



TheEdenPodcast.com

Episode 2. 1 Timothy 1:1-17. Paul's Three Sins -- The Template for 1 Timothy 1:18-3:16

A number of years ago there was a popular television show called My Three Sons. This is not about that. This is about Paul's Three Sins.

Early in his letter of 1 Timothy, the Apostle Paul wrote a list of many sins people were committing in the city of Ephesus:

... lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; those who kill their fathers or mothers, murderers, adulterers and perverts, slave traders and liars and perjurers ... (NIV) (1 Timothy 1:9b-10).

After listing all these terrible sins, Paul turned to his own. He called himself the Chief of Sinners. Wow! What terrible sins had he committed? What was on the list of his sins?

He listed three sins in 1 Timothy 1:13. First, Paul was a blasphemer. He had spoken evil of Jesus. Second, he was a persecutor. He had persecuted believers in Christ. Third, he was injurious. He had disrupted the church.

Paul was (1) a blasphemer, (2) a persecutor, and (3) a disrupter.

In his early years, Paul, who was then called Saul, was a student who had come to Jerusalem to study under the respected Jewish teacher, Gamaliel. Paul followed all the strict rules the Jews had made for Pharisees to follow. But this did not make him loving and good. Instead, he became critical and cruel.

The Good News came to Paul's synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Acts 6:8-10). Stephen, a believer and a servant of the other believers in Jesus, announced that Jesus was God and had died for the sins of the world. Some rejected the wisdom of Stephen and the Holy Spirit and argued with him.

Since his accusers could not stand up to his words, his critics decided to blame Stephen falsely for blasphemy, a crime punishable by death (Acts 6:11, Numbers 15:29-31). They seized Stephen and accused him before the high court of the Jews where he was condemned. Then, he was dragged outside the city and put to death while Jesus watched from heaven!

Paul was there. He approved of Stephen's execution (Acts 6:11-8:1). Paul did not believe that Jesus was God.

The day of Stephen's death, a great persecution broke out against the believers in Jerusalem. Paul persecuted the believers and disrupted their meetings. According to Acts 8:3, he "was destroying the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."

Afterward, Paul was still "breathing threats and murder against the disciples." He asked for official letters from the High Priest to go even to synagogues outside the borders of Israel. He got them and became an official persecutor of believers (Acts 9:1-2). He planned to enter the synagogues there and arrest any who believed in Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem as his prisoners.

As Paul and his companions walked to the city of Damascus, he was brought up short by a blindingly bright person who spoke to him. It was Jesus! He told Paul that Paul's persecution of his followers was persecution of himself (Acts 9:3-6).

Paul had set out from Jerusalem intending to sanitize the synagogues by getting rid of the followers of a fake. He had not meant to rebel against God! He had sinned "in ignorance and unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13b). Paul had not rebelled against God on purpose.

Paul arrived in Damascus, physically blind, and convinced that he had been spiritually blind. Jesus had mercy on Paul and "judged him faithful by appointing Paul to his service" (1 Timothy 1:12).

Near the end of my first year in grad school, the president of student council came to my room. Bruce, we want you to run for student council president next year. Nobody else has signed up and we need somebody to run. What a complement! I joked with him. But he was serious. And maybe a little desperate.

Earlier that academic year I had run for a seat on Student Council a month or so after I had arrived on campus. I had never been in student government in high school or university and thought it would be good to try. I came in second out of three. So I crossed that off my to-do list.

You will get to have a private two-hour lunch every Friday with the Dean of the seminary, you and the other officers. That I could not turn down! I was coming to greatly respect Dr. Kenneth Kantzer and suspected that lunch with him would be better than any course I could take.

Something I hadn't been told about when I accepted to run unopposed for president was that I would be booked as the one student speaker in Chapel for that academic year. I learned I would preach in front of all my professors and the other students the first Tuesday in January, right after we returned from Christmas break.

And then I heard the news. A renowned speaker I had had for two classes the previous Fall would be back in town around that time as well. He was the British Bible scholar Dr. John R. W. Stott.

Monday's we had no Chapel. So to fit him in to the fully packed schedule, he had been asked to preach at a special Chapel on Monday. The day before I was scheduled to speak.

Who in the world could presume to follow a speaker like that! I was horrified, felt already humiliated by the contrast and got a terrible stiff neck that Monday morning. I too had wanted to hear Dr. Stott who we all knew and loved. But there I was on my bunk, immobilized by an attack of nerves that took the form of a completely stiff neck. It was the only stiff neck of my life. That Monday during Chapel I was alone in my darkened dorm room. Praying.

The next day I took heart and gave the message I had prepared. It was on 1 Timothy 1:12. This sermon was the start of my researching and teaching something I hadn't heard anyone else ever say.

I knew this verse would apply to us. We all were at the beginning of our ministries. We all could identify with Paul terrified at the enormity of Christ's call to service. Paul hadn't done anything right in the service of Christ. In fact he had done everything hurtful and wrong!

But in 1 Timothy 1:12 Paul acknowledged the mercy and glory of his call. He wrote, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service" (NIV).

There in that blinding vision on the road to Damascus Christ stopped the madness of Paul's persecution efforts in calling him to believe. Right then, or soon after, he appointed Paul to serve him. That assignment to serve was proof that Christ reckoned him faithful. His Holy Spirit would strengthen and enable Paul in his service to Christ.

As I finished my Chapel message and walked to the back I received an encouraging word. One of the long-time professors stopped me. He said, "In contrast to years of my sitting through sermons fighting to focus on the speakers in Chapel, you never once lost my attention. It's the very first time." I was humbled and very grateful to God for his help.

Had Paul asked the Jewish leaders to send him outside of Israel to the distant synagogues? Jesus confirmed that this would be his territory of future service. But, Jesus changed the mission Paul had started with. Instead of blaspheming the name of Jesus and persecuting the followers of Jesus, he would bear the name of Jesus wherever he went and he would suffer persecution for it (Acts 9:15-18).

After a few days with the believers, Paul announced in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus was the Promised One, Savior of the world (Acts 9:20-22). To the amazement of all, Paul became the messenger of Christ, Jesus the Savior to the Jews, and the Savior of those who were not Jews.

By the time he wrote the letter of 1 Timothy, Paul knew from much experience that Jesus, the Word, was always faithful! He closed the first section of his letter with a word of praise to God (1 Timothy 1:17).

Section Two. What did he write next to Timothy? There is much confusion about this. And there is much that people have missed in Paul's advice to Timothy. I believe this is because people have missed the underlying literary structure Paul used to organize his thoughts as he wrote them out for Timothy. Paul famously wrote using many ideas and patterns of thought well-known in ancient Jewish literature. That is what we will discover next in Section Two of 1 Timothy.

Three groups in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:18-3:16). Paul often gave a list near the start of his letters. The list pointed to what was coming next in his letter. When I learned of this I began looking for a list in 1 Timothy. I read various commentaries to see what list they had found. No one mentioned any list.

And then, I found it! Paul's list comes in 1:13. The list is found in his three sins - Paul had been (1) a blasphemer, (2) a persecutor, and (3) a disruptor. These three sins become the template he will use in Section Two of this letter.

In Section Two of his letter, Paul writes about three groups of people in Ephesus who correspond to each one of his three sins. Paul comments about those who are guilty of his first sin in a few words. He comments about those who have the power to commit his second sin with more words. He comments to Timothy about the group guilty of his third sin with the most words.

Here are the three groups:

1. Blasphemers at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:18-20)
2. Persecutors at Ephesus (1 Timothy 2:1-7)
3. Disruptors at Ephesus (1 Timothy 2:8-3:16)

The Blasphemers (1 Timothy 1:18-20). After repeating his greeting to Timothy and the reason for his letter (1 Timothy 1:18), Paul draws a contrast between Timothy, who has not gone astray, and several Ephesian teachers in the church who have gone astray. They are blasphemers.

Paul names two of them - Hymenaeus and Alexander. These blasphemers received severe correction because they were first-degree blasphemers who had willfully sinned. They had rejected faith and a good conscience and made a shipwreck of their faith. Paul turned them over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:19-20).

There was a big difference in the treatment of Paul who was a second-degree blasphemer, and Hymenaeus and Alexander who were first-degree blasphemers. In the Garden of Eden there was a big difference in the treatment of Adam the first-degree sinner and Eve the second-degree sinner.

The Persecutors (1 Timothy 2:1-7). Next, Paul writes to Timothy about those who have secular or political authority - “for kings and all those in authority” (2:2). They had the power to persecute Christians in Ephesus. Before he believed in Christ, Paul had been one of these – in his case a persecutor with authority from the high priest in Jerusalem.

In Ephesus, there had already been a noisy demonstration against Christians led by those who made idols (Acts 19:23-40). This disturbance had been put down. Paul urged believers to pray for kings and all others in authority to leave them in peace and not persecute them (1 Timothy 2:1-2). A period of peace occurred in Israel after Paul’s coming to believe in Christ (Acts 9:31).

Paul also wanted those in Ephesus who had the authority to persecute believers to come to know Christ just like he had. This was God’s will even for them (1 Timothy 2:3-7). Paul knew from personal experience that they could come to Christ. They could believe like Paul had believed!

The Disruptors (1 Timothy 2:8-3:16). Those whose sin corresponded to Paul’s third sin were the disruptors. Correcting these “shepherd-teachers” (Ephesians 4:11), or “overseers” (1 Timothy 3:1), who had become false teachers was the work of Timothy. In the beginning of 1 Timothy, Paul had written the following,

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command some not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God’s work (1 Timothy 1:3-4).

Those Paul called “some” in the church in Ephesus was a group of some of the men and some of the women teaching overseers who had been teaching false doctrines in church. Not all of the teaching overseers had been false teachers. Perhaps not most, nor even half of the overseers had been teaching incorrectly. But a subgroup of the men and women overseers had been doing so.

When he left Ephesus, Paul had told Timothy to command these individuals not to teach false doctrines and myths any longer. By the time Timothy received the letter from Paul, it is very likely he already had carried out this command and had stopped these disruptive teaching overseers from teaching incorrectly.

Then, Paul writes to Timothy on how to correct and restore these disruptors to fruitful service.

Part 1. 1 Timothy 2:8 is about the group of wayward men among the overseers.

Part 2. 1 Timothy 2:9-15 is about the group of wayward women among the overseers.

Part 3. 1 Timothy 3:1-7, is about the restoration of these corrected overseers by the Jesus

“faithful Word.”

Part 4. 1 Timothy 3:8-10 is about both the men and women deacons. The pronouns are

inclusive.

Part 5. 1 Timothy 3:10 is about female deacons.

Part 6. 1 Timothy 3:11-12 is about male deacons.

Thus, Paul presents two three-Part sections that mirror each other in a chiastic or rainbow-like parallel pattern.

Part 1, is about men. Part 6 mirrors Part 1. It is about men as well.

Part 2, is about women. Part 5 mirrors Part 2. It is about women as well.

Part 3, is about both men and women overseers. Part 4, mirrors Part 3. It is about both men and women deacons as well.

In the center, the key idea around which Parts 1-3 and 4-6 turn is found in 1 Timothy 3:1. Christ Jesus is the Faithful Word.

Do we see the importance of this modified prophetic rhetorical template? Just as it is important to see and follow route signs that say “Keep Right” or “Keep Left,” recognizing the parts to the pattern Paul uses in Section Two of 1 Timothy is extremely important!

Understanding this pattern and its parts as they are written out will help us to think again about this part of the Bible. It will help us to untie the knots of wayward translation and interpretation and practice that have plagued the church for so long.

Just like we benefit from a *true* understanding of Genesis 3:16 we will greatly benefit from a true look at Paul’s advice to Timothy on correcting and restoring women and men in ministry.