

1 Timothy 1:3-11

It's amazing what can happen in the space of five or six years! Ask Paul – he knows only too well, his words have come true. Ask Timothy – he's on the frontline, the firing line.

It all began fantastically well – God worked in a spectacular way and many souls were delivered from the kingdom of black darkness; lives were dramatically and miraculously changed; a city was left reeling under the extraordinary power of the Spirit of God. As it turned out, a thriving church was born; it was a beachhead in the most important city of the Roman province of Asia. It became the command centre for the evangelisation of the region and far beyond.

But what started off as a time of wonderful blessing and spiritual harvest has turned sour, it's all gone pear-shaped as false teachers have hijacked the local assembly in Ephesus. In Paul's tearful farewell to the elders of the church, he warned them of the likelihood of such a scenario—wolves in sheep's clothing, men with their own agenda, men who have nothing better to do than maul the flock of God would appear.

In five years, tragically, Paul's forecast has become a reality. It is into that situation that young Timothy is ushered – Paul sent him there as a trouble-shooter; for better or worse, it's proving to be more than a handful for the budding successor to the old man Paul. His hands are not tied, but they are full!

You really feel for Timothy in these circumstances—you would almost think the poor guy was way out of his depth; for him it's a classic case of sink or swim. But, Paul trusts him to come up with the goods; actually, it was imperative that Timothy deliver – he had to succeed. Simple as that!

That's what this first epistle is all about – it focuses on the local congregation and how people should conduct themselves etc. In a sense, it's a manual on 'how to do church'—it was relevant in the first century, it's most relevant in the twenty-first. You see, God's

word may be out of fashion in some circles, but it's never out of date!

When Paul penned these words around AD 64, it is worth noting he doesn't offer any commendation for the church in Ephesus, there isn't a single word of thanksgiving in his intro – not one; when that happens, you can tell the old man isn't best pleased with what's going on.

That also explains why he goes for the jugular after his initial greeting to his emissary, Timothy – he reminded him of the resources available to him in the Lord and he hoped this would add a touch of steel to his nerve. Then, with no further ado, he goes on the front foot and into attack mode!

We'll take a break there and when we come back we'll begin to unpack Paul's insights into this perennial problem.

MUSIC BREAK

It seems from reading between the lines in verse 3 that Timothy was on the verge of calling it quits in Ephesus. You can detect in Paul's comments that the young preacher is sick to the back teeth with what's going on, he's had enough, and he wants out fast!

Now, that's perfectly understandable; the pressure's intense, the people often inflexible, and the expectations unreasonable – yes, there are times when to up and out is the best choice, but in this situation, it would only exacerbate the problem. The best thing here is stay at it. Persevere. It would not help it at all if Timothy had gone AWOL—hence Paul's directive: 'stay there, don't even think about packing your bags, you haven't finished the job.'

It seems to me that Timothy is fast discovering that there is no such thing as stress-free or problem-proof ministry; it can be fun, sure it can, but there can also be a lot of hassles as well! I love the way Chuck Swindoll put it: 'If the grass is greener on the other side, you can bet their water bill is higher.'

There's no way that Paul expected Timothy to pussyfoot in his dealing with the problem; he was to go at the false teachers, all guns blazing, no holds barred. These men had to be silenced. Timothy

had to take a firm stand, dig his heels in, he wasn't to flinch in front of them. He was to lay down the law and take no nonsense from them.

This was high noon. Therefore, Paul wants him to be decisive and resolute. He is to call a spade, a spade; no matter what they say, Timothy has the backing and blessing of God on his life. That should fortify him and enable him to do what God wanted him to do. Not easy, but God would undertake.

It is apparent from verses 3 and 4 that the most effective way to deal with false doctrine is to answer it with true doctrine. Like a lion, when you let it loose, the truth is more than capable of looking after itself! Sound doctrine is fundamental to the life and growth of every local church—the minute we veer away from it and go off on some tangent, we are inviting trouble, big trouble. That's a recurring theme in this epistle—be sound in what you teach!

Paul doesn't go into any great detail as to the precise nature of their false teaching; suffice to say, he says they are devoted to 'myths and endless genealogies.' That strikes me as being very boring to listen to, totally unedifying—there's nothing dynamic about it, it's not the kind of stuff to set the world on fire. But that's what they were indulging in—what I would call 'fluffy faith', their head was in the clouds!

