

## A SCANDALOUS FREEDOM 1 Timothy 4

Coming off of chapter 3, we just learned about the proper leaders of a church. Now, immediately into chapter 4 Paul tells us about the wrong kind of leader, the one who teaches another gospel by restricting the freedom we were created to have. Now these false teachers were probably not obvious despite Paul's strong words like 'demons' and 'liars.' I think the key phrase here is 'consciences are seared' - this seems to suggest a person who has continually done what they know to be wrong but refused to change. They end up knowing that they've done wrong but unable to do the one thing they most need to do: turn to God in repentance. Now, if they weren't 'religious' they would just turn to sex and drugs to dull their pain and make them feel better. But since they can't risk anyone thinking they're pagans, they do the next best thing- they build up a set of rules to make themselves look good.

I am convinced of a basic truth about human nature: *we will always try to make more rules than God.* And hence, a truly godly person will often appear scandalously free and a threat to the groups who build their identity on their rule-making and rule-keeping. Jesus Christ was never so angry as when He was dealing with the rule-makers and legalists of His day. For Paul, our freedom in Christ is so essential that he wrote the book Galatians to basically condemn those who were preaching a gospel of extra works.

If you're a Christian, you are free, and I want you to understand and delight in your freedom. And, as a church, we need to build our faith on an understanding of the gospel of freedom, otherwise we pervert the basic message of Jesus. The gospel is first and foremost about God's redeeming us from death to life, not about what we do.

We're going to look at three basic proclamations about Christian freedom: we are free to enjoy anything, we are free to learn from anyone, and we are free to give up our freedom.

*We are free to enjoy anything.*

In verses 4-5 we have a foundational statement for a good theology. If you wanted to teach your children what the Christian faith is all about, you could do a lot worse than to start here: the world was created good- it didn't start out bad, God's design was not flawed. We were the ones who corrupted things. But what Paul is saying here is that when a Christian, with a new heart and a new conscience, engages in the world, he can do so in a holy, pure way.

One of the specific examples Paul uses of things we can enjoy is marriage. Apparently, people were teaching that you shouldn't get married, maybe even making rules against it and shunning people from fellowship if they did. It's interesting that in 1 Corinthians we see Paul arguing against the opposite of this idea, that you can be single in a society where your identity is based on marriage and family. Conservative society always tends to idolize the family; but liberal society always tends to idolize your individuality, so that we often hear that in marriage you need to retain your individuality. But the Scriptures say that you're free to marry or not, that if you marry you enter into an extraordinary union that replaces your individuality and if you don't marry that you still have an identity in the eternal people of God.

The second example is eating and drinking. What a silly thing to legislate and yet

it's genius- if you can restrict what someone eats, it's a constant reminder for them of your power over them. But, in the New Covenant, there are no restrictions for eating and drinking. Now, to stay in good health, you might want to avoid certain foods, and you certainly want to avoid getting drunk or sick on certain drinks. But, I say that if you have a good conscience before God about that hot fudge sundae, go for it!

In many areas, we have a lot more freedom than we've been told. I was talking with a friend recently about music and we were laughing at how many Christians we knew (ourselves included) who had once been convinced that they needed to get rid of all of their 'secular' records, but are now buying them all back on CD. So, does that mean that our kids are free to sit around listening to gangsta rap while eating JuJubees and smoking pot?

First off, the glorious freedom of a child is to live within the protection his parents give him. We give them more and more freedom as they're able to handle it, but are perfectly right in restricting their freedom when they are young.

Secondly, to really enjoy something is to enjoy it as God intended. Language and music and relationships can all be enjoyed, but they'll only really be enjoyed in the boundaries of God's law. One writer calls the 10 Commandments 'the law of perfect freedom' - because they're designed to keep us freely pursuing the really good things in life. Let's take a few examples from the 10 Commandments:

'Have no other gods before me.' Why? Because all other gods will enslave you. They'll promise more and more things, but they never deliver and they always end up controlling you. Jesus is the only one who delivers what He promises and brings you true freedom as you worship Him.

'Honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy.' Why? So you don't work all the time. So you can be free to enjoy life and no employer can take away at least one day for reflection and learning and redemptive praise.

