



On Target

1 TIMOTHY 1:3-5

Baxter T. Exum (#1489)
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Most of you know by now that I have a genetic predisposition to pretty much abhor anything that is remotely athletic. And I believe this goes back for several generations. Some of you might know that my dad is somewhat proud that his only “C” in college was in weightlifting! As far as teams go, as I have mentioned before, my trauma goes back to elementary school, growing up in the Chicago area, when my parents went to a thrift shop and bought me a Dallas Cowboys winter vest. They had no idea! It had a giant blue and silver star on the back. This would be during the Ditka years in the early to mid-80’s, leading up to Super Bowl XX - the Black n’ Blues Brothers, the Super Bowl Shuffle, and in the middle of all that, here I am wearing a Dallas Cowboys coat! I’m thinking of Johnny Cash and “A Boy Named Sue.” Perhaps they did this to build character. In reality, though, they had no idea, because, again, we are not sports people.

However, over time, I’ve come to realize that there are some things I enjoy doing, and I’m not really sure why, but a few years ago, I realized that all of these activities involve hitting a target of some kind. I’m thinking back to using a slingshot and shooting those iron ore pellets from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. I had a dartboard in my college dorm room, and it has followed me through the years. I’ve enjoyed learning more about firearms over the past ten years or so - pistols, shotguns, and various rifles. We’ve set up an air rifle range of sorts in our garage. Some of us love corn-hole. I don’t think I’d ever done that until the Higgins family brought a few sets to the Turleys’ picnic a few years back. Cornhole involves hitting a target!

But one of my favorite target sports is throwing a tomahawk or an axe. I did it a bit as a kid at home and at the Illinois State fair, but we discovered it again a few years ago at our summer camp. We were shooting air rifles as a part of our program, and I noticed a log set up as a target out in the poison ivy, and I asked the camp people about it. We now throw tomahawks! The rubber chicken is our mascot, and a few years ago, Aaron promised a Mountain Dew to anybody who could take off the chicken’s head. He lost many parts, but never his head, until Chris Archuleta came to camp last year! Some of you might have noticed that Madison now has a venue for throwing blades, Happy Axe, over on the West side, near Memorial High School, right near Judy’s place, and it has been incredibly popular. We set up an axe target in our front yard a few years ago. So far, nobody has called the cops on me, but I bolted together a bunch of 4x4 posts, painted a target, and started throwing. And it is fun. I can go out there and throw for 10-15 minutes at a time, and there is some satisfaction in hitting the target. I love that this is cheap! The hatchet I have up here was \$1 at Habitat Restore. But again, there is great satisfaction in hearing that “thunk” as you hit the target.

This morning, as we think about some of these target sports, I would like for us to start studying a book written by the apostle Paul to a church that was in danger of missing the mark completely. And the first lesson in this series comes from the opening paragraph of the letter, as Paul actually writes to a young preacher, encouraging him to get this congregation back on target. I am referring, of course, to Paul's first letter to Timothy (p. 1854). Paul, of course, had been a leader in the Jewish faith, a persecutor of the church, but he meets Jesus on his way to Damascus. After obeying the gospel, Paul is then given the special assignment of reaching out to the Gentiles.

On one of his preaching trips, Paul apparently converts a young man by the name of Timothy. We know from Acts 16:1 that Timothy's mother is Jewish, and his father is Greek (a pagan). He learns the scriptures from his mother and grandmother. And when he meets Paul, he becomes something of a son to Paul, as he is mentored to be a preacher. The letter we're looking at is addressed to Timothy, but it is something of an "open letter," as Timothy is commanded by Paul to make things right with this congregation in Ephesus.

