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THE PROPER USE OF THE LAW

1 Timothy 1:8-11

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1 Timothy Lesson 3

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When I was trained to share my faith in Christ, I was taught that I should not mention to a potential convert anything about his particular sins, since that was not the main issue. Yes, you tell him that in general, everyone is a sinner. But you don't confuse the issue by confronting his profanity, immorality, drunkenness, or greed. The only issue, I was told, is his need to believe in Christ, so I should put my focus there. Also, since judgment and hell are sensitive issues, I should downplay them and rather put my emphasis on the abundant life Christ offers here and now. So I was taught and so I practiced for many years.

But I never was completely at ease with this methodology. For one thing, it didn't seem to square with a number of Scriptures. Also, it struck me as being a lot like good salesmanship, where you try not to say anything to turn off the potential customer. But in catering to the customer, it seemed to hold back a crucial part of the truth of the gospel. And, some of the people who "bought the product" didn't seem much concerned with holy living. They were more caught up with having a happy life. For them, Jesus was not so much *essential* as He was *useful*, in terms of helping them to enjoy a better life.

The more I read some of the great evangelists from the past, the more I realized that this approach didn't square with how they presented the gospel. They thundered against sin and preached about judgment and hell, so as to strike terror into the hearts of the lost. Their message wasn't so much, "If you'd like a bit happier life, try Jesus." It was rather, "Because of your great sin, you're under God's wrath. Unless you repent and trust in Christ, you will spend eternity in hell." They pled with people to flee to Christ with a lot more urgency than the modern evangelical salesman with his low-key approach: "Try Jesus for just 30 days and see if you aren't totally satisfied."

I came to realize that a major missing ingredient in the most popular gospel presentations of our day is the proper use of God's law to bring deep, lasting, life-transforming conviction of sin. People who are not convicted of their sin and who do not realize their own utter inability to meet God's holy standard by their own efforts are not desperate for what God offers through the gospel.

They're like casual shoppers. A desperate shopper would be a person who has to have bottled oxygen to live. His supply is almost gone because there has been a strike at the company that supplies it. He's down to his last bottle when he rushes in the door of the bottled oxygen company and pleads, "If you can't sell me more oxygen, I will die!" A casual shopper is a person with a closet full of nice clothes who goes strolling through the mall. He doesn't have a great need for anything, but if something grabs his fancy and the price is right, he might be in the mood to buy.

By not preaching God's holy Law, we've given self-righteous, contented people the false impression that they can be casual shoppers toward the gospel when, in fact, their condition is desperate. In 1 Timothy 1:7, Paul wrote to Timothy about some false teachers troubling the church at Ephesus who wanted to be teachers of the Law, but who didn't understand its proper use. In verses 8-11, Paul shows that ...

The proper use of God's Law is to bring conviction of sin so that people are driven to the gospel for salvation.

When sinful men and women learn the righteous demands of God's Law, they should be driven to despair because of their guilt before God. In this desperate state, the good news that Jesus Christ bore the curse of the Law on our behalf and offers pardon and eternal life freely to any who will believe in Him should impel them to flee to Christ that they might be saved. Thus we who have been entrusted with this great news need to know how to use God's Law properly. We must never fall into the error of marketing Jesus as the way to a happier life.

1. The proper use of the Law is not as a means of salvation, but to bring conviction of sin (1:8-10).

We aren't sure exactly what these false teachers were saying, but if they were Jews with a pharisaical bent, they probably were teaching that keeping the Old Testament Law is the means of salvation, while at the same time they were living in a licentious manner. That sounds contradictory, but really it is not. Jesus condemned the Pharisees because on the one hand they were promoting a works sort of righteousness, urging the keeping of the Law (both the Law of Moses and their various traditions); but at the same time they were inwardly licentious or lawless (Matt. 23:25-28).

