

America is still a "*Christian nation*" - if the term simply means a majority of the population will claim the label when a pollster calls. ... But... as a 2019 Pew Research report explains... the decline of Christianity in the United States "*continues at a rapid pace.*" ... A bare 65 percent of Americans now say they're Christians... (which is down a sizeable 13% from 2007.)

In recent years... we have seen so many high-profile Christian leaders either fall into immorality... or walk away from their Christian faith. This is true of two of our nation's largest churches... (Pastors Josh Harris and Bill Hybels. ...And to be fair... Hybels still claims innocence.) ... It was tremendously disheartening for me to learn about Ravi Zacharias' apparent "double life" (which came out after his death)... and his board of directors for RZM reluctantly gave probable credibility to the claims.

What causes dedicated Christians to turn away from their Biblical faith...? Is it possible that you could ever turn away from God's truth?

Paul wrote the letter we are studying to Timothy... who he left in Ephesus... because the church (there) faced the serious threat of false teachers. These false teachers were (now get this!) - **Elders** in the church who had turned away from Paul's teaching and were leading church members to believe a false gospel (which I will refer to – from here on – as "apostasy".) Wholesale apostasy in Ephesus drove Paul at the time he wrote this letter.

Boy! You know Satan sure strikes hard... and Boy(!) does he ever work FAST! ... It had only been four or five years since Paul stood on the shore of Miletus... giving his famous farewell address to the Ephesian elders. At

that time... he had warned them saying, *“After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them”* (Acts 20:29-30). And now it was dreadfully true.

Unbelievable! Before his farewell... Paul lived among them for 2 or 3 years... and the power of God was displayed in many incredible ways. Paul taught daily in the school of Tyrannus. The Ephesian church had drunk from the pure stream of Paul’s apostolic teaching – longer than any other church that Paul started. He lingered at Ephesus more than he did at any other church that he founded. And there could be no better water for young believers to drink from! God’s Word from a writer of God’s Word! Their experience must have been like drinking from an apostolic fire hose— for three years.

But not only that... sometime after Paul left them... he wrote the most magnificent ecclesiastical letter of the entire New Testament - personally to them! ... But (now) within forty-eight months of Paul’s farewell... apostasy had come. ... .. **That** is fast!

Sadly... the Ephesians were not unique with their quick turning away. Only six verses into his letter to the Galatians... Paul had exploded:

**Galatians 1:6-7 (ESV)**

*<sup>6</sup> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— <sup>7</sup> not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.*

Perhaps his experience with the rapid demise of the Galatians fueled his passion in this subsequent letter to Timothy concerning these errant Ephesian elders.

In any event... both Galatia and Ephesus present to us the sobering reality that churches (which are very well-taught in God's Word)... can become apostate at warp speed.

Should our concern - for how quick good ministries turn away for falsehood - be any less today? ... Absolutely not! ... It is what we see happening. ... Given the repeated record of church history... and the leading up to our increased (recent-day) events in the evangelical church... our vigilance must be even greater. It is a solemn fact that the evangelical church (as a whole today) or any given church... can depart from the faith with such mind-boggling speed.

1974 was declared by *Time Magazine* to be "The Year of the Evangelical"... because it saw great evangelists... huge churches... overflowing schools and seminaries... and strong cultural influence. (Two years later... a man *claiming* to be a "Born Again Christian" ran for president – and won. Our churches were full... Student led Christian movements on College and university campuses were thriving... Mission organizations were sending out scores of missionaries... Contemporary Christian music was born. And by the 1980s evangelical Christianity seemed to be riding the crest of the wave.. ... But what has happened since then...? ... It is quite a different story today.

Since the 1970's we have been ignoring the solution that Paul gave to the church at Ephesus – which we read in today's passage. And we are so much like the church at Ephesus... when Paul wrote this letter to Timothy.

We must remember that Ephesus had been the lighthouse to all of Asia Minor. The church at Ephesus was (up to this point) an apostolic success story. It had been evangelical in the purest sense - with its primary emphasis on the gospel and on mission. But the church at Ephesus was beginning to decay from the inside.

