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1 Timothy 1:1-7

First Message

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THE RESTORATION OF LOVE

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

One year ago, our nation was embroiled in a war to liberate a country that had been invaded by a tyrant. I was impressed by the fact that our political leaders utilized almost all of our military resources to remove the Iraqi forces from Kuwait. And I was impressed by the quality of our military leaders. The briefing by General Schwartzkopf on the ground war, and the secret strategy that pulled off the largest troop movements in military history, was astounding. This was a work of genius. But then reality struck. The battle was over, victory had been won, but the full work of restoration of Kuwait would be an arduous task. The scars of war heal slowly. Perhaps this was best symbolized by the oil fires which raged out of control, transforming the Kuwaiti desert into a living hell.

The tragedy of Kuwait reminds me of what happens at times to a church. A tyrannical enemy invades the flock, doing his worst damage not by persecution from without, but by posing as an angel of light and operating from within. Using false teachers to accomplish his task, this enemy creates division and strife, tearing apart the bonds of love that have taken years to develop. The questions we want to look at today in our opening study in Paul's first letter to Timothy are: How is love restored in a church that has been so infiltrated? What kind of leadership is needed to restore such a church? And what strategy should they employ? How to restore a broken church, therefore, is the theme of this letter. We will begin by looking at the choice of leadership, and what should be leadership's primary concern.

Before we look at Paul's instructions to Timothy it will be helpful to understand the background to the city of Ephesus in order to see the imposing forces that threatened the church. Ephesus was one of the chief cities of the Roman Empire, and the largest and most famous city of Asia Minor. In Paul's day it had a population of 250,000. Ephesus grew to be the major commercial center of Asia Minor and an important seaport. It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, and hence a center of government. The city contained a theatre that seated 25,000, and a large stadium.

But the most outstanding feature of the city of Ephesus was the Temple of Artemis. In 356 BC, the former temple had been burned and a new temple was constructed over a period of 30 years. This new temple was the largest and most magnificent building ever constructed in the Greek world. Actually it was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was 420 ft long and 240 ft wide, and its roof was supported on 117 60-ft high columns. The image of Artemis herself was adorned with many breasts, symbolizing fertility. Tourists came from all over the world to visit the site and involve themselves in temple worship, engaging the many temple priestesses in temple prostitution. The temple became immensely rich through such tourism. In the Ancient world, temples also served as banks since they were thought of as a safe place to deposit money. Thus, practically the entire economy of Ephesus was built on this sacred female cult.

Planting a church in Ephesus would be like planting a church in Las Vegas today.

The question then arises, In the midst of such intimidating opposition, who would Paul choose as a leader to restore the church in Ephesus?

I. The choice of leaders (1:1-2)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, our hope; to Timothy, [my] true child in [the] faith: Grace, mercy [and] peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (NASB)

This typical greeting identifies the author, Paul, who introduces himself with his full apostolic authority; and the recipient, Timothy, who is identified as Paul's legitimate son in the faith; and this is followed by the blessing: "Grace, mercy, and peace."

(a) No worldly stature

What kind of leadership does the apostle Paul seek for the monumental task of restoring a ministry of love to the church in Ephesus? Surprisingly, he chooses Timothy, his "true child in the faith," to accomplish this task. Why should we be surprised by his choice of Timothy? To begin with, this young man had no worldly stature. He was half-Jew and half-Greek and, like most half-breeds, was unwelcome in many spheres. Nor was Timothy chosen because of the force of his personality. He was not an aggressive, outgoing, type A personality. On the contrary, he was timid, shy, and retiring. Paul had to stir him up on occasion to use his gifts lest he become passive. Timothy wasn't chosen because he was mature in years, either. He was, perhaps, in his early thirties at the time this letter was written. He was lightly regarded, perhaps even despised by some for his youth. Finally, he probably had a weak constitution. Paul encourages him to "take a little wine for his stomach and for his frequent ailments." Worldly stature, therefore, was the farthest thing from the apostle's mind in his choice of Timothy to spearhead the revival of love in the church at Ephesus.

(b) Enlightened in mind and heart

What, then, were the qualities that Paul recognized in this young man? First, we will see that Timothy was enlightened in mind and heart. When he first heard the apostle preach the gospel in his home city of Lystra, Timothy recognized that the secret to life was not to be found in Greek philosophy, in the many sects of Judaism, or in the Roman mystery religions. Life, he learned, was to be found only in the risen Christ. Further, he discovered that Christ had entrusted his apostles with his full authority.

