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1 Timothy 1:6-11

Third Message

Brian Morgan

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## THE WAY OF RESTORATION: THE RIGHT USE OF LAW

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

One of my delights as a pastor is doing premarital counseling to prepare engaged couples for a lifetime of cultivating love in the sacred bonds of marriage. It's somewhat like the joy of doing new construction. You take time to lay down a solid foundation, reinforced with plenty of rebar to withstand earthquakes. Premarital counseling can help young couples establish good habits and right priorities that hopefully will last a lifetime.

I find marriage counseling after the fact much more challenging, however. That is more like restoring an old home. You begin by naively thinking the construction process will go without a hitch, but then the demolition process uncovers years of dry rot, faulty wiring, shoddy work, and the code violations of previous builders. It is especially demanding when the entire structure has to be brought up to code before new construction can begin. In some cases, this involves exposing and fortifying the old foundations. Though the work is difficult, demanding, and costly, the process of restoration can be even more rewarding than new construction. Nothing brings more glory to God than resurrecting dead marriages, healing damaged relationships between siblings, or restoring long lost friendships to health and wholeness.

Considering the work that goes into restoring just one relationship, imagine the effort involved in restoring an entire community! This is the monumental task that confronted Timothy in Ephesus. False teachers had infiltrated the church, damaging sacred bonds of love within an entire community. Timothy is authorized by the apostle Paul to command these leaders to stop spreading their false doctrines and get the church back on track, with healthy teaching that fosters "love, from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1:5).

Our text addresses two vital questions we face in the process of restoration. First, How did we get here? It does little good to make attempts at healing until we know how we got to where we are. No doctor prescribes a cure for an ailment until he knows the nature and extent of the disease. The second question is, What is the necessary first step to begin the process of restoration?

### I. How Did We Get Here? (1 Tim 1:6-7)

**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 1:6-7 TNIV)**

When dealing with false teachers, it is tempting to get caught up in their theological arguments, only to find yourself trapped in a quagmire, wrangling about words and arguments that go nowhere. Yet this never seemed to be the case with Jesus when he dealt with controversial questions of theology. The Lord was never one to shun controversy, but whenever the Scribes or Pharisees approached him to inquire about some theological issue, he turned their question on its head. Instead of answering them on their terms, he asked his op-

ponents a question or two designed to expose their own evil motives. In the end, they found themselves on the defensive, condemned by the very kangaroo courts they had constructed to level accusations against Jesus. In like manner, Paul is training Timothy to look beneath the content of the doctrinal controversies to the evil desires that were driving the teaching. More often than not, gross theological error is not the product of misguided thinking, but deviant morality.

Note how carefully Paul identifies the sequential steps of their decline. Their damaging doctrines are fostered not by ignorance, but a deliberate moral choice to "abandon" (*astocheo* - "to go astray by departing from moral or spiritual standards") all that was pure and true, which in turn caused them to "wander" into "empty, fruitless talk." Though they appear to have intellectual aspirations, wanting "to be teachers of the law," they haven't even enrolled in the right school. Having abandoned the truth of the gospel, their minds were darkened by the devil (2 Tim 2:26). To cover up their ignorance they learned to turn up the volume, pontificating with the unshakable confidence of our modern-day info-commercials.

What caused such a departure from the truth? The answer in a word is, greed. They did not serve the flock for love, but for money. They believed that "godliness is a means to financial gain" (6:5), and would stoop to any level to attain it. In Ephesus, they were adept in making inroads into homes through gullible women who, weighed down with guilt from their past, were extremely vulnerable to supporting them financially (2 Tim 3:6-7). Tragically, this sounds all too familiar.

For Timothy to do battle with these teachers solely over their doctrine would be futile, for they were in need of repentance, not more arguments. If the moral issues were not gently (2 Tim 2:25) but firmly addressed, then he will be lured into endless battles over words that only "result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between people of corrupt mind" (6:4-5). As Paul warns, such quarreling "ruins those who listen" (2 Tim 2:14).

