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1 Timothy 1:3-7

Second Message

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THE GOAL OF RESTORATION: LOVE

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

For the last several weeks I have been watching Public Television's series "The War," a compelling documentary on World War II, told from the perspective of those who fought it and three American towns that were impacted by it. As one born during the prosperous times following the war, I was amazed by how unified our country was during those years and the immeasurable sacrifice we were willing to pay for a cause we believed was right. For half a decade we placed everything we had on the line to liberate nations from evil on two fronts. My wife's father served as a weatherman in England, giving the green light for the B-17's to fly across the channel when the weather was clear. A quiet man, he never spoke about his experiences, but I learned from Emily that it had had a devastating impact on him.

In 1943, the life expectancy of these crewmen was 17 days. Their planes did not have enough fuel to take them into the heartland of Germany. In August of that year, the unescorted bombers had to venture further than ever before in an attempt to take out the industrial center of the Nazi war machine. Instead of crippling the German ball bearing factories, the Allied bombers became sitting ducks for 300 Luftwaffe fighters. Sixty B-17's were shot down and 600 crewmen perished. Those who miraculously survived returned in planes that looked more like shooting range tin cans than viable aircraft. Eight weeks later, they were ordered back for a second attempt. October 14, 1943 became known as Black Thursday. The results were almost identical: 59 of the 291 bombers shot down; only 33 landed without damage.

Sitting in my armchair watching the series, I couldn't help but wonder if I would have had the courage to climb into one of those B-17's and fly back into the jaws of death. I began to understand why Emily's father had a breakdown when he was recalled into service during the Korean War. I was very thankful for not having to serve in a war.

But then the Lord reminded me that, lest I become too complacent, there is a war going on, a war of liberation on a scale more massive than the two world wars of the last century. And, like it or not, Christians are called into the front lines to confront the enemy. We are the only ones equipped with the weapons of liberation: the gospel of Jesus Christ, coupled with the gift of the Holy Spirit. If we truly grasp the power of the gospel and the infinite value that God places on human life, we will begin to understand the military tone and uncompromising zeal of Paul's first letter to Timothy.

Wherever the apostle traveled, planting churches for over two decades, it wasn't long before some form of false teaching began to infiltrate the communities, threatening the purity of the gospel that he had preached. Gordon Fee suggests that during the years of 54-63 A.D., Paul was constantly battling on two fronts:

On the one hand, a Judaizing faction from the church in Jerusalem, undoubtedly spurred on by conservative elements in the Diaspora, was insisting on the circumcision of Gentiles who have become believers in Jesus. They wanted such people to become full members of Israel, as it had been formerly constituted. On the other hand, religious syncretism was in the air in the Hellenistic world, and many Hellenistic Jews appear to have been involved in such speculations. When Gentiles were converted, they too, brought to the faith a lot of foreign baggage, both philosophical and religious, that to them seemed easy enough to absorb within their new faith in Christ. But Paul realized clearly that such foreign elements would ultimately destroy the gospel every bit as much as Judaizing would.¹

Jesus had warned the apostles that the devil would use false teaching as one of his tactics to undermine God's kingdom throughout the church age. God's people should expect violence and persecution, coupled with subversive infiltration by the devil's planting counterfeit seed in God's field (Matt 13:24-28). Yet the thing that made the situation in Ephesus so troubling was that the false teaching did not originate with outsiders, it was being perpetuated by their trusted leaders. This was the very thing that Paul had warned their elders about five years earlier. Before leaving them in Ephesus, he predicted that "savage wolves" would infiltrate their own leadership and "not spare the flock," and would "distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

In our text this morning, Paul outlines Timothy's strategy of restoration: first, of boldly confronting all that is false; and second, faithfully cultivating what is true.

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain persons not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm. (1 Tim 1:3-7 TNIV)

I. Confronting False Teaching (1:3-4)

A. Confront boldly and directly

Paul left Timothy behind in Ephesus for the expressed purpose, to "command certain persons not to teach false doctrines any longer." Timid Timothy was to confront these errant teachers with bold, direct intervention, armed with the mandate and authority of the apostle, making sure there was complete compliance to Paul's commands in the letter. There is an urgency to Paul's words. The tone of the letter is all business. It is dominated by commands that are not open for debate. Seven times in the letter we find this military-like term "command" (*paraggelein, paraggelia*) used as a verb or noun.

