

1 Timothy 1:8-11

A Sermon

Scott Lindsay

... Taking Christian by the hand, the Interpreter led him into a very large parlor, full of dust as though it was never swept. When they had looked at it for a little while, the Interpreter called for a man to sweep. As the room was swept, the dust flew about so abundantly that Christian almost choked on it. Then said the Interpreter to a young woman who stood by, 'Bring water and sprinkle the room.' When she had done this, the room was swept and cleaned with ease. 'What does this mean?' asked Christian. The Interpreter answered: 'This parlor is the heart of a man that was never sanctified by the sweet grace of the Gospel. The dust is his original sin and the inward corruptions that have defiled the whole man. He that began to sweep at first is the Law, but she that brought water and sprinkled the room with it is the Gospel. Now you saw that as soon as the man began to sweep, the dust flew about so much that the room could not be cleansed, but, instead, you were almost choked with the dust. This is to show you that the Law, instead of cleansing the heart from sin, actually revives and puts strength into it and increases it in the soul, even as it uncovers and forbids it. The Law does not give power to subdue sin. Again, you saw the young woman sprinkle the room with water, and afterward the room was easily cleansed. This is to show you that when the Gospel comes in, the sweet and precious influences of it so affect the heart ...that sin is vanquished and subdued, and the soul is made clean through the faith of the Gospel.... (*Pilgrim's Progress*, 57-58).

With those words John Bunyan, in his classic work *Pilgrim's Progress*, tries to describe something of the relationship between the Law and the Gospel as well as what happens when we try to use the law in the wrong way. The very same sort of dynamics that appear in Bunyan's illustration are also found in the passage before us this morning (1 Tim. 1:8-11).

Now, before we go any further, and by way of reminder, you need to keep in mind that this is a letter written from Paul, the Apostle, to Timothy, his most faithful and trusted disciple. At the time of this letter, Paul was nearing the end of his ministry and Timothy was living in Ephesus, pastoring the Christian congregation launched through Paul's ministry a number of years before.

As was the case in many of the early churches, the Ephesian Church was not the most harmonious or mature of congregations. So, Paul is writing to Timothy *amidst* a certain amount of difficulty and, as such, wants to provide some practical teaching which will

both *encourage Timothy in his role as pastor* and, at the same time, *promote the good order and functioning of the Church in Ephesus*. Those were his main purposes.

Crucial to this whole plan of encouraging Timothy and promoting good order in the local church was the need to deal with the matter of leadership. As a result, and as we saw last week, much of this letter revolves around that issue, both negatively, as false teachers and false teaching are addressed, and positively, as Paul provides some very useful criteria which could be used by Timothy (and indeed all the Ephesian Christians) to discern whether or not certain persons ought to be placed into positions of leadership.

Thus far in our study of this letter, we have taken a good look at some preliminary background information and we have then taken some time to examine the first seven verses. In those opening verses we saw how Paul wasted no time in telling Timothy, in no uncertain terms, how imperative it was for him to put a stop to the false teachers who were going around, misusing and misreading the Scriptures and, as a result, causing quarrels and controversy amongst the Christians. Instead of being faithful to the truths that Paul had passed on to them, they had adopted some questionable interpretive practices and, as a result, had begun to embrace some pretty strange ideas. These idle, and ill-founded speculations were not helpful at all and, in the end, had the effect of confusing the local believers and getting them all tied up into knots. They were not promoting love that, as Paul says, comes from a “pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith”.

All of which brings us up to the verses before us this morning where Paul picks up with what he began talking about in those first few verses and gives us further insight into the problems being created by the false teachers in Ephesus. One of the things we will see in our study of these verses is that, while these people *wanted* to be teachers of the law and perhaps to be *known* as teachers of the law, they did not really understand what they were talking about (as verse 7 points out) but were, in fact, using the law in an improper way. That’s our subject matter for this morning. Before we look at that, let’s pray together.

