As recipients of God’s grace, believers are entrusted with the truth of the gospel message.

Spending a week at scout camp often topped the delights of my boyhood summers. At one summer camp I signed up to train as a lifeguard. Part of my training involved serving on the lifeguard staff at the pool whenever camp attendees were permitted to swim.

I was sitting at my poolside station one day when I noticed two younger boys treading water while facing each other. One boy’s head bobbed underwater and then came back up. Neither boy looked upset or panicked, so I assumed they were either playing a game or practicing lifesaving techniques. As I continued to watch the pair, however, the first boy’s head bobbed underwater a second time. I began to wonder why the second boy did not assist his friend. When the first boy sank underwater a third time, I realized he was in trouble and that neither of the boys knew what to do. Another lifeguard and I quickly jumped in the water and pulled the endangered boy to safety.

In a similar way, new believers or young churches sometimes do not recognize serious spiritual threats that can overwhelm them. Or they do not know how to respond to the threats and protect themselves from danger. When the apostle Paul wrote 1 Timothy, he was aware of a serious spiritual threat endangering the believers in the church at Ephesus—false teaching. He had trained his young gospel coworker, Timothy, and had left Timothy in Ephesus to help watch over the believers. In this session’s Bible passage, Paul encouraged Timothy to recognize the dangers of false teaching and guide believers toward sound doctrine and holy living.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 TIMOTHY 1:1-20

Paul’s longest recorded ministry in one location was his two-year tenure in and around Ephesus (see Acts 19:10). During Paul’s time in Ephesus,
the church experienced growth and conflict, with the conflict arising mostly from outside the church. Now the church was experiencing problems with false teachers, and Paul had sent Timothy to the city to address the issues. Paul wrote 1 Timothy to provide his young coworker with more instruction on how to deal with the false teaching.

Paul addressed Timothy as his “true son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2). Near the end of chapter one, he again referred to Timothy as his “son” in Christian ministry (1:18). Paul’s instruction came with encouragement to remember the past confirmation of Timothy’s calling to gospel service, which included prophetic declarations about Timothy’s ministry. Paul encouraged the young leader to “fight the good fight” in Ephesus.

The conflict among the Ephesian believers had already claimed victims, among whom were two men named Hymenaeus [HIGH meh NEE uhs] and Alexander (1:20). By rejecting sound teaching, these two men had shipwrecked their faith. Paul had already rejected these men as teachers. Paul urged Timothy to continue to hold false teachers accountable and to point believers to sound teaching that would produce the love that Paul desired for the church.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

ACCOUNTABLE (1 Tim. 1:3-7)

VERSE 3

As I urged you when I went to Macedonia, remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach false doctrine

Paul omitted his usual thanksgiving-prayer section that followed the sender, recipient, and greeting in other letters (see Rom. 1:8; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3). Instead he immediately moved to address the problem of false teaching in the Ephesian church. Paul reminded that this was a primary reason he had urged Timothy to remain in Ephesus even as he went to Macedonia.

One view of when Paul gave this encouragement proposes that both men had been working in Ephesus but that Paul later departed for Macedonia. An alternate view suggests that Paul and Timothy were traveling together, then separated as Paul headed for Macedonia and Timothy went to Ephesus. In any case, Paul’s encouragement for Timothy to remain in Ephesus may have indicated a hesitation on Timothy’s part to be separated from his spiritual mentor again. Timothy apparently had experienced some problems in Corinth (see 1 Cor. 16:10), and he may have anticipated facing similar
problems in Ephesus. By reminding Timothy and the church at Ephesus that Timothy was there at his urging, Paul may have been supporting Timothy’s authority in the Ephesian church.

Timothy’s task in Ephesus was to instruct (“charge,” KJV; ESV; “command,” NIV) certain people not to teach false doctrine (“no other doctrine,” KJV; “any different doctrine,” ESV). The phrase certain people probably included but was not limited to the two men Paul named in 1:20, Hymenaeus and Alexander. The false teachers do not appear to have been outsiders but rather were people within the church congregation who drifted away from sound gospel teaching.

The words teach false doctrine translate a single Greek term found only here and in 1 Timothy 6:3. It is a compound word comprised of a Greek adjective meaning “other, different” and a noun meaning “teacher” and, by extension, “teaching, doctrine.” Paul used the term to refer to teachings that deviated from the gospel message he received and taught faithfully in every church (see 1 Cor. 15:1-8). In 1 Timothy 6:3, Paul contrasted the false teachers’ doctrine with “the sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

VERSE 4

or to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies. These promote empty speculations rather than God’s plan, which operates by faith.