1. "command certain persons not to teach false doctrines any longer." (1:3)
2. "The goal of this command is love," (1:5)
3. "I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well." (1:18)
4. "Command and teach these things." (4:11)
5. "Prescribe (command) these things as well, so that they may be above reproach." (5:7 NASB)
6. "I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ." (6:13-14)
7. "Command those who are rich" (6:17)

Paul does not always come across with this much force in his letters. When he is giving advice to the church in Corinth as to whether, given an impending crisis, engaged couples should proceed with their wedding plans, he writes, "Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give

a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy" (1 Cor 7:25). But whenever the gospel itself is being threatened, his zeal reaches the boiling point. Like a mother bear robbed of her cubs, he will do anything to save his flock from danger. When you pervert the gospel, you bring irreparable damage to souls.

Paul's uncompromising zeal for truth seems foreign to us who are living in a pluralistic age, where tolerance is the supreme value. It's just not politically correct to apply our standards to anyone else's religious opinions! But if the apostle seems intolerant, so was Jesus. He, too, gave severe warnings about the dangers of false teachers. If we do not have zeal for the truth, it calls into question the value we place on human life and the sacrifice that Christ made. Without such zeal, for which both Jesus and the apostles gave their life's blood, we could not be saved from hell's destructive fires. It would be good to ask ourselves whether, in an effort to embrace non-believers with acceptance and love, we have lost our holy zeal for the truth. For Timothy, who was under Paul's command, that was not an option.

B. Their teaching is a futile, dead-end road

The exact content of the false teaching in Ephesus is difficult to pin down with precision, but certain features of it appear with clarity. Paul says, "that they want to be teachers of the law." That in itself is not bad. A proper teaching of the law can awaken dead consciences, convict us of sin, and turn us to faith in Christ Jesus. But these aspiring rabbis did not use the law lawfully. Instead they became obsessed with "myths and endless genealogies." This suggests that they had found the volumes of esoteric Jewish tradition in the non-canonical books a happy hunting ground for their speculative minds.

Genealogies played a significant role in the Old Testament, serving to trace the line of one's parentage as a legitimate heir to the Promised Land. But in several of the non-canonical writings, like *The Book of Jubilees* and *The Life of Adam and Eve*, genealogies are embellished with legendary stories replete with myriads of fanciful details that do not serve the purpose for which Bible was written. More important than tracing one's parentage, Israel's genealogies ultimately looked forward to identify David's future seed and the legitimate heir of his throne, God's Messiah.

This is why the gospel of Mathew begins with "the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). Now that Christ has come, there is no longer any need for genealogies, for Christ's progeny are not born of the flesh, but of the Spirit (John 3:5-8). To be in the kingdom of God, you must be related to Christ by the Spirit. Yet these would-be rabbis were inundating God's flock with these non-biblical texts, going on endlessly with all their mental gymnastics.

C. They shut down God's work

To Paul, this kind of teaching was not just futile and fanciful; it was criminal. For "Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith." Instead of being marked by unified praise and mutual edification, many of the home fellowships in Ephesus became dominated by intellectual egos that set arguments aflame and left damaged emotions in the wake of their controversies. As a result, God's "work" had come to a standstill.

The term "work" is perhaps not the best translation of the Greek term *oikonomia* (lit: "house law," thus "management"), as it obscures the idea of "household" that underlies the term. Townner explains that it "refers to the organization and ordering of a household or the responsibility of management that maintains the order."² Because the church is indeed "God's house" (3:15), it is therefore necessary to know how God has ordered life and relationships within his household and how its administration is to be carried forward to re-shape the entire world. Paul says this wondrous plan by which he was now ushering in the consummation of the ages is advanced only by faith.

But just as the Jews became sidetracked from building God's temple when they returned from exile, leaving it in a state of ruins to build their own houses, so these false teachers had shut down the work on God's new temple, the church. There is nothing more shameful to a community than a half finished building left unattended and exposed to the elements. No building at all is better than one that stands unfinished. Today, nothing

brings more shame to God's name than half-baked, immature Christians attempting to exert their influence on the world with theological half-truths and little grace or wisdom. In Haggai's day, the prophet charged the people, "Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD (Hag 1:7-8).

Earlier, upon his leaving the elders in Ephesus, Paul made it quite clear that it is God's word that builds his church: "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). It is the faithful teaching of God's word that nurtures and strengthens our faith, advancing his kingdom in the world. This is why our church is committed to expository preaching week after week, month after month. The elders take responsibility to see that God's name is honored by what is taught from our pulpit. After each preaching series, they evaluate not only what was taught, but also the spirit in which it was given. They then give us feedback to make sure we are not getting sidetracked in the minors, as it were, or as it is sometimes tempting, to give glory to ourselves instead of Christ. I confess that I have needed such correction on more than one occasion. No matter how many years one teaches, one is still vulnerable to self-deception.

