

Dealing with the Problem of False Teaching at Ephesus

1 Timothy 1:18-20

1 Timothy 1:18-20: *“This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare,¹⁹ having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck,²⁰ of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”*

Background Notes

The theme that emerges from Paul’s letter to Timothy is “Church Order” - how to properly set up and organize a New Testament church. However, before Paul could begin to discuss church order, such as the distinctive roles of men and women in the church, the recognition of elders and deacons in the church, and other important matters of church order, he first had to take care of the critical problem of the false teachers who were in and around the church at Ephesus.

Thus false teachers, particularly the Judaizers, are the main focus of 1 Timothy 1. The apostle told Timothy to silence the false teachers! Verse 3: *“As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine.”* And verse 5 gives the reason: *“Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith.”*

This “charge” (v18) is the same “charge” or “commandment” that was given earlier in the chapter: the charge and commandment to silence the false teaching. Stopping the false teachers was part of “waging the good warfare” - or fighting the good fight. This teaching is for the church today, just as in the 1st century. “Fighting the good fight” is not just doing evangelism and defending the faith. It involves silencing false teaching in the church as well.

What were the “prophecies” about Timothy that Paul mentioned in verse 18? *“This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you.”* Prophecy was one of the “sign” gifts in the early Church. In Acts 13, it was through the New Testament prophets and the gifts of prophecy that the Holy Spirit set Paul and Barnabas apart for missionary work.

Here we see that prophecies were made about Timothy regarding his calling to the ministry. These prophecies were probably made when Timothy joined Paul on his second missionary journey. Acts 16:1-3, *“Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted to have him go*

on with him.” The fact that his fellow-believers spoke well of Timothy may be part of the prophecies about Timothy. At least that is likely the context in which the prophecies were made.

Doctrinal Points

1. Motivation is provided to fight the good fight.

In verse 18, Paul told Timothy that the prophecies should motivate him to fight the good fight: *“that by them [the prophecies], you may wage the good warfare.”* In other words, whenever Timothy was discouraged, or was experiencing burnout, or was tempted to quit, he should look back and remember the prophecies that were made about him. That would motivate him to keep on fighting! The Holy Spirit had given these prophecies, so they should, and would, motivate Timothy to hang in there and continue to fight the good fight.

The Lord does this for us today, too. Prophecies may not be given about us, but the Lord gives us encouraging events that we can look back on. The memory of these events should motivate us to continue in the faith and fight the good fight. Whenever I’m discouraged in the ministry, or feel tempted to quit, I look back on certain events in my life when God encouraged me to serve him.

I think of the time when God raised me up from polio at the age of 12. I will never forget how, with gratitude, I sensed that the Lord had healed me in order for me to serve him. I remember when I left my job as a research scientist to go into the Lord’s work fulltime, a group of fellow believers joined hands with me and prayed that the Lord would bless me and keep me in the ministry of preaching and teaching God’s Word. I’ll never forget those events – and other encouraging events. They continue to motivate me to go on! They motivate me not to fade out of fighting the good fight!

I’m sure you can look back on your Christian life and remember events that encourage and motivate you to keep on fighting the good fight. God provides these special moments to encourage and motivate us. We may not have the “sign” gift of prophecy today, as in the early Church, and a prophecy may not have been made about your call to serve the Lord, but God provides special moments of motivation in every believer’s life. Motivation is provided to fight the good fight.

2. Keeping faith and good conscience are necessary to avoid shipwreck.

Verse 19: *“Having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck.”* This is a further exhortation to Timothy to keep the faith and maintain a good conscience. Keeping the faith means to remain orthodox in our doctrine, and not to stray away from sound teaching.

But we must do more than remain sound and orthodox in our doctrine. We must maintain a good conscience as well. We must do what we know to be right. Everyone has a God-given conscience, but the conscience can become misguided,

and desensitized, and seared by sin. Look at 1 Timothy 4:2, where some unbelievers are described as *“speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.”*

In contrast, a believer’s conscience is enlightened by the Word of God. We are to maintain a good conscience, and we are to keep the faith. Something is wrong when doctrinally sound Christians cheat on their income taxes, or cheat their employers, or cheat in their marriages. When I was at seminary, one of the professors cheated on his wife and left her to marry another woman. He didn’t give up the faith, but he certainly did give up the good conscience.