Paul also wanted Timothy to warn Christians against getting wrapped up in discussing myths (“fables,” KJV) and endless genealogies. The Greek word translated myths originally referred to stories that could be either fictional or historical. By Paul’s day, however, the term referred exclusively to fanciful tales presented as true but filled with falsehoods. The term appears five times in the New Testament (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Pet. 1:16). In 1 Timothy 4:7, Paul described these mythical stories as “pointless and silly.”

The Greek word translated genealogies occurs in the New Testament only here and in Titus 3:9, although the Gospels of Matthew and Luke both contain genealogies of Jesus. The appearance of these two terms in tandem could refer to myths that were structured in the form of genealogies.

Bible scholars propose several possible backgrounds behind the false teachings Paul warned against. Some suggest a Greek background associated with the heretical movement known as Gnosticism. A more likely view, however, points to a background in fictitious expansions of Old Testament stories dealing with patriarchs and other Israelite heroes. While these stories could spark intense fascination over certain biblical figures, Paul opposed the myths because they produced nothing beyond empty speculations
among the believers in Ephesus. They distracted Christians from a serious focus on promoting and living out God’s saving plan, the gospel. Salvation in Christ was not (and is not) a matter of silly tales. The true gospel operates by faith—trust in Christ that translates into Christlike living.

The Greek word rendered plan (“edifying,” KJV; “stewardship,” ESV; “work,” NIV) literally means “house law” or “house rules.” It referred to a set of governing principles that a household owner established and the owner’s main steward employed to run the household. Paul used the term in 1 Timothy 1:4 to describe the gospel of Jesus Christ as God’s governing principles for His “household,” the church. The false teachers in Ephesus were drawing believers away from their mission of proclaiming the gospel to engaging in endless, empty debates about mythical stories.

VERSE 5

Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.

Paul reminded Timothy and the Ephesian believers of the goal (“end,” KJV; “aim,” ESV) of true gospel instruction (“commandment,” KJV; “charge,” ESV; “command,” NIV). The Greek word rendered instruction points to the authoritative and faithful proclamation of “God’s plan” (1:4)—the gospel and its implications for Christian living. The aim of gospel instruction was not to generate pointless debates among believers but to produce love within the body of Christ (see John 15:12,17).

The term in the Greek text rendered love is agape [ah GAH pay]. The New Testament writers consistently used this term in reference to God’s sacrificial, self-giving love for the world (John 3:16) and especially for His redeemed people (Rom. 8:37-39; 1 John 3:1). For believers, this type of love issues in intentional Christlike actions, because it arises from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.

First-century believers considered the heart to be the center of a person, the vital seat of attitudes and decision making. Jesus taught that the pure in heart were truly blessed because they would “see God” (Matt. 5:8). Paul urged Timothy to pursue Christian character “along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22).

Christian love emerges also from a good conscience. Hebrews 9:14 declares that the atoning death of Christ cleanses the believer’s conscience from dead works. That is, the transforming power of God’s forgiveness in Christ removes the believer’s former shame and guilt. The conscience, led by the Spirit, then becomes a trustworthy internal guide that leads the believer into Christlike attitudes and conduct.
Finally, Christlike love arises from a sincere faith. The Greek word translated sincere means “genuine, without deception.” Both Paul and James agreed that genuine faith issues in selfless, Christlike actions—good works—for the well-being of others (Eph. 2:8-10; Jas. 2:17-18). Paul wanted Timothy’s gospel teaching to produce believers who daily demonstrated their faith and changed lives, not who argued endlessly about pointless stories.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Conscience” on pages 333–334 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What does the saying “let your conscience be your guide” mean to you. What role does the believer’s conscience play in following the Spirit’s guidance?

VERSE 6

Some have departed from these and turned aside to fruitless discussion.

Evidently only some of the church’s would-be teachers had departed from ("swerved," KJV) faithful gospel instruction. However, just as Jesus warned His disciples to beware of “the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 16:11-12), Paul warned Timothy that any false teaching left uncorrected could quickly spread, turning the church from its gospel mission.

In contrast to the gospel’s goal of Christian love (good works) growing out of sincere faith in Christ, the false teachers’ goal was fruitless discussion (“vain jangling,” KJV; “meaningless talk,” NIV). The Greek term rendered fruitless discussion appears only here in the entire New Testament. Paul used it to describe endless rhetorical discussions that led nowhere—as when people spend weeks analyzing and discussing the doctrine of prayer without ever praying. In the minds of the false teachers in Ephesus, religious talk was an end in itself. Paul’s warning against such vain activity is no less important for today’s churches than it was for first-century churches.

VERSE 7

They want to be teachers of the law, although they don’t understand what they are saying or what they are insisting on.

