

Q. What is the lawful use of the law as stated in 1 Timothy 1:8?

A. This verse states, "But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully." Certainly, this is a difficult Scripture that would seem to contradict other New Testament Scriptures about the law. We know from these other Scriptures that Jesus fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17), that we are dead to the law (Romans 7:4), that we are not under the law but under grace (Romans 6:14). We also know that we can find no place where Christ's servants preached the law. But we know that the Bible does not contradict itself. There is a danger when facing such a Scripture, however, to try to force our opinion on it, to read into it what we think it should say rather than accept what it does say. Keeping this in mind, let's see if we can find out what God is telling us in this Scripture.

First, I want to point out something interesting. The consensus decision concerning circumcision and the law voiced by James in Acts 15 contains these words: "But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day" (verses 20-21).

I believe James is essentially saying, we don't have to lay the law on these people, we don't have to preach the law at them, but if they really want to hear it (just as we continue to read the Old Testament today), they can hear it in the synagogues in every city every week. That's their business. This, I believe, is a lawful use of the law. But it is not the lawful use Paul refers to in 1 Timothy 1:8.

Now let's look at 1 Timothy 1:8-9 in context from verse 1 through verse 11 of the chapter:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Saviour, and Lord Jesus Christ, which is our hope; Unto Timothy, my own son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. As I

besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do. Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust.

Paul first gives his greeting, which speaks of Jesus Christ our Savior as our hope, and Paul's blessing to Timothy of grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ. Then, he says that when he asked Timothy to remain in Ephesus, it was so that Timothy might charge (*parageilēs*—transmit a message to) some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables (*muthois*—narrative fictions; quite possibly here this refers to Jewish stories by and about Rabbis, as if these held any weight; see Titus 1:14), and endless genealogies (relying upon physical descent).

In verse 5, he says that the end (*telos*—end or aim) of the commandment (*paraggelias*—the "charge" of verse 3 about teaching no other doctrine; this has nothing to do with commandments of the law) is love, a pure conscience, and faith (still nothing about law). He says that some have turned aside from these to "vain jangling" (or purposeless words). And what is it that these people teach? They are *nomodidaskaloi*—law teachers. In fact, as *Vincent's Word Studies* points out, the participle that begins verse 7 ("desiring") is "explanatory and confirmatory of the preceding statement: since they desire." In other words, they have turned aside to purposeless words since they desire to be law teachers, not understanding either what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm (*diebebaioutai*—thoroughly, strongly, or confidently affirm).

Then, in verse 8, Paul says, "But we know..." This is in contrast to the law teachers who don't know. "But we know that the law [with the definite article] is good (*kalos*—intrinsically good), if a man use it lawfully." This implies that there is an unlawful use of the law. But what is the "lawful" use that Paul has in mind? He now explains: "Knowing this," that is, this is what we know about the lawful use. "...that [there is no definite article here] law is not made [*keitai*—laid down] for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient [*anupotaktois*—unsubdued, insubordinate]," whom Paul then describes in more detail. Paul goes into this detail because it is the emphasis of the passage. Paul wants to tell us who an unrighteous person is. Paul's list is a list of persons whose lives show they are not Christians. Yes, Christians can commit sins, but this is not a list of sins; it is a list of people for whom sin is a way of life. This is a very important distinction. It is one thing for a Christian to sin; it is another thing for a person to so live a life of sin that the sin is what describes him.

But how did Paul know what these people were? What did he use to define them? Law. Notice the similarity between what Paul says here in 1 Timothy 1 and what he says in Romans 7:7: "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." We are not under the law. Preaching the law evangelically in trying to bring God's elect into the fold and preaching the law to saved Christians with the intent of putting them under it are unlawful uses of the law. We saw one lawful use in Acts 15. It was a purely voluntary use. If these Christians wanted to hear the law to see the examples of God working with Israel and certain individuals (1 Corinthians 10:11), or to see the types and shadows of Christ and the church, they could lawfully do so. Today, we have the Old Testament (the law and the prophets) in print and can read it for the same reasons.

Getting back to 1 Timothy, Paul is saying that those who are trying to preach the law to Christians are barking up the wrong tree. This is an unlawful use. If people are going to be legalists, then let them go to the lawless and insubordinate. And, it is my opinion, that Paul purposely leaves the definite article off of law when he says, "Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man..." (some English translations wrongly insert the definite article). I think he says this because all law and any law is useful to keep sinful people in line. We who understand our liberty under the New Covenant like to say we are not under the law and that the law has ended. But try telling that to a policeman who has stopped you for speeding. At that point, as far as

the civil law is concerned, you are not a righteous man. You have broken the law. And aren't we glad that the authorities are enforcing the law against lawbreakers to discourage murderers, rapists, pedophiles, thieves, and so on? So, I think Paul is saying, Do you want to preach law? Go preach it to sinners. But to preach law to bring people to Christ or to preach it to saved Christians is an unlawful use of law.

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