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Lane Assist

1 Timothy 1 v 1-11

Introduction

My car is trying to kill me. Well, let me rephrase that before the lawyers' letters start arriving from Hyundai: my car has a special feature called Lane Assist. It watches the road ahead for the white lines that mark the lane I'm driving in. If it thinks I'm drifting out of my lane it will either make a beeping sound, or even move the steering wheel to keep me in the lane. Which is quite a shock the first time it happens. The problem is that on country roads it gets a bit confused, and keeps trying to steer me into the hedge.

It works quite well on the motorway though. And I can see why it might be a good safety feature. It's easy to drift out of your lane. Have you ever turned your head while driving, to look at something, and found that you've turned the steering wheel too? Or if you've been driving for too long you can find yourself start to drift off, and the car drift off as well. It's easy to swerve off the correct path, and probably a good thing that this mechanical friend is keeping an eye on my journey.

Maybe I should call it Timothy, as that's just the job that Paul has given his friend Timothy at Ephesus.

Background

Over the next few Sundays we're going to spend our evening services reading through a letter - a personal letter - written by Paul to Timothy. Let's start with a bit of background.

Paul, of course, was a learned Jewish man, who spent a good while persecuting the church, until a supernatural encounter with the risen Lord Jesus totally turned him around. He became a Christian and God led him on several missionary journeys around much of the Roman Empire, preaching and setting up new Christian churches in many of the towns and cities he visited.

One of those cities was Ephesus, a large and important sea port at the time. Paul spent two or three years there, teaching those who came to make up the local church day after day about Jesus and the good news of salvation. Some time after he left, and while imprisoned in Rome, he sent them a letter to encourage and direct them. Later on he seems to have been let out of prison, and taken another journey, which he references in some of his letters, and leaves his friend Timothy at Ephesus when he passes through.

Timothy is a younger Christian, from Lystra. Paul talks of Timothy's grandmother and mother becoming believers, and then Timothy. He joins Paul on his journeys and is a great help and companion to him. Despite the fondness Paul has for Timothy, he commanded him to stay at Ephesus, to help the church there stay in the right lane.

Purpose

So 1 Timothy is a letter to Timothy, no doubt read out in front of the church, to encourage him, to confirm him in his position, to direct the church towards godly living and to give instruction for how a church should be run. It was useful to the Ephesian church back then and it's useful to us as a church today.

Greeting

Paul starts with a greeting, as he normally does in his letters. It's easy to skip past this because it can just seem like a formality, but it's important to see what Paul is doing in this introduction.

Firstly, he introduces himself: *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus [1 Timothy 1 v 1]*. He is asserting his authority here, reminding the reader that he was appointed personally by the Lord Jesus. This isn't to raise his own profile, but to help the Ephesians take his message seriously. For those who would teach a different gospel, Paul is saying here is the truth, ordained by the saviour.

Secondly, he greets Timothy as his *true child in the faith [1 Timothy 1 v 2]*. He is legitimising Timothy's position, because he want the church to take Timothy seriously. Paul had led Timothy to Christ, had laid hands on him to ordain him, and had appointed him to lead the church in Ephesus. Timothy might be young, but Paul wants to make sure he is given the place of authority.

Thirdly Paul greets Timothy with *Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. [1 Timothy 1 v 2]*. Now this is his standard practise in his letters. He always greets with "grace", a traditional greeting among the Greeks. He also always includes "peace", a traditional greeting among the Jews and still used in many countries today (shalom in Hebrew, salaam in Arabic or Farsi). So by wishing grace and peace, Paul is including the gentile and the Jewish audiences reading or listening to his letters. Three of his letters are different though: in both letters to Timothy, and in Paul's letter to Titus (in some translations) we also have "mercy". These are personal letters, and they are written to friends of Paul who are in need of help. So he wants to encourage them that God's mercy is there in times of need.

Swerve Avoidance

Now Paul gets straight into one of the big points of his letter. He left Timothy behind at Ephesus for a purpose:

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, [1 Timothy 1 v 3]

Timothy's job is the same as the lane assist function on my car: he has to keep the Ephesian church on the right track. The church had grown and there were people who were trying to influence its direction, but they were teaching a "different doctrine". Different from what? The "sound doctrine" which Paul mentions in verse 10, which is the teaching that Paul gave to them in the 2 years he was there. These "certain persons" were "swerving" from the truth, and Timothy was to warn the church and steer them back into the right lane.