(c) Abandoned in his faith

Secondly, Paul recognized that Timothy was abandoned in his faith. When he became a disciple of Jesus Christ, he was well spoken of by the brethren (Acts 16:1-3). He threw in his lot with Paul, risk-

ing everything when the apostle asked him to join him. In the city of Derbe he saw Paul stoned to death for preaching the gospel, and he knew that this could be his lot too, but he considered the risk worth taking.

(d) Recipient of the gift of the Spirit

Thirdly, Timothy had become the recipient of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, thus he was qualified to serve in this manner. Paul had laid hands on him, and prophecies were uttered about his gifts of leadership and pastoring. Thus it was divine gifts, bestowed through the blessing of God the Father, not a fine education and the conferring of degrees that were in the power of man to bestow, that qualified Timothy for the task ahead. And his weaknesses surely would have made him more likely to base his ministry on these divine gifts, not on fleshly qualifications.

(e) Faithful in his commitment

Lastly, Paul saw that Timothy was faithful in his commitment. He was the apostle's "true son in the faith." Other sons may have deserted him and the gospel that he preached, but not Timothy. He was a faithful emissary who risked his own life on several occasions, and even endured prison for the cause of Christ (Heb 13:23).

Thus Timothy brings to mind the words of God to the prophet Samuel regarding qualifications for leadership: "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature...for God does not see what man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). This is the kind of leaders we need in the church of Jesus Christ—men and women who will renounce the world and its empty blessings and throw in their lot, often at great expense to themselves, for the cause of the gospel. I have a good friend who reminds me of Timothy. He is an excellent student of the Scriptures, but he is shy and retiring, humble and gentle. Wherever I go to minister, he accompanies me. Last year, we went together to his home in Colorado. He comes from a large Catholic family, and as I watched him sow seeds of love among his family members I was reminded of Timothy, this gentle man who was the apostle Paul's choice to restore love among the brethren in Ephesus.

Next, Paul outlines his battle plan to dispossess the enemy from the church there.

II. Dispossessing the enemy (1:3-7)

As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may command certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than [furthering] the administration of God which is by faith. Now the goal of the command is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a unhyprocritical faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.

(a) Facing the situation (1:3)

Three things here will help prepare Timothy face these false teachers in Ephesus. The apostle says, "As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may command certain men not to teach strange doctrines." First, he wants Timothy to have the correct perspective on false teaching. "As I urged you," says Paul. Expect it, in other words. Posing an an angel

of light, the enemy is forever seeking to invade the vineyard of Christianity. Don't be surprised, says the apostle; it's going to happen. How should Timothy deal with it? With patience, counsels Paul: "remain on." This would take persistence over the long haul. And he was to do it with boldness. Direct intervention, decisive action is a must: "command certain men not to teach strange doctrines," is the apostle's advice.

(b) Knowing the dangers of false teaching (1:4)

Why all this? you ask. We have Paul's answer in verse 4. It is because he knew the dangers of false teaching. They are two-fold: "myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than [furthering] the administration of God which is by faith. Now the goal of the command is love," says Paul. First, the efforts of the false teachers are misdirected. They major in the minors, with their concern over myths and endless genealogies. They are more concerned with what isn't in the Scriptures than what is. They labor over tedious, exhausting minutia concerning something that signifies nothing. Some of the cults of our own day do the same: they are forever tracing genealogies. The purpose of genealogies in the OT, of course, was to trace the seed of Israel. But when Christ, the Seed, the one who conquered sin and death, came on the scene, there was no need for any more genealogies. His progeny are not born of flesh, but of the Spirit. Why waste time with genealogies when the Seed himself has come?

Secondly, says Paul, false teachers foster speculation of the mind instead of planting faith in the heart. I have discovered that this was the weakness of some of the Jewish writings of the Intertestamental period. It is often difficult to discern myth from historical fact. While speculation on such matters might entertain the mind, however, it does great damage to the soul. Unless the truth changes the heart, the mind becomes perverted. Such speculation was "full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing" (Gordon Fee). The Scottish preacher, James Stewart, said that the aims 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.*

This should be the goal of every church.

