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THE GOAL OF BIBLICAL TEACHING

1 Timothy 1:3-7

By

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1 Timothy Lesson 2

The Goal Of Biblical Teaching 1 Timothy 1:3-7

A story is told of an elderly man who ran a variety store. At one time it had been a prosperous business, but in recent years he had become obsessed with trying to keep the store neat and clean. He would spend hours arranging and rearranging the merchandise on the shelves, often refusing to unlock the doors for fear that the store would be thrown into disarray. The appearance of his store became the priority; selling merchandise became secondary.

That sounds crazy, but the same thing often happens among God's people. We get diverted from the true goal of the Christian life and busy ourselves with lesser things. Jesus clearly summed up the goal when He said that the two greatest commandments in God's law were to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as we do in fact love ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). Genuine love for God and others is the goal of the Christian life.

And yet we in the church often get caught up with the trivial and neglect the crucial. We strain the gnat and swallow the camel, to use Jesus' phrase (Matt. 23:24). We argue some abstruse point of theology but shred relationships. We get caught up with church programs but neglect the people the programs are supposed to help. We serve on committees but ignore the hurting person in our midst who needs our love. We focus on knowing the Bible but forget that the goal is to change our lives, not to fill our heads.

The church at Ephesus was being diverted from the goal of the Christian life by some false teachers. They were promoting "strange doctrines" (1:3, lit., "other doctrines") that is, non-apostolic doctrines. Apostolic doctrine, as contained in the New Testament (which includes the proper interpretation of the Old Testament), is the only truth for God's people. But these teachers had turned aside to fruitless discussion centering on myths and speculations about genealogies. Paul had assigned Timothy the unenviable but necessary task of confronting these men and getting

the church back on track. In 1 Timothy 1:3-7, Paul makes the point that ...

The goal of biblical teaching is love
in line with God's truth.

We need to navigate these waters carefully, because we can run aground on a number of extremes. Many shipwreck by saying, "Doctrine just divides people and causes controversy. You can't know for sure that you're right. So forget about theology; love is all that matters." But there is no such thing as biblical love apart from sound theology. Others run aground by assuming a cultural definition of love instead of a biblical one. They think that love means being nice all the time, burying our differences and never criticizing or opposing anyone. But if that's what Paul meant, he contradicts himself within this chapter.

To help us think clearly about the goal of biblical teaching as set forth here by Paul, I want to develop three thoughts:

1. Biblical teaching has been entrusted by God to those who teach; thus they are not free to change the message.

These false teachers were making up their own message, supposedly based on Old Testament genealogies. No doubt they were interesting and entertaining stories. But Paul calls them "myths" and contrasts them with "the administration of God which is by faith" (v. 4). Most likely these men were teachers of Jewish background who would take names from Old Testament genealogies and make up stories that had no factual basis. Such fables were included in a portion of The Talmud known as Haggadah. Another example of this sort of Jewish myth (Titus 1:14) is The Book of Jubilees, written about 100 B.C., which takes the historical stories from Genesis and embellishes them with all sorts of fictional accounts (William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, "Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles" [Baker], p. 59).

By way of contrast to these speculations, Paul asserts that "the administration of God" is "by faith" (v. 4). (The KJV reading, "godly edification," is based on a weak textual variant that must be rejected. The NIV "God's work" misses the main nuance of the Greek word.) The Greek word for "administration" means stew-

ardship or management (see 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25). The idea is that the gospel message is a treasure entrusted by God to men who will give an account to Him on whether they managed or dispensed it faithfully (see 1 Tim. 1:11). Such a steward of the gospel isn't free to modify the message or teach whatever he likes or dislikes or what he thinks his audience wants to hear. He is under orders (v. 3, "instruct" [NASB] = "a military command") from God to proclaim what God has revealed and nothing else. This treasure of the gospel comes to people "by faith."

In our day, as in every age, there are men who tamper with the apostolic message by all sorts of cultural myths to make it more palatable to people. One flagrant example is Robert Schuller, whose book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* [Word, 1982], carries endorsements by two well-known, supposedly evangelical theologians, one of whom was the president of a major evangelical seminary. The book purports to be based on the Lord's Prayer, but it is an utter perversion of the gospel, in which Schuller states, "To be born again means that we must be changed from a negative to a positive self-image--from inferiority to self-esteem ..." (p. 68). He goes on to say that this happens when we meet "the Ideal One" (Jesus) who receives us as his peer and treats us as an equal! As a result, the core of our life changes from shame to self-esteem and we can pray, "Our Father in heaven, honorable is *our* name" (p. 69, emphasis his).

What awful blasphemy! The book is full of statements that twist Scripture into conformity with worldly ideas. Yet a prominent evangelical pastor gushes on the book jacket that Schuller is "a communicator of the gospel of Jesus Christ" and that his "theology is traditional"! So you've got to be on guard so that you aren't led astray by those who claim to be evangelical and who claim to base their message on Scripture, but they're merely using the Bible as a springboard to make up their own message. Biblical teachers must be faithful to the biblical text.

