

“Sound Doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3–11)

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If we lose our focus, bad things can happen.

Our youngest son, Simon, started playing tee-ball recently. It’s not a very competitive league, as far as tee-ball goes. It’s mainly an opportunity for the kids to try to hit pitches and use the tee if they fail, and for them to do some very basic fielding. The kids are just getting their feet wet in baseball and most of them lack skills. They tend to lack focus, too. That’s the case with Simon. He’s just happy to be out doing something. When he gets on base, he hops and dances on it. When he’s fielding, he’s talking to his friends. But I try to teach him to focus on the ball the whole time, even when he’s not batting. I figure it’s only a matter of time before a ball is hit at him when he’s not looking. And if he’s not focused on the right thing, he could get hurt.

The same thing is true when it comes to the things of God. We can easily lose our focus. I assume that we are here today because we want to refocus our lives on God, or perhaps get a better sense of who God is and what he requires of us. But if I asked you what the focus of Christianity is, what would you say it is?

If you asked that question to many different people on the street, you’d probably get a variety of answers. Some non-Christians might think Christianity is all about rules, a set of dos and don’ts—particularly the don’ts. Others might say that Christianity’s focus is on helping the poor and oppressed. Some Christians might say that the focus of Christianity should be on theology. In that case, Christianity is reduced to a set of beliefs. Christians must give mental assent to the right statements about God. Others would say that Christianity is focused on endless Bible studies. And still others would say that Christianity isn’t about beliefs as much as it’s about a relationship with Jesus.

There is truth to all these things. Christianity does involve rules. Christians should help the poor and needy. Christians should have right theological beliefs. Christians should read the Bible. And Christianity is about a right relationship with Jesus. But all these things are not equal, and it’s easy to focus on only one of them. Sometimes people focus only on the rules, or they focus only on studying obscure passages in the Bible, or they focus only on certain theological teachings. If we lose our focus on the core of Christianity, which is Jesus Christ himself, bad things will happen. Our faith will be distorted. It won’t be healthy.

That was certainly the apostle Paul’s concern. He wrote the letter of 1 Timothy to a younger associate, warning him that false teachers were trying to teach something different than what Paul taught. Their teaching was unproductive and unhealthy. It was even destructive. So, Paul told Timothy to hold fast to the truth, and to teach it in love.

We’ll see this today as we look at 1 Timothy 1:3–11. Last week, we started to look at 1 Timothy and I gave an introduction to the book. If you missed that message, you can find it online. Today, we’re moving ahead into the body of the letter. Let’s first read verses 3–7:

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.¹

We don’t know where Paul was when he wrote this letter. He was headed to the province of Macedonia, where the city of Thessalonica was located. But he told Timothy to stay in the city of Ephesus. Timothy wasn’t the pastor of the church in Ephesus, but he was an apostolic delegate. He was there to help a relatively new church maintain its health.

Paul told Timothy to tell “certain persons” not to teach a different theology. “Doctrine” simply means teaching. Paul must have had in mind a definite group of false teachers, people who were off track in what they were teaching. They might not have been the pastors of the church, but they were leading others astray.

It’s hard to know exactly what these people were teaching, because Paul doesn’t get very specific, probably because he had already told Timothy these things. When we read letters in the New Testament, sometimes we have to do something called mirror reading. It’s like when you hear someone talking on the phone. You only hear one side of the conversation, but based on what you hear, you can guess what the other person is saying.

The false teachers were focusing on myths and genealogies. We’ll also see that they were using the law that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai in a wrong way. So, these teachers were likely Jewish Christians.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Some Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament became very fanciful. When I was studying a bit about Islam, I found out that some Jewish myths even made their way into the Qur'an. One fanciful Jewish story, which is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Jewish writings from after the time of Jesus, concerns what happened at Mount Sinai. According to the Bible, after God rescued Israel out of slavery in Egypt, he brought them to Mount Sinai, where he made a covenant with them and gave them the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law. In the Talmud, the story becomes something rather interesting: God had searched the nations for one that would accept his covenant. But only Israel did. And they accepted his covenant because God lifted Mount Sinai over the Israelites, threatening to drop it on them if they did not accept his offer. One rabbi is quoted as saying, "This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, held the mountain over Israel like a cask and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, well and good, and if not, then there is where your grave will be.'"²

This is obviously legendary material. It's a myth. But this myth made its way into a few passages in the Qur'an (2.63, 93; 4.154; 7.171), which shows that the Qur'an has historical errors and is likely based on what Muhammad thought the Jewish Scriptures actually taught.