The false teachers in Ephesus wanted to be recognized as teachers of the law. Paul probably was referring here to the Old Testament law, the law of Moses. That is, the false teachers fancied themselves as scriptural experts.
Paul begged to differ, however. His primary condemnation was the false teachers’ ignorance of the subject matter. They did not understand what they were teaching. Even worse, they displayed great enthusiasm in perpetuating their ignorance. The Greek word translated insisting on (“affirm,” KJV; “make confident assertions,” ESV; “so confidently affirm,” NIV) occurs in the New Testament only here and in Titus 3:8. The word means “to state something with confidence and certainty.” The false teachers tried to make their biblical ignorance appealing to others by speaking confidently.

Paul insisted that the false teachers in Ephesus be held accountable for their wrong teaching. The goal of Paul’s teaching was love that grows out of godly motives, not fruitless speculation and empty chatter.

IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL (1 Tim. 1:8-11)

VERSE 8

But we know that the law is good, provided one uses it legitimately.

After condemning the false teachers’ uninformed use of the law, Paul explained its proper use. His intention was not to condemn the law or dissuade believers from discussing the Scriptures. Rather, he wanted Timothy to correct those in Ephesus who wanted to be teachers but who understood neither the law nor its purpose.

Paul reminded Timothy (but we know) that, in contrast to the false teachers, they understood the law’s proper role. God had revealed the law to Moses on Mount Sinai as He prepared the people of Israel to live as His holy people; consequently, the law was good. Paul well understood, however, that people could misuse the law for ungodly purposes. The Greek word translated legitimately (“lawfully,” KJV; ESV; “properly,” NIV) appears only here and in 2 Timothy 2:5, where it describes an athlete’s competing “according to the rules.” Here Paul argued that the law must be used as God intended.

VERSE 9

We know that the law is not meant for a righteous person, but for the lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinful, for the unholy and irreverent, for those who kill their fathers and mothers, for murderers,

Paul explained that the law was not meant for a righteous person. The righteous person (“the just,” ESV) is one who lives in right relationship with God and whose character and behavior accord with that relationship.
The phrase *not meant for* (“not made for,” KJV; “not laid down for,” ESV) literally means “to lie down” or “to place on a level (horizontal) surface.” In a legal context, it referred to a valid standard of conduct. The phrase “lay down the law” captures this idea.

The law’s true purpose was to reveal the nature and extent of human sinfulness. Paul first used three pairs of general words to describe those for whom the law was valid. The first pair, **the lawless and rebellious**, are those who reject God’s sovereign right as Creator to lay down the principles of proper conduct for His creatures. They rebel against His authority and flout His clear commands. The second pair, **the ungodly and sinful**, are those who choose their own standards of conduct over God’s. The third pair, **the unholy and irreverent**, are those who treat nothing—not even God—as sacred. The law exposed the utter depravity of sinful, self-worshiping hearts.

To the three pairs of general terms, Paul added seven specific sins. The list was not exhaustive but representative. It included **those who kill their fathers and mothers** as well as **murderers**. These offending groups link unmistakably to violations of the fifth and sixth commandments. God had commanded His people in the covenant to honor their parents (Ex. 20:12) and not to commit murder (20:13).

**VERSES 10-11**

*for the sexually immoral and homosexuals, for slave traders, liars, perjurers, and for whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which was entrusted to me.*

The terms **the sexually immoral** (“whoremongers,” KJV) and **homosexuals** (“them that defile themselves with mankind,” KJV; “those practicing homosexuality,” NIV) pointed to types of sexual sins that violate the seventh commandment. The Greek word translated **slave traders** (“men stealers,” KJV; “enslavers,” ESV) appears only here in the New Testament. Its appearance in this list shows that God condemns the practice of human slavery in any era as sinful. The last two words in this list relate to failing to tell the truth both in a general sense (**liars**) as well as in a legal or religious setting (**perjurers**). These two sins link to violations of the ninth commandment.

The phrase rendered **and for whatever else** makes clear that Paul could have added other examples to the list of specific sins. He warned that all such conduct (not to mention its toleration if not outright promotion by the false teachers) stood in stark opposition to the **sound teaching that conforms to the gospel**. The Greek word rendered **sound** could refer to physical healthiness but in this context means “correct or free from error.”
The standard by which sound teaching must be measured is the gospel. The gospel reveals the glory of the blessed God. That is, sound gospel teaching is not that which obsesses over pointless myths but rather proclaims the truth of God’s splendor and the majesty in working through His Son Jesus Christ to forgive sins and transform the lives of all who believe in Him.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Compare Paul’s discussion about the law’s purpose in these verses with his discussion of the law in Romans 7:7-13 and Galatians 3:19-24. What further insights do you gain from these passages? What do you see as the law’s place in your life today?