2. The goal of biblical teaching is love, properly defined.

Perhaps someone is thinking, "Steve, you're not being very loving toward Dr. Schuller!" That precisely is the kind of cultural definition of love that we must avoid, that love means being nice to everyone and not criticizing anyone or their teaching. If that is love,

Paul contradicts himself by telling Timothy to confront these false teachers and by his criticism of Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20). Our definition of love must encompass all of what Paul (and Jesus) did and taught, not just when they were nice!

When Paul states, "The goal of the commandment is love" (1:5, lit.) it may refer to the commandment to Timothy to tell these men to stop teaching false doctrine (1:3). But in light of Paul's discussion of the Law (1:8-11), and the fact that the Law is summed up in the two great commands, to love God and others, Paul is probably extending the meaning of "commandment" to refer to the whole of biblical teaching. Thus he is reminding Timothy that the goal of God's commands as contained in Scripture is that we would love God and others. If these false teachers really knew what God's law was all about, they would be teaching toward that aim, rather than entertaining people with fruitless speculations and discussions.

Paul qualifies or defines "love" in three ways:

A. Biblical love stems from a pure heart.

God, who alone can see what is in every heart, weighs motives. If we act in an outwardly loving way toward someone, but our inner motive is to get something back for ourselves or to use the person for our own selfish pleasure or fulfillment, or to manipulate the person for our own ultimate gain, we're not loving from a pure heart. Love from a pure heart is love that has been cleansed from all self-centeredness, love that truly seeks the glory of God by seeking His highest good for the person, even if it means personal sacrifice and loss for us.

The only way we can be freed from our innate selfishness to love in that manner is to be inwardly cleansed by God through the cross of Christ, where God's sacrificial love was supremely demonstrated; and, then, to die to self daily by denying self and walking continually in light of the cross (Luke 9:23). To love from a pure heart requires that we deal with our sin, especially our selfishness and pride, on the thought level. When God's Spirit through His Word confronts our sinful, selfish motives, we must confess and turn from our sin rather than deny or excuse it by blaming others.

We call out to Him for the selfless, pure love that truly seeks the highest good of the other person.

B. Biblical love stems from a good conscience.

The Greek word for “conscience” comes from two words meaning “knowing together” and refers to that knowledge of ourselves that we share together with God alone. Apart from ourselves, only God knows our thoughts and the things we do when no one else is looking. Everyone stands guilty before God because every person, whether religious or pagan, has violated his own conscience (Rom. 2:14-16). The only way we can have a good conscience is to ask God to cleanse us, based on faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins and was raised so that we might be right before God (1 Pet. 3:21; Heb. 9:14; 10:22).

Then, having been made right with God through faith in Christ, we live each day by maintaining a clear conscience both before God and before people (Acts 24:16). We do this by confessing all sin, even sins of thought, to God; and by asking forgiveness of those we have wronged. If there is anyone you have sinned against and have not sought his (or her) forgiveness, then you aren’t able sincerely to love that person as God commands. Even if the other person started the problem by sinning against you, and even if he or she has continued to sin against you and has never sought your forgiveness, you cannot be obedient to God’s command to love until you go to this person and clear your conscience by asking his or her forgiveness. Love must stem from a pure heart and a good conscience.

C. Biblical love stems from a sincere faith.

The original phrase means faith without hypocrisy or play-acting. Again, this term goes below the outward appearance and looks at the heart. Sincere faith is directed toward Jesus Christ and results in loving others because you want to please Christ. Hypocritical faith plays to the audience, ignoring or forgetting that God is watching. You can put on an outward show of faith that looks pious to everyone, but your heart is self-serving. You can act loving to a person’s face, but then run him down behind his back.

My roommate once was watching a children’s TV program. The host was outwardly kind and sweet toward all the kids. The

program ended and the host thought he was off the air, but he wasn't. He turned to a person off camera and muttered, "That ought to fix the little brats for another day!" His "love" was not sincere.

I read about a couple that was expecting a baby. At the office where the husband worked, his fellow workers seemed so caring and concerned about his wife and the expected child. As the time drew near, they would ask, "How's your wife doing? Any news? Is she feeling all right?" It all sounded so sincere, so caring. But then the man found out that there was an office pool betting on the exact date of her delivery. They didn't care about the couple or their baby. They only cared about winning the pool! That's not love from a sincere faith.

Thus biblical love stems from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. That means that at its core, biblical love stems from a right relationship with God and the motive of seeking to please and glorify Him. It means that biblical love has the courage to confront someone who is in error or sin, because such a person is not pleasing God and is not helping others to please God. Thus biblical love, which is the proper goal of biblical teaching, does not mean being sweet and nice to everyone. It means doing whatever you can to help people get right with God through genuine faith in Jesus Christ. Biblical love stems from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.

We've seen that biblical teaching has been entrusted by God to those who teach, which means that they aren't free to make up their own stuff. The goal of their teaching must be love, properly defined.

3. "Love" that is not in line with God's truth is not love.