When men choose that particular path for their line of ministry, they are living dangerously; according to Paul, such speculation obscures biblical truth and confuses the people of God. That's why we read at the end of verse 4 that 'these [untruths] promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith.' In a word, these truth twisters smothered the gospel of grace. They were into distortion, big time; they treated the truth in the same way as a man walking into a hall of mirrors. Except, there was nothing funny about the outcome.

Yes, it has a certain appeal to some folks, it tickles their fancy, they are enamoured by a raft of facts and figures—it leaves them spellbound; they thrive on the unusual, they see fantastic ideas in

every jot and tittle. Talk about going from the sublime to the ridiculous—these guys mastered that art.

But, at the end of the day, it does absolutely nothing for the good of their soul or their walk with the Lord. In actual fact, the chilling reality is, it will take them on a downward spiral. These peddlers of error were raising questions, not answering them. That's always what happens when you propagate error sprinkled with a few grains of truth. It leads to a snootiness and intellectual arrogance!

In verse 5 Paul goes back to basics when he spells out the main reason for his thinking—we read: 'The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.' This shows how single-minded Paul is; in this instance, he has one string to his bow.

The baseline, the goal, the target, is love: a love for truth, a love for God, a love for his church, a love for the honour of God's peerless name, a love for God's glory. You see, our love for others is made possible and is fuelled by our love for God. I like the way John Piper expressed it: 'Love is the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets the needs of others.'

Basically, we have no option but to take on board the greatest commandment; and we ought to love God more today than we did yesterday—one way to feed that diet is for us to feast on the sumptuous, mouth-watering truths of biblical doctrine. We can never get too much of the Word!

Love flows from three streams: from our heart, our conscience, and our faith. The idea of a pure heart is a rich Old Testament theme and it's one that Jesus picked up on in his Sermon on the Mount. David the psalmist referred to it more than once – the concept speaks of a heart that is truly the Lord's and one that is unswerving in its commitment and loyalty to Christ – it seems to me that a pure heart is an obedient heart.

Next is a good conscience – that inner voice that tells us what is right and what is wrong. Some folks have a stifled or a seared conscience, we desperately need one that is spiritually oriented.

When it's good, it produces pleasure and satisfaction and a real sense of fulfilment.

Finally, love comes from a sincere faith – i.e. one without any pretence. There is nothing hypocritical about it, nothing shady in its makeup; it's the Real McCoy, the real thing! It is a tried and tested faith—it's authentic.

What a contrast to the false teachers, see what Paul says about them in verse 6! They have dirty hearts and their lives have not been cleaned up by the gospel. They have consciences that are guilty and condemning—but you can't expect anything else. If the heart's not right, the conscience will flash red lights and go beep, beep, beep. Their faith is false and misguided—there is no way in a month of Sundays that these guys will ever produce love!

They were on a wild goose chase, pandering to their own ego, and lining their own pockets. Their teaching was nothing more than 'meaningless talk'. That's polite-speak for gibberish, it is a load of balderdash. Empty hearts, empty heads, empty lives, empty words. I think we'll pause there for a short music break and, when we come back, we'll take a look at verses 7-11.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul offers no floral bouquets or olive branches to these false teachers—to put it bluntly, he pulls the rug from under their feet in verse 7. When Paul is through with them, they don't have a leg to stand on! He is scathing in his comments, it's as if he sets them up and then pokes huge fun at them; here is the apostle at his sarcastic best—he derides these guys as a bunch of know-nothing, do-gooders. They haven't a clue what they are talking about! They may be slick, and suave, and sound so plausible, but they are just a bunch of tricksters talking a load of drivel and codswallop.

These guys want to be top dog in a world of puppies; they have burning ambitions to be hailed as gifted orators. They have no inhibitions at all; in fact, they are not behind the ticket when it comes to pushing themselves forward. Talk about pride, these guys were so full of it, they'd have put a peacock off the stage. They have

big heads and teeny-weeny hearts. Such was their pompous attitude that they saw themselves as the divine answer to congregational life in Ephesus.