The book that we are studying here (1 Timothy)... is imperative for us who know and serve Christ today. Sadly... however there is widespread neglect of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy by evangelicals... and these remedies that Paul puts forth. Paul is so direct in matters such as church discipline... qualifications for leadership... and male and female roles. And **you** may want to recoil (at first) by what Paul will say – because it doesn't fit what our culture today tells us is right.

So many evangelicals today have been intimidated by our culture which shouts that these guiding principles are wrong! **[ P A U S E ]** ... (LISTEN!)... If we do not allow Scripture to define the church - the forces of culture will! ... **[ P A U S E ]** ... The truth is... apostasy can easily happen to any of us if we do not guard against it by applying these instructions.

But so many (well-taught and godly) church leaders – **ARE** abandoning Scripture's teaching. ... What could possibly lead Biblical Christians to “roll-over”... “play dead”... and allow culture to have such a big say in the church's affairs...? ... Believe it or not... but Paul has already told us in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy. .... We saw it in a verse we covered last week.

Namely... the Elders in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century church at Ephesus started aiming at the wrong outcome of their teaching. ... Their main goal became THEIR OWN REPUTATIONS. (They wanted to be seen as great teachers... impressing people with worthless genealogies and their misunderstanding of the Law.) They had abandoned the proper aim for teaching.

### **1 Timothy 1:5 (ESV)**

*<sup>5</sup> The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*

Whenever this aim for teaching loses its importance – any church is **RIPE** for doctrinal departure. ... Whenever any emphasis in teaching God's Word to try to impress takes over... and overshadows the proper aim that 1 Tim 1:5 spells out... brace yourselves for some false teaching... [ P A U S E ] ..

But it isn't just egotistical teachers who are to be blamed. It is also the pleasure-seeking listeners who (rather than wanting to be stimulated to a love that issues from a pure heart... and a good conscious... and a sincere faith... (instead) only want teaching that wows them and makes them feel good. ... The desire to have one's ears tickled... and massive departure from the faith... go hand-in-hand... as marks of the end times.

### **2 Timothy 4:3 (ESV)**

*<sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions,*

### **1 Timothy 4:1 (ESV)**

*<sup>1</sup> Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,*

Teachers who don't aim for *love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith...* and listeners who don't want such exhortation... can expect to see a lot of shipwrecks of faith.

**1 Timothy 1:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> *holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith,*

Satan strikes hard... and he sure strikes fast.

If this isn't a call for some much needed prayer – then I don't know what is! We have several teachers in our church – who need your constant prayers. The temptation is real (Folks) to try to be impressive. ... I will admit that the first thought that pops into my mind (at times) when I study is: “*Boy! That will preach well!*” ... But that is not a **bad** thing – unless it overshadows the proper aim for Biblical instruction. ... I need for you to pray for me that my wanting to impress is never the main reason for me to say what I do. Pray for all of our Bible teachers. ... And I will pray that you don't evaluate us on the basis of how well we do at giving you exciting spiritual goose bumps.

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Well... so much time has already elapsed... and I have not even gotten to today's passage. But all that I have been saying sheds a great deal of light on the verses we are about to cover. ... We now know why the false teachers departed from the truth... let's look now to Paul's response to them. ... These errant... false-teaching elders abandoned the true gospel of grace... and turned to the law (of all things.)

**1 Tim 1:8**

A person doesn't have to be around here for very long... before they pick-up on the fact that we believe the truth expressed in such verses as Ephesians 2:8-9.

**Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* <sup>9</sup> *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Anyone who tries to make salvation a matter of being “good enough” – that we can earn our own salvation - has it all wrong! There is a great deal of error in thinking and teaching that a person can do enough virtuous things to make themselves acceptable to God.

However (as I'm sure you noticed) Paul clearly says in 1 Timothy 1:8 that the Law is “good.” How are we (who believe that the law cannot save us) to regard the Law...? Paul says: as “good.” ... .. Now wait! This sounds confusing. ... And then add what Paul says at the beginning of verse 9.

**1 Timothy 1:9a**

The Law does not save us... and the Law is only for the ungodly (*the unsaved...* not for believers.) ... It is for this reason that many Christians (rather than seeing the Law as good) do not regard it at all. They have nothing at all to do with it. They completely reject it. ... .. But if it is “good” – this has to be a wrong response. Why is it “good” from a believer's point of view... and why should we regard it so favorably...?

