

Week One: 1Tim 1:1-17

“Beware of Poisoned Wells”

1Ti 1:1-17 ESV 1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2 To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

3 As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. 5 The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, 7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, 9 understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, 11 in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

12 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

When Paul talks about teaching the Church he means we are hearing the proclamation from God Himself. We gather what we hear into our minds and try to understand it. It is like water falling on dry ground and things begin to grow, and we can compare it to water because God’s message is described as water all through the Scriptures. Why is this? We know man cannot live without water; clean, fresh water. Water cleanses us and refreshes us and keeps us alive and without it we dry up and die. What is true physically is true spiritually. Without clean healthy teaching we dry up and die in a way we do not even recognize. We become like the living dead. Paul warns Timothy in this first letter that “different” teaching can be faulty, or unsound, and it will not result in a healthy spiritual life. It is sound teaching that produces spiritual health and real life, what Paul calls Godliness. Paul’s warning is like Jeremiah’s warning to Israel long ago, when they followed false prophets and teachers and they got the same results Paul is warning us about: that false teachers will lead us into a wilderness of confusion and chaos that can only end in death.

Jer 2:8 “... My own priests did not know me. The rulers rebelled against me; the prophets spoke in the name of Baal and worshiped

useless idols. ... 12 And so I command the sky to shake with horror, to be amazed and astonished 13 for my people have committed two sins: they have turned away from me, the spring of fresh water, and they have dug cisterns, cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all. (GNB)

It is God who brings drought to the land and if there is no water that means more than loss of life, it also means sorrow and despair, a "sickness of heart." On a spiritual level it means God is hidden from them. They no longer hear His Word, the water of Grace, that they have rejected.

Jer 14:1 The LORD said to me concerning the drought, 2 "Judah is in mourning; its cities are dying, its people lie on the ground in sorrow, and Jerusalem cries out for help. 3 The rich people send their servants for water; they go to the cisterns, but find no water; they come back with their jars empty. Discouraged and confused, they hide their faces. 4 Because there is no rain and the ground is dried up, the farmers are sick at heart; they hide their faces. (GNB)

"They go to the cisterns, but find no water..." which means they go to their false gods, their idols, but idols do not hear and can not fill them and bring forth life. They refused to hear the words of Jeremiah. God is no longer sending His rain, His fresh healthy water, upon them. Paul has heard this is happening in Ephesus, so he is standing up as an Apostle to give orders to the servant he trusts, his beloved Timothy, who he calls "*my true son in the faith.*" Timothy's faith is genuine and Paul has confidence in him. Like a general in the army, Paul is giving him the command of the Ephesian Church. And Timothy is expected to give orders to those in his charge.

There are many teachers in Ephesus who are teaching from the Scriptures. What is scary is that even though some are teaching from the Bible, they are not telling people who God and Jesus really are. They are telling people what they want to hear, not what they need to hear. Maybe they are entertaining, putting forth new and novel ideas that are interesting and intriguing. Why is that bad? Jeremiah would say "It is a cistern without water!" Paul says such teaching does not result in the one thing that matters: Godliness. The two words that dominate his letter are *teaching and godliness*. For Paul, Godliness is the goal. And teaching that does not pursue that goal promotes "*speculations rather than the stewardship from (or of) God,*" and people "*have wandered away into vain discussion...*" Notice Paul uses the word *vain*. Empty, worthless talk that accomplishes nothing but self-promotion and human vanity.

Paul is very concerned for his beloved Church.

The wells are being poisoned. The cisterns are dry.

Sound doctrine leads to godliness, which means a growing, healthy, mature Christian. Paul says "*The aim or goal of our charge to teach sound doctrine is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*(1:5). The goal of our teaching is love! Sound doctrine is the blessed rain that purifies the heart, cleanses the conscience, and waters the the soil of faith, all producing good works from a resurrection empowered personality. When Paul says a *sincere* faith, he uses a compound word that means "*not under judgment*" kind of faith. The one truly born of God is never under judgment and condemnation. The one born of God when tested will prove to be genuine and trustworthy. *Sincere* faith is not seeking righteousness by doing works, rather *sincere* faith is doing works because *we are* righteous. Paul would

agree with James who tells us *“Faith (sincere faith) without works is dead (not being watered with the Word of Life).”*

