**Heresy at Ephesus** 19/5/24 dkm

Read: Acts 20:17-38, 1Timothy 1

Text: 1Timothy 1:5-11

Psalms: 23old, 119:105-112, 86:5-11, 117

Timid Timothy was Paul’s representative in Ephesus when false teachers started appearing in this church. False teachers are never quiet or timid. They are proud men or women seeking power in the church. The only resource they have is their worldly wisdom and persuasive speech. A man like Timothy was easily threatened by such people. Was Timothy thinking of leaving the church in Ephesus and moving to another place? This would have the easiest thing for him to do, but the apostle told him to stay. What a blessing to have a man with heavenly wisdom helping him decide what to do!

Timothy must have been physically weak. He was certainly young (4:12) and was intimidated by the bullies and their false teaching. But the gospel he received from Paul, and preached in Ephesus, was power in itself. ‘God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, and of love and of a sound mind’ (2Tim 1:7). As a believer, Timothy had been given the Spirit of God. He had been given a new heart, a heart of love. There is no greater power than love! Paul was confident timid Timothy could deal with the false teachers in the church. All he had to do was preach ‘the glorious gospel of the blessed God’ and live out this gospel in his life. The ‘gospel’ preached by the false teachers was empty; it was ‘idle talk’ which people would soon see through, and they would see through the charade of their lives.

These false teachers focused on ‘fables and endless genealogies’. We do not know exactly what they taught, but they were from a Jewish background so probably derived their ‘doctrine’ from the OT and associated allegories, myths, and traditions. What we do know is that their teaching, like all false teaching, lead to disputes rather than godly edification which is by faith (1:4). Faith was not part of their teaching because they had none. Their teaching was aimed at the intellect, not the heart. Their preaching was aimed at making them popular with other people. They were not exactly Judaizers, but like the Judaizers they misunderstood and misused the law. Legalism seems to have been a part of their teaching. If it was early Gnosticism there would have been legalists as well as libertines, although the latter heresy had not yet appeared.

The law, as in the ten commandments, was known to all Jews. They also had ceremonial laws, like circumcision. They thought that keeping the law was the way to be saved, but this was a misunderstanding of the law, according to the gospel preached by Paul. Here in these verses written to Timothy, Paul points out that the ‘law meant love’, that the ‘law is for law-breakers’, and the ‘law is fulfilled in the gospel’.

**1.Law means love**

A lawyer came to Jesus one day to test him regarding the commandments: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?’ (Mat 22:36). It is apparent that the lawyers or scribes spent a lot of time disputing this question, and many other matters in the law. The false teachers at Ephesus loved disputing matters in the law also, not to mention disputing what foods could and could not be eaten (4:3), and things that could and could not be touched (Col 2:21).

The lawyer who came to Jesus was shocked by the answer he heard. Jesus summarised the ten commandments: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and with all your mind… and you shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mat 22:37,39). This was not exactly new teaching because, along with the ten commandments, Moses gave them the command, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength’ (Deut 6:5). Moreover, Jesus said he came to fulfil the law and the prophets, not destroy them (Mat 5:17). It is amazing that so many Jews, and indeed Christians, fail to understand the law itself, and the reason God gave the law.

‘The purpose of the commandment is love’ writes Paul, ‘Love from a pure heart’ (1:5). ‘Jesus said, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart’. Love comes from the heart; it is not simply a feeling or emotion, but something you decide to do. Love, as in ‘*agape*’ or selfless love, does not flow from a sinful heart. It flows from a pure or transformed heart, a heart transformed by the love of Jesus Christ (1John 3:16). Love is related to faith, to belief in Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ touches our innermost being or heart. You can be very knowledgeable about the Bible, and even teach the Bible, without having your own heart changed by the truth. You can go to church for years without being touched by the truth of the gospel. In a church I once attended the minister was surprised when one of the elders professed faith in Jesus after years of being an office-bearer in the church. The false teachers at Ephesus did not have changed hearts.

Our heart affects our conscience, that inner place where we decide what is right and what is wrong. Paul speaks of a ‘good conscience’, meaning a conscience that is illuminated by the Holy Spirit. When we believe, our heart and our conscience is changed through the work of the Holy Spirit. The conscience of the false teachers was still darkened by sin or ‘seared as with a hot iron’ (4:2). Our conscience is meant to tell us right from wrong, but sin screwed it all up. God gave us laws to follow but we cannot follow these while our heart and conscience remains corrupt. We might have tried, but we failed. Only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, revealed in the cross and the resurrection, are our hearts changed.