So Timothy must not be naïve about the deviant character of these teachers and the relationship it had to their deceptive teaching. The church at Ephesus got into this dark state not because these teachers lacked the opportunity to know the truth, but because they forsook the truth. The same is true in our personal relationships. Restoration cannot truly begin until we freely admit to ourselves and others where we went off course. Such admission can be painful, as we may have to expose idolatry that we have hidden for years. But without it, we are merely masking cracks in our foundations with duct tape.

Once we know how we got to where we are, what then is the necessary first step to recovery? Paul now turns Timothy's attention to the proper use of the law.

## II. The Doorway to Recovery: The Proper Use of Law (1 Tim 1:8-11)

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for law-breakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers. And it is for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Tim 1:8-11)

### A. The wrong use of law

To appreciate the impact that Paul's letter had in Ephesus, we must keep in mind that it was publicly read before the whole church, which included the false teachers. Paul's opening statement, "We know that the law (*nomos*) is good if one uses it lawfully (*nomimos*)," speaks about things "we know" – things that have been clearly taught and are basic to the apostolic tradition. To have to explain what most already knew is a backhanded stab to the lofty claims of the false teachers, as it placed them outside the received, mainline tradition of apostolic teaching.

The fact that Paul says, "the law is made not for the righteous," suggests that these teachers were not only using the law as a launching pad for their wild speculations, they were also holding it up as a means of becoming righteous. They were insisting that through strict observance of the Torah, believers could expect to live a virtuous life. If they merely intensified their commitment to God and strengthened their resolve to be holy, a higher level of spirituality could be achieved.

But the law was not given to righteous people as a tool to cultivate their virtues. The good news of the gospel is that the "righteous" have not only been cleansed by the blood of Christ, they have also passed over into an entirely new existence "living in conformity to the requirements of the law by the work of Christ wrought by the Spirit in them."<sup>1</sup>

Placing believers back under law does not help us become more righteous but only serves to foster self-righteousness. It does not build up or restore communities, marriages, or homes, but rather shuts down authentic ways of relating. Competition and comparison choke all vestiges of vulnerability. The acceptance we once felt in our hearts is suddenly crushed. We no longer feel free to confess our weaknesses, fears, and failures for fear of rejection, or worse, condemnation.

When the law replaces grace as the primary way we relate, the focus shifts from internal attitudes to external performance, with benchmarks posted to publicly demonstrate that such success is attainable. In Ephesus, these took the form of ascetic practices: forbidding marriage and abstaining "from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth" (4:3). Paul denounces such practices as merely giving the "appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Col 2:23). Posting our external accomplishments does not foster love, but rather invites comparison and resentment from those less fortunate.

Worse still, legalism robs a community of its exuberant joy and contentment in mutual service, replacing it with an insatiable drive

to be publicly recognized by breaking into the narrow circle of the successful elite (Gal 4:17). The result is that the unseen ministries that Jesus valued most – care for orphans and widows, nurturing faith in the children, discipling new converts, anointing the sick, and evangelizing the lost – are neglected for ministries that receive public recognition and acclaim.

Being "under law" is a constant battle for all of us, although its attraction varies, based on our different upbringing or cultural background. Growing up as the youngest of four siblings in an atmosphere of love and acceptance, I didn't experience the tyranny of the law until college. In high school, I competed in gymnastics and blossomed under a coach who treated me like a son. Though he did not have the technical expertise of other coaches, his love motivated me beyond what I ever thought I could do.

In college, it was a different story. Our coach was one of the best gymnasts in the country. A former world trampoline champion, his expertise was responsible for recruiting the best gymnast in the country to come to Stanford. We went from last place in our conference to second within two years. Yet for me the atmosphere was completely different. Working alongside an Olympian, I never felt I measured up. I learned how terms like "you always" or "you never" can paralyze and break you. Our weight was constantly monitored. The phrase, "an ounce of fat means a pound of pain," so haunted me that for two years I struggled with an eating disorder, vacillating between rash diets and compulsive bingeing. By my senior year, after training for three hours a day for years, my scores were lower than those I had ever received in high school. My joy for the sport was replaced by a loathing for the gym. After graduation, I married Emily and traded law for love and never struggled with my eating habits again.