Father in Heaven , we thank You again this morning for Your kindness and wisdom in not only creating a world and placing us IN that world but in also giving us Your Word - that we might know how we should live in this world You have made. Lord, we stare at these words as those who are far removed from them in time and culture and yet knowing all along that these are not dead words, that this is not just some interesting history but that this is LIVING history and TIMELESS truth. These are Your words, words of life and health and peace for us today. Lord, help us to hear and overhear them in a way which will produce the results You want to see produced, in a way which will accomplish Your plans and purposes. Help us to listen now, expectantly and humbly. We ask this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Right and Wrong Uses of the Law

As we work our way through the verses before us this morning, we will be trying to answer a number of different questions:

- 1) What is the situation that Paul seems to be addressing here?
- 2) What does he mean by a “lawful” or “proper” use of the law?
- 3) What, by implication, would be an “unlawful” or “improper” use of the law?
- 4) What difference do these verses make for God’s people today?

Let us start with the first question: *What is the situation that Paul seems to be addressing here?* At the risk of being redundant, let me draw our attention once again to the fact that Paul has already given Timothy instructions about certain men who were teaching *false doctrine* and who were delving into *myths* and strange teachings that were somehow connected to some of the Old Testament *genealogies*. He later on describes these same people as those who “want to be teachers of the law”, but then he goes on to say that they *do not know what they are talking about*. Additionally, in verse 8 he says that the law is good “if one uses it properly”.

Putting all of this together then, it would seem that, alongside whatever else they were doing, these false teachers were apparently taking “the Law” (which is just Paul’s shorthand here for the moral teachings of the Old Testament centered upon the Ten Commandments) and using it in an improper or unhelpful way.

Moving on to the second question, or set of questions - at this point we may wonder just exactly *what* Paul is referring to here. What sorts of “improper” uses of the law might he mean? What use, or perhaps uses, of the law would cause Paul to say that these people, “do not know what they are talking about?” Well, it would seem that there are a couple of possibilities. From what has already been said it would appear that the false teachers were using the law as a kind of launching pad for all sorts of speculations and meaningless talk. Perhaps they were engaging in theological, hair-splitting debates among Christians as to how a given law might apply in various and bizarre circumstances. The Jewish leadership in Jesus’ day had certainly done a fair bit of that sort of thing and some of that same sort of practice may have been brought into the church by some of these now-converted Jews.

Or perhaps, more seriously, they were wrongly teaching that obeying the law was how a person earned God’s blessing and approval. This was certainly a problem that had surfaced in *other* churches, like the Galatian church, and it is very possible that this, or something like it, was going on in Ephesus as well.

The truth is, we cannot be *completely* certain as to the exact nature of their misuse and misunderstanding of the moral law. It could be the sorts of things suggested. It could be other things. Whatever the case, they were not using the law properly, i.e., in the way that God intended it.

Over against that - and moving on to our third question or set of questions - the thing that Paul *does* tell us a little more clearly with regard to all of this is what it is that would constitute a *proper* use of the law. He explains in verse 9 and following that, “the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels....” What does he mean by that?

Well, in answering that question we need to be careful to think about both what Paul IS saying as well as what he is NOT saying. As we consider this matter, it seems that the most difficult part of making sense of Paul’s language here is understanding what he means by the phrase “the righteous” in verse 9.

Some of you bible scholars, upon hearing that phrase might immediately think of Paul’s words in Romans 3, quoting Psalm 14, where he says, “There is no one righteous, not even one...” Thinking of that you may wonder if Paul is making a rather pointless distinction here. In other words, why say that the “law is not made for the righteous” when, in fact, there are no righteous people to be found? That sort of comment would be fair enough IF that was the only way the word “righteous” was ever used in the Bible.

But it isn’t.

Sometimes the word “righteous” is just the Bible’s word for people that know God. It is a description that refers to their *position* before God, their relationship with God, and is not a reference to their *condition* as they stand before him. To put it another way, the word “righteous” is not always used in an absolute sense. For example, Jesus himself uses the word “righteous” in this kind of non-absolute way in Luke 5 where, after being criticized for spending time with tax collectors and sinners he responds by saying, “...I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance...”