It is commonly taught that legalism is on one extreme and licentiousness is on the other and that grace is the balance between the two. But that is not what Scripture teaches. Legalism and licentiousness are actually two sides of the same coin. The common operating principle for both is the flesh. The legalist takes fleshly pride in his observance of certain rules (of course he always picks rules he can keep!), but since he operates in the flesh, he has no power over indwelling sin. Since sin is not being dealt with inwardly, sooner or later, he falls into outwardly lawless behavior. Grace, on the other hand, operates in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit who enables the believer to judge sin at the thought level and to be transformed in the inner person through the renewing of the mind through God's powerful Word.

Thus we must be clear on both the improper and the proper use of God's Law:

- A. The improper use of God's Law is to try to be saved by keeping it.

Paul doesn't specifically address this improper use here, but this was the entire thrust of his life before he was converted. As he explains in Philippians 3:4-6 (also Gal. 1:13-14), he was zealous for the Law, thinking that keeping the Law and the Jewish traditions was the way to salvation. But in actuality, he was a violent persecutor of the church, far in his heart from the inner righteousness required by God's Law. As he explains in Romans 3:20, "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin."

God's Law can be compared to a mirror. The purpose of a mirror is not to wash your face, but rather to show you the dirt on your face and drive you to soap and water. The purpose of the Law is to convict you of your sin and drive you to Christ for cleansing. Keeping the Law can't save you because, as we shall see, no one is able to keep it perfectly. Only Christ can save.

If the Law can't save us and if we can't keep it, we are prone to say that the problem is with the Law. But Paul affirms, "The Law is good, if one uses it lawfully" (1:8). There is nothing wrong with the law. The problem is our sinful nature. It is only the delusion of our sinful pride that makes us think that we can commend ourselves to God by keeping His Law. When we look more carefully at the Law, we discover that ...

- B. The proper use of God's Law is to bring conviction of sin.

Paul says that the Law is not made for a righteous man (1:9). I understand "law" (1:9) to refer to the Law of Moses. Paul has just twice referred to it (1:7-8) and his list of sins (1:9-10) is parallel to the Ten Commandments. When Paul refers to "a righteous man," I take him to mean one who has been justified by faith in Jesus Christ. Such persons are the only ones who are truly righteous, because they have God's righteousness imputed them. A merely good man (by human standards) or a self-righteous man (some take it this way) is still under God's condemnation and thus needs the Law to reveal his sinfulness.

Thus Paul is referring to those who have been declared righteous by faith in Christ. Such persons are not under the Law, but are under grace (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 5:23). This does not mean that they are lawless; they are under the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:2), also called the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). Nor does Paul mean that the Law has no benefit for believers. It reveals God's righteous character and how we must live to please Him. But since "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4), we who are in Christ are not subject to the Law's condemnation. The primary function of the Law is to bring conviction of sin to those who are still in rebellion against God.

Thus Paul says that the Law is for the lawless. God's Law speaks to the sinner to reveal his sin and convict him of sin. Paul gives a catalogue of sins that roughly parallels (in order) the Ten Commandments; first, offenses against God; then, crimes against fellow men. Note the parallels:

1 Timothy 1:9-10	Ten Commandments
Lawless and rebellious	1. No other gods
Ungodly and sinners	2. No idols
Unholy and profane	3. Not take Lord's name in vain
	4. Keep Sabbath
Kill fathers & mothers	5. Honor parents
Murderers	6. No murder
Immoral men, homosexuals	7. No adultery
Kidnappers/slave stealers	8. No stealing
Liars and perjurers	9. No false witness
Whatever else is contrary	10. No coveting

In each case except the last (a catch all term), Paul takes a flagrant violation of the Ten Commandments, perhaps to make the contrast between the righteous (for whom the Law is not intended) and the unrighteous (for whom it is intended) more vivid. At first glance, the person of average morals might look at Paul's list and think, "He's not talking about me. I've never done these things."