### B. The right use of law

What then is the right use of the law? As Paul wrote to the Galatians, the law was never designed to bestow life, but to be a "tutor to lead us to Christ" (Gal 3:24). To accomplish this, the law acts like a mirror to reveal our sin; then it provokes sin within us, causing it to come alive and "utterly sinful" (Rom 7:13); and finally, the law condemns us as slaves to sin. Luther called the law "a mighty 'hammer' to crush the self-righteousness of human beings."<sup>2</sup>

So Paul affirms that the law was not laid down for the righteous, but for the *lawless* and *rebellious*. "Lawless" speaks of those "who are uncontrolled by any law. They have no authoritative guidance, no revealed command from God,"<sup>3</sup> while the rebellious are perhaps best understood as those who had revelation (i.e. the Jews), but willfully transgress against it and stand opposed to God's authority. Together they encompass both the totality of the Jewish and gentile world that stood in opposition to God. This pair heads up the list of Paul's catalogue "of vicious persons, guilty of the most abominable sins."<sup>4</sup> The list of four pairs, followed by six single items, resembles the Decalogue, with its four commands to love God, followed by six on how to love one's neighbor.

Following the lawless and rebellious, Paul lists the *ungodly* and *sinful*. The term "ungodly" (or "godless") expresses an atheistic disregard for God in one's attitude, while "sinner" gives expression to it in idolatrous behavior (Gal 2:15; Rom 2:22).

In the third pair, Paul links the *unholy* with the *irreligious*. "Unholy" speaks of behavior that desecrates the true worship of the Lord, while "irreligious" (or "profane") describes individuals who are so

worldly they have no capacity for sacred thoughts or conversation. They have no regard for that which is highly revered, and will not hesitate to violate its sanctity. An example was Esau, who was so profane that he sold his birthright in a fleeting moment of hunger for a bowl of some “red stuff.”

In the fourth pair, *those who kill their fathers or mothers* takes our revulsion for *murder* in the following term to new heights. In Israel, to strike those who gave you life was unthinkable; to kill them was abhorrent.

The next two terms relate to sexual sins covered by the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod 20:14). The first term, the *sexually immoral ( pornos )*, comes from the Greek root “to sell” and originally meant “harlot for hire.” The term here describes any sexual activity outside of marriage, from fornication and adultery to male prostitution. Prostitution often flourishes with increased prosperity. In Paul’s day, female slaves provided a large pool of defenseless victims to draw from.

Homosexuality was also quite common in both Greek and Roman cultures, so Paul adds *those practicing homosexuality* to his catalogue.

Homosexuality ordinarily expressed itself in sexual relationships between grown men and adolescent boys. They were publicly tolerated and regulated legally, though there was an ongoing uneasiness about such practices too... If some pagans considered homosexuality aberrant, there is not a single text in the Jewish tradition, biblical or otherwise, from Lev 18:22 through Philo, that expresses less than total rejection of all homosexual practices, including pederasty.<sup>5</sup>

The apostles concurred by censoring all sexual activity outside of marriage. But, like Christ, they did not leave the sinner condemned. They embraced the good news that the work of Christ was indeed sufficient to cleanse and deliver us from all sexual sins.

**Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)**

Following those addicted to sex, Paul moves to the most abhorrent form of theft, that of slave traders who kidnap individuals made in God’s image and sell them into slavery for profit. In the ancient world, most of the slave population came from the ranks of prisoners of war. There was scarcely a Jewish family that did not have one of its members sold at auction.

The final two terms, *liars and perjurers*, link the third and the ninth commandments with the same sin, lying. In the first case, the individual violates his neighbor’s reputation by “bearing false witness” against him; in the second, he violates God’s reputation by taking his name in vain by lying under oath. By calling God to be a witness to his falsehood, he makes God a liar.

