms of a particular class of sins are mentioned: not disrespect toward parents but *beating* fathers and mothers; not

carelessness of others but actual murder; not any sexual immorality but the practice of homosexuality; not thieves but stealers of persons; not just liars but perjurers, those that go into court and tell lies under oath.

Now a word about the mention of homosexuality. You are no doubt aware that some, even in the so-called evangelical church, have been arguing nowadays that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality *per se* but only certain sinister forms of it, the predatory forms of it. Those arguments have been consistently exposed as instances of special pleading and as an exercise in evading the clearest and most emphatic teaching about homosexuality in the Bible and concentrating on the few texts that, taken entirely by themselves, might yield another conclusion. Others have argued that the Bible does not condemn homosexual orientation or desire, but only homosexual practice. But here, as often in the Bible, Paul describes the sin generally. The two terms put side by side -- fornication and homosexuality -- represent simply two forms of sexual sin. Paul has, in other words, included both the hetero- and the homosexual forms of sexual sin. And homosexual desire is certainly sinful if the practice is forbidden, just as heterosexual desire is also sinful when directed toward people to whom one is not married or betrothed. As Jesus was at pains to teach us, one can commit fornication or adultery in the mind as surely as with the body. Homosexuals are certainly not excluded from that general law of sin and righteousness.

On the other hand, let's not give in to this preoccupation with homosexuality that has often afflicted evangelicals today. The fact is -- and everyone knows it -- we wouldn't be having this conversation about gay marriage were it not for the fact that the society has come completely to terms with sexual libertinism, the vast majority of which is, of course, heterosexual. If what we are actually saying as a people, as a culture, God forbid as a church, is "that *only* homosexuals shouldn't be able to fulfill their sexual desires with whomever and whenever they please," no one should be surprised that homosexuals and many heterosexuals don't take that argument seriously. If what we are saying is that everyone else can enjoy pornography, just not homosexuals, well, anyone will ask, "Why?" Our problem is first and basically a problem of heterosexual promiscuity. What we need as a church and as a country is *chastity*, which is sexual abstinence outside of marriage and sexual love and pleasure within marriage. *That* and that only has always been and must be today the Christian position! Surrender that position and, whether one realizes the implications at the time or not, one has surrendered a great deal more besides. If we are going to convince homosexuals that a higher life of sexual chastity is what God calls them to, we must have proved that as Christian heterosexuals.

One commentator describes the last phrase of v. 10 as a "rather lame ending." Paul's lists of vices usually end with some catchall phrase like this, but it is hardly lame. It is a way

of reminding us of the far-reaching demands of God's law. The law is going to have something to say about every single aspect of your life. "Sound" doesn't mean orthodox or correct. It means *healthy*, life-giving. The problem with the false teachers is that by embracing their teaching people were becoming spiritually sick.

- v.11 For Paul the touchstone of healthy teaching is always the gospel itself: the great message of Jesus and his salvation. The gospel is the standard against which any teaching is to be judged.

There are few perspectives with deeper and broader implications for one's understanding of the Christian faith and practice of the Christian life than the perspective one has on the law of God. Perhaps only one's view of the sovereignty of God in salvation -- whether Arminian or Calvinist -- more profoundly shapes one's understanding of the teaching of the entire Bible and the nature of the Christian life, but I'm not really sure even that is as influential as one's perspective on the law of God. I suspect many Christians do not realize how profoundly their whole understanding of their faith is shaped by the view of the law of God that they have been taught to believe. What one believes about the law determines how one understands the salvation of God! There are, according to the Bible, two fundamental errors in thinking about what it means to be a Christian, and each of them is at bottom a particular viewpoint about the law of God. One is legalism, the view that the law can be used to earn salvation; the other is antinomianism, the view that God's gracious salvation frees the Christian from the obligation of obedience. Either error, the Bible says repeatedly and emphatically, is fatal to the soul. Does the Christian life arise from obedience or divine grace; is the Christian life obedience, or is it something else? All such questions are first questions about the proper understanding of the Law of God and its role in human life. The Bible is, after all, full of law. A great deal of its space is taken up with the Law of God, either setting it out and enumerating its commandments, or calling upon the people of God to obey it or warning them of the consequences of their disobedience to it, or correcting their mistaken notions about the law of God.

And since one's view of the law determines in many ways his or her view of the relationship between what we call the Old Testament and what we call the New Testament, it has a host of additional implications: from how Christians ought to worship God, whether they are obliged to keep the Sabbath holy, their understanding of church government and the Christian ministry, the nature and efficacy of the sacraments, and on and on.

There have always been significant disagreements among Christians about the role of the law in the Christian faith and the Christian life and the reason for that is almost entirely due to the way in which Paul talks about the law in his letters. Now we believe in the divine oversight of the writing of Holy Scripture, so you are not going to be able to go to the Apostle Paul when you meet him in heaven and say, "Why in the world couldn't you have been more clear in your

talking about these things in your letters?” The Lord obviously wanted us to struggle with Paul’s teaching on this subject. Here, for example, Paul writes that the law “is not laid down” or “is not valid” for the just. That could easily be taken and has often been taken to mean that once one is a Christian the law has no further role in his or her life. Whatever purpose the law may have, it has no role in the life of someone who is already a Christian.