IN RESPONSE TO HIS GRACE (1 Tim. 1:12-17)

VERSE 12

I give thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful, appointing me to the ministry—

Remembering the gospel that had been entrusted to him motivated Paul to express thanksgiving to the Lord. He knew well the gospel’s sin-breaking, life-giving power, because Christ had transformed him from the worst of sinners to a primary witness of God’s saving grace. Memories of this transformation came flooding through Paul’s pen in this section of his letter to Timothy.

Timothy needed much encouragement as he ministered in Ephesus at this time. Paul was not there to take the lead, and forces opposed to sound gospel teaching had arisen both inside and outside the church. Thus, Paul reminded Timothy of the believer’s true source of strength: Christ Jesus the Lord.

Paul recalled the early days after his conversion. Who would believe that a zealous persecutor of Christians now was a believer who testified of a personal encounter with the risen Lord? Jews would think he had gone insane. Christians would rightfully distrust him. Yet, the Lord strengthened him in his newfound faith. What is more, Christ considered Paul faithful to the extent that He appointed Paul to the ministry as an apostle and preacher of the gospel. Paul was amazed that the Christ he had formerly opposed so viciously would deem someone like him to be worthy of trust. Timothy could likewise gain strength by remembering how Christ had saved him and called him to gospel ministry.
VERSE 13
even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an arrogant man. But I received mercy because I acted out of ignorance in unbelief,

Paul was painfully aware of his former life before encountering Christ. He used three words to describe that life. The Greek word rendered blasphemer refers to one who speaks in a demeaning and dishonest way about God. The word translated persecutor refers to someone who harasses and hurts others, especially on account of their beliefs. Before Paul’s conversion he had pursued Christians, attempting to get them to blaspheme (Acts 26:11). The Greek word translated arrogant man occurs in the Greek New Testament only here and in Romans 1:30; the term refers to a violent, insolent person.

As a believer, Paul was not proud of having sinned in these ways before his conversion. These were serious sins, but Paul was so blinded by legalism at the time that he thought he was zealously serving God by persecuting Christians. Only after encountering the risen Christ and believing in Him were Paul’s eyes opened to the depths of his former sinfulness. Yet, God knew that Paul had formerly acted out of ignorance in unbelief. God showed mercy to Paul. If God did this for Paul, would He not also strengthen and use His servant Timothy in effective gospel ministry in Ephesus?

VERSE 14
and the grace of our Lord overflowed, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Jesus’ mercy became evident in Paul’s life by the outpouring of God’s grace. The Greek word rendered overflowed (“was exceeding abundant,” KJV; “was poured out on,” NIV) is a compound word that literally means “to experience extraordinary abundance.” God’s undeserved favor had been poured out on Paul beyond anything he could imagine.

Along with that grace came faith and love. Paul had already mentioned love as the goal of his instruction to Timothy (1:5) and faith as the way that God’s plan operated (1:4). This faith and love were found in Christ Jesus. Faith and love were the proper responses to God’s initiative of grace, and the source of that faith and love was found in Christ Jesus alone.

VERSE 15
This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them.
Paul then quoted a **saying** that expressed part of the sound gospel teaching he expected Timothy to uphold in Ephesus. Further, all believers could (and should) confidently embrace the truth that **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.** It was a truth arising from Jesus’ own testimony that He came “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). For Paul, the saying was intensely personal; his sinful past made him aware of the helplessness of his situation apart from God’s grace. His claim to be the **worst** of sinners was a heartfelt acknowledgment of his status as a sinner saved only by grace.

**VERSE 16**

**But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life.**

For the second time in this section, Paul mentioned the **mercy** he had received (see 1 Tim. 1:13). In this verse, mercy was seen as part of God’s plan for reaching the lost. Paul repeated his claim to be the **worst** among sinners and then tied that claim to Jesus’ demonstration of **extraordinary patience** (“all longsuffering,” KJV; “perfect patience,” ESV). If Paul, with his sinful past, could receive God’s mercy, then no one was beyond the reach of God’s mercy. Paul’s salvation was an **example** for all. Anyone who was willing to **believe in** Jesus Christ **for eternal life** could anticipate that the God of perfect patience and mercy would save them too.

**VERSE 17**

**Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.**

Paul concluded this section with a doxology. Reflecting on God’s immense mercy led Paul to praise God as the **King** who is **eternal, immortal, invisible, and the only God.** Earthly kings come and go, but God is King forever. He is infinitely above, beyond, and other than mortal human beings; yet He came to earth as Savior in Jesus Christ the Son. God alone is worthy of **honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.**

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

In what ways can contemporary Christians serve, as Paul did, as examples to the world of the grace of God? How can you better serve as an example of God’s grace to those around you?