As we reflect on Paul’s list one can’t help but wonder where in the ancient world did someone meet such a fraternity of deviant characters. Jerome Quinn suggests that the setting for Paul’s list could well have been the Greek tragedies that were performed with great frequency at the famous theatre in Ephesus:

These evil people, larger than life, belong on the stage, and the ancient Greek drama, particularly the tragedy, was peopled with

characters that illustrate why laws, human and divine, are laid down and why retribution overtakes them. The venerable trilogy of Aeschylus, the *Agamemnon*, *Libationbearers*, and *Eumenides*, turned around monstrous murder and matricide, which became the occasion for the Athenian legal system, under the aegis of the goddess Athena. The patricide and incest of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* rivet the attention of vast audiences to this day. There is no lack of *perjurers* or *liars* in Euripides or in Sophocles. The human spoils of war, populations and individuals reduced to slavery, figure in Euripides’ *Hecuba*, *Daughters of Troy*, and *Andromache*. In *Cyclops* the one-eye giant reveals that he is homosexual, and Euripides’ lost tragedy, *Chrysippus*, was based on the myth of the homosexual rape of the title character by Laius, father of Oedipus... Murderers of every stripe walked the ancient Greek stage... The tragedies themselves characterize one or another of the *dramatis personae* as *lawless* or *godless* or *unholy*.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps if Paul were writing today, he would say the law was not laid down for the righteous, but for those portrayed on Hollywood’s stage, who operate outside law and push all the boundaries of moral decency. The excessive violence and blatant sexuality displayed under the banner of free expression that pours out over satellite dish, cable and Internet has resurrected the abhorrent practices of Canaanite worship into an international religion. How did we get here? In 1973, the Supreme Court ruled that pornography was protected by the First Amendment. Today there are 4.2 million pornographic websites on the Internet, and the income gained from the sale of pornography has gone from \$5-10 million forty years ago to some \$13.3 billion in 2006.<sup>7</sup>

Though the world is growing extremely resistant and hostile to any suggestion that there is a holy God, and that we are accountable to his moral absolutes revealed in the Ten Commandments, we must never back down and allow his voice to become silent through fear or ridicule from unbelief. We must never forget that the “law is laid down for those who refuse it”<sup>8</sup> “so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God” (Rom 3:19). This is the divine purpose of the law. Though, as C. H. Spurgeon writes, “it is terrible in the drinking” it has wonderful benefits:

A spiritual experience which is thoroughly flavoured with a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him that hath had it. It is terrible in the drinking, but it is most wholesome in the bowels, and in the whole of the after-life. 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. We would not judge modern converts, but we certainly prefer that form of spiritual exercise which leads the soul by the way of Weeping-cross, and makes it see its blackness before assuring it that it is “clean every whit.” 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.<sup>9</sup>

### III. The End of Law: Opening the Window to Heaven

Thanks be to God that the law is not the end of the story. When it leads us to utter despair and there is no way out, God opens the window to let in the light of the gospel. This is the gospel that tells the story not of our sin, but of God’s work in Christ “who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through

the gospel” (2 Tim 1:10). Paul considers himself privileged that God entrusted him with such a gift at the hinge of history, just as the Messianic age had dawned upon all flesh, and the life that God bestows is now so available and near. So then, how does the law function for us as believers?

Several years ago, when our daughters were young, we took a family vacation at Black Butte Ranch in Oregon. One day a down-pour drenched the landscape and left a large meadow dotted with puddles. Later, under the bright sunlight, the pools mirrored the massive cumulous clouds in the blue sky like a Monet painting. So stunned was I by the beauty of this extraordinary sight, I called my daughter to come and tell me what she saw. Looking down into a puddle, she replied, “I see mud.” I told her to move back and look at the puddles from an angle. She lifted her gaze slightly and exclaimed, “I see heaven!”

Such are the disparate views we get when we look into the law, depending on which lens we look through. On the one hand, the law can be a mirror of our own sin, condemning us with guilt and discouragement. But on the other hand, when we view the law through the lens of Christ, and see that he has fulfilled all that it requires: “we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18 NASB).

1 George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles, A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 83.

2 Quoted by John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 47.

3 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 97.

4 Quinn, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 96.

5 Quinn, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 100.

6 Quinn, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 96-97.

7 Jeff Olson, *When a Man's Eye Wanders, Breaking the Power of Pornography* (Grand Rapids: RBC Ministries, 2007), 5.

8 Quinn, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 98.

9 C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Volume 1, The Early Years 1834-1859* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 54.

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