Having given Timothy orders to silence all that is false, the apostle now reminds him what is the ultimate goal of true worship.

II. Cultivate All that Is True (1 Tim 1:5)

Restoring churches to health is somewhat akin to what a landscaper does to renovate a garden. First, he removes all the weeds and unwanted intruders, like tenacious Bermuda grass. Then he prepares the soil by adding natural nutrients and topsoil. Finally, he puts in new and healthy plants, which need special care to make sure they take root properly. Once their roots are established, the yard is soon teeming with new life, color and fragrances. In similar fashion, Paul charges Timothy that once he has rooted out false teaching, he must be diligent to cultivate God's field with healthy teaching that promotes new life in community. You can test if this new life is genuine, says Paul, not by theological speculations, but by the fruit of love.

Notice that Paul expresses no concern for the size of the church or its organizational structure. Is there love in their midst? This is his main concern. Are Christians living merely out of a sense of duty and rules, or are they showing spontaneous love for God and each other? Paul's statement is similar both in content and structure to Israel's great commandment, the *shema*, given in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. If we are careful to also note the differences, we will see that Paul has re-written Israel's *shema* with the theology of the New Covenant:

Moses:

Love the LORD your God
with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your strength. (Deut 6:5)

Paul:

The goal of this command is love,
which comes from a pure heart
and a good conscience
and a sincere faith. (1 Tim 1:5)

Because God is one (meaning, there is no division in his heart), he requires that we love him with an undivided heart (repeated three times for supreme emphasis). Sadly, Israel could never respond to God's unmerited love and grace with her whole heart. But Ezekiel announced the good news that one day God would do divine surgery, removing her heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh, having God's commandments written upon it by his Spirit. The result would be that through this radical surgery, God's people would no longer have divided hearts but could freely serve him with one heart: "And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within

them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God” (Ezek 11:19-20 NASB).

Because the promise given by Ezekiel has been fulfilled in Christ, Paul reminds Timothy that genuine love is no longer an idealistic dream, but a reality that springs from an interior life that has been thoroughly cleansed by the blood of Christ and regenerated by the washing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5). Thus, true biblical teaching should always be continuing this renewal process by first leading us into confession, repentance and cleansing through the blood of Christ. Love cannot take root in a soul plagued by guilt. But when a heart has been set free from condemnation, it freely loves, as Jesus said of the woman who kissed his feet and wet them with her tears: “I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47).

When love is planted through a cleansed heart, it grows and is refined through a good, or healthy, conscience. Without a good conscience love is impossible to demonstrate. There is little teaching on the conscience today, but to Paul, cultivating a healthy conscience was of prime importance for it gave him supreme confidence and freedom in his ability to love others.

Someone has well defined the conscience as the eye of the soul, recording what it sees. Two qualities make it healthy: freedom and sensitivity. Freedom is essential to liberate Christians from laboring under a burden of rules. For some Christians, their lives often appear as if they are walking on a tightrope, their progress painfully slow because they are always fearful of falling. What frees an over scrupulous conscience is knowing that in the New Covenant we have only one law to obey, “to love one another,” coupled with the confidence in the person of the Holy Spirit to guide us. But along with freedom we also need sensitivity to how our actions affect others. As we feed on God’s word, not only does the conscience become more free, the Spirit makes it more sensitive to relationships. No longer do we go around insensitive to others, like a bull in a china shop, impervious to all the damaged emotions we leave behind.

Finally, once the heart is cleansed, the conscience liberated and fine-tuned, then we can act with a “sincere” faith. The term “sincere” is literally “unhypocritical.” In the Greek world, the word “hypocrite” was the same as the word for actor (*upokrisis* - “to play a part”). Ephesus was filled with play actors who performed Greek dramas, playing their parts well. But, says Paul, Christians are not to play this role. True Biblical teaching does not merely to engage the mind but enlightens the heart and moves the will to step out in faith to love God and others with the whole heart. Jerome Quinn well summarizes the integrity that Christians should demonstrate:

The author leaves no room for driving wedges between the external manifestations of love for God and the internal Christian life from which they proceed. Thus the heart must be clean, dedicated solely to the one God and his Christ. The conscience must be clear, i.e. “good,” leveling no reproach about the deeds of the worshipper’s life. The faith must be unfeigned, not simulated but a genuine adherence to the whole revelation proclaimed by Paul.³

In summary, Timothy is charged to restore the church in Ephesus by putting an abrupt end to the false teaching and replacing it with true Biblical teaching that has as its goal “love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” As James S. Stewart (1896-1990), called by many the most outstanding modern Scottish preacher, proclaimed, the aim of all genuine preaching should be:

To feed the mind with the truth of God,
To quicken the conscience by the holiness of God,
To purge the imagination by the beauty of God,
To devote the will to the purpose of God.