Look out for these two words as we work our way through 1 and 2 Timothy. Both “sound” and “swerve” will come up again. The idea of a sound doctrine is one which is healthy, or solid. And it’s an internal health, not just a surface look. A boat might look fine on the outside, but an experienced sailor will tap the wood with a hammer: if the wood is good all the way through it will ring out. If it is rotten inside there will be a thud. Similarly if a doctor wants to know a patient’s health inside, they may use a stethoscope to listen to the heart and lungs, before pronouncing the patient “sound”. Similarly our doctrine will be tested, to see if it stands up. If it’s based wholly on God’s word then we have nothing to fear. But we must watch out for those who would swerve away from good teaching.

In what way were the Ephesians being swerved away from good doctrine?

nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. [1 Timothy 1 v 4]

- Myths - are stories which aren’t true, perhaps about Jesus’ deeds or his words. The church had to be sure of the truth to spot when lies were being propagated.
- Genealogies - were all about secret knowledge, digging into the lines of descent in the scriptures, or numerology, to present some hidden knowledge to the church.
- Speculations - are where we start from an unknown but suggest a possibility, then base further teaching on the assumption that that possibility was truth.

These are all dangerous areas that the church was being swerved into. So what does sound doctrine look like? Paul was happy to explain:

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. [1 Timothy 1 v 5]

These aren’t arcane, mysterious things that only a special few can understand. They’re simple, honest traits that Paul expects from every Christian:

- A pure heart - desire for good, wanting the best for others
- A good conscience - desire for truth, discerning right from wrong
- A sincere faith - desire for God, living the life that we speak of

And the result of these in a Christian is love.

Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions. [1 Timothy 1 v 6-7]

These teachers wanted to be heard, but they were not speaking truths. They were swerving away from the right path. They might sound confident in what they were saying, but it wasn’t sound, it was rotten inside, as were they.

Do we need to be wary of these same problems today? Of course we do. Always test what you hear from the pulpit against the word of God. And not just from your own church. We have unprecedented access these days to religious teaching, from all over the world, whether

through television, radio or the internet. It's tempting to just assume that everything branded as Christian must be good, but there is a lot of harm out there. There is a lot of swerving from sound doctrine. Just like the false teachers in Ephesus you'll see myths, genealogies and speculations. Do some of the following sound familiar?

- A preacher tells you a story about themselves. They bring in the odd verse here and there but the message is basically about how great they are, or what mighty thing they did for the Lord. A pure heart would never lift itself up when it is God who should be glorified.
- A preacher tells you they have a special message from God, given to them personally, and they're going to share it with you. God has chosen them especially to receive this secret knowledge. A good conscience could never pretend that such a thing had happened.
- A preacher fits their pet theory in to explain a difficult verse, then builds on that as if it is certain, putting together a whole confection and presents it as definite truth. A sincere faith would plainly state what it knew was true and admit where it couldn't be sure.
- A preacher takes a portion of the law and uses it to vilify a whole section of society. Is this love issuing from sound doctrine, or is it hate, stirred up by a twisted heart?

This last issue is where Paul takes us next. It seems that some people in Ephesus have been using the law of God in the Old Testament scriptures to attack others and insist on things being done a certain way.

What About the Law?

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 but for the lawless and disobedient [1 Timothy 1 v 8-9]

Legalism is a common problem, where people misuse the laws written in the scriptures. This can be in several different ways:

- They may use the laws to criticise others where they see a failure to obey. The problem here is the one Jesus pointed out, that the person pointing out a mote in someone else's eye isn't dealing with the plank in their own.
- They may use the laws to justify themselves. Again Jesus burst this bubble. Do you say that you're not a murderer? Well, anyone who hates in his heart is a murderer. We can never obey the whole law, so using it to claim righteousness is a waste of time.
- They might also extend the law. In their zeal to keep every bit of it they add details to God's laws that were never there in the first place.

But just because legalism is bad, it doesn't mean the law is bad. Paul points out that it is good, in that it points out our own sinfulness. The law helps us realise we need saved, and the gospel shows us the saviour.

In case you think you are living in an unusually sinful society, look through the list of sins Paul mentions.

for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and 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. [1 Timothy 1 v 9-11]

These are the things being practised in Ephesus, and in fact seem to be the things that these false teachers are encouraging, as these are the things contrary to sound doctrine that Paul said earlier they had been swerving away from. It's up to Timothy to return them to the right lane and keep them on track.

Application

So, the message here for us is similar to that you might give a driver on a long journey:

- Stay alert
- Don't get distracted
- Look to the book for direction

We have been given the gospel of the glory of the blessed God. Let us know it, speak it and live it, that others may see that Christ Jesus is our Lord and that Christ Jesus is our hope.