

## The Goal is Love (Part 5)

Passages: 1 Timothy 4:1-16  
Matthew 8:5-13

For the past 4 weeks, we've been studying Paul's First Letter to Timothy... but we've been doing it with an important twist—we've been studying this letter in the light of Paul's earlier letter to the Ephesians.

You see, both letters are about the church in Ephesus. Sadly, however, what we find in the earlier letter to the Ephesians... where Paul extols all the wonderful advances that have been made towards a unified, healthy, multi-ethnic church in Ephesus... now seem to be under threat as Paul writes to Timothy some 3 years later! As we saw back in chapter 1, certain Jewish Christians were stirring up trouble with the Gentile Christians by arguing that they must adhere to the Jewish food laws and laws about circumcision. Understandably, certain Gentile Christians have aggressively pushed back, giving Paul no option but to expel them from the fellowship.

Indeed, this is clearly why Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus; in order to call the church back to its former unity... back to a place of peace as a genuinely reconciled, multi-ethnic Christian community.

This is what lies at the heart of Paul's First Letter to Timothy! And if we don't have this background of multi-ethnic tensions in mind as we read the letter, we will find it extremely difficult to make sense of what Paul is trying to communicate to his 'son in the Lord', Timothy.

Now, today we come to chapter 4... and, once again, so many commentators have made a great mistake in the way they understand these verses.

**Let's look at verses 1-5. (read)**

***"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."***

In these opening verses, Paul raises two key issues that have arisen due to

false teachers:

***They forbid people to marry and...  
order them to abstain from certain foods***

Who, exactly, does Paul have in mind here? Who are these false teachers who forbid marriage and certain foods?

Well, if you don't keep in mind the larger context of the multi-ethnic tensions in Ephesus, you will probably assume that the trouble was started by the **Greeks!** In fact, every commentary I've read on this passage makes this same assumption- that it was the Greeks who were at fault! Take just one example from the NIV Study Bible: *"This unbiblical asceticism arose out of the mistaken belief that the material world was evil—a central belief of the Gnostic heresy."*

The trouble with this assertion is that is totally unconnected to what we already saw back in chapter 1! Back in chapter 1, who did Paul say was the main cause of disunity in Ephesus? It wasn't the Gentile Christians who were forcing some form of Greek Gnosticism onto the Jewish believers. No! It was the Jewish Christians who were forcing OT law upon the Gentile believers! That was the central problem in Ephesus.

Now, if that is so, then obviously the most likely party who was ***"forbidding people to marry"*** and ***"to abstain from certain foods"*** was the newly-converted Jewish Christians!

Of course, the 'food' part of this is easy to understand! In Judaism, foods were divided into two categories: clean and unclean. No doubt, these newly converted Jewish Christians were still indoctrinated...they were still held captive... by this Old Testament practice. But listen to what Paul says in verses 3-5: ***"God created (all food) to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."***

So, it's pretty clear: it was the Jewish Christians who were responsible for stirring up these ethnic tensions around food.

But what about the issue over marriage? Why would Jewish Christians forbid people to marry? Well, it couldn't have been as simple as categorically forbidding marriage. More than likely, the marriage that these

Jewish Christians were forbidding was **inter-ethnic marriage**...marriage between Jews and non-Jews!

Why do I say that? Like the Old Testament food laws, this teaching was engrained into them from a very early age! It was part of their DNA! For centuries (ever since the days when Ezra and Nehemiah brought the Jews back to Jerusalem from exile), Jews had been taught that it was a sin to intermarry. They were taught that the Jewish race needed to stay pure. They were taught that the Jewish race had a divine calling from God and must never be corrupted with non-Jewish blood!

Do you know that this same thinking continues today? Today, Jewish people around the world are still being taught that they must not marry a non-Jew! Here is something I found on a Jewish website regarding interfaith marriage.

*“Traditional Judaism does not permit interfaith marriages. **If you are considering interfaith dating or marriage...** there are some practical matters you should consider. And before you casually dismiss this as ivory tower advice from a Jewish ghetto, let me point out that both my father and my brother are intermarried, as well as several of my cousins.*

**The Marriage:** *Where will you get married, who will perform the ceremony and where and how will it be performed? Most movements of Judaism don't allow interfaith marriages to be performed in their synagogues, nor do they allow their rabbis to perform interfaith marriages. And before you casually dismiss this as bigotry, let's remember that you are asking them to put a religious stamp of approval on an act that has nothing to do with their religion. You might as well ask the rabbi to say "amen" to a blessing over a ham and cheese sandwich. You may have to be married in a church: how do you feel about being married under a cross or crucifix? How will your relatives feel when they are told, "in Jesus' name, let us say 'Amen'," as happened at an interfaith marriage in my family?*

**The Holidays:** *What will you do when Christmas and [HYPERLINK "http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/chanukkah.htm"](http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/chanukkah.htm) Chanukkah overlap? When Easter and [HYPERLINK "http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/pesach.htm"](http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/pesach.htm) Pesach overlap? Whose holiday will you celebrate? Will your gentile husband veto the annual Chanukkah visit to your parents because Christmas is more important, as happened to an intermarried friend of mine? Will your wife be*

*willing to cook and/or eat the cardboard meals of Pesach? Will your gentile spouse be willing to sit through the lengthy seder ritual at your parents' house, or the lengthy High Holiday services?*

***The Children:*** *How will the children be raised? The Jewish grandparents want a [HYPERLINK "http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/circumcision.htm"](http://www.jewfaq.org/defs/circumcision.htm) bris, and the gentile grandparents insist on baptism. The Catholic grandparents want the child to learn catechism while the Jewish grandparents are looking forward to the bar mitzvah. Many interfaith couples think they are being oh-so-enlightened by raising the children with both faiths and letting them choose. But the message you are giving your children is that none of it is real, that none of it matters, that religion is a Chinese menu and you can pick one from Column A and one from Column B...*