III. Overcoming Modern “Myths and Endless Genealogies”: One Elder’s Story

Reflecting on these truths, I wonder what Paul would say to our church in Cupertino, identifying different traditions that we have brought into our faith from our varied cultural backgrounds as “false teaching.” Though we may think they are innocent, they may in fact be hindering us from fully embracing the New Covenant. To help us with this, I have asked one of our elders, Jerry Tu, to share how in his spiritual journey, he and his wife have had to address certain customs and traditions which they grew up with in their Asian culture.

Jerry Tu: Let me give you my family background to set the context of my sharing this morning. I am a first generation Chinese immigrant. I came to the United States as a high schooler and have spent my adult life here in this country. My wife is also Chinese. She was born in New York City to traditional immigrant parents who first worked in a Chinese hand laundry and worked hard to build a successful career in banking.

Both of us grew up steeped in our Chinese culture and heritage, which we appreciate and cherish.

Customs, Beliefs, and Superstitions

However, along with the heritage come traditions, customs, taboos, and superstitions that have influenced us and have an impact on our lives even today. After both of us accepted the Lord as young adults, we realized some of these cultural traditions are the modern day equivalents of the “myths,” “endless genealogies,” and “speculations” that Paul mentions in his letter to Timothy. These falsehoods have diluted the power of the gospel in our lives and kept us from pursuing God wholeheartedly. Those of you who have an Asian heritage will probably identify with some if not all of what I will share this morning. I pray that it will be relevant to all of you in the body.

I’ll start with a bold statement: Much of Chinese and Asian tradition is **based on fear**. Much of this culture revolves around saying and doing things to soothe the evil spirits so that catastrophe does not befall us.

Ancestor worship, idols, and “Feng Shui” abound. This term “Feng Shui” means “wind” and “water,” essential elements of “creation.” It is believed that the proper balance and harmony of these elements will bring good fortune, while an imbalance brings misfortune. With proper Feng Shui, people believe that they can make themselves more compatible with their surroundings, thereby making a positive impact on their finances, health, and emotions. During the past 18 months, in my trips to China, Taiwan, and Thailand, I have seen countless Feng Shui elements, sculptures, temples, and idols that appease evil spirits.

And it is here in the Silicon Valley as well. Just go to Chinese market on Blaney Avenue and Bollinger and you will see a little incense altar in the corner; a Thai restaurant in Mountain View has an elaborate spirit house in the back to ward off evil; a big Merlion statue outside a restaurant in Cupertino auspiciously faces east for best Fung Shui effect. Just ask any area realtor which houses are not marketable because of bad Feng Shui.

How have these elements appeared in the lives of my wife and me? The impact is subtle but it is indisputably there. When we moved or traveled or had medical procedures, my mother-in-law would check a lunar calendar and almanac to find which days were “good” for such important events. During Chinese New Year, we’re not supposed to sweep the house for fear of sweeping away any good luck, and we wear something red and eat oranges because these colors symbolize happiness and good fortune. We dare not speak of anything bad, especially death, in the presence of our parents. For most important events in life, like funerals, childbirth, weddings or business grand openings, there are similar taboos and superstitions. I must confess that we follow some of them. They appear to be innocuous and harmless, but when we begin to believe they actually determine the future, we have “false teaching” and “idolatry.”

Another example is wearing jade. Chinese revere jade and believe that it brings safety, health, and longevity. So when my wife went off to college

and started working at IBM, her mother gave her a jade bracelet for “protection.”

One rainy day, as my wife left her apartment for work, she slipped on the wet, steep stairs and plunged head-first all the way down the stairs. Amazingly, she got up without a broken bone, bruise or even a scratch! The only thing that broke was the jade bracelet. She couldn't believe it! Was it the jade bracelet that protected her? Should she praise the jade or praise and thank God? The answer to that question is obvious in hindsight, but when you have had superstitions and taboos ingrained in you since childhood, the immediate answer was not obvious. These old thoughts sometimes sneak into our minds: perhaps the jade did help a little bit? What harm could it be to wear another bracelet or give one to our children for protection? Innocuous, but false and unbiblical. It is this kind of dangerous falsehood that Paul warned Timothy about. When we put trust in anything other than our Almighty God, it becomes idolatry and sin in the sight of the Lord.