Man falls far short and is too sinful. This is the reason God gave man the law - not to show man that he can be righteous (if he behaves well enough) - but to show him just how far short he will always be of God's glory through his own efforts — and how much he desperately needs the grace of God.

Law and grace go hand-in-hand. The Law without the grace is diagnosis without remedy. AND grace without Law can never be “Good News” – because people would never know the bad news... that there is a condition that they need to be saved from.

Paul’s point is relentlessly clear for us: We SHOULD proclaim the law in this dark... diseased world... as an entrance to preaching the gospel of grace. The gospel message is: “Here is the problem – but here is the ONLY solution.”

After teaching at a Native American conference in Flagstaff, Arizona, Dr. Harry Ironside took one of the Christian Native Americans with him to Oakland, California. Among other things, this Native American was asked to speak at a young people’s group that was confused about the ideas of law and grace. They were befuddled about the place of the law in the Christian life. So... Dr. Ironside’s guest spoke up and told the group:

*“I came here from Flagstaff on the train, and we stopped over for several hours in Barstow. There in the station’s waiting room I noticed signs on the walls which said, ‘Do Not Spit on the Floor.’ That was the rule there. I looked down on the floor, and observed that nobody had paid any attention to the law. But when we got here to Oakland I was invited to stay in a lovely Christian home. As I sat in the living room I looked around and noticed pretty pictures on the walls, but no signs which said ‘Do Not Spit on the Floor.’ I got down on my hands and knees and felt the rug and, you know, nobody had spit on the floor. In Barstow it was law, but in the home in which I’m staying it is grace.”*

Under law man never kept it... he couldn’t measure up to it... and he broke it continually. ... Under grace a man is brought into the family of God... and his nature is no longer to do the things that the Law points out as wrong. As a believer we do not need the Law to govern us.

## 1 Tim. 1:9-15

Two extremes are cited in these verses... of those for whom Christ came to save. One is the group of sinners described in verses 9–10... the other is Paul himself... who... in spite of all his righteous deeds... calls himself “*the worst*” (the foremost) “*of sinners.*” Wow! Against this backdrop Paul claims to be the worst of all sinners! Did he really mean it? (I’ll come back to this. But for now... there are a few important things that I want to show you.)

First of all... just as we saw in last week’s passage... Paul is trying to encourage his overwhelmed protegee (Timothy) who he left at Ephesus to straighten out quite a mess. The mess was being caused by errant Elders in the church. Paul seems to be saying to Timothy: “*Any sinful person (even the worst of the worst) can be regenerated. Timothy... evangelize these false teachers with the truth! They are not beyond reach!*”

Whoever it is in your life... that you may think would ***never*** come to Christ... let this passage “call you on the carpet...” No one is unreachable!

Next... I would have you look again at verse 12...

## 1 Tim. 1:12

Notice that *strength* for Christian life and ministry comes from Christ. God’s commandments are God’s entablements. ... He never asks a believer to do something without first providing the ability to do it... When someone obeys God’s call to serve... God always equips and enables that person.

If there is an “oughta” in your Christian life right now (“I ought’a do this for the Lord”) but you are being stopped because you don’t see yourself as having enough ability... let there be no doubt - God will always equip the

person He calls. ... There are many believers today who are not answering God calling them to action through an “ought’a.” But stop and consider: Lack of ability may not be God’s red light.

Now let’s go back to the question if Paul was being sincere in calling himself the foremost of all sinners. Did he really believe that... or was he overstating it to make a point...? ... Well... Paul backed it up by what he writes in verse 13.

### **1 Tim 1:13**

Paul presented a threefold evaluation of himself. First, he was a “blasphemer” (*blasphēmon*). This term is derived from *blaptō* (“to injure”) and *phēmē* (“speech”). To blaspheme is to exert strong hostility toward someone as to injure their lives with words. ... I think of what we see today with our current “cancel culture”... that tries to destroy anyone who contradicts political correctness. ... Let your disgust for what we are seeing today shade your view of who Paul once was. Paul had his own destructive “cancel culture” against Christians.

