

Absolutism: Don't We All Have to Find the Truth for Ourselves? - Tim Keller

by From the Pulpit & Classic Sermons

Tim Keller's sermon explores the relationship between absolute truth and freedom, arguing that true freedom is found in submission to the truth of the gospel.

Duration: 1:07:33

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Galatians 2:4-16

Topics: "Radio"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of freedom and its relationship to truth. He uses the movie iRobot as an illustration to explain that true freedom is not the absence of restrictions, but rather the submission to the truth. The preacher emphasizes that truth is more important than we realize and that freedom is more complex than we think. He concludes by stating that Jesus is the ultimate source of liberation, as only through Him can we find true freedom by submitting to the truth.

Transcript

Welcome to From the Pulpit and Classic Sermons. Each week we bring you a different message from some of history's greatest speakers in the Christian faith, and powerful sermons from modern preachers too. This week we have Tim Keller with his message, Absolutism.

Don't we have to find the truth for ourselves? The scripture is found in Galatians 2 verses 4 through 16. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

As for those who seem to be important, whatever they were makes no difference to me. God does not judge by external appearance. Those men added nothing to my message.

On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.

They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong.

Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles, but when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew.

How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law, no one will be justified. This is the word of the Lord.

Each week we're looking at a... We're choosing one of the things that trouble folks in our culture, and especially in New York City, the most about Christianity. So we're trying to take each week one of the things that people say, This is my biggest problem with Christianity, or this is my trouble, or this is my objection to Christianity. And today, tonight, we look at one that could be put like this.

Christians believe they have absolute truth. That is, they see that they have some things that everyone should believe, and everyone should do. So Christians believe they have absolute truth.

But people who have absolute truth, the objection goes, undermine freedom. First of all, they tend to oppress people who are different than they are, and they tend to impose their views on others, so they tend to harm other people's freedom. And people who believe they have absolute truth are themselves not really free.

Here they are under the burden of trying to comply with this set of divine directives. And our culture believes everyone should be free to determine for themselves what is true. Everyone should be free to determine their own truth and what is right or wrong for them.

So absolute truth is the enemy of freedom. It harms and erodes freedom. That's the objection.

What do we say to that? How do you respond to that? You know, the Supreme Court itself, by the way, has actually enshrined the cultural mindset on this in a famous passage in a 1992 ruling in which the Supreme Court actually said, quote, the heart of liberty is to define one's own concept of existence of the meaning of the universe. So there it is. What do we say? There's three things to say.

Truth is a lot more important than you would think. Freedom is a lot more complex than you would think. And Jesus is a lot more liberating than you think.

Now, those three principles that, you know, oh, absolute truth doesn't fit freedom well, truth is more important, freedom is more complex, Jesus is more liberating than you think, those principles are found in this passage. It illustrates these three principles. Let's look at them.

First, truth is more important than you think. The passage is a story. It's an account of what happened in the earliest days of the Christian church.

The earliest Christians were Jewish. And because of that, they observed the Mosaic ceremonial law, the ritual purity codes of what you ate and what you could wear. But when Paul went to the Gentiles and preached the gospel, and many of them were converted, when the Gentiles started coming to the church, the question arose, has Jesus Christ so fulfilled the ceremonial law, all the sacrifices and the priests and the temple and all the dietary restrictions and so on, has Jesus so fulfilled all that that now they're obsolete and we don't have to observe them? And Paul's answer to that question was yes.

And amongst the Gentile converts, they didn't have to do any of that. Now, there was a controversy about that because there were many people who said, no, that's not right. And see verse 4 and 5 at the very beginning of the passage.

People came and spied on what Paul calls the freedom we had in Christ. So Paul had to go to a special meeting with all the other apostles in Jerusalem where he contended for the truth, verse 5 of the gospel. And as we will see, everyone came to agree that what Paul was doing was right.

But the point is, verse 4 and 5 says, we have freedom in Christ because of the truth of the gospel. And in a moment, later on, we're going to get back to what that truth of the gospel is. But for a minute, I would like you to just consider the relationship between truth and freedom that Paul lays out in those two verses.