It is easier still to interpret Paul here in that fashion when you add to this statement in 1 Timothy 1 other statements about the law that the Apostle made in the course of writing his various letters:

“...sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”
[Rom. 6:14]

“For by the works of the law no human being will be justified...” [Rom. 3:20]

“Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ...”
[Rom. 7:4]

“But the law is not of faith...” [Gal. 3:12]

“Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming of faith would be revealed.” [Gal. 3:23]

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” [Gal. 5:18]

Seems pretty clear. Statements like these have led many Christians to conclude that the law, by which is usually meant the Law of Moses in particular and the Old Testament in general, has ceased to play a role in the Christian life, that its principle is contrary to the free grace principle of the gospel, and that Christians, by their faith in Christ, have advanced beyond the law to live their lives on a higher plane and on different terms than did believers in the ancient epoch. Defining those differences has always been the problem and continues to be the problem.

And that is because the New Testament is simply not written, nor the letters of Paul in particular, as if the law no longer has a role to play in Christian faith and life. Take for example this sampling of statements.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” [Matt. 5:17-18]

And you remember how the Lord goes on to say hard words about someone who teaches his disciples to relax *any* of his commandments. That was Jesus himself, but we are thinking particularly of the statements that Paul makes about the law. Among which we find these:

“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” [Rom. 3:31]

“For we know that the law is spiritual...” [Rom. 7:14]

“By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh *in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us...*” [Rom. 8:3-4]

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, *for it does not submit to God’s law...*” [Rom. 8:7] The assumption, confirmed by the following verses, is that the mind of the Spirit, that is, the Christian mind, *is* submissive to the Law of God.

“For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.” [1 Cor. 9:19]

And we can add other writers of the NT to affirm the abiding validity and authority of the Law of God. Here, for example is John in his First Letter.

“...by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar...” [2:3-4]

“...sin is lawlessness...” [3:4]

“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” [5:3]

There is so much more to say in demonstration of the fact that the New Testament teaches that the Law of God continues to have an abiding role in the life of Christian believers. All of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament in one form or another and a number of the case laws -- specific applications of the Ten Commandments are repeated as well and repeated *as commandments to be obeyed*. You cannot listen to either Jesus or Paul and think the law of God has somehow or another been abolished or nullified or removed from the Christian life.

I don’t intend tonight to attempt to unravel the complicated weave of the NT’s doctrine of the Law of God. Suffice it to say that the view we have always taken here and that is commonplace

in most Christian teaching is that the law has various functions and these various functions have to be taken into account when interpreting particular statements made about the law in the New Testament. Furthermore, the law has also often been misunderstood and misused, as by those who seek to make of it a ladder by which to climb to heaven. Much of first century Judaism had made and continued to make precisely that mistake with the Law of God and the contradiction of *that* view of the law is found on virtually every page of the New Testament. Much of the New Testament's discussion of the law, and of Paul's in particular, is polemical in nature, is intended to correct mistakes, and is directed against either the legalistic or antinomian misuse of the law. Our view of the totality of the NT's teaching about the law of God is neatly summarized in several verses of Ralph Erskine's *Gospel Sonnets*.

A rigid master was the law,
Demanding brick, denying straw;
But when with gospel-tongue it sings,
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.

When once the fiery law of God
Has chased us to the gospel road,
Then back unto the holy law
Most kindly gospel grace will draw.

All of this to say that while there is absolutely a sense in which the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and the profane, there are other senses in which the law is very much for the just. Like ancient believers, Christians today are also to love the law because it guides their steps and shows us what is good and right. It's a transcript of God's own nature, holy, just, righteous and by the law we learned how to be like him. He says, "Be holy because I am holy." What does that mean? The law tells us what it means. Being a transcript of God's own morality (being that definition of holiness reflected in the Lord's command that his people "be holy because I am holy"), it shows us how to love him with our actions.

But there is something still more fundamental here, something so fundamental we are inclined to pass over it without really noticing it, and it is *this* that I want to draw your attention to as we conclude this evening. *What we have here is a typical statement of the Bible's categorically moral view of human life.* What the law of God impresses upon us, and relentlessly so, is that man's life is what it is because it is judged, evaluated, and measured *morally!* You're your life is, any human being's life is, *is what God says it is.* And *he* says our lives are moral things, personal existence defined by whether the person does right or wrong. Every other aspect of human life is subordinate to that. There are two kinds of people in the world and only two: those who keep the law of God and those who break it. No other distinction really matters, because this is the one

that matters to God. Much may be said, of course, about how still sinful Christians can be described as keepers of the law, but not tonight.