Second... Paul was a “persecutor” (*diōktēn*). He didn’t just use words... he also used physical power to try to destroy the church.... And anyone involved with it. The way Paul persecuted the church was brutal and bloody (Acts 26:11). “Murderous threats” were the very breath of his life (Acts 9:1). Persecution involves pursuit and harassment, both physical and psychological. He “made havock of the church, entering into every house, and hauling men and women to prison” (Acts 8:3). Believers were terrified of him; the mere mention of his name struck fear within them (Acts 9:13,

21, 26). He confessed “that beyond measure he persecuted the church of God (in Gal. 1:13 and Acts 22:4).

Third, Paul was “injurious” (*hubristēn*). This word is difficult to translate into English with its full meaning. The word means to take inordinate delight in violence... one whose pleasures lie in outraging the feelings of others. Paul’s mind delighted in being cruel to Christians... with unrestrained contempt he broke forth into overly vicious and outrageous acts.

### **1 Tim 1:14**

Paul received “grace”. In fact, the grace “was exceeding abundant” (*hupair-e-play-on-ace*) toward him. God’s grace has that characteristic—the greater the sin - the more abundant the grace.

An artist once submitted a painting of Niagara Falls to an exhibition but neglected to give it a title. The gallery came up with the whimsical words, “More to Follow.” Niagara Falls, which has been spilling over billions of gallons per year for thousands of years and has more than met the needs of those below, is a fit emblem for the floods of God’s grace. There always is more to follow.:

What did Paul’s “ignorance” have to do with his receiving such grace from God? Does the second part of verse 13 teach that ignorance gives us an excuse before God?

### **1 Tim 1:13b**

No. Of course not! ... Be careful not to confuse grace with mercy. Paul says his ignorance brought mercy – not grace. The whole idea of ignorance

bringing mercy is related to a special Jewish law (Lev. 5:15–19; Num. 15:22–31). If a person sinned knowingly “with defiance” in Israel... he was cut off from the people. But if he sinned in ignorance... he was permitted to bring the proper sacrifices to atone for his sins. ... Jesus recognized this principle when He prayed on the cross, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34). ... Just like in Paul’s case... ignorance can bring **mercy**. (In other words it can postpone immediate damnation.) And in Paul’s case... mercy delayed his immediate punishment... giving him an opportunity to be saved.

### **1 Tim 1:15-16**

This trustworthy saying contains the essence of the Christian message: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save all sinners – including the worst of the worst.” ... Jesus displayed His unlimited patience to Paul... as an example for ANYONE to believe in Christ and receive eternal life.”

What we must grasp here (and grasp it with its full integrity and passion) is that Paul was absolutely convinced of the truth of his words. Jesus’ is eager to save anyone who turns to Him with empty hands (nothing at all to bring.) ... Why? ... Because Jesus’ atoning death on the cross was sufficient. He took ALL of our punishment. And salvation is a free gift.

If God was patient and gracious enough to give it to Paul... He is patient and gracious enough to save anyone. ... We are look back at Paul as a prototype or pattern. (And here is what we see): The ultimate sinner became the ultimate saint. ... God’s greatest enemy became His finest servant. ... Somewhere between these extremes is where you and I fall. You may not be the foremost sinner... or the foremost saint. ... But

Sinner... He can save you... so that He will significantly use YOU! ... He doesn't just save us to sit on the sidelines. ... [ P A U S E ]

At this point Paul is ready to explode with a doxology.

### 1 Tim 1:17

John Calvin remarks:

*His enthusiasm breaks out into this exclamation, since he could find no words to express his gratitude. These sudden outbursts of Paul's come mainly when the vastness of the subject overpowers him and makes him break off what he is saying. For what could be more wonderful than Paul's conversion? At the same time he admonishes us all by his example, that we should never think of the grace shown in God's calling without being lost in wondering admiration. This sublime praise of God's grace swallows up all the memory of his former life. How great a deep is the glory of God!*

In just a moment we are going to close our service with a song of worship. If you have never accepted God's free gift of salvation... I invite you to ask God to come into your life and radically change you... like He did to Paul. If you want someone to pray with you... I would be happy to do so. Meet me at the back door.

Now... if you have this gift of salvation (already)... my invitation to you... is to break out in worship... like Paul did. (Not out of duty – but delight!) ... Paul knew that he didn't deserve salvation... Come and celebrate God's overflowing grace – if you know this same truth.