

# Life: The truth of the Gospel

January 24, 2013

• This **LifeWay Bible Studies for Life** lesson for **Feb. 3** focuses on 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 12-20.

What is the gospel? Perhaps we too often assume everyone who is a follower of Christ clearly can verbalize an answer to that question. Is the gospel just the history of what God did in Christ in the first century A.D.? Or is the gospel alive and fluid, moving throughout the ages, throughout generations, a power still transforming lives today more than 20 centuries after Jesus lived and died and was raised from the dead?

A very good exercise for teachers would be to pass out pieces of blank paper at the beginning of their classes. They could ask the members of the class to anonymously write a simple summation of a definition of the gospel—in no more than two or three brief sentences. Then, each definition could be read aloud by one class member. It would be interesting to see the variations in the definitions.

Paul was taking no chances on making certain the early church had a clear understanding of the true gospel. He summarizes the gospel well in 1 Timothy 1:15 and then challenges his son in Christ, Timothy, to keep the church on track with that definition. “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” That is the gospel.

The law, the purpose of which Paul discusses in the first verses of this chapter, was meant to point people to their need of God. There were two problems with regard to the “law,” as given in the Old Testament and then expanded unnecessarily many times over throughout subsequent generations that still existed in the first churches, which still are with us to

this day.

First, some saw the law and the fulfillment of it as the primary core of biblical teaching. There are those today who believe good preaching and teaching mean simply telling people what the rules are, how to keep them and then chastising them to do so. That is not the gospel.

In reading the entire New Testament, even the teachings of Jesus, we are led to understand that the law's primary purpose was to demonstrate to us where we had already failed to achieve God's holiness. We know the rules and break them anyway.

There is no worse feeling than to look in the rearview mirror and see the red and blue lights of a highway patrolman's car behind us. As we glance at our speedometer, we realize we have broken the law. We knew what the speed limit is, but we were in a hurry or just weren't paying attention. Either way, knowing the law didn't keep us from breaking it. The patrolman's job, the law's job, is to alert us to where we have fallen short.

The purpose of the Ten Commandments is a good outline for holy living. In the end, what the commandments eventually do is lead us to fall on our knees before God, begging for mercy, because what they actually do is put a mirror in front of us, showing us where we have failed to be holy. Paul gave witness to his own inability to do what he knew was right in Romans 7. It was his frustration with his own inability to do what he knew was right that led him to Christ for mercy, which is the witness of Romans 8.

The second problem in the early church Paul addressed was the fact that some, perhaps those who had yet to fully embrace Christ instead of Judaism, tended to keep looking back to the law as their only hope of salvation. "Know and do the right thing, and you will be OK with God," they might preach. Paul wanted Timothy to stay where he was and, with his pastor's heart, shepherd people toward a deeper understanding of the

purpose of the law and the true nature of the saving gospel.

We all had to be introduced to the gospel. We constantly need to be reintroduced to it. We never come to a place where we fully understand all God did in Christ. However, if we do not constantly study the meaning of the gospel within the community of believers, we likely are to return to old and legalistic teachings we falsely associate with the good news, the gospel.

Years ago in a rural community, I was having coffee with some men from town. After I had gained their trust, they began to tell me some of their spiritual background. One of the men told how, when he was in high school in the '50s, he and some of his other friends who attended the local Baptist church had gone to a Friday night dance.

Word got out. The next Sunday, the pastor called the youth by name and told them, from the pulpit, that if they did not come forward and publicly repent, they would be banned from the church. The older gentlemen told me he had never been back to church in his life because he was so humiliated.

The tragedy is that this man, when he was younger, had not been asked to accept or reject Christ or believe or deny the gospel. He had been asked to conform to a local congregation's concept of holiness based on its cultural extrapolation of the law.

No one goes to hell for failing to live up to what is right. Our eternal destinies are only shaped by our acceptance or rejection of Christ, the one who came to seek and save sinners. In most cases, those who knew what was right and failed to do it anyway.