



Our choir sounds good, but no sound is as sweet as God's grace, which we all need. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." We have gathered to glorify him. So, let us continue our time of worship by turning to 1 Timothy 1 (p. 932, pew Bible). Please follow along as I read verses 1-11:

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.

- 1 Timothy 1:1-7

This is the same gospel we preach today. In verses 3-7 Paul says to *guard the gospel* – the good news that God saves sinners through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ his Son, who died for our sins and was raised to life to make us right with God. The gospel creates in us “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5), which produce “love.” “Love is the overflow of joy in God which gladly meets the needs of others.”¹

Love is the driving force, the compelling motive, of the Christian life, and it is the goal of biblical instruction. But that goal is missed if God's word is mishandled. A misuse of the Scriptures leads to meaningless talk and draw people away from the gospel. This was a problem in the church at Ephesus. “Certain persons” wanted to be “teachers of the law” but had no clue what they were talking about, despite their dogmatic assertions. They were ignorant and arrogant, and that's a dangerous combination! So, Paul tells Timothy to tell them to stop it. Get rid of human speculation and get back to God's revelation!

¹ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 96.

If we are going to “guard the gospel,” we must understand how it relates to the law. And that’s what the Holy Spirit, speaking through Paul, wants us to consider in verses 8-11.

The Purpose of the Law (vv. 8-10)

In verse 8, Paul says, “Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully.” Paul wasn’t teaching Timothy anything new. They both knew the benefits of the law when it’s used properly, as God intended. According to Scripture, the law has two main purposes: *to reveal sin* and *to restrain wrongdoers*.

Paul talks a lot about the first purpose of the law, to reveal sin, in the book of Romans. The law shows how we’ve disobeyed God and deserve to be punished. That’s the bad news. The good news is that Christ kept the law perfectly on behalf of all who would trust in him for salvation. He took our punishment by dying for our sin, and made us right with God by rising from the grave. The law doesn’t save us. The law reveals our need for Christ, and he saves us! That’s why Paul writes in Romans 8:3, “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do....”

The law is not bad, we’re bad. The law is good! The law reveals our sin and condemned state before God – the God who is above us and against us. But the gospel reveals grace – the God who is for us and with us! The package of salvation includes the gift of the Holy Spirit who lives in us and gives us the desire and capacity to please God. He creates in us “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith,” which produce “love” (v. 5).

But there’s a second purpose of the law. It not only *reveals* sin but also *restrains* sinners. This is the issue Paul addresses in verses 8-10 by way of a *contrast*. Let’s read verse 8 through the first part of verse 9: “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...*”² In this context, the “just” refers to “Christian believers who through genuine conversion” are characterized by love (1:5).³ This is important because according to Scripture “love is the fulfilling of the law.” This is what we read in Romans 13:8-10:

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for *the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* ⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore *love is the fulfilling of the law.*

- Romans 13:8-10

² Italics added for emphasis since in the original text “for the just” appears in the emphatic position.

³ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, gen. ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 124.

Think of it this way: If we looked at God's law as a cup to be filled, love is what fills that cup as God intended.⁴ Only Jesus filled that cup perfectly, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and that is why we are not justified by the law. We're justified by grace through faith in Christ, who fulfilled the law on our behalf by his sinless life and his atoning death. In fact, God's love was exemplified supremely when Christ gave himself for us. So, our love for neighbor is not the means of our salvation. But such love is our expression of gratitude to God for saving us. It is also clear evidence of our new life in Christ.

So, when Paul says in Romans 13:8, "the one who loves another has fulfilled the law," he is speaking about believers – those who have already trusted in Christ for salvation. In commenting on this verse, Douglas Moo correctly states,

"Paul reserves the word 'fulfill' for Christian experience; only Christians, as a result of the work of Christ and through the Spirit, can 'fulfill' the law."

- Douglas J. Moo⁵

Ironically, Christians fulfill the law not by focusing on the law but by fixing their eyes on Jesus, who said to his disciples,

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

- Jesus Christ
John 13:34

The law of Christ is the law of love. "The fruit of the Spirit is love" and every other Christ-like quality, "and against such there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23). So, as we're filled with the Spirit, we fulfill the law ethically in our lives. Christ fulfilled it perfectly for our justification. We fulfill it progressively in the power of the Spirit for our sanctification. So, the Christian life is not a law-focused life, it's a Spirit-filled life. That's why Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:9, "the law is not laid down for the just," i.e., for believers, "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, for the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine."

In verses 9-10, Paul "creates a portrait of godless human activity that is precisely the opposite" of Christian love.⁶ These vices fulfill not the cup of God's law but the cup of God's wrath by committing the very crimes that the law of God, summed up in the Ten Commandments, forbids. In fact, this list follows the same sequence as the Decalogue. It begins with offenses against God, followed by crimes against fellow humans.

Offenses against God:

⁴ Illustration adapted from Ligon Duncan's sermon on Romans 13:8-10 titled "A Call to Fulfill the Law Through Love," 13 March 2002 [online]. Retrieved on 21 October 2023 from <https://ligonduncan.com/a-call-to-fulfill-the-law-through-love-49/>.

⁵ Moo, 831.

⁶ Towner, 124.

- These transgressors are described as “lawless and disobedient.” That is, they ignore God’s law and rebel against his authority by disobeying his commands.
- They are “ungodly and sinners,” which is to say that they have no reverence for God and do what displeases him.
- They are “unholy and profane.” They have no regard for what’s sacred, including God’s own name, which they take in vain.

