

2-23-08: Our Blessed Liberty

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1 Timothy 4

The New Testament message is one of liberation – stunning liberation. Throughout, it tells us of our liberty in Christ, our freedom from arcane regulations, from the restrictions of the Old Testament law, from the back-breaking burdens of the teachers of that law and it points us to freedom from our own self-obsessions and self-destructiveness. Finally, it declares that we are ultimately set free from the power of death – join us next month at Easter for more details!

It has always been the inclination of tyrants and despots to take away personal liberties. Left-wing or right-wing, there is always a crowd out there that wants to tell us what to do, maybe more pointedly what not to do. That same crowd wants to tell us how to think and, for sure, how to speak. Proclaiming righteousness (usually on the right) or enlightenment (usually on the left) they'll restrict our expression, profession (of words, actions and faith) and, if they can, what we may read and write. Both sides do this, brothers and sisters, both sides. Religious and secular, the sides meet in a kind of center spot, full of pontifications that they know what is best for society or for faith or for the church or for the gay community (all of these, in some cases) and, as they gain some following, they become progressively more indignant about anyone who holds a different opinion.

The church in Ephesus was plagued by this kind of crowd, apparently teachers of legalism and some forms of superstition. They tried to restrict people from marriage in general or, possibly, from marrying whom they wanted (this sounds oddly familiar today). They told the faithful that they had to restrict foods, perhaps harkening back to Hebrew dietary purity laws – some of the heretics in the first century told gentile believers that they had to become Jews to be complete Christians (a total contradiction to the gospel of grace). Or they might have imposed dietary rules for the purpose of imposing their own control so that listeners would have to turn to them for clarification or rules or permission to proceed – another common tactic of tyrants.

Paul reminded Timothy that anything God has created is good – do not reject anything that has been received with gratitude (verse 4). But verse 5 reminds Timothy to proceed thoughtfully and prayerfully, implying the importance of the prayers of the community. And Paul proceeds to tell Timothy to be disciplined into a pattern that leads to godliness – physical exercise has a good purpose but godliness serves us now and eternally. I think godliness just means having an ear for God and a heart that wants what God wants for us.

Paul reminds Timothy that the believer's eyes are to be fixed on "the living God" (possibly a gentle slam at all the superstitions) who is open to saving all people but especially those who believe.

Timothy was probably close to 40 at this point, folks speculate. Paul told him to be bold, not allowing anyone to be condescending toward him at his age, instead he was to be exemplary in speech, behavior, love, faith and purity. For sure, if we profess Christ, people will judge us by a stricter standard and some will point out our slightest failings. Paul wanted Timothy to be powerful in his faith and practice and to not let anyone steal the liberty that he, and we, have in Christ.

Think about all the people who have delineated to you, as a younger person or Christian, their list of all the things you could not do. The more legalistic and doctrinaire they were, or are, the longer the list. Let's set ourselves free from those people and their lists and, instead, prayerfully consider what God wants us to do, individually and jointly. Then let's make sure we aren't putting false lists on ourselves or other people. Then as we stand in the clear light of our liberty in Christ, let's become disciplined, love disciples who are here to tell other people how to break their bonds, how to get free. There are lots of them out there, standing in the bondage of old restrictions or of foolish convictions. They need to be set free. If

they will listen, let's do that.