Well, they are entitled to their thoughts; the won't-go-away fact is that Paul is having none of it. That explains why in verses 8-11 Paul goes right back to events on Sinai—he zooms in on the law and its attributes. It is the gold standard—against that, the heretical teaching of these twits is incredibly tarnished. God is unsullied, they are blackened with spots of soot.

No wonder Paul says with huge confidence in verse 8 'that the law is good if one uses it properly.' That's a resounding word of affirmation that when God does something he does it well; if a man wants to use the law, yes, it will bless him and bring him a waft of benefits, but only if he uses it in the right way. So far as God is concerned, two and two always make four—he's not going to lead us into a spiritual cul-de-sac, he'll not take you by the hand and lead you into a spiritual dead end!

Why? Because the law is a reflection of his nature, it's an echo of his impeccable character. Take a look at Exodus 20, that's where the living God says: 'This is who I am, this is what I am, this is what I have done for you ... therefore, you must do this and you must not do that.'

We know from the books of Romans and Galatians that the law is there to show us how far short we fall in relation to the high and holy standard of God, it's there to remind us of our need of a Saviour. It's not primarily for the good man or the righteous man—it's there for sinners! And, when you read the list that Paul gives us in verses 9 and 10, he doesn't leave too many out. We're all in there somewhere!

Some of the terms that he uses may not be deemed politically correct in today's world, but that doesn't matter—we're here to uphold biblical truth and old-fashioned godly principles. We're not here to appease the devil in any shape or form; our serious

obligation before God is to do what is right and to be seen to do what is right.

In other words, with God's help we seek to value his law and at all times we should live in the light of it – because of Jesus, we are a people of grace, a people who are deliriously happy only when we embrace 'sound doctrine' and walk in the light of the law of the Lord – a law that brings liberty, not bondage; a law that frees men, not shackles them.

The punchline is, our belief has a massive influence on our behaviour—what I believe and know to be true will colour my thinking and shape my decision making. What I believe in my heart and mind invariably rubs off on my character and lifestyle – simply put, what I know tells me what I ought to do. That is why biblical truth is at a premium and that's why Paul tells his envoy, Timothy, to confront these men.

It's interesting to note that the word Paul used for 'sound' in verse 10 is one that we get our English word 'hygiene' from. It refers to that which is healthy and wholesome. Paul advocates teaching that produces and promotes spiritual life, growth, and health. Good teaching, sound doctrine, will always build a man up; his life will always be the richer for it. There is no flip side to a biblical ministry. It's intensely positive and life enhancing. It always does us a power of good.

Paul has a wonderful turn of phrase in verse 11 when he speaks of 'the glorious gospel of the blessed God'—in context, if there were no bad news that men were lost sinners, there could be no good news of Christ's redemption. Man has sinned, but Jesus saves! That's the ethos of the gospel.

The gospel is glorious because it reveals the heart and mind of God, it gives us a glimpse of the glory of God, we see a vision of his attributes. This life-changing gospel is closely linked in to the character of God, they are inextricably intertwined—he is the 'blessed God'. Let's tease that title out a little ... he is one who is

blessed in himself as in 6:15, but he is also the source of blessing for his people as in Ephesians 1:3.

In that light, Paul is bowled over with the sheer wonder of it all; this great God, one who is blessed forever, is the same one who has entrusted the gospel message to him. It's all too much for him to comprehend—even though he can't fully understand it, he is no less grateful for it. Such is the genius of God's grace in the lives of very ordinary people.

Well, we're in the third millennium, these guys were living in the first millennium—a lot of water has gone under the bridge in two thousand years, that said, we have a lot of false teachers in today's world. How do we detect them? Do we know the truth of scripture so well that we can smell a rat a mile off? It seems to me that the nearer we are to the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the more alert we must be!

We need to watch out for these characters—how do they handle the word of God? What is their attitude to revealed truth? Are they guilty of placing extrabiblical teachings on a par with the Bible? In their exposition, how accurate are they? What about their goals? Do they always seek to honour the Lord and bring glory to his name? Are they into empire-building or is their passion to see the kingdom of God extended? Does their life and ministry tie up? Are they genuinely humble or would they much prefer to be top gun?

Those are just some checks you can make when you meet these synthetic saints—don't be taken in by them. Remember, there is no substitute for sound doctrine. Love it and live in it.