

## 1 Timothy 1:18-20

Paul rounds the first chapter off with a solemn warning to his potential successor, the congenial Timothy. Having extolled the wonders of God's astounding grace in his own life and outlined the simple glories of the gospel, he brings us down to earth with a really heavy thud. A classic case of crash, bang, wallop!

The old preacher has waxed lyrical and eloquent on the mercy of God and on the ability of Jesus to change lives for the better, he exudes confidence in the all-sufficient grace of God, he is ecstatic when he reflects on the unchanging character of God; now he gets to the nub of the problem that Timothy is having to deal with.

The various matters that were causing a ripple in the Ephesian church are dealt with in the rest of the book—there's the role of women, the essential qualifications for elders and deacons, the responsibility resting on godly leadership to proclaim the whole counsel of God, the relationship between the younger and older members in the congregation, the special ministry to those who are widowed—all this, and more! Mind you, it has to be said that this little book is stunningly relevant for church life in the twenty-first century.

If Timothy needed reminding, this was it—serving Jesus isn't all plain sailing. It's not for the faint-hearted. There are times when we sail with the wind, there are other times when we sail right into a storm. There will even be a few times when there is no wind at all and we seem to be just there, doing very little, no progress, because we're not going forward or back.

That's life in the real church—to change the analogy, it's all about dealing with people and the hot potato issues that they bring to the table. These have to be faced head-on; there's no point in sweeping them under the carpet or even turning a blind eye and pretending they don't exist.

It's obvious from the way Paul expresses himself that he is deadly serious at this point—there's no beating about the bush, there's no

messing around with vocabulary, he gets straight to the point and tells Timothy: 'OK, son, this is it; bite the bullet; do what you know to be right; stick to your biblical principles; don't throw a wobbly when you're in the ring ... and, basically, you'll be all right! And, don't forget, we're behind you all the way; and, better still, God is on your side!'

That mindset is exemplified in a couple of telltale phrases that Paul uses in verses 18 and 19, he talks about 'fighting the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience.' Paul is in to military speak right here; it's a potent reminder that we're in a battle. This is no garden party or a day out at the races; indeed, far from it, this is conflict. Real conflict. An armed struggle; it seems to me that Paul is underlining the fact that Timothy and the rest of us are soldiers in the Lord's army. We're certainly not conscripts, we're not weekenders, we're not reservists, we are fulltime!

The word 'instruction' in verse 18 is the same as 'command'; it has the idea of a military order; something that demands instant obedience, no questions asked. It's not a suggestion, it's not up for discussion; there's nothing to negotiate ... in moments like this, we simply do what we're told and get on with it. We are duty-bound to obey the Lord and thus fulfil our ministry. Such things are not optional.

This isn't a concept confined to the New Testament alone—we see ample evidence of it in the heart of the Old Testament when we look at servants of the calibre of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jonah. All of these guys were fairly high profile and had huge influence on their generation, but that did not diminish their sense of personal responsibility to do what the Lord commanded them to do. Every one, without exception, was given a charge to fulfil.

The full force of this would not be lost on Timothy for he was nurtured on a diet of Old Testament theology—he knew only too well that he was accountable, first, to Paul, as his mentor and apostle; he was also accountable to the local church; but, more to

the point, he was accountable to his commander-in-chief, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think we'll take a short music break and, when we come back, we'll look deeper into Timothy's position in verse 18.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

There's no doubt about it, a lot was expected of young Timothy – he was impressionable, relatively inexperienced, and retiring by nature, but, at the same time, he was also well-endowed. It is the living Lord who has called him into ministry, and he's the same one who would equip him and anoint him for the task in hand. No matter how big it was, it was nothing that he and the Lord couldn't handle together.

Alongside that, he has a commission to fulfil. The apostle used the phrase 'I give you', three words that mean 'entrust'. A bit like putting a deposit in a bank. He had been given a valuable deposit, a priceless deposit, that was God's truth. That truth had to be guarded diligently, we know that from his comments in 6:20.

We need to remind ourselves that that same deposit has been handed down through the centuries to us; we must preserve it and hand it down intact to the generation who are coming after us.