Ephesus was a difficult place to establish a congregation. Hopefully we can learn a bit more about it as we work our way through 1 Timothy, but Ephesus was home to the Roman goddess Diana. And as the fertility goddess, the worship of Diana involved lots of prostitution. In fact, I couldn't find an image of Diana that wasn't obscene. Ephesus, then, was a hub for sex trafficking. It was an immoral city. Paul had established the church in Ephesus a number of years earlier (in the early 50's AD). He spends about three years there on his Third Missionary Journey (teaching and preaching both publicly and from house to house), he stops by for a quick visit to warn the elders (in that passage Reid read for us earlier) - warning them that savage wolves would come in from among themselves to threaten the church, but over a period of roughly 15 years, the church is struggling.

So, here we are several years later (in the early 60's AD), the church in Ephesus is having some trouble, they are drifting off target, and Paul needs somebody to go in to set things straight. And he chooses Timothy. Timothy is an interesting character in that he's faithful, but he's not a superhero. He's somewhat timid. He's fairly young. He seems to have some struggles with his health. He is also bi-racial, which actually makes him perfect to preach to this racially mixed congregation in Ephesus. Timothy knows what it means to grow up as a Jew with a pagan father. Timothy is chosen, then, to go to Ephesus, and to fix what is going on here.

In this letter, Paul wants the church to recognize that he is writing with the authority of an apostle. There might have been some turnover in the eldership since Paul had been there 10-15 years earlier, so he opens the letter with a reminder. Notice, please, 1 Timothy 1:1. He opens with these words, ***"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope."*** So, he is not an apostle by CHOICE. This isn't something Paul went looking for, but instead, he is an apostle by the ***"command"*** of God - almost like Moses. Moses didn't go looking for a position of leadership, but instead, he was drafted. So, Paul starts with this reminder, that these words he is about to write are words that come from God. This is a letter that needs to be obeyed. It needs to be respected as scripture.

And then, notice who this letter is written to. In verse 2, he says, ***"To Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."*** And with that, there are no other greetings. Sometimes Paul will go on and on about how thankful he is for somebody. But here, he jumps right into it. This is a desperately critical situation. And so we come to our text for today - 1 Timothy 1:3-5. And in this opening paragraph, Paul is reminding Timothy to bring the congregation back on target. Today, we know how easy it is for us to get off target spiritually. We know how easy it is to wander, to forget what is truly

important. And this seems to be happening in Ephesus, so Paul has to call them back. He has to bring them back on target. Notice, please, 1 Timothy 1:3-5,

³ As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, ⁴ nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith. ⁵ But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

- I. In this opening paragraph, we have a **CORRECTION** and then the statement of an **AIM** or a **GOAL**. But we start with the **CORRECTION** - we start with a **WARNING**.

And the warning comes in the form of a command as Paul reminds Timothy that he left him in Ephesus for a very specific reason, ***“so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines.”*** The word ***“instruct”*** could also be translated as ***“order”*** or ***“command.”*** It’s a word that was used in the military when a commanding officer would tell someone of a lower rank to do something. This is not a suggestion; this is a command. So again, Paul does not ease into this letter, but he starts off demanding that the men of this congregation stop teaching ***“strange doctrines.”*** The word ***“doctrine”*** simply means ***“teaching.”*** And with this, we are reminded of something we have noticed before, that whenever the word ***“doctrine”*** or ***“teaching”*** is singular, it refers to solid or sound or healthy teaching. But whenever the word is plural, it refers to false or unhealthy teachings. And the reason is: There are many false teachings out there, but there is only one teaching that is true. If it comes from Jesus, it’s true. But if not, those other teachings are not true.

In his letter to this church, Paul said in Ephesians 2:20 that the church itself is ***“...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, [with] Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.”*** Jesus, then, speaks through the apostles. And when the church ignores the teaching of the apostles or when the church changes that teaching in some way, the church ceases to be a church belonging to Jesus. It ceases to be a church of Christ. Unfortunately, Paul’s warning to the elders in Ephesus is slowly coming true. Some from within the church were changing God’s message. We hate to admit it, but there is trickery and deceitfulness in the religious world. So, in his letter to the preacher, Paul, then, tells Timothy to command that the men of the congregation stop teaching these ***“other doctrines.”*** Do not teach these things!