My family is in the process of allowing God to reveal and then peel away these layers of the old self, replacing the fear-based life of tradition with the freeing assurance that our God is sovereign and in control. Our prayer is that in our home, the next generation learns total trust in God and not a set of do's and don'ts rooted in fear and cultural taboos.

Honor/Shame

The Asian culture also is driven by “honor” and “shame.” “Keeping face” or conversely, “losing face” is a big deal for Chinese families. We will do all we can to appear good and honorable before others. We keep family skeletons hidden from outsiders and even from each other. It is taboo to talk about divorce, bankruptcy, mental illness, sin, etc. Because of the shame involved, we hide family dysfunctions, repress emotions, and do not accept or seek help or counseling. We create walls of isolation in which we suffer in private rather than sharing the burden and receiving help. Openness and transparency is far from our normal conduct.

However, this insistence on keeping pain, sins and needs private is contrary to the healthy development of the church. Acts 2 gives a model of a community that is open, sharing burdens, pains, and resources. In order for all the saints to use their gifts and contribute to the growth of the whole church body, there needs to be transparency, vulnerability and openness – and that's hard for us. We who are bound by the shackles of “honor/shame” need to let go of this cultural taboo for our own sake as well as for the sake of the body.

My father-in-law was well known in the Chinatown community. My wife remembers that everywhere they went in Chinatown, people would stop and greet him. After my wife graduated from college, her dad started having financial problems. For three years he hid his struggles from friends and family for fear of bringing shame to his family name. Seeking outside counseling and help was not an option for him. His debt grew, and in the end, he lost all he had worked for. When the family lost their home, they had to move into an apartment. People from my wife's church came to help them move because they couldn't afford movers. She still remembers her pastor and half the congregation showing up at their front door to help. Her parents were amazed and were so touched by their love. Later that year, both her dad and mom accepted the Lord. God has restored them to himself.

I confess that too often it is easier for me to put up a front of well being rather than being vulnerable and admit my own internal struggles. It's something that the Lord is working on in my life. My example: two years ago, I shared a personal struggle at an elders meeting and I was loved by my brothers. I was not shamed but accepted by them.

Performance and Success

But the most powerful cultural influence that has shaped my spiritual walk is the quest for perfection. The Asian culture places utmost value on hard work and success, which is usually measured by wealth. Both my wife and I grew up hearing over and over again that we must get a good education in order to get a good job, in order to earn lots of money and hopefully, get married and have lots of sons.

We see this mentality in the Asian populations in our neighborhood schools, Monta Vista, Lynbrook, and Saratoga high schools. Parents put so much pressure on their kids to be straight A students, immersing them in private tutors, after school SAT classes, preparing them for Ivy League colleges as a stepping stone to become doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Kids are rewarded solely on work and performance and find acceptance only when they achieve perfection. My wife and I do our best to not place our kids under those pressures. We give them grace and instill in them a sense of identity of who they are in Christ, not what they accomplish in school. But they still see it all around them in their peers – a work-based, performance-oriented mentality that carries over to all aspects of their lives.

This works-based attitude isn't just Asian, is it? It permeates the whole valley. I know this has been ingrained into my psyche, and it not only affects my career but also my spiritual life. I realize now that for too long I have been work-based in my ministry. I want to do, do, do for God. I want to prove my worth to my heavenly Father by what I “accomplish” for his kingdom.

My works-based journey had been going on for years until two years ago when I hit a drought, a spiritual wilderness. I was drained, burned out from “ministry” and not seeing any tangible fruit from my labors. I was spiritually parched and pleaded with God to reveal to me what I was doing wrong, what I am to “do” for him.

Then God in his mercy met me in my brokenness. Last summer, he took me thousands of miles away from my family, church and work into the sweltering humidity in Thailand.

There I was broken. Then, in the quiet of the night, God embraced me.

He said, “It's not what you do that's important to Me; it's who you are. You are my child, and I want you to pursue your relationship with me passionately.” It's not works, performance, or accomplishments; it's accepting my identity as his child, redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

This was a simple lesson, one that we all know in our heads but too often disregard in our hearts. That was a life-changing week for me. The Lord loves me for who I am. He cleansed my conscience and liberated me from the chains of works-oriented mentality.

I have a new-found joy to love him and serve the body. God has used my brokenness to “promote ... God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” May the Lord liberate us all from falsehood and redeem us for his work with genuine faith.

1 Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIBCNT; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 9.

2 Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 112.

3 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 80.