There was also a tendency in Judaism to fill in the supposed "gaps" of the Old Testament, particularly in genealogies. There's a document called *The Book of Jubilees*, probably written in the second century BC, which chronicles the time between the creation of the world and the giving of the law. Among other things, it says that Adam and Eve had many children not mentioned in the Bible, and it gives their names, indicating who married whom.

All of this may seem strange to us, but there is a tendency even in Christianity for people to try search the genealogies of the Old Testament for some hidden wisdom, or to become obsessed with figuring out timelines. This can be seen in the book called *The Prayer of Jabez*, which builds a whole theology on one verse tucked away in the genealogies at the beginning of 1 Chronicles.³ First Chronicles 4:10 reports that Jabez prayed, "'Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from harm so that it might not bring me pain!' And God granted what he asked."

² This is quoted in James R. White, *What Every Christian Needs to Know about the Qur'an* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2013), 233. It apparently comes from section BB of Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011).

³ Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2000).

Now, that is what the Bible says. But what is descriptive in the Bible is not always prescriptive. God does not always promise to “enlarge our borders.” But people who didn’t know the Bible well touted this prayer as the key to God’s blessings.

There is also a tendency in some circles of Christianity to focus almost entirely on certain doctrines, particularly end times issues. Usually these people come up with fanciful and fairly ridiculous readings of the book of Revelation or perhaps Daniel, readings not based on carefully study of history or the original languages. Their readings tend to sound more like science fiction or fantasy.

We’ll learn a bit more about what these false teachers were promoting as we continue to study this book. What matters is that Paul wanted Timothy to make sure that the church didn’t go off the rails.

In verse 5, Paul states his goal: “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” He and Timothy had good motives and they wanted the Christians in Ephesus to experience love, pure hearts, good consciences, and a sincere faith. The greatest command is to love God with all our being. The second greatest command is to love our neighbors as ourselves. This love fulfills the law (Matt. 22:34–40; Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14). This love is at the core of Christianity, and it’s likely that the false teachers were missing it.

Paul also says that the false teachers taught in vain. They claimed to be experts in the law, but they didn’t really understand it. Yet they made “confident assertions” about the law. And that leads us to the next paragraph. Let’s read verses 8–11.

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.

The false teachers were using the law unlawfully. That’s ironic, isn’t it? The law is not for the righteous, but for the lawless. The law has a right and a wrong use.

Paul has in mind the law given to Israel. We know that because his vice list summarizes most of the Ten Commandments. We’ll explore that in just a moment.

In the rest of Paul’s writings, he says that the Old Testament law had a limited use. In the book of Galatians, he said that the law had held people captive until the time of Christ. This is what he says:

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith (Gal. 3:23–26).

In Romans 3:20, Paul writes, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” No one ever became acceptable to God through obedience to the law, because no one other than Jesus obeyed it perfectly. Part of the law’s intent was to reveal how sinful we are.⁴

The topic of the law given to Israel at Mount Sinai is complex and it is often misunderstood. I’ll try to make it as simple as I can.

Before we talk about the law given to Israel at Mount Sinai, we should know that there is an objective, universal, eternal moral law. Murder is always wrong, for example. This isn’t said in very explicit terms in the Bible, but it is presupposed. The nations that did not receive the law are still held accountable for their sins, which means there must be some moral or natural law that they transgressed.

But the law in the Old Testament, which we read about in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, was given to Israel, God’s covenant people. This law was given only for a limited period of time, though that period of time was over a thousand years. And the law was given for limited purposes.