Paul really gets to the point when he says *“Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.”* These *“certain people,”* which could be both men or women, have swerved off course, lost their way and are now pointing in the wrong direction, so they have a completely different goal now, and that goal has nothing to do with true righteousness and godliness. Paul says they don't know what they are talking about! They are empty cisterns. And Paul should know. He is a former Jewish rabbi who knows the Law and the Prophets better than any of the teachers in Ephesus, and certainly better than the Gentile citizens of Ephesus who are listening to them. Paul says they are teaching the Law and getting very bad results but Paul does not want us to think that teaching the Law is a bad thing. Everything the Apostles proclaimed about Jesus came from the Law and the Prophets; the complete body of the Jewish Scriptures. We need to have a firm grasp of the meaning of the Scriptures because in them we actually do find Jesus. The Law does not stand *against* us. We are children of God, and it is *given for* us, and that is the point Paul makes when he says: *“Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just (for God's children) but for the lawless and disobedient...”* By *lawfully* Paul means we must *teach it correctly* because he tells Timothy in his second letter: *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...”* (2Tim 3:16) All Scripture can be used to instruct us in godliness because they all point us to Jesus, the King we serve and follow.

But God wants the Scriptures and the Law to stand against and judge those who are lawless and disobedient. Paul offers up a list of human actions that oppose all godliness and good order. The Law of Moses, which is perfect, and governments, which are imperfect, are ordained by God as restrainers of evil, but never a means of salvation or righteousness. Laws do not change the heart, they diagnose the heart. Paul is warning the Church that listening to the false teachers puts us on a path of ungodliness and on the path to judgment. We are all in danger of this if not for God's grace and mercy. We are also in danger of picking and choosing which sins are the most wicked, perhaps even unforgivable. We don't see our own sins, but are quick to see the sins of others. Of course, depending on our culture, some of the sins in Paul's list would not be considered wrong at all. Paul faced this in Ephesus. The typical Ephesian noblemen would be very offended by one part of Paul's list because a good Roman citizen could have relations with anyone, male or female, and they never considered it as immoral. It was perfectly legal and normal. It was only Roman women who were forbidden to have sex outside of marriage. But Paul is telling the Ephesian Church we are called to a new kind of morality and that this morality would challenge the culture of Caesar and threaten the freedoms men enjoyed. For Paul all sin matters and he wants all men to be freed from the bondage of sin, but Paul is not in Ephesus to change the culture, the laws or the customs of Rome, though he suffers the backlash of persecution because they see him as trying to do that very thing. While he clearly condemns both heterosexual and homosexual sin in the same way he condemns lying and cheating, he wants to see lives changed as they come to the Church because of the power of the message he proclaims. There is a new King, a Savior raised from the

grave and He is the True God calling people to a new priesthood, to a new level of holiness. No one who comes to see this and believe it can ever be the same as they were. They change not because Rome changes the laws, but because they have new power, a new life! So Paul does not condemn the citizens of Ephesus. Paul knows change is slow, and change comes through Christ changing the heart. He knows this from his own experience and that is why he refuses to stand on any moral high ground. As far as Paul is concerned, no one is holy and righteous according to the Law of God, not even himself.¹

And this is where Paul shifts the whole tone of the letter and begins to pray: *12 I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* Gratitude! Gratitude for God's mercy for someone so undeserving of that mercy. Paul usually starts most of his letters with prayers of thanksgiving and praise for the marvelous grace of God. But here, as in the letter to the Galatians, he cuts right to the point. He abruptly begins with a commandment to Timothy *"to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine."*(1:3) Then Paul gets to this catalogue of sins that truly are wicked and evil, sins that the Law can only restrain. It is so easy to stand in judgment of "those people" as I let myself off the hook. Paul does not do that. I think Paul stops here in the middle of his commands to Timothy because he is driven to thank God and praise God for the mercy he's received. He knows that it is God's Law that stands in judgment against all men and all sin, but it also stands in judgment of him if not for one Person: *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."*(1:15) Far from thinking he is better than "those sinners" in his list, Paul presents himself as worse. He says *"I AM the foremost, I hold the chief position."* I *"WAS a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent of Jesus"* but I still *AM* a sinner. Paul is holding himself out as proof that the least deserving person can be saved and receive God's indescribable mercy. That means anyone who finds themselves on Paul's list and begins to wonder *"Can what happened to Paul happen for me?"* And that is the question Paul wants us to ask.²