'Do not commit adultery.' Why? Because you destroy your ability for true intimacy if you do. We're constantly told by modern society that religious people are just repressed, uptight people. What a crock! It's the faithful man who is really free. The loose man or woman has no ability for commitment or intimacy and will never taste the deeper pleasures of covenantal love.

Do you know what the greatest tool of evangelism is? Pleasure. Listen to what that 'crusty old Puritan' Jonathan Edwards says: "We come with double forces against the wicked, to persuade them to a godly life...[we might try to argue] the profitableness of religion, but alas, the wicked man is not in pursuit of profit; 'tis pleasure he seeks. Now, then, we will fight with them with their own weapons."

In other words, Edwards is saying that people overcome sin, not by reason or by trying harder, but by seeing and experiencing something greater and more wonderful than their sin. Christian, do you really enjoy life? Or do you just walk around saying "Don't look! Don't touch!" You're a terrible witness for Jesus Christ if you're not pursuing and finding real, lasting pleasure in life. Enjoy all that God gives you, receive it, say 'thanks.'

*We are free to learn from anyone.*

Let's look again at verse 12. In context, we might say that Paul is arguing for the dignity of the pastoral office Timothy holds. But I don't think it's reading too much into

this to say that Paul is setting out a principle that we can learn from people younger than us- in fact, we can learn from anyone. This is what we call 'common grace,' that if all truth is God's truth, then we can accept it wherever we find it, from anyone.

Most every theological circle has certain 'taboo authors'- meaning 'if you read them either I can't take you seriously' or 'I wonder if you're as heretical as they are.' But, how will I ever see or learn what my blind spots are if I stay in my closed circle of accepted authors?

Religious people aren't the only ones who are good at restricting learning- few students ever get to discover the wonderful insights into human nature and redemption in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* [or *Huckleberry Finn*] because English professors find it too imperialistic and racist. At core, we humans have a great fear that if we give people too many options that they may end up not agreeing with us, and thus not validating us. But, if God is sovereign, why should we be afraid of cultural works that are different from what we believe and listen to?

What if we're able to learn from these culture-makers? Francis Schaeffer lived in the midst of the 20th century when much of the evangelical world was condemning and ridiculing modern art. He spoke and wrote prophetically and helped change a lot of people's attitudes. Listen to what he says, "[Modern works of art] are the expression of men who are struggling with their appalling lostness. Dare we laugh at such things? Dare we feel superior when we view their tortured expressions in their art...[these artists] are dying while they live; yet where is our compassion for them?" Not only do we learn something about lost people, but we often gain startling insights into God and the human condition from filmmakers, painters, and poets- theist or atheist. This is why we do film night, where we almost never watch a movie that's made by a Christian. And we learn about ourselves, and about the world, and even about God.

*We are free to give up our freedom.*

Verses 13-16 seemed a bit works-oriented to me the first time I really read this passage. Paul is essentially telling Timothy that if he will persist in using his ministry gifts, devoting himself to them, and keeping a close watch on himself, he'll save himself and his hearers.

"Ah-ha!" you say. "I knew it was too good to be true. This whole grace/freedom thing- it's all about our work, that if we do enough we'll save ourselves."

No, the point is not that we are the saviors, the point is that by living out our gifts, Jesus uses us in His saving work. And this always involves some amount of sacrifice.

Whatever line of work you do, to do it for the good of others is much harder than just doing it for yourself. It's hard to put your clients, your company, and your co-workers ahead of yourself, but you can, and other people are given a gift when you do.

We all have the opportunity to give our time and resources to benefit others- and God uses that in the redemption of others.

Jesus Christ gave up His freedom to save His hearers. The men who wrote the gospel records tell us that Jesus willingly chose to leave the comforts of heaven and go through the suffering of life and death and by doing so he saved us. That's what the temptations in the garden were all about- Satan was tempting Jesus with things *He could have done*- do a miracle, gain power... But if He had done them, He would have been bypassing His own suffering- and our redemption.

Are you willing to give up some of your rights, some of your freedoms for your neighbor? If you aren't, you probably haven't experienced the grace and freedom that Jesus' story brings you.

He who the Son sets free is free indeed.