False teachers often emphasize love and unity at the expense of truth because invariably false teachers don't want their own sin confronted by God's Word. They will say, "We need to love everyone and not divide over anything." They're tolerant of everyone except the man who confronts sin and serious theological error. They accuse such men of being judgmental and unloving. But sound doctrine always confronts sin because God is holy and He calls His people to holiness. So-called "love" that tolerates sin that

God's Word plainly confronts is not biblical love, no matter how nice it is, because it is not in line with God's truth (see 2 & 3 John).

Since it's easy to be deceived by false teachers who seem loving, but who don't love in line with God's truth, how can we spot them? Much more could be said, but from our text alone, here are five marks of a false teacher:

A. False teachers are often motivated by pride.

Note verse 7: "wanting to be teachers of the Law." They love a following. They're filled with so-called "knowledge." But as Paul states (1 Cor. 8:1), "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." It would be a false conclusion, in opposition to all that Paul wrote, to thus discard knowledge. The point is not to be ignorant and sweet! The point is that knowledge of God's truth must always result in a change in our thinking and behavior. But false teachers often have an air of pride and they appeal to the pride of their followers: "If you learn from me, you'll be in the know!"

B. False teachers promote "new" insights supposedly, but not truly, based on God's Word.

God has revealed Himself in history and in His Word of truth that is based on history. Furthermore, His Word is propositional, that is, it makes statements that can and must be taken in their plain sense. But false teachers come up with "new" insights based on a subjective approach or on reading some supposed secular wisdom back into Scripture, even though it's unrelated to the meaning of Scripture in its context. These false teachers were taking the historically accurate genealogical lists in Scripture and making all sorts of fanciful applications from them.

C. False teachers use, but misuse, the Bible.

This is how Satan leads God's people astray. If someone was using the Koran or Book of Mormon, true Christians would immediately put up their defenses. But when someone cites the Bible, it sounds good, especially when the things they say make sense and seem to help you cope with your problems.

That's how all the unbiblical teaching about self-esteem has flooded into the church. It comes from Carl Rogers, although it originated with Satan in the Garden, when he showed Eve how to

build her self-esteem by becoming like God. Now it is pervasive in "Christian" self-help books, which often wrongly teach that the Bible commands us to love ourselves. Others begin with the unbiblical assumption that low self-worth is at the heart of most of our emotional problems and then read this back into the Bible as if the Bible taught it.

Like these spinners of genealogical yarns in Paul's day, modern false teachers love to use stories to substantiate their teaching. I've read about a pastor's wife who was suicidal. She had tried to trust and obey God, but that "didn't work." Then she went to the experts, and they got her in touch with her deepest feelings, and now she's a happy, well-adjusted woman. It sounds marvelous, but it doesn't prove a thing, because their counsel is not based on God's truth.

D. False teachers are dogmatic about their speculations.

Paul calls their teaching "speculations" (v. 4), but then says that they "make confident assertions" (v. 7). It's possible to sound biblical and to speak confidently, but to be dead wrong. I get book catalogs that invariably market some of the modern false teachers by portraying them as the expert authorities on complex problems: "The doctors give you professional help with their proven program."

Christianity Today contributed to this unbiblical nonsense when they wrote (2/10/92, p. 28): "Myth: A pastor is competent to counsel his parishioners. Fact: Most pastors are armed with only a meager knowledge of behavioral therapies. A pastor's calling is, primarily, a spiritual one, helping people to find strength in God's presence and a sense of divine direction in the midst of difficulty." They go on to say that pastors need to link up with professionals who can deal with psychological matters. They're dogmatic that pastors, armed with the Bible, can't give expert help; but those who dispense the world's speculations have the answers for your deepest problems!

E. False teachers love arguments but avoid biblical obedience.

These men in Ephesus loved to discuss their speculations, but they didn't want to confront the sin in their lives (v. 19). Paul calls

their discussions “fruitless,” because they didn’t result in more godly lives. False teaching is closely connected with sinful living, because God’s Word of truth is the only source that confronts our sin to make us holy. The word “sound” which Paul repeatedly affixes to “teaching” (1:10) or “doctrine” (4:6) means “healthy,” that is, doctrine that produces spiritually healthy Christians. Sound doctrine results in sound believers. Speculations that don’t result in godliness are worthless.

Conclusion

Some of you, no doubt, are thinking, “Steve, that didn’t sound like a loving message! You were so critical and negative!” I only ask you to critique me by asking, “Did my teaching accurately explain and apply the biblical text?” I’m not free to change the message, even if it comes across as critical. If Paul was critical of these false teachers, then I must be critical of modern false teachers who promote cultural myths as if they were biblical truths. Love must be in line with God’s truth or it is not biblical love, no matter how nice it sounds. Biblical love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith must be the goal of our commandment. Let’s not be distracted from it!

Discussion Questions

1. How can we properly emphasize biblical truth without becoming puffed up with “knowledge”?
2. Note Acts 13:9-10. Was Paul being loving or was he acting in the flesh? How was this “love”?
3. How can we know which truths are worth fighting about and which ones we need to tolerate differences on?
4. Is loving the same as liking? How can we love someone we don’t like?

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