I really see Paul's prayer as the heart of this letter and the true motivation for all that Paul will say to us. In fact, it may be the heartbeat of all of the Epistles of Paul. As we already have seen, *"The aim of our command (the command to teach sound doctrine) is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."* Our goal of our teaching is *LOVE*. What does that mean? It means we have a message that points to, or *AIMS* at, a Person. In 1:15 Paul says *"The Word is Faithful, and deserves total acceptance: 'Christ Jesus came into the world with one specific aim and goal—to save sinners...'"* The Word, the message, is about Jesus and His faithfulness in coming to die for us. *"This is a trustworthy saying..."* Paul says. We can trust it because we can trust Him. All teaching and prophecy find their end in Him. Paul says that hanging on to this *Word*, the *"Faithful Saying"*, keeps us on the right path and on course as followers of Jesus. We are not engaged in an endless discussion of theories and philosophies, but a simple message with a very clear goal. And Paul uses himself as a prime example of how low Jesus will stoop to save the worst of us. Paul has taken us back to his former life when he was a *"blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent,"* to a time when he really thought he was doing God's will and protecting Israel from idolatrous heresy. Now he confesses that his rage and his campaign of destruction against the

followers of Jesus made him no different than any of the previous persecutors of God's people. Because Paul was so brutal and vicious that the Christians he pursued, who were hiding from him in fear, thought Paul was certainly beyond God's mercy. It took a long time for many of them to truly trust him even after he met Jesus and saw how wrong he was. But Paul's message is that nobody is beyond God's reach. And Paul says he was acting "*ignorantly, in unbelief.*" He knew from John and Peter and many others who witnessed the crucifixion that Jesus asked His Father to "*forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing.*" Jesus prayed this even for the Roman soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. They were ignorant! One centurion, after hearing Jesus ask the Father to forgive them and seeing all that was taking place said "*Certainly this man was innocent!*" The Father breaks through the ignorance. Paul looks back and sees that he, like them, had had no idea what he was doing. He may even see his own salvation as an answer to that prayer of Jesus from the cross. That is why Paul holds himself out as an example of the lavish mercy and grace of God.

Paul closes his prayer with an outburst of praise to the one true God: "*To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*" You may recognize the line from the hymn by W. Chalmers Smith, "*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.*" I have sung that hymn many times and can hear the tune in my head. When Paul thinks of Jesus and His forgiveness, and the mercy of God, and the glory of His Kingdom compared to his former life, his mind is filled with praise for his one and only God. Paul is not teaching doctrine in these verses, though there is a lot here to learn and to teach. No, Paul is teaching us how to pray and worship because worship is at the heart of the genuine "*never to be under judgment*" Christian life. It is prayer and worship that has been soaked in the Word of God, the pure water of grace that quenches the thirst of our deepest desires and cleanses us from our darkest stains. It is the rain of heaven that fills our well to overflowing with the pure water of the Gospel, not the foul water of our own broken cisterns, our own ideas.

Father, We never want to forget your mercy to us. Without you we are foolish and arrogant and lost in our own imaginations. You are the truth, and you have shown us that truth in your Son, and revealed that truth to our hearts through your Holy Spirit. We praise you, we thank you and we honor you. The glory is yours Father, and you are beautiful to us. As we honor you today, we pray that each day you give us the grace to persevere, all the way to your eternal Kingdom. Amen.

¹McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity* pp.164-5. Crossway. Kindle Edition. Some of the ideas for this paragraph are from the chapter “Isn’t Christianity Homophobic?” Also, in her book *The Secular Creed* she says, “In Romans 2, anyone who has read Paul’s list of sins and come out feeling smug gets a slap in the face: ‘You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself.’ (Rom. 2:1).” That same thought would apply to this list in 1 Timothy. See McLaughlin, Rebecca. *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims* p. 35. The Gospel Coalition. Kindle Edition.

2 For two excellent examples of how coming to believe and experience the salvation and the love of Jesus Christ can drastically change a life I commend the lives Rosaria Butterfield and Charles Colson.

Rosaria was a liberal professor at Syracuse University in a committed lesbian relationship. Through the friendship and compassionate kindness of Ken Smith, the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church, she was introduced to Jesus Christ, who is now the ruling King of her life. For her story and testimony, I refer you to this *Christianity Today* article: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-february/my-train-wreck-conversion.html>

Chuck Colson is at the other end of the spectrum. His sin is not sexual but immoral all the same. He was driven by power and greed. He was an ultra-conservative Republican who served the Nixon administration as Nixon’s “hatchet man.” He was indicted for his part in the Watergate coverup and went to prison. As he was facing his trial he was led to a prayer group where he met Harold Hughes, the Democratic Senator from Iowa. It was through his friendship he became a Christian. After his release from prison he founded the Prison Fellowship Ministries in 1976, which today is still active as the nation’s largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families. He is the author of *Born Again*, an autobiography of his life in the white House, his fall and indictment, and his conversion to Christ. For his testimony, I refer you to this article: <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/2020/04/the-glorious-defeat-of-chuck-colson/>