One purpose of the law was to give specific descriptions of how the moral law should be employed in that particular, ancient society. So, the law taught general moral principles (particularly the Ten Commandment) and applied them in specific ways to that specific time,

⁴ “In line with Pauline thought elsewhere, but not expressed here, the law functions to reveal sin (Rom 3:20; 5:13; 7:7–12; 1 Cor 15:56; Gal 3:19). The law is good (Rom 7:7, 12, 14; 3:31), but human sin has made it ineffectual (Rom 7:13–25; 8:3) because it could not empower a person to follow the law. The righteous have outgrown the law (Rom 7:1–4; Gal 3:19, 23–4:7), have died to it (Rom 7:6; Gal 2:19), and are now captive to the law of Christ (Rom 7:4–6, 22, 25; 8:2, 7), slaves of righteousness (Rom 6:18) and of God (Rom 6:22; Gal 2:19), not under the law but under grace (Rom 6:14).” William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 34.

place, and culture. We can see that in the many specific laws about paying for damages caused to a neighbor's property (for example, Exod. 21:33–22:15).

Another purpose of the law was to teach certain principles, such that sin is such a serious crime that it deserves death. Sin is rebellion against God. It's a failure to love, trust, and obey God. The law also taught that sinners can find atonement through a substitutionary sacrifice. When animals were slaughtered to pay for the penalties of sin, the idea was that the sins of the people were transferred to those animals, who died in place of sinners. Certain laws provided pictures of what separation from idolatrous people would look like. They were pictures of having different practices. That's why we there are dietary restrictions and laws regarding not wearing garments made of two kinds of fabric, or not sowing two kinds of seeds in one field. Israel was learning how to make distinctions, and to be separate from the nations that surrounded them, because those nations worshiped false gods.

And a third purpose of the law was to reveal how sinful humans are. The law showed Israel that they did not measure up to God's standards.

But here's the key thing: we are not saved by obeying the law. No one is. That's because we don't obey perfectly. The Israelites failed, time and again, to keep the law. And if we were in ancient Israel, we would have failed, too. So, we do not become right in God's eyes by first obeying his law. If that were the case, we would never have a right relationship with God.

Even after salvation, we are not bound by the law given to Israel. We are bound by the "law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Jesus came to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17–18). We must understand the law through the lens of Jesus' fulfillment of the law. That's why we don't offer up animal sacrifices—Jesus is the only sacrifice for sin ever needed. That's why we don't have to worry about which animals we eat, or whether we're wearing a poly-cotton blend. The moral principles of the law are still in place, because they are part of God's unchanging, universal, eternal moral law. But we can't simply read a law in the Old Testament and apply it to our lives without first thinking about how it is understood in the light of Christ.

Does that mean we can do whatever we please? No. Certain things are always wrong and continue to be wrong for Christians. Look again at that vice list in verses 9 and 10. This vice list shows us some things that are still wrong. It is always wrong to be "lawless and disobedient, . . . ungodly and sinners, . . . unholy and profane, . . . those who strike their fathers and mothers, . . .

murderers, . . . sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and [to do] whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.”

Why are these things wrong?

Some people might conclude that God gives us arbitrary rules. Think again of sports. A lot of rules in sports are fairly arbitrary. Why must a football team advance ten yards to get a first down? Why not nine or eleven? Why do they only get four downs to get those ten yards, instead of just three or perhaps five? There’s no great reason. There’s just the rules. Why three strikes and four balls? There’s really no great reason. It’s just that there needed to be some number that wouldn’t make the game too easy or too hard. Are God’s rules arbitrary? No. There are reasons for them.

Some people assume that if there is some eternal moral law, then that law is greater than God, because even he is bound by it. That’s something captured in a philosophical dilemma called the “Euthyphro dilemma.” The idea is that some things are morally right either because God says them, or because the moral law exists outside of God. If the first option is right, then God could say that murder was morally good. If the second option is right, then the moral law is greater than God.