We live in a world today in which that distinction and that moral definition of life, the essentially ethical judgment of human life has virtually disappeared. In our culture people may be rich or poor, bond or free, hetero- or homosexual, single or married, they may belong to this race or ethnicity or that, but what they are not, not in cultural estimation, not in public policy, not in private judgment is good or bad, just or lawless. Distinctions continue to be made but they are rarely that fundamental moral distinction. We may think of a particular person's particular behavior as good or bad, we do that all the time, but not the person himself or herself, not essentially, not fundamentally, and if we do, we are likely to say he or she is a good person whether or not he or she keeps the commandments of God. The lack of moral seriousness is precisely why virtually everyone is a "good" person nowadays.

A very large part of the reason for the mess we are in as a people is found precisely here, in the denial of the moral imperative of human life. Countries are not the church, to be sure, but there remains but one law of God for all of mankind. Virtually every one of our social and political problems, each of the problems we Americans are talking about endlessly nowadays -- none of which is ever seriously cast in moral terms -- is, in fact, fundamentally moral, that is, a matter of obedience or disobedience to the law of God. As the Scripture tells us and shows us times without number, the way of the transgressor is hard. And just as we find that to be true in our private lives, so all societies and cultures find it true as well.

Indeed, human life is so profoundly moral in its essential nature that the principle of disobedience functions, and must inevitably function like a virus that infects the entire system or body. This is the point that Mother Teresa made so powerfully some years ago. She was speaking about abortion, but arguing that this violation of God's law had drastic consequences far beyond what people ever admit.

"I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a war against the child -- a direct killing of the innocent child -- murder by the mother herself. And if we accept that a mother can kill even her own child, how can we tell other people not to kill one another? ... By abortion, the mother does not learn to love, but kills even her own child to solve her problems. And by abortion, the father is told that he does not have to take any responsibility at all for the child he has brought into the world. That father is likely to put other women into the same trouble. So abortion just leads to more abortion. Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching the people to love, but to use any violence to get what they want. That is why the greatest destroyer of love and peace is abortion." [Cited in W.R. Blackburn, "The Destroyer of Peace," *Touchstone* (Jan/Feb 2013) 17-18]

It is very difficult to argue with that logic, but how many people in our political world, or how many social commentators make the link between abortion and our loss of peace. Her point was that morality is a seamless robe. A tear anywhere will unravel the whole. Something like abortion, grave crime that it is, serious offense against every proper instinct of the human soul that it is, is and must be connected to everything else; virtue is not and cannot be practiced piecemeal. A good man strives to obey all God's commandments because he loves obedience and understands obedience as an honor paid to God. In the same way no one is ever guilty of just one discrete violation of God's law; one leads to another. The same point can be made negatively. Immorality is a sickness and it is not a piece of the body that is sick but the body itself. The germs are everywhere and go everywhere. As a fever affects the sinuses, the throat, the lungs, even the heart, so abortion is connected to and gives further impetus to the disintegration of the American family, to the looming budget crisis, to our national security, to our health care problem, and everything else. Abortion changes us *morally* and because we are in our very nature a moral existence, when we are changed morally we are changed root and branch. This results from the ineluctably *moral* nature of human life. Human life is overshadowed by right and wrong as real, intractable things. A people can deny this fact, as Americans today are denying it, but escape it they cannot.

We could say the same thing about sexual libertinism or the wholesale promiscuity and sexual immorality that have become the norm in American experience, as that experience is portrayed in the media, and in public policy. We may laugh at the medieval chastity belt, and its use may well have disguised an evil double standard, but it bore witness to the fundamental role of sexual purity in promoting social peace and harmony. Promiscuous sexual relations first undermine and eventually destroy the cultural expectations that protect and nourish the family. So many of our social, economic, and educational concerns, our crime problem, and, still more sinister so far as the likelihood of the survival of our civilization is concerned, our falling birthrates, are the direct result of the disintegration of the family which itself in various ways was the direct result of the sexual revolution. Where has *this* come from? Where has the collapse of masculinity come from? What has led to the disappearance of American fatherhood? Well among other causes and perhaps chief among them is the sexual revolution, that social upheaval that in contradiction to the law of God disconnected sex from marriage, from children, and from permanence. Immoral sexual behavior has now in a single generation unraveled the entire social fabric.

What Paul has given us here, and why I thought it important to stop and pause on these four verses, is a very large part of a Christian philosophy of human life. It is a moral life. It can be sound and healthy only when virtuous as the Law of God defines virtue. This is a big picture sermon and most of us usually are thinking about our lives in a little picture way. But the big picture in so many ways shapes the little picture. So many things happen in private, individual Christian lives today that would never have happened, at least not at all to the same extent, fifty

years ago or seventy years ago. And, as I said last week, the big picture will have more to do with the lives our children live than we almost ever fully realize.

And so Paul's final phrase: "in accordance with the gospel..." The whole grand project of the Gospel is to restore virtue. Forgiveness in the Bible is never an end in itself. Forgiveness is always not only a release from guilt and a freedom from punishment, but always equally, if not more so, a liberation to live righteously, to be healthy as a human being. And to be a healthy human being is to be one who is striving to conform his life, in general and in particular, to the commandments of God's law.