(c) Identifying the enemy (1:6-7)

Thirdly, Paul instructs Timothy on how to identify the enemy: "For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions" (vv 6-7). First, false teachers are consumed with controversy. Forsaking faith and love, they turn aside to fruitless discussion. Wherever they find controversy, whether relational (gossip about someone), or doctrinal (concerning things about which scripture is unclear), they hone in on it. They love to stir things up, to create argument and strife. God, however, gave the gift of speech not to make us polemicists, but to enable us to give a word to the weary for their edification (Isa 50:4).

Here is another way to identify false teachers: "they [want] to be teachers of the law." Their motive is pride. This is manifest in their desire to be recognized. They step over others in order to be first. They seek titles of distinction rather than engaging themselves in a quiet ministry of service that needs no recognition.

And lastly, their speech is characterized by a dogmatism that betrays their ignorance. “They do not understand what they are saying,” says Paul, “or the matters about which they make confident assertions.” Life is not so simple as the formulas they so confidently assert. I’m reminded of the slick television salesmen who tell us we can make millions by buying up repossessed real estate. They parade their possessions before us to try and convince us, but they neglect to say they are prospering on the misfortune of others, violating the commandment of God to help the poor in their misfortune. Life is very complex; it is far from simple. Beware of dogmatic assertions preached by people who do not understand what they are saying. Humility and gentleness, not dogmatism and confident assertion, should be the marks of the Christian’s speech. This was what was to characterize Timothy’s speech, and it would prove to be the most effective weapon in refuting these false teachers (see 2 Tim 2:24ff).

Here we learn that we have far more to worry about with what comes from within ourselves than we do from what proceeds from outside the church. Internal pride, distraction with controversy, and speculative teaching do far more to destroy a church than 300 years of Roman persecution. Paul seldom wept for the church under persecution. In Philippi, as he languished in prison after being flogged, he and Silas broke into song in praise of God. But when the apostle heard about the division in the church in Corinth, brought on by jealousy among the leadership, his heart was so grieved he couldn’t minister even when an open door for ministry lay before him in Troas (2 Cor 2:12-13).

Let us shun controversy like the plague and instead use our speech to bring a word to the weary for their edification. When Michael Green ministered among us recently, someone called me to say he disagreed with something Michael had preached. I asked my friend how many points did Michael have in his message. Ten or eleven, was the reply. “How many points did you agree with?” I asked. “All except this one,” he replied. I told him, “I can’t even get my wife to agree with me on ten out of eleven points! Because of this one thing you’re not going to allow him to teach you and love you?” I asked. I learned a great deal from Michael Green. I learned about the holiness of God. I learned how to pray. I learned how to rejoice in suffering. I learned about simplicity. Let us take the example of Paul and Timothy and shun controversy.

And, secondly, let us beware of pride. Let us crucify our fantasies of spiritual greatness and our need to be recognized, and then go behind the scenes and “visit orphans and widows in their distress.” We have a new widow among us. She called me a few days ago to say that two widows from our congregation invited her to go to lunch last week to share with her how to live as a widow. This was an act of spontaneous affection; no one instructed them to do it. This is how God’s people are to live.

Having instructed Timothy on how to choose leaders, and on the strategy for dispossessing the enemy, Paul now goes on to detail the plan of restoration. Here we come to the central point of this text.

III. The plan of restoration (1:5)

Now the goal [or end] of the command [i.e. the command to silence these false teachers] is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a unhyprocritical faith.

The way to silence false teaching, says Paul, is to re-plant transcendent love in the vineyard. Without pure doctrine love cannot grow in the body. The only hope for the kingdom of God in Ephesus lay in

a community built on God’s love. Notice that Paul is not concerned with the size of the church or with 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 for each other? John Owen wrote, “Life gives power for obedience, love gives joy and pleasure in it.”

(a) Love is planted with freedom from guilt

Paul goes on to say that three things are necessary to plant love in God’s vineyard. First, love springs “out of a cleansed heart.” Love is planted when there is freedom from guilt. Many people cannot love because they themselves have never been loved. Through the cross of Christ, however, the flame of God’s love burns bright in the heart and purifies everything it touches. True teaching always leads to confession, repentance, and cleansing. We will not be free to truly love until we have been cleansed, until we know that we are loved by God. On occasion I counsel couples whose marriages are crumbling. They cannot communicate anymore because their hurt is too great, so they come, asking me to fix their marriages for them. But I always tell them they cannot love each other because they have never allowed God to love them. I advise them to go home and pray and fast for a day. I ask them to read the first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah and write down what the Holy Spirit prompts them to confess is their sin. Then I tell them to read Isaiah 40–66, and to note every instance where God says, “I love you,” and to allow God to love them. Then, if they confess their sins, and allow God to wash them clean, they will be freed to love the one whom they now regard as their enemy. Jesus said of the sinner who anointed his feet, “her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47). When the heart is truly cleansed, love is free to grow at the deep level of the heart.