But there’s a third option. God’s moral law is a reflection of who he is. God says, “be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:16). God’s laws can also be viewed as something like an instruction manual. God is the creator of life. He designed things to function in certain ways. He knows how his creation works best. He doesn’t give laws to oppress us or rob us of joy. His laws are for our good. And if we love God, we will obey his commandments. That’s why the apostle John writes, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:2–3).

We were made to know, love, trust, worship, and represent God. The first four of the Ten Commandments tell us something about how to relate to God: We should have no other Gods, we shouldn’t have any false gods, or idols, in our lives, we should take God’s name seriously, and we should find our rest in Jesus, his Son (Exod. 20:3–11, interpreted in the light of Christ). So, to be “disobedient, . . . ungodly and sinners” is always wrong. When we rebel against God, we are rejecting the very best “thing” there is, God himself. It’s like trying to fight gravity. It’s foolish and harmful.

The fifth commandment is to honor father and mother (Exod. 20:12). Striking parents or disobeying them is wrong because God designed the family as the basic building block of society and parents are the authorities in the family. Families precede cities and governments and businesses. That's why Christians care so much about the structure of the family.

Parents were also designed to point us toward a greater Father. Strange as it may seem, God could have designed life so that people reproduced asexually, so that only one parent was needed, or he could have created a world in which no reproduction was necessary. He could have created one generation of a billion people at once, who each lived for thousands of years. Or he could create people out of nothing every once in a while. But he created parents who could create children. And this is a shadow of the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity, and of the Father-children relationship of God and his people. Those who dishonor their parents are more likely to dishonor God.

The sixth commandment is against murder (Exod. 20:13). Murder is wrong because it's killing someone made in the image of God (Gen. 9:5–6). To kill an innocent person is a great insult to God, because human beings are the height of his creation.

The seventh commandment is against adultery (Exod. 20:14). Strictly speaking, that prohibits a man from having sex with another man's wife. But it was interpreted more broadly to prohibit any sex outside of marriage, which is the union of one man and one woman (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7; Eph. 5:31). Jesus even interprets lust as a violation of this commandment (Matt. 5:27–28).

Why is any form of sexual immorality, including homosexual activity, wrong? Are these just arbitrary commandments designed to take away fun? No. God created sex, and he created it to be enjoyed only in the context of marriage. God's design for marriage is found in Genesis 2, before sin entered into the world and caused all kinds of disordered sexual desires. The definition of marriage in Genesis 2 is also affirmed by Jesus (Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7). The reason why God's laws regarding sex and marriage are so serious is because God designed both to be a shadow of the exclusive, faithful, relationship of God and his people (Eph. 5:31–32). In a marriage two parties who are different come together. In the marriage of God and his people, it's two different parties. It's not God and God, or humans and humans. It's God and human beings. Or, if you like, it's the God-man, Jesus Christ, and his people. But what matters is that Jesus is God, and he is united to mere human beings. That is best reflected in a heterosexual relationship.

Of course, I realize that what the Bible teaches about homosexuality is rejected by most Americans today. But just because a majority of people hold an opinion doesn't mean that opinion is right. It's often the case that what is right is rejected by many people.

The passages in the Bible regarding homosexuality are rather clear. Revisionist scholars try to say that those passages are really about something other than committed, consensual homosexual unions that we find today. They say they are about men dominating teenage boys, which certainly was common in the Roman Empire in the time of Jesus and Paul. They say those passages really are about some strange sexual rites performed at pagan temples. They say these passages really prohibit excessive lust. But the passages don't discuss these issues. Most of the passages are rooted in God's design for men and women, and they often echo Genesis 1 and 2. (The language of Rom. 1:18–23, which precedes descriptions of homosexual activity in Rom. 1:24–27, echoes Genesis 1:26–28; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, which also includes homosexuality in a vice list, comes before a quotation of Gen. 2:24 in 1 Cor. 6:16.)