He continues with a warning against paying attention to ***“myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation.”*** Notice again how both of these are plural! We have the word of God, and then we have everything else - strange teachings, myths, endless genealogies. We think about Ephesus. Some of those ancient cities had elaborate stories concerning how their city came to be. We think about Greek and Roman mythology. And so there is a pagan element here. But then we also have ***“endless genealogies.”*** We know that genealogies were so important to the Jewish people. Their tribal ancestry was incredibly important. And sometimes teachers would make up elaborate stories based on some obscure name from some passage buried deep in the Old Testament. It’s all speculation, so Paul says: Don’t do that! Don’t be paying attention to myths and these endless genealogies. There is the rock solid truth of God’s word, and then there is everything else. Don’t be paying attention to the everything else, because those myths really don’t help advance or build up God’s work, by faith. Faith comes from hearing the word of God, and those myths are not from God.

Now, to many of us in our pluralistic culture, this sounds so strange! The world around us teaches that everybody has a right to their own opinion, that it doesn’t really matter what we believe, as long as we are sincere, that there is really no such thing as truth, that what is true for you might not be true for me, and so

on. But here, Paul clearly has the idea that some things are not to be taught. There are many **“strange doctrines”** that are not to be taught or tolerated in the Lord’s church. We don’t need to be mean about this. We don’t need to be arrogant about this. But there are clearly some **“strange doctrines”** that are not to be taught. By the way, **“strange doctrines”** is something of a compound word, and the first part of it is “hetero,” meaning “different” or “other.” Different from what? Different from what Jesus taught. Different from what Jesus’ apostles taught. If something is not in the Bible, we don’t need to be teaching it.

What does this mean for us? It means that we need to be careful to only teach the word of God. When we preach and teach, our sermons and our classes need to be based on the word. We need to open our Bibles. We can use good materials and resources, but when we come together for a class and worship, we need to show up with an open Bible.

As I was preparing today’s lesson, I ran across one author who made the point that no church can be healthier than the teaching that is presented and tolerated. And his point was: If the teaching is unhealthy and unbiblical, the church will soon be unhealthy and unbiblical, and we as members of the church will soon tolerate all kinds of immoral and bizarre behavior. If we honor God’s truth, we build our house on the rock, but if we ignore or dismiss sound teaching, we are building our house on sand.

And so, the lesson is: What we accept as truth has an impact on how we live. If I’m not regularly hearing from God through his word, then what I do doesn’t really matter. And then we end up like the people in Judges, with all of us doing whatever we think is right in our own eyes. A church can be no healthier and stronger than what is taught.

As a preacher, I am the Timothy in this picture, and I need your help with this. All of you need to be checking up on what I’m teaching. You need to help make sure that I continue to teach nothing but the word of God. From a practical point of view, this is why I try to always have us open our own Bibles as we study. This is why I usually don’t put the text of the lesson on the wall up here. I put the reference up here, but not the text. And the reason is: All of you need to be checking my work! As a preacher, I do not have God’s authority to change the message. Like Timothy, my job is to explain it. My job is to communicate it. In fact, anyone who teaches or preaches must use the word to teach, and warn, and encourage.

So, here at the beginning we have a warning: Timothy is in Ephesus to command certain men not to teach strange doctrines. They must not pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, as these lead to nothing but speculation and do nothing to strengthen God’s work.

- II. **As we continue, in this first paragraph, Paul now makes a positive statement as he describes the target we all need to be aiming for, and so we have a GOAL, we have an AIM.**

“The goal of our instruction,” Paul says, **“is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”** So instead of just avoiding the kind of speculation that doesn’t really matter, instead of leaving with a condemnation, we have a goal here. What are we aiming for? Our goal, first of all, Paul says, is love from a pure heart.