If we don’t maintain a good conscience along with sticking closely to sound doctrine, the result is shipwreck. “Shipwreck” doesn’t mean that we lose our salvation, but our Christian life and testimony will end up shattered on the rocks. We will no longer be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We don’t have to search too far to find illustrations of this truth - for example, some well-known TV evangelists in recent times. Keeping the faith and keeping a good conscience are necessary to avoid shipwreck.

3. Excommunication is remedial, not punitive.

Verse 20 gives examples of two believers who made shipwreck of their lives: *“Of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”* Hymenaeus is probably the same Hymenaeus who is mentioned in 2 Timothy 2:17-18. *“And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.”* Alexander was a common name in the 1st century, but the Alexander mentioned here might be the same Alexander of Acts 19 or 2 Timothy 4.

In any case, these men had made shipwreck of their Christian testimony and brought shame on the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, they had been *“delivered to Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme”* (v20). What does “delivered to Satan” mean? Does it mean that these men were sent to hell under the apostolic authority of the apostle Paul? No, because Satan is not in charge of hell. That’s cartoon theology! **God** is in charge of hell. Cartoons that portray Satan stoking the fires of hell are false and blasphemous. Matthew 24:41 says that hell was prepared for the eternal judgment of Satan and his fallen angels. Unfortunately, people who reject the Lord Jesus will be in hell forever, too.

Being “delivered to Satan” means excommunication. It means being excluded from the fellowship of the local church. It is phrased this way because, at the present time, Satan is called “the god of this world.” In reference to Satan, 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “the god of this world has blinded the minds of those who do not believe.” Three times the Lord Jesus referred to Satan as the ruler of this world (John 12, 14, and 16). So when a person is excluded from the local church, he or she is put out of the community of the believers, and sent into the world that is ruled by Satan. The community and fellowship of the local church is really a sanctuary from Satan’s domain.

Notice that excommunication is meant to be **remedial** - *“that they may learn not to blaspheme.”* There is no such thing as punitive discipline in the church. There is reprimand, rebuke, and warning, but the most severe form of church discipline is excommunication. It is used when a believer continues to sin knowingly and deliberately, and warnings and rebukes have failed to bring him or her to repentance.

Biblically, all of these forms of discipline are meant to be remedial. They should motivate the person to repent from his or her sinful ways return to the Lord.

You might think that excommunication would drive a person further away, but if that person is a true believer the loss of fellowship with believers should bring him or her to repentance. A true believer will not find true happiness and fellowship in the world, because it is the realm of Satan. Excommunication promotes repentance, confession, and a return to the fellowship of believers. Excommunication is remedial, not punitive.

Practical Application

Are you involved in blasphemy?

Hymenaeus and Alexander did not keep the faith. They had not maintained a good conscience. Thus we read here that *“they blasphemed God.”*

Are you involved in blasphemy? You’ll probably say, “No way! I’m not involved in blasphemy! I never swear, or use the Lord’s name improperly.” But blasphemy involves more than just dishonoring God by using his name casually or crudely. Are you involved right now in some form of immorality, or unethical business practice, or lying, or stealing in any form? If so, you are involved in blasphemy. God is not honored or revered if your life is not consistent with your testimony. In fact God is ridiculed and blasphemed by others, because of your life’s inconsistencies.

Look what the various media do, when they get a hold of a salacious story about a compromising Christian celebrity. God is mocked! The name of the Lord is smeared. But this problem isn’t reserved for sinning celebrities. When **any** Christian fails to “keep a good conscience,” God is dishonored, and unbelievers ridicule the Christian faith. In addition, young believers may be stumbled, and their faith may be shipwrecked as well.

Is it possible that you’re involved in something - right now - that is bringing shame on the name of the Lord? Are you involved in blasphemy right now? Repent and turn away from your sin. Don’t allow an inconsistent life to bring dishonor and ridicule on our Lord.