If the biblical prohibitions in the Bible are regarded as arbitrary, it's hard to provide a reason why there can't be three people in a relationship instead of two, or why two brothers or two sisters couldn't be in a sexual relationship. Yet most reasonable people realize there are boundaries to sexual relationships. So, why not trust that the boundaries that God has drawn are the right ones?

The fact is that most of us are sexual sinners. Even if we have never had sex, or have only had sex with our spouses, we have likely sinned or coveted another person's husband or wife. The Bible focuses a lot more on heterosexual sin than homosexual sin. And there is hope for heterosexual and homosexual sinners. In another one of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians, Paul writes:

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 (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

Any sinner can be made right with God. The question is whether that person will turn to God and away from sin. Not one of us will be perfect in this life. We will struggle with sin even after becoming Christians. Remember, we're not saved from condemnation because of our

perfect obedience. But salvation comes to those who trust in Jesus, and that requires repentance, a turning away from our old ways.

Getting back to Paul's vice list in 1 Timothy, he makes reference to the eighth commandment, which is against stealing (Exod. 20:15). But he does that by mentioning "enslavers," those who kidnap people and make them slaves or sell them as slaves. Stealing someone else's property is wrong, because it harms that person. It elevates things above people. But this goes further: stealing a person is wrong because it treats a person as a thing. Philo, a Jewish writer of the first century, said, "A kidnapper also is a thief; but he is, moreover, a thief who steals the very most excellent thing that exists upon the earth."⁵

Some people have claimed that the Bible doesn't say anything against slavery.⁶ But that's not true. This verse says otherwise. So does the book of Philemon. But we'll talk more about slavery when we get to 1 Timothy 6:1–2.

Paul also references the ninth commandment, which is against bearing false witness against one's neighbor (Exod. 20:16). Paul says "liars, perjurers," which deals both with legal false witness as well as a broader category of deceit. God is a God of truth and Jesus himself is the truth (John 14:6). So, lies are contrary to God and his ways.

Paul doesn't mention the tenth commandment, which forbids coveting (Exod. 20:17), but he does give a blanket statement that sinners are those who practice "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted."

The word "sound" means "healthy." Sins aren't healthy. Right theology leads to health. Bad theology leads to disaster.

We can be unhealthy by believing false things about God. We can be unhealthy when we focus too much on true things. When we get obsessed with minor doctrines and make those ultimate priorities, we can quickly become unhealthy. We shouldn't major on minors and minor on majors.

⁵ Charles Duke Yonge with Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 617.

⁶ MSNBC host Lawrence O'Donnell made that claim in 2013. See Clare Kim, "Pastor Is under Fire for Views That Are in the Bible," *NBCNews.com*, January 11, 2013, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/50433217/t/pastor-under-fire-views-are-bible>; Billy Hallowell, "MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell Mocks the Bible and Urges Obama to Exclude It from the Inauguration," *The Blaze*, January 11, 2013, <https://www.theblaze.com/news/2013/01/11/msnbc-lawrence-odonnell-mocks-the-bible-urges-obama-to-exclude-it-from-the-inauguration>.

The center of Christianity is the gospel, the good news that God saves sinners through the work of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God who also became a human being. The gospel is healthy, because it restores us to spiritual health. And it glorifies God because God gets all the credit for saving sinful wretches like you and me. If we were saved by our own obedience, we would be glorified. But the gospel says that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23). The gospel says that only Jesus lived the perfect life (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22), yet he died to pay for our sins. He is the true substitutionary, atoning sacrifice. We must never forget that we are not saved by our knowledge, our obedience, our goodness, or our strength. No, Jesus “became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Today, I urge us to know and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus brings true, eternal health. Christianity involves knowing right things about God, but it’s more than that. It is about a relationship with Jesus. If we truly know Jesus, we will know facts about him, and we will live a life that is pleasing to him. That means turning from sin and embracing God’s moral law, not as a means of earning God’s favor or maintaining a relationship with him. No, our standing with God is based on whether we trust Jesus or not. But if you love Jesus, you will keep his commandments, and you will find that they are not burdensome, but they are intended for your good.