Over and over again, God calls us to love from a pure heart. And the kind of love we’re talking about here is a choice. To love is to choose, sometimes despite our feelings, to choose to do what is best for another person. In other words, the kind of love we are talking about here depends not on the lov-ee, but on the lov-er! This isn’t just a feeling we have toward someone, but we do what the other person needs to have done, and we do

it with pure motives - not for the purpose of being noticed or thanked, not to guilt somebody into doing something, not to earn some kind of favor in return - but as God's people, we do for others what we would appreciate having done for us if we were in the same circumstances. And this applies both spiritually and in material matters. If I'm struggling spiritually, I want somebody to check in on me and to tell me truth. If I'm struggling financially, I want somebody to help me out a bit. If I'm struggling physically, I want somebody to help out in some way. We know what love looks like, and Paul says that instead of teaching a bunch of weird speculation, our goal is to get to work, doing what needs to be done, motivated by a pure heart; making sure we are clean not just outwardly, but on the inside.

We think about what Jesus said about the Pharisees in Matthew 23. One of his criticisms was that those men looked good on the outside, but on the inside, their hearts were like a tomb, full of dead men's bones and all kinds of uncleanness. These men were like a fancy cup - sparkling clean on the outside, but full of nastiness on the inside, where it counts. Jesus' solution comes in Matthew 23:26, where he says, ***"You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also."*** We allow the word to convict us of sin, and then we do what needs to be done. We don't blame others, we don't excuse our own behavior, but we creatively do for others what we would appreciate having done for us.

The writer of Hebrews speaks of cleansing our hearts in Hebrews 10:22 when he says, ***"...let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."*** Our hearts are cleansed in the act of baptism.

And that leads us to the second part of this goal, the ***"good conscience."*** Peter speaks of this in 1 Peter 3:21 when he talks about Noah being saved from a corrupt world through water, and he says, ***"Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."***

The conscience is a part of the mind that is constantly telling us to do what we think is right. What we think is right might actually be wrong - then our conscience is really telling us to do what is wrong (this is what happened to Paul before he obeyed the gospel - he was persecuting the church, all while thinking that he was serving God). But assuming the conscience has been properly informed (or trained), the conscience tells us to do what we think is right. We can ignore the conscience by doing what we know to be wrong (this produces what we know as guilt), and if we do this long enough, we can "sear" the conscience - we can burn it out, we can become calloused (kind of like what happens to our hands when we shovel three feet of snow in less than a month) - we lose feeling, the conscience stops working - that is, we get to the point that we just don't care any more. Obviously, that's a huge problem. But Paul tells us here that our goal is to live with a ***"good conscience."*** We want what we are doing to match what we know to be right, based on the word of God. And that is a great feeling! This comes as the result of solid teaching. And that is what Paul is commanding here. In Hebrews 9:14, by the way, the author says that, the blood of Jesus can ***"cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."*** We want to serve God with a good conscience. This is our goal. Good teaching leads to a good conscience. False teaching leads to either a guilty conscience or a seared conscience.

The other goal is that we aim for having ***"sincere faith."*** The word translated as ***"sincere"*** in this passage refers to not being hypocritical. Literally, our faith is not to be an act. We are not to be pretending. In 1 Peter 1:22-23, Peter says, ***"Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is***

perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.” Our aim is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.

Conclusion:

As we close, one thing I find interesting is that all three of these goals are at least somewhat realized in baptism. Through our obedience to the gospel, our hearts are made pure, the conscience is cleaned, and being born again causes us to love each other sincerely. The Word confronts us with sin and then explains what God has done for us. Jesus came to this earth, he lived a perfect life, and he died in our place. He came back from the dead with a message that demands a changed life and a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins. We trust and obey and are born into God’s family, the church. If you’d like to know more, get in touch, but if you’re ready to obey the gospel right now, we’d love to help. You can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com