But a more careful look will convict even the most moral person. Who has never been lawless or rebellious against God? Who has not been ungodly and missed the mark of God's righteousness (a sinner)? Who has not been unholy and profane (to tread on that which is sacred)? Who has not been disrespectful in striking out at his parents, if not physically, in word or thought? Who has not been angry enough to kill someone else, except for the restraint of the law? Who has not entertained immoral thoughts? Who has not taken that which is not rightfully his? Who has not bent the truth? Who has not wrongfully desired that which is another's? On all ten counts we all stand guilty before God!

But it only takes one count to convict us! The Law is like a chain--one bad link means it's broken. "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (James 2:10). If you are in a boat in a swift river, 25 feet from a high waterfall, and I throw you a chain secured to a tree on the shore, you are saved. But if there is just one bad link in the whole chain, you're lost. One violation of God's Law brings condemnation. Thus the Law is aimed at those who have not been justified by faith in Christ to bring them to a point of despair so they will sense their condemnation before a holy God.

In my opinion, this proper use of the Law is greatly lacking in our day. Many people think they're doing God a favor to put their trust in Christ as Savior. Others come to Christ with the attitude, "I'll try Jesus and see if He can make me happy." What they need to realize is that they're heading toward the falls! You don't need to sell a man about to plunge to his death the idea of grabbing the life ring. We need to know God's Law so that we can use it to reveal God's holiness to a generation of men and women who have flagrantly violated that Law. The proper use of the Law is to bring conviction of sin.

But God does not leave us in despair. The Law is not revealed apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. The result of using the Law properly is to drive people to the gospel for salvation (1:11).

The fact that the Law is not for the righteous but for sinners is "in accord with (Greek = *kata*) the gospel of the glory of the blessed God," that Christ bore the curse of the Law for us. The law proclaims, "We ought to obey God, but we haven't; furthermore, we can't." It's not in our will power to do it. And so we're condemned. The gospel proclaims, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13)! There are three points to note concerning the gospel:

A. The gospel brings spiritual healing.

The word "sound" (1:10) modifying "teaching" means healthy or whole. It is a predominant theme in the Pastoral epistles; this word occurs in its metaphorical sense ("spiritual health") eight times in these letters, and no where else (in that sense) in the New

Testament. The good news is that no matter how spiritually diseased a person may be, no matter how far gone in sin, there is healing in the gospel and in the teaching of God's Word.

The late Malcolm Muggeridge told of an incident while he was in India. While swimming in a river he noticed an Indian woman who was bathing in the same river. She was naked. Muggeridge dived and swam under water to surprise her. As his head rose above the water, the woman turned toward him. Muggeridge froze. The woman was a leper! He retreated with shame, stung by the realization that it was his heart that was leprous.

Religion can clean up the outward person, but only Jesus Christ and the sound teaching of His Word can heal a leprous heart. I don't mean to imply that believing the gospel brings instant, permanent deliverance from lust and other inward sins. We who live in this body struggle against such sins every day (Heb. 12:4; 1 Pet. 2:11). But when we believe the gospel, we are delivered from sin's penalty; as we learn sound teaching, we can experience daily deliverance from sin's power.

B. The gospel reveals the glory of the blessed God.

Verse 11 literally reads, "according to the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, ..." God's glory is the splendor of His attributes. The gospel reveals God's glory--His love, righteousness, mercy, grace, wisdom, and power. God is described as "the blessed God" (6:15 is the only other time this phrase occurs in the Bible). This does not refer to men blessing God, but rather to the fact that God is in and of Himself blessed (or truly happy). He is perfect in Himself. The source of all true happiness and joy is found in God through the gospel.