Applying this thinking to the passage before us, one commentator, Knight, writes the following words regarding the meaning of verse 9, which I think summarizes it quite nicely:

Paul is saying [here] that the law is not given to apply in some mystical way to people who are already “righteous”, i.e., those ALREADY seeking to conform to the law. It is, rather, given to deal with people who are specifically violating its sanctions and to warn them against their specific sins.... (*The Pastoral Epistles*, George William Knight)

Indeed, this is the primary use and purpose of the law, as Paul himself points out in another place, Romans 7:9 (New Living Translation),

I felt fine when I did not understand what the law demanded. But when I learned the truth, I realized that I had broken the law and was a sinner, doomed to die...

In other words, the primary function of the law is to *reveal sin*, to show those who are living in rebellion against God that, in fact, they ARE sinful people, that they DO stand justly condemned by Him. That is the law's primary, although not only, use. This is precisely the use to which it was NOT being put by the false teachers in Ephesus. Rather than being outwardly facing, rather than teaching the law in a way which brought conviction of sin and, led people to embrace the hope of the Gospel, these false teachers were using it, instead, to engage in meaningless debates, and endless speculations and to discuss obscure points of doctrine among those who were already saved, and who should have known better.

To use the law in that way, for that purpose, is an improper use of the law. It is to forget the law's main purpose and substitute something else in its place. It is like a person taking a brand new computer and setting it on the floor and using it as a doorstop, or a stepladder, or a paperweight - using it for *anything* but what it was actually designed for. The law, says Paul, was not given for the primary purpose of engaging God's people, the righteous, in obscure theological speculations; it was given *for sinners*, to show them their sin and their need of God's grace and forgiveness.

Now, some of you who have spent some time thinking about this, may have a question or two rattling around in your head at this moment. Some of you may be saying to yourself something along the lines of, "Now wait a minute. Does this mean that the law has no use or value for *believers*? Is that what Paul is saying?"

The short answer to that is, NO that is not Paul's intent here. You have to keep in mind that Paul is not trying to say *everything* that could be said about the law and its uses. Indeed, if Paul tried to say *everything* about a certain subject whenever he said *anything* about it, he would end up saying *nothing* at all, or else what he said would be so cumbersome it would be of no practical use. So, Paul is not speaking exhaustively on the subject of the law and its uses.

Instead, he is honing in on one *particular* use of the law, its main use, and he is doing so precisely because he is addressing a specific circumstance in Ephesus whereby the law was being used in an illegitimate manner. So, with that circumstance in mind, it is perfectly legitimate for Paul to say that the law is not intended for the "righteous" as a revealer of sin (because they have already realized this) but rather as God's instrument for revealing sin in *those who have not yet acknowledged their sinfulness*. That is the use of the law that the false teachers are apparently *not* engaging in. They wanted to use it as an object of discussion and speculation, Paul wanted them to use it to confront sin and so lead people to the Gospel.

Some Implications

Now, having said all of that, and with only a couple minutes remaining, I want to address the fourth question - what difference do these verses make - by quickly drawing our attention to some implications of this text for God's people today.

First, and even though we did not say anything about it as such, let's think for a moment about Paul's "list" in verses 9 and following. As we read through that list – lawbreakers ... ungodly ... irreligious ... those who kill fathers and mothers... murderers ... adulterers ... liars ... etc ... as we read through that list it has probably occurred to us that this list seems familiar. That is because in pointing out these different kinds of sinful people, Paul is basically following the outline and content of the Ten Commandments. There is a tight correspondence between those commandments and the persons that appear in this list, with a few differences.

What was the purpose of doing such a thing? There are at least a couple reasons. One is that by framing his comments in this way, Paul makes it clear that when he talks about "the law" he is thinking of the moral law, centered on the Ten Commandments. Another reason is that by following the Ten Commandments *outline* he is bringing them *to mind* and, with that, and hopefully re-enforcing something else, namely, the *reason why* those commandments were given in Moses' day - once again, not as a source for speculation and debate but to humble the people as to their sinful state before a Holy God.