(b) Love grows by sensitivity in relationships

If love is planted through freedom from guilt, it grows, secondly, by sensitivity in relationships. Thus Paul writes that without a “good conscience” love is impossible to demonstrate. I find there is little teaching on the conscience today, but to Paul, maintaining a good (or healthy) conscience was of prime importance. Someone has well defined the conscience as the eye of the soul, recording what it sees. Two characteristics, freedom and sensitivity, make it healthy.

Freedom is most essential to liberate Christians from being bound to legalism as if they were laboring under an arduous set of rules. They feel they are forever walking a tightrope, and they are always afraid of falling. Here is how Oswald Chambers describes this type of conscience: “There is a difference between a refined conscience towards God and the fussy conscience of a hyper-conscientious person without the Holy Spirit of God. Hyper-conscientious people are an absolute plague to live with. They are morally and spiritually nervous, always in terror, expecting bad things to happen, and they always do. Jesus Christ was never morally or spiritually nervous any more than he was physically nervous.” But we can have a clear conscience because we have only one law to obey, the law that Jesus commanded: We are to “love one another.” That’s all. Thus we are free to go about our business every day seeking whom we can love, someone for whom we can demonstrate spontaneous affection.

Secondly, the Christian conscience is highly sensitive because it is empowered by the Holy Spirit to make subtle corrections. This is a primary concern for Paul. If the first question Christians must ask themselves is, “Whom can I love today?”, the second is, “Whom have I wronged?” No longer can we act like a bull in a china shop, break-

ing relationships and offending others. We must be sensitive toward people, gentle and caring for them. If we have wronged someone, we will find that our conscience bears down on us, prompting us to take corrective action. And if we refuse, our enlightened conscience turns up the volume, as it were, to get our attention. Spurgeon wrote, “Give me into the power of a roaring lion, but never let me come under the power of an awakened, guilty conscience. Shut me up in a dark dungeon, among all manner of loathsome creatures—snakes and reptiles of all kinds—but, oh, give me not over to my thoughts when I am consciously guilty before God!”

(c) Love is harvested with genuine risk

Once the heart is cleansed, the conscience liberated and fine tuned, then Christians can act with an unhypocritical faith. Love is harvested through genuine risk. The word “hypocrite” in the Greek world was the same as the word for actor. Ephesus had a large theatre where actors put on the Greek plays. The world of Ephesus was filled with play actors, but Christians are not to adopt this role. Rather they are to love others with abandon and a certain degree of risk. Last summer, I took a group of men from our church to a retreat in Canada. During the retreat, the pastor of the church confessed to his men, “I have never wanted to admit that I have been weak in the faith, but I want to say that this has been the hardest year of my life.” As he wept, everyone gathered around him to comfort him. One non-Christian man who was present said, “If church was like this, I would come!” This is what Paul was seeking for the church at Ephesus: a cleansed heart, a healthy conscience, and an unhypocritical faith.

A year ago, the war of liberation in Kuwait came to an end, and the enemy was ousted from the land. Yet I wonder if full, genuine restoration has come to that country. Having spent all that money and resources, has tyranny truly been defeated, or was that war of liberation merely an external one? This, too, is Paul’s concern for the church in Ephesus. Historically, they did deal with the false teachers—they were ousted and silenced—but love never was fully restored in the church. Paul would weep for the church at Ephesus, and so would the Lord. In Revelation, Jesus would say that though their doctrine was pure, they lacked love, and without love they would lose their witness as a light to the community.

If Paul were peering into your life today, would he be grieved because the enemy has invaded your vineyard and captivated you with controversy and speculation at the expense of the main thing, which is love?

What good is it if our minds think lofty thoughts about God, but our hearts are frozen stone cold to his blazing love?

What good is it if we are publicly recognized and applauded for religious service, but secretly we are tormented by a guilty conscience for neglecting our children or hurting those closest to us?

What good is it if we appear terribly busy doing all the right things, but Jesus says of us, “You are merely actors”?

Little children, beware. The goddess Artemis of the Ephesians is still alive and she has many children. To love another person, however, is to see the face of God.

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