Freedom, verse 4, comes from the truth. That's the reason why Paul was fighting for it. Freedom comes from the truth.

And that's exactly the opposite of the way in which we in our culture think. We feel like if you have to comply with the truth, if you're forcing the truth, if you're having to obey the truth, that's a lack of freedom. Why do we feel that way? One of the great, most influential philosophers, French philosophers of the last few years was Foucault.

And Foucault writes something that you may not have heard this quote, but the idea has been extremely influential in our culture. Foucault says, quote, truth is a thing of this world. It is produced only by multiple forms of constraint.

And that includes the regular effects of power. And what Foucault is saying is simply this. Truth claims are power plays.

That when you claim to have the truth, what you're really doing is trying to get power over other people. Claiming to have the truth is a method of control. Claiming to have the truth is a form of constraint, a way of controlling other people's behavior and getting power over them.

Now, that's the view. And maybe you think that as a Christian minister, I'm going to start off my response by saying, what a lot of malarkey. But I'm not.

I am not. I think we need to hear that. See, Foucault was probably the number one disciple of Nietzsche in the 20th century.

And Nietzsche established the hermeneutics of suspicion. And what somebody once said is the hermeneutics of suspicion is really philosophical squinting. And this is what they meant by that.

If you would make a truth claim to Nietzsche, if you would say everyone should promote social justice, everyone should do justice in the world, Nietzsche would go, hmm, you're calling everyone to justice, are

you? Why are you calling everyone to justice? Is it because you love justice? Or is it because you want to start a revolution that will put you on the top and give you power? Or someone would say to Nietzsche, everyone should obey God's Word, and Nietzsche would go, everyone should obey God's Word, huh? Of course he'd say this in German, but I can't do that. Everyone would obey God's Word, huh? Why do you call everyone to obey God's Word? Is it out of love for God? Is it out of love for His Word? Or is it as a way of establishing your moral superiority? Is it a way for you to justify yourself and to justify your oppressing and abusing or marginalizing at least or ignoring people who don't believe God's Word? The reason I want you to listen to what Nietzsche says and what Foucault says is because it's exactly what Jesus says about the Pharisees. Jesus also says, when he looks at the Pharisees, he says, your truth claims, you're claiming to have the truth, but your truth claims are ways of getting power.

They're ways of justifying yourself. They're ways of justifying your group. They're ways of getting control over God.

They're ways of getting control over other people. Listen, truth claims in general, says Jesus, are power plays. And listen, when Foucault and Nietzsche and Jesus Christ all agree on something, you know, it's just got to be true.

I mean, it just has to be true. But if you insist that all truth claims, all the time, always are all power plays, they always destroy truth, that all truth claims destroy truth, that anybody who says they have the truth destroys freedom, you're wrong. C.S. Lewis's little book, *The Abolition of Man*, is a great book.

And maybe my favorite passage in *The Abolition of Man* reads like this. He says, you cannot go on explaining away forever, or you will find that you have explained your own explanation itself away. You cannot go on seeing through things forever.

The whole point of seeing through something is to see something else through it. For example, it's good that you can see through a window, but that's only because the garden behind is opaque. But if you could see through everything, if everything was transparent, a wholly transparent world would be an invisible world.

And to see through everything would be the same as not to see. What's he saying? See, he's talking about Nietzsche, and here's what he's saying. If you say all truth claims are power plays, so is that.

What is that? That's a truth claim, and so is that, so I don't have to listen to you, do I? Or if you say, like Freud says, all statements about religion and God are really just psychological projections to deal with your own guilt and insecurity, well, so is that. What is that? That's a statement about God and religion, and so is that, so I don't have to listen to you. You know, you've explained away your explanation, see? Or if the evolutionary biologists say, you know, everything your mind tells you about God, morality, and truth, everything your mind tells you is really just hardwired brain chemistry that's there in order for you to pass on your genetic code.

Well, everything their brain tells them about everything, including the evolutionary biology, is the same, so why should I listen to it? See, to see through everything is not to see. And to say no one should make truth claims because that's just a power play, that's the biggest power trip of all because that's a great big needle. You can go around and you can puncture everybody's balloon.

You better puncture your own, and guess what? You're back to square one. Because everybody does make truth claims. Everybody believes in truth claims.

To say no one should say they have the truth is itself the most incredible power trip. It's a way of getting on top of your sophistication, you know, and your jadedness over everybody else. Look, everybody does make truth claims.

You have to. And therefore, it's not making a truth claim per se that leads to oppression. It's what's in the claim.

It's what's in the truth claim. Example. I have just been absolutely amazed by the, like a lot of you, by the reports coming out of Lancaster County in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy.

You know, a man comes into a school and slaughters these little girls, these Amish school children. All right. And what do we see? One of the things that most amazed me was we understand that one of the little girls who was killed offered to die for the rest of them.

Said, kill me and let the rest go. And by the way, they did not watch television. They did not see movies.

Where would she have gotten that idea of dying for her friends? And when it was all over, the amazing thing, in fact, usually you could see the reporters themselves were amazed, that the community and the bereaved families not only forgave the man who did it, but took up a collection and prayed and forgave the widow and the children of the man who did it. Now by anyone's definition, the Amish are fundamentalists. And they believe they have the truth.

And have you ever heard anybody say, oh, fundamentalists, they think they have the truth. That leads to oppression. It didn't there.

Why not? Because it depends on what the fundamental is. And the fundamental in this case is a man dying on the cross for his enemies. A man with whose last breath he blesses the people around him and prays for their forgiveness.

And if you take that into the very center of your life, then you begin to see that it's not truth claims per se that erode freedom. It's what's in the truth claim. It's true, of course, that truth claims can be used to destroy freedom.

But there is no freedom without the truth. Because as Jesus himself said in John chapter 8, the truth will set you free. So it's not just that truth claims aren't necessarily eroding of freedom.

You've got to have the truth and be in touch with the truth to have freedom. Only the truth will set you free. What do I mean? I've always wished I was a ship's captain in say the 16th century.

I always wanted to be the captain of one of those incredible ships. And if I was a ship's captain and I was trying to take my ship into the English Channel, you know, between Britain and France, but I made a mistake and I sailed up the Bristol Channel, which is far more shallow and I didn't realize it. And I just plowed right across thinking it was the English Channel.

Very soon I would have run aground. Very soon my ship would be wrecked. Everybody would be killed.

Why? I was out of touch with the truth. I was out of touch with the truth of how deep the channel was. I was out of touch with the truth of where I was.

Maybe somebody lied to me. Maybe I was just miscalculated. But either way I was out of touch with reality.

I was out of touch with the truth and the truth would have set me free. And only the truth would have set me free. And you see, the idea, the modern idea that you have to get away from the truth somehow to be free and get out from under the truth and get away from the truth to be free is silly.

It's actually stupid. Only the truth will set you free. Being closely in touch with the truth and living in accordance with the truth will set you free.

You say, well, maybe that's true in the empirical realm, you know, the scientific realm, but not necessarily in the moral spiritual realm. Oh, really? There you can live any way you want. Oh, yeah? I think I can say without fear of contradiction, if you live for money and only for money, if you live only to make money, if you live only to spend money, if you live only to have money, nothing else matters to you.

You will shrivel your soul. You will destroy all your relationships. You might work too hard and ruin your health and your body.

Why? Because you have run aground on the rocks of a moral spiritual reality that's there, every bit as much as the Bristol Channel was there. It's there. It's the way things are.

You are out of accord with the truth of how human beings ought to live. Only the truth will set you free. The truth is much more important than you know.

Freedom comes from submission to the truth, not getting away from it. Well, you say, now that leads us to a question. Wow.

I guess I always thought of freedom as being able to create your own truth, so you're saying that freedom is submission to the truth. Why? How's that? Well, you see, what we're getting to is point two, fortunately. And point two is freedom now is much more complex than you think.

Paul gets up to Jerusalem and has this debate, has this discussion, and everybody says, yeah, you're okay. Your mission to the Gentiles is legit. And so they shake hands, and we see down here in verse 9, it says, so we all agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, they to the Jews.

But then look at verse 10. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. Well, we can't, I think I've told you, in this series, we don't go that deeply into these passages.

But there's a lot there, and here's what it is. Paul was going to the Gentiles, and that was a place where the power was and the money. And what the apostles in Jerusalem were trying to remind him of is the Judean Christians.

In fact, the people of Judea had far less money and far less power. And what they were saying is, remember what the Bible says about the poor. You can win them to Christ, but they have to see what the Bible says.

They have to care about the poor. And suddenly you begin to realize something really weird. In verse 4, Paul says, we're free in Christ.

We're free, free. But now in verse 10, we see that Paul says, yes, of course, we're still restricted to the biblical ethical norms. You can't live any way you want.

You can't spend your money any way you want. You have to tell the truth. You can't commit adultery, all that.

So now, wait a minute. Here in verse 4, we're free, he says. But in verse 10, we're restricted.

We're still restricted to certain living in certain ways. And our response as modern people is, wait a minute. I thought that freedom is the absence of restrictions.

I thought freedom is the absence of all constraints and boundaries and restrictions. The fewer restrictions there are, the more free I am. Freedom is not having any restrictions on anything I do.

Wrong. Oversimplification. I'm here to try to show you that.

Freedom is much more complex than that. Let me give you a couple of examples. First of all, as you get older, as you will find, you can't just eat anything you want.

And at a certain point, the doctor will say to you, now look, there's a lot of these things that you love eating. You can't eat them anymore. And so what you're going to have to do is you're going to have to restrict your freedom.

You're going to see them on the table. You're going to see them on the shelf. You're going to get near them, and you're going to have to go, no.

And you're a constraint. That's constraint. That's restriction.

So you have to give up your freedom to eat anything you want if you want to be released into the richer, deeper freedom of good health and long life. Or if you want to, you can just eat anything you want. No restrictions.

Be totally free. And then you will lose both your health and probably have a shorter year. So you can't have them both.

And obviously, the freeing, the liberating restriction of freedom is to be restricted here so that you can get that richer and deeper freedom of good health and long life. Let me give you another example. It's not as simple as just loss of restrictions.

A lot of you have musical skill because this is New York City. And at some point in your life, you made a decision. And that is you were going to restrict your freedom because you were going to practice, practice, practice.

You're going to practice every day. You're going to practice a long time every day. You're going to practice, practice, practice, which means all kinds of stuff that other people can do you can't do.

You don't have time. So you're restricting yourself now, but only if you restrict yourself then would you eventually be released into the far richer, deeper freedom of being able to perform, being able to express,

being able to thrill a crowd, being able to compose, all kinds of stuff you could never even begin to do if you didn't restrict your freedom here. You could never be released into that freedom there.

Oh, you're starting to say, OK, I see it. I see it. So this naive idea that freedom is an absence of restriction, no.

Discipline, restriction can release you into a greater freedom. So discipline is a good in itself, right? No, no, no. Oh, no.

Hey, freedom is not the absence of restriction, but freedom is not the presence of restriction. In a more liberal culture like ours, we think of freedom as the absence of constraint. But in traditional cultures, there's a feeling like discipline is a good per se.

Discipline is always good. That freedom comes through discipline. Really? Well, for example, imagine a young guy, 22 years old, 5'3", he's 115 pounds, and he dreams of being an NFL lineman.

And because he's gone to American schools all his life, every year his teacher has said, you can be anything you want to be. And like an idiot, he believed. And so now he gets up and he says, this is my dream.

I'm going to be an NFL lineman. I'm going to practice, and I'm going to discipline myself, and I'm going to restrict myself, and I'm going to work out, and I'm going to build myself up, and you know, he's going to waste his life. Because freedom is not the absence of restriction or the presence of restrictions, but it's freedom is the presence of the right restrictions, the ones that fit in with your nature, with who you are, the truth of who God has made you to be, the truth of the givenness of your nature.

And if you find the truth of who you are, the truth of what you've been given, see, the musician, because of her aptitude, restriction releases her. The little guy who wants to get into the NFL because he doesn't have the nature and the aptitude, restriction destroys him. Freedom is not the presence of restriction or the absence of restriction, it's the presence of the right restrictions, the ones in accord with the truth, who God made you to be.

And then when you give up your freedom, you surrender to those restrictions, it will release you into richer, deeper freedom. The truth will set you free. This is the reason why, for example, a fish out on the grass, a fish out on the grass isn't free.

A fish out on the grass has lost its freedom to move, even to live. You have to restrict the fish to the water. And in the water, its strength returns, and its power returns, and it can swim away like lightning.

And therefore, freedom is a lot more complex, is it not? It's the right restrictions, the restrictions that fit in with the givenness of your nature, the restrictions that fit in with the truth of who you are, and the truth of how things are. And the ultimate example of the complexity of freedom is love. Oh my goodness, yes.

You see, love is a way to get free, is it not? I mean, doesn't love bring you the freedom of security and fulfillment and joy? But Françoise Sagan, the famous French writer, some years ago when she was having a magazine interview, she was, I think, kind of up in years at the time, and they asked her, have you lived the life you wanted to live? And she said, yes, I have lived to be free. And then the interviewer said, then you have had the freedom you wanted. And Sagan said, yes, well, I was obviously not free when I was in love with someone, but one's not in love all the time, fortunately.

Apart from that, yes, I've been free. Very realistic, and I'll tell you why. The freedoms of love only come if you surrender all kinds of individual freedom.

I remember very shortly after I was married, like days or maybe the most weeks after I was married, I remember I was coming home from work, and I suddenly had an idea. I don't even remember what it was, but I took a detour. I went someplace to buy something or something, and I got home about 25 minutes late.

And my wife looked at me and said, where were you? Now, you have to remember, this was before cell phones, and as some of you probably suspect, it was before phones. But the whole point was, so I should have written her a letter, I guess. Pony Express probably would have been a good idea.

But the point was, I mean, all of my life, I had, you can make a little, I suddenly realized, oh my gosh, I'm married, and therefore my right to make even small unilateral decisions is over forever. The scripture is found in Galatians 2 verses 4 through 16. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.

We did not give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. As for those who seem to be important, whatever they were makes no difference to me. God does not judge by external appearance.

Those men added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.

James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles, but when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

This is the word of the Lord. Each week we're choosing one of the things that trouble folks in our culture, and especially in New York City, the most about Christianity. So we're trying to take each week one of the things that people say, This is my biggest problem with Christianity, or this is my trouble, or this is my objection to Christianity.

And today, tonight, we look at one that could be put like this. Christians believe they have absolute truth. That is, they see that they have some things that everyone should believe and everyone should do.

So Christians believe they have absolute truth. But people who have absolute truth, the objection goes, undermine freedom. First of all, they tend to oppress people who are different than they are, and they tend to impose their views on others.

So they tend to harm other people's freedom. And people who believe they have absolute truth are themselves not really free. Here they are under the burden of trying to comply with this set of divine directives.

And our culture believes everyone should be free to determine for themselves what is true. Everyone should be free to determine their own truth and what is right or wrong for them. So absolute truth is the enemy of freedom.

It harms and erodes freedom. That's the objection. What do we say to that? How do you respond to that? You know, the Supreme Court itself, by the way, has actually enshrined the cultural mindset on this in a famous passage in a 1992 ruling in which the Supreme Court actually said, quote, the heart of liberty is to define one's own concept of existence of the meaning of the universe.

So there it is. What do we say? There's three things to say. Truth is a lot more important than you would think.

Freedom is a lot more complex than you would think. And Jesus is a lot more liberating than you think. Now those three principles that, you know, oh, absolute truth doesn't fit freedom well.

Truth is more important. Freedom is more complex. Jesus is more liberating than you think.

Those principles are found in this passage. It illustrates these three principles. Let's look at them.

First, truth is more important than you think. The passage is a story, it's an account of what happened in the earliest days of the Christian church. The earliest Christians were Jewish.

And because of that, they observed the Mosaic ceremonial law, the ritual purity codes of what you ate and what you could wear. But when Paul went to the Gentiles and preached the gospel, and many of them were converted, when the Gentiles started coming to the church, the question arose, has Jesus Christ so fulfilled the ceremonial law, all the sacrifices and the priests and the temple and all the dietary restrictions and so on, has Jesus so fulfilled all that that now they're obsolete and we don't have to observe them? And Paul's answer to that question was yes. And amongst the Gentile converts, they didn't have to do any of that.

Now, there was a controversy about that because there were many people who said, no, that's not right. And see verse 4 and 5 at the very beginning of the passage. People came and spied on what Paul calls the freedom we had in Christ.

So Paul had to go to a special meeting with all the other apostles in Jerusalem where he contended for the truth, verse 5 of the gospel. And as we will see, everyone came to agree that what Paul was doing was right. But the point is, verse 4 and 5 says we have freedom in Christ because of the truth of the gospel.

And in a moment, later on, we're going to get back to what that truth of the gospel is. But for a minute, I would like you to just consider the relationship between truth and freedom that Paul lays out in those two verses. Freedom, verse 4, comes from the truth.

That's the reason why Paul was fighting for it. Freedom comes from the truth. And that's exactly the opposite of the way in which we in our culture think.

We feel like if you have to comply with the truth, if you're forcing the truth, if you're having to obey the truth, that's a lack of freedom. Why do we feel that way? One of the great most influential philosophers, French philosophers of the last few years, was Foucault. And Foucault writes something that you may not have heard this quote, but the idea has been extremely influential in our culture.

Foucault says, quote, Truth is a thing of this world. It is produced only by multiple forms of constraint. And that includes the regular effects of power.

And what Foucault is saying is simply this. Truth claims are power plays. That when you claim to have the truth, what you're really doing is trying to get power over other people.

Claiming to have the truth is a method of control. Claiming to have the truth is a form of constraint, a way of controlling other people's behavior and getting power over them. Now, that's the view.

And maybe you think that as a Christian minister, I'm going to start off my response by saying, what a lot of malarkey. But I'm not. I am not.

I think we need to hear that. See, Foucault was probably the number one disciple of Nietzsche in the 20th century. And Nietzsche established the hermeneutics of suspicion.

And what somebody once said is the hermeneutics of suspicion is really philosophical squinting. And this is what they meant by that. If you would make a truth claim to Nietzsche, if you would say everyone should promote social justice, everyone should do justice in the world, Nietzsche would go, hmm, you're calling everyone to justice, are you? Why are you calling everyone to justice? Is it because you love justice? Or is it because you want to start a revolution that will put you on the top and give you power? Or someone would say to Nietzsche, everyone should obey God's Word, and Nietzsche would go, everyone should obey God's Word, huh? Of course he'd say this in German, but I can't do that.

Everyone would obey God's Word, huh? Why do you call everyone to obey God's Word? Is it out of love for God? Is it out of love for His Word? Or is it as a way of establishing your moral superiority? Is it a way for you to justify yourself and to justify your oppressing and abusing, or marginalizing at least, or ignoring people who don't believe God's Word? The reason I want you to listen to what Nietzsche says and what Foucault says is because it's exactly what Jesus says about the Pharisees. Jesus also says, when he looks at the Pharisees, he says, your truth claims, you're claiming to have the truth, but your truth claims are ways of getting power, they're ways of justifying yourself. They're ways of justifying your group.

They're ways of getting control over God. They're ways of getting control over other people. Listen, truth claims in general, says Jesus, are power plays.

And listen, when Foucault and Nietzsche and Jesus Christ all agree on something, you know, it's just got to be true. I mean, it just has to be true. But if you insist that all truth claims, all the time, always, are all power plays, they always destroy truth, that all truth claims destroy truth, that anybody who says they have

the truth destroys freedom, you're wrong.

C.S. Lewis's little book, *The Abolition of Man*, is a great book, and maybe my favorite passage in *The Abolition of Man* reads like this. He says, you cannot go on explaining away forever, or you will find that you have explained your own explanation itself away. You cannot go on seeing through things forever.

The whole point of seeing through something is to see something else through it. For example, it's good that you can see through a window, but that's only because the garden behind is opaque. But if you could see through everything, if everything was transparent, a wholly transparent world would be an invisible world.

And to see through everything would be the same as not to see. What's he saying? See, he's talking about Nietzsche, and here's what he's saying. If you say all truth claims are power plays, so is that.

What is that? That's a truth claim, and so is that, so I don't have to listen to you, do I? Or if you say, like Freud says, all statements about religion and God are really just psychological projections to deal with your own guilt and insecurity, well, so is that. What is that? That's a statement about God and religion, and so is that, so I don't have to listen to you. You know, you've explained away your explanation.

See? Or if the evolutionary biologists say, you know, everything your mind tells you about God, morality, and truth, everything your mind tells you is really just hardwired brain chemistry that's there in order for you to pass along your genetic code. Well, everything their brain tells them about everything, including the evolutionary biology, is the same, so why should I listen to it? See, to see through everything is not to see. And to say no one should make truth claims because that's just a power play, that's the biggest power trip of all because that's a great big needle you can go around and you can punch everybody's balloon.

You better punch your own, and guess what? You're back to square one. Because everybody does make truth claims. Everybody believes in truth claims.

To say no one should say they have the truth is itself the most incredible power trip. It's a way of getting on top of your sophistication, you know, and your jadedness over everybody else. Look, everybody does make truth claims.

You have to. And therefore, it's not making a truth claim per se that leads to oppression. It's what's in the claim.

It's what's in the truth claim. Example. I have just been absolutely amazed by the, like a lot of you, by the reports coming out of Lancaster County in the aftermath of the terrible tragedy.

You know, a man comes into a school and slaughters these little girls, these Amish school children. All right. And what do we see? One of the things that most amazed me was we understand that one of the little girls who was killed offered to die for the rest of them, said kill me and let the rest go.

And by the way, they did not watch television. They did not see movies. Where would she have gotten that idea of dying for her friends? And when it was all over, the amazing thing, in fact, usually you could see the reporters themselves were amazed, that the community and the bereaved families not only forgave the man who did it, but took up a collection and prayed and forgave the widow and the children of the man who did it.

Now, by anyone's definition, the Amish are fundamentalists, and they believe they have the truth. And have you ever heard anybody say, oh, fundamentalists, they think they have the truth. That leads to oppression.

It didn't there. Why not? Because it depends on what the fundamental is. And the fundamental in this case is a man dying on the cross for his enemies, a man with whose last breath he blesses the people around him and prays for their forgiveness.

And if you take that into the very center of your life, then you begin to see that it's not truth claims per se that erode freedom. It's what's in the truth claim. It's true, of course, that truth claims can be used to destroy freedom, but there is no freedom without the truth, because as Jesus himself said in John 8, the truth will set you free.

So it's not just that truth claims aren't necessarily eroding of freedom. You've got to have the truth and be in touch with the truth to have freedom. Only the truth will set you free.

What do I mean? I've always wished I was a ship's captain in, say, the 16th century. I always wanted to be the captain of one of those incredible ships. And if I was a ship's captain and I was trying to take my ship into the English Channel, you know, between Britain and France, but I made a mistake and I sailed up the Bristol Channel, which is far more shallow, and I didn't realize it.

And I just plowed right across thinking it was the English Channel. Very soon I would have run aground. Very soon my ship would be wrecked.

Everybody would be killed. