

Bible Studies for Life Series for October 1: Contend for the truth always

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Contend for the truth always

- 1 Timothy 1:3-7,12-20

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As the parent of two teenagers, I spend considerable time, energy, thought, time, resources, conversation and more time making sure these two near—adults receive the necessary equipping to face the real world.

Christians, too, must spend time, energy, thought and resources learning to face the challenges of life.

In October, the Bible Studies for Life series takes up the study theme “Equipped for Real Life.” Using 1 and 2 Timothy as the primary resource, the lessons of the next five weeks ask us to use our time, energy, thought and conversation to: Learn how to guard against false teaching (October 1); consider our need to live godly lives (October 8); be content in our circumstances (October 15); become useful to God (October 22); and exercise faith in order to endure difficult times (October 29).



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Called the pastoral epistles, 1 and 2 Timothy, along with Titus present themselves as mentoring letters of encouragement from an older minister, Paul, to two younger ministers, Timothy and Titus. Some scholars question the genuine Pauline authorship of the pastoral epistles because of issues like vocabulary and syntax, conflicting historical circumstances, and the level of concern for things like church organization and “heresy.” The arguments on both sides are complex.

In short, those who hold to pseudonymous authorship point out the letters sound too different from the known letters of Paul. In addition, the letters do not seem to fit into the known timeline of Paul’s life reconstructed from his letters and the Acts of the Apostles. Finally, the letters’ concern with qualifications for church leaders and the repudiation of false teaching suggests to some scholars a second century composition date.

Of those who hold that Paul did not write these letters, some allow that fragments of genuine letters from Paul were added by later writers. Others suggest a complete pseudonymous creation as a way of maintaining Paul’s influence.

A better position maintains that Paul authored these letters later in life and allows for changes in compositional style and vocabulary attributable to Paul’s age and circumstance. We can readily acknowledge Acts does not tell us everything Paul did or every place Paul visited. Paul may well have composed the pastoral epistles after his imprisonment in Rome during a

subsequent missionary journey.

Certainly, Paul writes these letters later in life with the full realization that he leaves behind young leaders who need to be able to identify and deal with difficulties in the church. The letters' concern with false teaching and church organization does not seem out of place in that context.

Identify the false teaching

The lesson for the week of October 1 bids Christians to "Take Hold of Truth." First Timothy begins as all of Paul's letters begin, with a salutation offering an address and a greeting (vv.1-2). Paul identifies himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our savior and of Christ Jesus our hope" (v. 1).

While Paul sends most of his letters to individual churches, here the lone recipient is Timothy. The greeting is typical of Paul: "Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 2).

Without a typical word of thanksgiving, Paul moves immediately to a warning about "false teachers." Paul urges Timothy to "command certain men not to teach false doctrines" (v. 3). While the identity of these individuals is not certain, and the content of the false doctrine is unclear, Paul suggests it includes an unhealthy interest in "myths and endless genealogies" (v. 4).

Other ancient writers often used the combination of these terms to denote the idea of false and foolish stories. In this context, the "myths and genealogies" may reflect the practice of some Jewish Christians who wished to find a super—spiritual significance in some of the Old Testament genealogical lists. Paul bluntly states that those who wander away from the "goal of love" (v. 5) turn to "meaningless talk" (v. 6).

It is important to recognize that these are not anti-Christian teachers opposing the work of the church from without. These Christians claim an extra level of understanding and knowledge that distracts from central truths of the gospel. Misplaced devotion to a particular theological framework, fictionalized accounts of the end times or Christian self-help programs come close to an unhealthy devotion to “myths and genealogies.”

Take your stand on the gospel of grace

Paul’s response to these challenges is to remind Timothy about the marvelous grace of God. Paul holds himself out as an example of one who has received God’s grace through the faithfulness and love of Jesus Christ in spite of Paul tremendous failures. Paul calls himself “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man” (v. 13). He reminds Timothy that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (v. 15).

The good news of God’s grace allows that mercy might be shown even to Paul, so that in “the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (v. 16).

Paul reminds Timothy salvation comes to us because of God’s grace demonstrated in his son, Jesus. No sin is so great as to put any person beyond the reach of God’s grace. That is the content of the “glorious gospel of the blessed God,” (v. 11) entrusted to Paul. Endless devotion to silly stories and the feeling of superiority generated by “expertise” distracts from the true good news: We are all in need of God’s grace.

Contend for the truth

Chapter 1 concludes with a recapitulation and amplification of Paul's initial encouragement to Timothy: "Fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience" (vv. 18-19). Paul understands the importance of connecting belief to actions.

Martin Dilelius argues the phrase "good conscience" suggests good Christian citizenship. Christians fight the good fight by the way we live our lives in peaceful obedience, seeking the "goal of love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (v. 5). It seems the fight envisioned here is less a fight against other people and more a fight against the tendency to wander away from the goal of love.

Too often, I turn to "meaningless talk" when I should contend for the truth that by God's grace "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." The truth of the gospel is that we are all sinners in need of mercy, and the grace of God pours out on us in abundance (v. 14). Focus on anything less moves us perilously close to distracting shores of meaningless talk and foolish stories.

Paul warns about some who have "shipwrecked their faith" (v. 19, compare 2 Timothy 2:17-18); however, his main concern seems to be that Timothy avoid that fate by connecting faith to action.

Discussion questions

- What kinds of "foolish stories" and "mindless talk" fill the classrooms and corridors of your church? How do we distinguish helpful instruction from mere talk?
- How does belief or faith connect to our actions?
- What are Christians supposed to contend for or against?



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