With sincere faith, a good conscience, and a pure heart, we are enabled to love as God intended us to love, to love him and to love one another; we do not have to be told to love ourselves! Sound doctrine produces dynamic love, ‘which comes from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith’. What we understand and believe about God is everything! The Lord’s disciples are known by their love, love for God and love for one another (John 13:34).

**2.Law is for law-breakers**

The false teachers in Ephesus, the ‘savage wolves’ that Paul warned the elders about (Acts 20:29), arose from within the church. They were of Jewish background and were actually turning back to the ways of Judaism. They wanted to be teachers of the law (1:7). They wanted to go back to legalism, to ritualism and to law-keeping as the way of salvation. But this would nullify the grace and love of God in the gospel. This would be to misunderstand the law, as Jesus pointed out in the sermon on the mount. Some had already turned aside to idle or meaningless talk (1:6).

These false teachers thought they were being clever with their ‘myths and endless genealogies’, but in the end, they were demonstrating their ignorance of the law and of the gospel. They thought themselves ‘scholars’; there are ‘scholars’ today who follow in their footsteps. A friend of mine commented that some Bible scholars go around quoting each other as they publish papers and give talks; they rarely refer to the Bible. A genuine scholar once told me that a book publisher asked him to use his name on a book, they would get others to write! Even preachers need to be careful not to rely on things scholars have written; they must delve into the word of God themselves. I have been reminded of this! Be careful of the teaching of men said Paul, as he urged Timothy to maintain sound doctrine.

What then is the place of the law, the law of the OT? Firstly, it was never meant as the way of salvation. No one has ever been saved by keeping the law. But the law given by God is holy and just and good (Rom 7:12). The law is good if it used lawfully. What does this mean? It means that the law has a purpose in restraining wickedness. You probably don’t know a lot about tax laws, but people trying to avoid paying tax do; otherwise they will get caught. The Jews, like all trying to be saved by law-keeping, need to know the law: ‘Have I kept the law or not?’ they ask. Moreover, sinners like to ‘push the boundaries’ with regard to the law.

Secondly then, the law is not made for a righteous person, a person who loves the Lord and wants to please him as a son want to please his father. The law is for ‘lawless and insubordinate people, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane’ (1:9). Paul gives a detailed description of those for whom the law acts in a restraining manner. It is for people who do not know God, people under the power of sin and Satan. For such people laws are there to be broken, except that society or those in authority will use the law to condemn them.

If the reference to the ‘unholy’ and ‘ungodly’ points to the first table of the ten commandments, what follows in verses 9-10 refers to the second table. Remember, love for God leads to love for neighbours. Disregard for God and his holiness leads to a lack of love for neighbours. The command not to murder is broken in different ways, especially in regard to fathers and mothers- as Jesus pointed out in the sermon on the mount. The command not to commit adultery is broken in different ways also, including sex outside marriage, and sodomy or homosexuality. ‘Kidnappers’ refers to slave traders, to men who exploit fellow human beings made in the image of God (1:10). The command, ‘Do not bear false witness’ means do not tell lies or commit perjury, the telling lies under oath (1:10). ‘And if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine’ (1:10). This list is not exhaustive; it is but a pointer to what follows when people in the church depart from the sound doctrine of the gospel of grace.

Jesus did not throw out the law, and neither does Paul. It has this purpose in restraining evil. And it has a purpose in convicting of sin and leading us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith (Rom 5:1, Gal 3:24). But after coming to Christ, after having our sins forgiven and being given the Holy Spirit, we are no longer under law but under grace (Rom 6:14, Gal 3:25). It is love, true love not law, which is our guide.

**3.Law fulfilled in the gospel**

We have touched on this final point, but we pause at the closing verse of this passage because Paul defines what he means by sound doctrine. He uses the word ‘gospel’, which means ‘good news’. The law has never been referred to as ‘good news’, although for those with eyes to see, it pointed forward to the good news. Paul often refers to the ‘mystery of the gospel’ being made known in Christ. This mystery was unveiled in the gospel that was committed to Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ (1:11). Paul then committed this gospel to the church, the body of Christ: ‘Now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church’ (Eph 3:10). The church, of which Christ is the head, must maintain this glorious gospel through sound doctrine and right conduct. Any departure from sound doctrine, as in the doctrines of grace, will lead to the loss of souls precious to God.

The apostle never undervalued the glory, or underestimated the power of the gospel, entrusted to him by the risen Jesus. He preached this gospel to everyone he met, even in prison. It is the glorious gospel of the blessed God (1:11) We call the Bible the ‘Holy Bible’ because in it the holy and glorious and blessed God is revealed. We do not worship the book but the God who is revealed in the book. The Bible is of no use if you don’t read it!