*These are just a few of the more important considerations in interfaith relationships that people tend to gloss over in the heat of passion or in the desire to be politically fashionable.*

As you can see, the opposition to inter-ethnic marriage is still prevalent amongst Jewish people. And if it still remains a tension point for Jews in our modern, liberated world, we can only begin to imagine how difficult it must have been for the newly converted Jewish Christians of Paul's day! Just think about it—The Ephesian church was going along quite well. Jewish and Gentile converts were able to accept each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. But, over the course of a few years, babies were (no doubt) born; young people were growing up in this multi-ethnic church. Soon, these young people are crossing the ethnic lines much more easily than their parents. Indeed, as the ethnic barriers increasingly fall away for these kids over the course of 15 years, certain romantic attractions develop across the ethnic divide. Jewish boy meets Gentile girl; Jewish girl meets Gentile boy. Hearts are stirred. Passions inflamed. You can only imagine how thoughts of marriage would become the centre of their conversation. But when they ask their parents, what happens? The old cultural issues of race suddenly surface! It was fine to be in the same church together when the kids were young. But now!!! Marriage?

Of course, this problem of inter-marriage is not just a Jewish problem. Every ethnic group faces this problem at some point! Just look at *West Side Story*...or *Romeo and Juliet*...or the movie "*Guess Who's Coming to*

*Dinner?"* Yesterday, I talked to a man who was from a Catholic background who told me how his parents were against his marriage to a Protestant girl! Then there's my situation—Did you know that I faced a similar tension when I asked Kim to marry me. You see, my father-in-law didn't like Americans!

With these pictures in mind, it's easy to imagine how the ethnic tensions over both marriage and food laws made the Ephesian church *ripe* for false teachers to come in and use fear tactics: "*We're losing our culture! We're being taken over! If we allow our children to marry non-Jews, our cultural values will erode to nothing! We must forbid this sort of marriage!*"

Paul combats this false teaching, however, by reminding them that ***everything that God has created is good and that nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.*** Not only are *Gentile foods* sanctified by God's Word but so are the *Gentiles*!

Indeed, as a way of accentuating this idea, Paul goes on to encourage Timothy to be a ***good minister of Jesus Christ*** by grounding the church in Ephesus back on the basic truths of God's universal love. He then adds these powerful words in verses 9 and 10-- ***This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.***"

It's a subtle but direct reminder to Timothy that, in Jesus Christ, God is creating a new humanity out of this broken and divided world. There is no Jew or Greek, for all human beings are the object of God's love. All human beings are included in this divine desire to renew the earth in Christ's peace and harmony. ***Jesus is the savior of all men, and especially of those who believe***...so, eat their food and let your daughters marry them!

You know, as we highlight this issue of inter-racial marriage in the church Ephesus 2000 years ago, I have to admit that, even in 2011, **it continues to be a very difficult issue!** Sure, if you ask Christians today about inter-racial marriage, I'm sure that the vast majority would be in favour of the principle. In our open-minded world, few would dare to disagree. But the real difficulty comes when the abstract theory becomes reality in your own

home. This was surely the case in Ephesus, where for almost 15 years the issues of race were being resolved and harmony was prevailing. But as soon as questions of marriage began to surface, it was easy for false teachers to slip in and put fear before faith.

Tell me, honestly, how many Anglo Christians or Chinese Christians or Korean Christians would feel comfortable allowing their kids to marry someone from a different ethnic background?

Let me finish by reading a letter to you that I found on the internet written by a black woman in the USA.

*“I remember my mother telling me that Christians, real ones, were not racially prejudiced. Perhaps when she said it she really thought so. Personal experiences, mine and others, suggest that what we think we believe and what we really believe don’t always match, especially when it comes to interracial marriage. And so, when I called her to break the news about my relationship to Eric, the first question she asked was, “What’s he look like?” “He’s six feet tall, blue eyes --” She angrily slammed down the phone, but not before exclaiming, “Don’t bring him here!” I was hurt and disappointed. Eric’s mother was also upset with us, but chose to talk with me about it. “I’m having a hard time with this black/white thing. How’s your family taking it?” When I told her they weren’t even speaking to me, she grew quiet, then wondered aloud if she should write my mother.*

*Eric and I continued plans for our marriage. Then, to our complete astonishment, our mothers had a surprise birthday party for Eric—at my mother’s house! Though there were some sharp questions from both our fathers (shades of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?), we found our relationship being cautiously accepted. Eric’s mother, it turned out, had written mine and said in part: “I know my son loves your daughter very much. . . . As much as I hate to admit it, the Lord has been showing me that I have harbored bigotry in my heart. I know that is wrong.” My own mother’s heart responded to those words!*

*Sixteen years after my wedding day, both our families are close to us. We realize that it was the Lord who worked in our families’ lives. Five years ago, Eric’s mother went to be with the Lord after a final bout with cancer. But her ability as a white woman to confront the racism in her own heart is*

*a testimony to God's reality. She faced the truth about herself and, in reaching out to my mother, brought about racial reconciliation for us all. Like my mama told me, real Christians aren't racially prejudiced. Or, if they are . . . they have to deal with their own hypocrisy."*

That, it seems, was a central reason why Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus. And although he was a younger man, sent in to solve problems created by the older members of that church, Paul encouraged him:

**1Ti 4:11-16** *Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."*

In the end, what Paul wants Timothy to do in Ephesus is to ***"give himself wholly to..."*** God's new culture...God's new people...God's new community. He is to be a living testimony of God's grace to all people by leading a church in which there is no distinction between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; a community centred around Jesus Christ.

Let's pray that we might do the same!