That's a hefty responsibility we can't shelve.

Paul doesn't plug the gaps in our thinking here about Timothy's commissioning into fulltime ministry—referring only to 'the prophecies once made about you'. But that's enough for us to realise that, back in the early church, prophets had a huge say in what went on. They didn't have the final revelation of scripture as we have it today, so they were essential for the development and growth of the infant church. These individuals had the ear of God; they were in touch with the Lord and he spoke through them.

It appears that a series of specific prophecies had been made to Timothy in connection with him having received his spiritual gift, we glean that from 4:14. This was the moment when he was set apart for gospel ministry; the hour of his ordination, as it were.

God used Paul in amazing ways to influence young Timothy, nonetheless, his call is a supernatural call. And when the going gets tough, it's always good to be able to look back and realise that it was the good hand of a sovereign God that called us. We are not there for the sake of man; we're there, just because God personally chose us.

Having been called by the Lord, there's no way that Timothy can throw in the towel at the first or second sign of opposition. He just can't call it quits and walk away and say that he has given it his best shot. No, it doesn't work that way—it's a job for life, as it were. It's a 24/7 calling. He was commissioned by God and, from what I've seen, our God is not in the habit of decommissioning his troops! The fact that he is called should encourage Timothy and the rest of us to hang in there, to hold on tight, to 'fight the good fight of faith.' It was said of the Scottish reformer John Knox that the consciousness of being chosen by God was what gave him courage. That's a virtue we all need to espouse.

The 'fight' we're participating in is not a 'bad' fight or a 'dirty' fight, rather, Paul labels it a 'good' fight. It's intrinsically good in that it is noble, excellent, and virtuous. This is our calling in life and to that we must always aspire. This is something worth living for; in fact, it's something worth dying for. We need the spirit of Martin Luther when he said: 'Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.'

Paul exhorts Timothy at the beginning of verse 19 to 'hold on to faith and a good conscience.' There's nothing unusual about that turn of phrase as it's one that Paul used repeatedly in this letter. For example, we see it up the chapter in verse 5 and then over the page in 3:9. A good conscience is important to a good warfare and a good ministry.

The 'faith' is a reference to the Christian faith, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is the revelation of God in scripture, it's the message of the Bible from cover to cover. When Paul tells Timothy to 'hold on' to faith, he is explicitly encouraging him to not give an inch when it comes to biblical truth—he's to hold on to it as if it were a matter

of life and death. When it comes to God's word, there is no room for negotiation—it must not be twisted or tampered with in any way. He was to be unwavering in his commitment to the doctrines of grace and glory.

A 'good conscience' as we discovered in a previous study is the result of a pure life, a godly life. Old man Paul yearned for the up-and-coming Timothy to have a blameless conscience. The conscience is a God-given internal warning device, something that sets the alarm bells ringing in our heart and mind when we go off on a tangent. It triggers off feelings of guilt and shame if we sin against the Lord—on the other hand, it gives us feelings of peace and well-being when we walk in God's ways.

Again, this is a potent reminder that our behaviour and lifestyle are inseparably linked to our understanding of biblical truth. It seems to me there is a link between truth and morality, between right belief and right behaviour. That's why sound doctrine and godly living are the twin towers guarding the purity of the church, Paul says as much in 4:16.

It is not enough to proclaim the faith with our lips; we must practice the faith in our daily lives. One man said of his hypocritical pastor: 'He is such a good preacher, he should never get out of the pulpit; but he is such a poor Christian, he should never get into the pulpit.' On that challenging note, let's pause for a short music break; in a moment or two, we'll see what Paul has to say about a couple of guys who have made a mess of their lives.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Paul has seen it all before, he's been down this same road many times in the course of a long and fruitful ministry – he can see in his mind's eye those who have chosen another path, those who have said 'no' to truth and, instead, have embraced error—they have, says Paul, 'shipwrecked their faith'. Strong, vivid language! But you can't help get the point that Paul is making – in fact, he names names when he singles out Hymenaeus and Alexander for special mention.