Even further, in highlighting these things again, Paul shows the ongoing validity of the moral law as a standard of holiness, as a perpetual guidepost which makes it clear what sorts of behaviors God will and will not be pleased to see in people.

Now, in making that statement, and in light of some recent decisions in some of our countries higher courts, let me make a little bit of a digression here and say that the *New International Version* has done us no favors in translating verse 10 in the way that they have. The NIV translates the original language here as "perverts" when, in actual fact, the Greek is talking very specifically about "men who practice homosexuality," as the *English Standard Version* has more helpfully translated it.

I say this not to elevate the sin of homosexual practice above any other sin. Paul certainly does not do that here when he puts it on the same level as lying and perjury. Rather I am drawing your attention to Paul's list to make a point. I highlight the matter of homosexuality only because this is something which I have watched society do a complete 180 degree turnaround on *in my lifetime*. Society's views on this matter have certainly and drastically changed.

However, regardless of what society has done, God's view on this has not changed. God is not moved by opinion polls. Morality is not decided by majority vote. And that means that if we are going to use the law *properly*, to convict of sin and lead people to the Gospel, then we need to be prepared to call sin what God calls sin, regardless of what the governing authority has said. The NIV's translation here, I hope, is not a sign of the church's un-ease with holding the line on these matters.

Forgive my digression. But I think the point is too important to pass by, especially with regard to the NIV's handling of this text.

A second implication of these verses is that we too need to be careful that we do not fall into the same trap as the false teachers - using the law of God in an “unlawful” or “improper” manner. There are several ways this can and might, and in fact DOES happen in the church today:

1) We use the law of God improperly when we treat it as a way of being made right with God, as if by keeping it we have earned God’s grace and forgiveness, as if by keeping it we have somehow put God into our debt and He now owes us something - forgiveness, eternal life, blessings and happiness, etc. When we see Christian obedience as anything other than the loving, grateful, natural response of a person in whom the Spirit of God dwells, we have misunderstood the law and that for which it was intended.

2) We use the law of God improperly when we perhaps stop short of thinking we have earned our salvation, and yet we treat godly living as a means of being *more pleasing and acceptable to God*, as if God loves us more when we have five quiet times than he does when we only have two.

3) We use the law of God improperly when we are more concerned with debating it or discussing it or speculating about it than we are with actually using it as God’s loving tool for continually bringing about a deeper and deeper repentance and thus, a deeper and deeper dependence upon the grace of God in the Gospel in ourselves and in other people.

4) We use the law of God improperly when we succumb to the pursuit of “mere morality” and try to achieve the goal of Christ-likeness through mere self-effort, by simply trying harder RATHER THAN letting the law of God (and our falling short of it) always lead us back to the deeper Gospel issues behind our sinfulness, our pride, our fear, and our idolatry, in short, our failure to believe God and to trust all that Jesus has done and IS for us.

A third and final implication of these verses is what they say to us about leadership and, in particular, about the task of choosing good leaders for our congregation. As we are preparing to elect elders in this congregation, and as we think about the responsibility of setting apart men who will not be false teachers but will be trustworthy and faithful leaders among us - as we think about those things we need to do so with regard to *this particular issue*.

We need to set apart leaders who understand the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. We need to set apart leaders who will not be prone to misuse the law, who are not legalistic, and who are not given to endless and meaningless theological debates. We need to set apart elders who want to keep the main thing the main thing, who want to see sin confronted (in themselves and in the world) and who want to see that confrontation result in people embracing the liberating truth of the Gospel. We want to have leaders who are models of repentance, who show by their life and action that they are teachable, that they are continually being shaped and formed by truth, that they

understand that repentance is a lifelong process and who are learning daily to confront the deep Gospel issues to which the law is meant to take us.

These are the kinds of men we need to be setting apart to lead and guide us in the days and months ahead. These are the sorts of things you need to be much in prayer about.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).