C. The gospel is entrusted to redeemed sinners to proclaim to lost sinners.

"With which I have been entrusted" (1:11). As Paul goes on to show, he was the chief of sinners, and yet God saved him and entrusted him with the awesome responsibility of proclaiming the gospel to others. The solemn truth is that God does not save us so that we might live happily for ourselves and go to heaven. He has left us on this earth to proclaim His message of reconciliation to others (2 Cor. 5:18-21). He could have shouted it from the sky or

used angels, but He didn't. He uses redeemed sinners to take the message to lost sinners. Sharing the gospel is like one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. God has entrusted every believer with the gospel to take to a lost world!

Conclusion

One of the greatest evangelists of the 19th century was the British preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Both his father and grandfather were preachers, so he grew up in a home with strict Christian standards. He grew up in an age without the pervasive corruption, sensuality, and violence that bombards us through TV, movies, pornography, and other modern media. Listen to his account of the deep conviction of sin that he went through before he was converted at age 15:

When but young in years, I felt with much sorrow the evil of sin. My bones waxed old with my roaring all the day long. Day and night God's hand was heavy upon me. I feared lest the very skies should fall upon me, and crush my guilty soul. God's law had laid hold upon me, and was showing me my sins. If I slept at night, I dreamed of the bottomless pit, and when I awoke, I seemed to feel the misery I had dreamed. Up to God's house I went; my song was but a sigh. To my chamber I retired, and there, with tears and groans, I offered up my prayer, without a hope and without a refuge, for God's law was flogging me with its ten-thonged whip, and then rubbing me with brine afterwards, so that I did shake and quiver with pain and anguish, and my soul chose strangling rather than life, for I was exceeding sorrowful.

... For five years, as a child, there was nothing before my eyes but my guilt, and though I do not hesitate to say that those who observed my life would not have seen any extraordinary sin, yet as I looked upon myself, there was not a day in which I did not commit such gross, such outrageous sins against God, that often and often have I wished I had never been born.... Before I thought upon my soul's salvation, I dreamed that my sins were very few. All my sins were dead, as I imagined, and buried in the graveyard of forgetfulness. But that trumpet of conviction, which aroused my soul to think of eternal things, sounded a resurrection note to all my sins; and,

oh, how they rose up in multitudes more countless than the sands of the sea! Now, I saw that my very thoughts were enough to damn me, that my words would sink me lower than the lowest hell, so that I could not bear them. I thought I had rather have been a frog or a toad than have been made a man. I reckoned that the most defiled creature, the most loathsome and contemptible, was a better thing than myself, for I had so grossly and grievously sinned against Almighty God....

A spiritual experience which is thoroughly flavored with a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him [who has] had it. It is terrible in the drinking, but it is most wholesome in the bowels, and in the whole of the afterlife. Possibly, much of the flimsy piety of the present day arises from the ease with which men attain to peace and joy in these evangelistic days.... Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honour of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography:1 The Early Years* [Banner of Truth], pp. 58-59; last paragraph, p. 54).

Today most Christians would think that a boy who thought like that must be from a severely dysfunctional home and that his parents had seriously failed to build his self-esteem. But that's how God used His Law to convict and drive to the cross one of the greatest evangelists in his generation.

Two final thoughts: First, do you know personally anything of what Spurgeon experienced? Or could it be that you mistakenly think that you're a basically good person? Thus, "forgiven little, you love little." Knowing God's holy Law should make us cling thankfully to the cross and walk daily by the Spirit who works God's righteousness in us. Second, do you recognize that if you've believed the good news, you're under obligation to take it to others? Make sure you don't try to "sell" Jesus as the way to a happy life. He came into this world to save sinners (1:15)! Use God's Law to bring His conviction to sinners, so they will flee to Christ to be saved.

Discussion Questions

1. Are we too quick to alleviate the guilt of a person under conviction of sin? Give biblical support.
2. Have we watered down the sinfulness of sin and the just condemnation of God in an attempt to make the gospel more acceptable in our age? What are some results of this?
3. How (practically) can we share God's Law without sounding like we're condemning the person?
4. Does the Law have any benefits for the believer? What?

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