Paul used the word 'rejected' when he highlighted the attitude of these purveyors of doctrinal error. To a man, they have turned their back on truth, they have deliberately chosen to recklessly pursue another path, they have said a defiant 'no' to the sweep of biblical revelation. When it comes to truth, they excel in the art of cutting and pasting.

These guys had no passion or devotion to maintaining a pure conscience. They had little or no interest in living for holiness. We noted earlier that 'bad theology has its roots in bad morals'. It seems to me, therefore, that those who teach error do so in order to substitute a system that accommodates their sin.

John MacArthur is right when he says that 'a good conscience is the rudder that steers the Christian life.' These blokes have chosen to ignore the pangs of conscience and the truth, so it's not surprising that they end up on the rocks—shipwrecked. It didn't have to be like that, they brought it on themselves. We see it all around us in today's evangelical church—so many who started out well with a bright and promising future ahead, only to end up on the scrapheap because they swallowed error in big mouthfuls.

The two men that Paul mentions are pretty much unknown in terms of their influence and stature in the community. We can speculate as to who they were and all the rest of it; suffice to say, Hymenaeus and Alexander blew it big time.

What we do know for sure is that Hymenaeus is mentioned by Paul in his second epistle to Timothy. He's the sparkly guy who indulged in 'godless chatter' according to 2:16-17. He is one of those guys with a lot to say! He is also reputed to have 'wandered away from the truth' in verse 18. His downfall did not happen overnight, it was a gradual thing, he drifted over an extended period of time. In the same verse we're told of one of the doctrines that he denied. He pooh-poohed the idea of the resurrection of the body—he said it's water under the bridge, it has already happened! That, as you will appreciate, doesn't tie in with Pauline theology in the Corinthian

and Thessalonian epistles, never mind what John had to say about it in the book of Revelation.

The end result was seriously unpleasant for they were 'handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.' That's the terse comment we read at the end of verse 20, it's one of those hard sayings that makes the hair stand on the back of your neck. In a sense, these church leaders valued the purity of the assembly of God's people. Talk about church discipline, they took the bull by the horns, that's the way they did it in the first century! If you didn't tow God's party line, and you were sowing seeds of error, you were kicked out! Excommunicated!

They didn't suffer fools gladly in the early church; the trouble today is that we try to be nice to every man, we accommodate forty shades of green when it comes to spiritual experience, we bend over backwards to keep people inside the four walls that we end up undermining our testimony and also weakening our effectiveness as a voice for truth. I think most of us realise that being all things to all men just doesn't work; we can bend over backwards from now till the cows come home and it still does not guarantee a quiet life. There are principles clearly set out in scripture for dealing with troublemakers in a congregation; we have covered these in our earlier studies in Matthew as well as in 1 Corinthians; Paul has something to say about it in 1 Thessalonians 5 as well – so, the guidelines are unambiguous, they are straightforward, and God expects us to rigorously enforce them.

At the same time, when we exercise discipline in a local church it must always be seen with a view to possible restoration of the sinning brother or sister. We don't just kick them out the front door and shout: 'That's it, we've had enough, get out and good riddance.' No, if they genuinely repent and prove the reality of their renewed commitment, they will find there is a way back. Failure is never final. God doesn't write us off!

That's the thought behind the phrase 'to be taught not to'; these folk have to be taught a salutary lesson, one they will not easily

forget; they need to learn some home truths – and if they repent and get their act together, they'll find that the front door of the church is still ajar. Biblical discipline is always remedial. It has to be said that such acts do not go down too well in today's world—it might appear otherwise, but Paul's attitude was one of grace, severe grace. This is essential if the church is to grow and prosper—a pure church is a powerful church.

In 'handing [them] over to Satan' they would be away from the Lord's care and protection and thus under the power of Satan. I often think of it like this: when the rain falls, they are no longer sheltering under the divine umbrella: they're out in the cold and they're going to get rather wet! But when they dry out, there is always a chance that they might value the security of the house of God and the fellowship of the people of God. They'll realise how daft and stupid they have been. A situation not unlike that of the Prodigal Son that we read of in Luke 15.

I think the overall message of this mini-section is clear: we are to do God's work in God's way, we are to follow closely God's word, we are to be conduits of blessing to others.