

“Watch Out for Wolves!” – 1 Timothy 1:3-7

On his way to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, Paul summoned the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him at Miletus. The church at Ephesus was very important to Paul. He ministered there for three years and many had come to Christ. The church at Ephesus seems to have spawned a number of other regional churches as well, but he was worried about them. Here is part of what he had to say.

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. (Acts 20:26-31)

After that, Paul proceeded to Jerusalem, where he was eventually arrested. That led to a long imprisonment and he eventually appealed to Caesar. And so, he was taken to Rome, where he dwelt in his own rented house, chained to a Roman guard. The book of Acts ends before we learn the result of his appeal, but it is pretty clear that he was released. He eventually returned to Ephesus with Timothy and then he left Timothy in Ephesus while Paul while he traveled on to Macedonia.

Paul was concerned about false teachers of two sorts: The first kind he called “savage wolves”, who would come in from outside the church body. But there would also be men who would raise up from within the congregation, speaking perverse things so as to build a following for themselves, attacks from without, and attacks from within.

It is exactly the same for us today. Satan has not changed his tactics, because unfortunately, his tactics work! We are bombarded with false teaching from outside of our fellowship. It comes from the television. It comes from the Internet. It comes from Christian book stores. These savage wolves twist the truth of God for their own selfish agendas. Yet, Christians seem to have an insatiable appetite for their lies.

There is also the danger of false teaching coming from inside the church, maybe from a respected elder, maybe even from the pastor. Often it is someone who wants to draw away disciples for themselves.

We need to be on our guard!

This letter back to Timothy shows us that Paul’s concern about false teachers had not diminished. With the greeting out of the way, it is the very first thing he addresses in this letter. Let’s look at it now.

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm. (1 Timothy 1:3-7)

So, Paul is giving Timothy a serious charge. And it is a repeated charge. “I urged you when I went into Macedonia”. The word translated “urged” is the Greek *parakaleō* (*παρακαλέω*) It is a very strong word which means to beseech. Paul is practically begging Timothy here. Timothy is to stay in Ephesus to confront folks who are teaching aberrant doctrine. Paul says command them to teach no other doctrine. Well, what does he mean by “no other doctrine”? I think we can get a clue by fast-forwarding a bit. In the second letter Paul wrote to Timothy, he says this:

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Timothy 2:2)

What things had Paul spoken among many witnesses? To the Corinthians, he wrote:

For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

That has been my desire too since the very first day I arrived here in the Canyon. I don't want to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I am not called to be innovative. I am not called to give you some new insight or new spiritual philosophy. I am called to proclaim the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth that is preserved for us in this Bible. Just the essentials; nothing else at all!

Paul always communicated the essentials of the Gospel. Those essentials would include: God is perfectly, immaculately holy. He cannot tolerate sin, And because He is perfectly just, every sin must be punished.

Human beings are totally depraved. You are a sinner and you sin because you are a sinner. It is your fallen nature.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Romans 3:23)

And

the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23a)

But despite your cosmic rebellion, God loves you anyway.

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

Jesus didn't have any sin. So, when He suffered and died on the cross, it was for your sin and for my sin.

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Yes,

the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

To accept that gift, you simply admit to God that you are a sinner worthy of nothing but an eternity of suffering in hell, confess that you believe Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sins, and believe God raised Him up from the grave so you can have a living relationship with your Lord. Submit your life to Jesus because, we know ...

that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

There they are, the essentials of the gospel.

Paul, by his Apostolic authority, commands that we add nothing to the purity of Christ's gospel. "Teach no other doctrine!" He insists. It should be easy, because God wrote it down. We have, preserved in our Bibles, the God-breathed, unvarnished truth. We would do well to take it very seriously because we are warned over and over again about deceivers and false teachers.

Let's zero in on the problem. We don't know exactly what these guys were teaching, but in verse 4, Paul mentions fables, which are, by definition, fictitious. They were making stuff up. Paul mentions endless genealogies. Somehow, these things were connected to a misinterpretation of the truth as given in our Old Testament, because in verse 7, Paul says that they presumed to be "teachers of the Law".

You know, we just finished our Contenders class in Church History and one of the things we learned is that, almost without exception, heretics claim to base their lies on scripture. They twist scripture. Instead of taking God's word at face value, they start to speculate. They try to go beyond what the Bible says.

When a teacher goes beyond what the Bible says, it will never lead to godly edification. It will not strengthen the faith of the saints. It will cause disputes to break forth and the peace of the church will be shattered.

Now, we all need to

contend for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 3)

We must never compromise the essential elements of salvation for the sake of peace, but we need to distinguish between the essential elements of salvation and those things the Bible is not clear about. Too many people who claim to be teachers depart from the revelation of Almighty God and bull their way into the realm of their own speculation.

That's why I am constantly harping on the target model for doctrinal discussion. There are doctrines we must be willing to die for. (The bulls-eye.) There are doctrines we must be willing to defend. (The first ring.) But we can, with charity, have fellowship with others who might not agree. We lovingly show them why we believe the way we do, but we certainly don't shun them or toss them out of the Church. Then there are doctrines we can discuss. (The third ring) With these we can agree to disagree because scripture is not completely clear. Finally, there are doctrines to dismiss, because they are clearly false.

But false teachers will build dogma on nothing but their own speculation. Let me give you an obvious example. There have been guys predicting the date of Jesus' return like forever. They almost always appeal to prophetic scriptures or Jewish numerology "hidden" in the Bible. And one group of these self-proclaimed prophets identified April 23, 2018 as the day the Lord would certainly come, rapture His saints, and begin to execute judgment on the Earth. That was last Monday, folks. It didn't happen. But these guys continue to make predictions, gathering their own disciples, and causing some to tremble with fear despite the fact that Jesus Himself told us that no one knows the day or the hour.

My friends, Jesus is coming back, and He will come as a conquering King taking vengeance on His enemies, But don't try to predict when it's going to happen. Just be ready. It could be today, but nobody knows that.

Not too many Christians pay much attention to these end-of-the-world crackpots, but there is an incredibly large number of people who have been deceived by the prosperity gospel hucksters. At the risk of offending some, let me just tell you directly that Creflo

Dollar and Joel Osteen are heretics. There are a bunch of others too. They replace the simple truth of the Gospel with their own speculations, and they are popular because they appeal to our fleshly instincts: More money, more power, more stuff, a comfortable life right now.

In verse 5, Paul gives us some of the outcomes of sound Biblical teaching. He calls it the purpose of the commandment. Sound teaching promotes Godly love. Sound teaching promotes a clear conscience. Sound teaching results from sincere faith. All Biblical teaching should promote a lifestyle that is motivated by a love of God and a love of people, a lifestyle uncontaminated by self-interest, a lifestyle that is completely open to the lordship of Christ, one that is willing to submit to His will.

Sound Biblical teaching promotes unity founded on truth.

But then, says Paul, some have strayed from sound teaching and turned instead to idle talk. In the Old King James, it is called “vain jangling”. I sort of like that translation. You might say they are babbling incoherently because what’s happening is that the false teachers have wandered off into useless reasoning, legalistic hair-splitting, an emphasis on empty ceremonies. I could go on and on.

Their motivation is generally personal power. They want to make a name for themselves. They want to be influential. A false teacher wants to be the sage on the stage, the center of attention. They are looking for the admiration of men. Look at verse 7 again.

desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm. (1 Timothy 1:7)

They don’t even know what they are talking about! In his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes:

But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Timothy 3:13)

Not only will they deceive others with their counterfeit eloquence, they will actually buy into their own lies. And by the way, their true lord is the father of lies. They are serving Satan!

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12)

I pray that you have received a love of the truth. I pray that you have developed a love for your Bibles. Are you in God’s word every day? Are you allowing yourself to be saturated with the beautiful truth this Book represents? If not, you are in danger because if you don’t receive a love of the truth, 2 Thessalonians 2:11 says that God Himself will send you a strong delusion so you believe the lie. What chance do you have against Almighty God?

Our God has graciously written His truth down for us. And as Charles Spurgeon once said, “There is dust enough on some of your Bibles to write 'damnation' with your fingers.” Do not let that be you! Get into your Bible. Let God’s truth get inside you.

And watch out for wolves!