Their defiance toward God expresses itself in crimes perpetrated against their fellow human beings. The law, Paul says, is “laid down...”

- “... for those who strike their fathers and mothers.” This is a gross violation of the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and your mother” (Ex. 20:12).
- “for murderers” – a violation of the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13)
- “the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality” – a violation of the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). Sexual immorality includes any sexual activity outside of marriage, including prostitution, casual sex (“hooking up”), cohabitation, or sex by married persons with someone who isn’t their spouse. Hebrews 13:4 sums up God’s standard and warning:

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”

- Hebrews 13:4 NIV

- A sub-category “the sexually immoral” is “men who practice homosexuality.” “This is one behavior among many that marks those who are strangers to God’s transforming grace.”⁷ The other use of this New Testament Greek word (*arsenokoites*) appears in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, which says,

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. 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.

- Praise God, there is forgiveness for homosexual actions and all other sins, but only for those who have been “washed ... sanctified ... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11), who redirects our desires toward God rather than self-indulgence.⁸

Next on the list of wrongdoers in 1 Timothy 1:10 are . . .

⁷ Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 116.

⁸ Ibid.

- “enslavers” (NIV: “slave traders”; EVH: “kidnappers”) – the worst kind of stealing, which includes all types of human trafficking - a horrific violation of the eighth commandment (Ex. 20:15).
- “liars, perjurers” – a clear violation of the ninth commandment, which says, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16).
- “and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.” This is the catch-all statement. Perhaps the tenth commandment – which prohibits coveting – is omitted because it prohibits a sinful attitude that is not punishable by civil law.⁹

The restraining purpose of the law seems to be what Paul has in view here. The same is true in Romans 13, where Paul says if you don’t want to live in fear of the authorities, do what is right. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because they don’t bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants who carry out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.

Can you imagine how chaotic, horrific, and corrupt the world would be without the rule of law? A decade ago, a movie came out that depicted such a scenario. It’s a horror film about a future dystopian America which observes an annual event known as “The Purge” in which all crime, including murder, is legalized for a 12-hour period. I’m not suggesting you watch the film. Our imagination is sufficient for envisioning such a nightmare. A key purpose of the law is to restrain evildoers through fear of punishment.

That’s why here in 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Paul lists the most extreme violations of the law. Philip Ryken notes,

He condemns not shoplifting but kidnapping, not lust but perverse sexual acts, not white lies but perjury, and so forth. In fact, he chooses the kinds of gross sin that civil laws often prohibit. According to Roman law, most of these vices were punishable by death. The law has a serious purpose of restraining wicked behavior: “*This*, Paul says, is why God gave his Law, not for idle speculation and meaningless talk.”¹⁰

Such nonsense is contrary to sound doctrine, healthy teaching, which comes from and is “in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God” (v. 11). This takes us to our concluding point:

The Primacy of the Gospel (v. 11)

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, edited by Daniel M. Dorani (NT), Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 13.

¹⁰ Ibid. Ryken attributes the final sentence in quotation marks to Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 46. In a similar vein, George Knight states, “when the law is rightly applied as an ethical restraint against sin, it is in full accordance with the ethical norm given in the gospel as the standard for the redeemed life.” George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, paperback edition, 2003) 91.

The “gospel” is the good news that “tells the glory of God.” The “*blessed* God.” Typically, the word “blessed” is used of people who experience God’s blessing. God bestows his blessing on them. But no one bestows blessing on God, for he is the source of all blessing. God experiences perfect happiness in the splendor of his own being. But he radiates his splendor through the gospel so that we can share his happiness forever!

Second Corinthians 4:6 says, “God ... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ.” The good news is that Jesus died “for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane,” that he might bring us to God.

***The law restrains sinners,
but only the Lord redeems them.***

And once God does his redeeming work and the Spirit of Christ lives within us, we are governed by his love, which accomplishes in us what the law could never do.

*“Run, John, run!” the law commands,
But gives neither feet nor hands.
Better news the gospel brings:
It bids me fly and gives me wings.¹¹*

This is the gospel that God entrusted to Paul. The word “gospel” appears sixty times in Paul’s epistles and appears on his lips in Acts 20:24 as a summary of his life’s purpose:

“But I consider my life of no value to myself; my purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace.”

- Paul the Apostle
Acts 20:24

The first eleven verses of Paul’s letter to Timothy remind us that we as believers are to defend God’s truth while at the same time displaying his love. In our own strength we can defend the truth without living in love, or we can live in love without defending the truth, but there’s no way we can do both together. Without the love of God, we become harsh, judgmental, and legalistic in our defense of the truth. Without the truth of God, our love becomes an excuse for theological and moral compromise. Sadly, this is what we see in many churches today: truth without love, or love without truth. Rarely do we see both together. But when we do find love and truth together, we know this is a gracious work of the one true God, “the blessed God,” who use the union of love and truth to save dying sinners.¹²

¹¹ This quote is usually attributed to John Bunyan (1628-1688), author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. But it most likely originated with the Scottish preacher Ralph Erskine (1685-1752), who wrote, “A rigid matter was the law, / demanding brick, denying straw, / But when with gospel tongue it sings, it bids me fly and gives me wings.” *The Sermons and Practical Words of Ralph Erskine*, vol. 10 (Glasgow: W. Smith and J. Bryce, 1778), 283. Cited by Justin Taylor, “Run, John, Run!” *TGC U.S. Edition*, 27 July 2011 [online]. Retrieved on 21 October 2023 from <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/run-john-run/>.

¹² Ryken, 17.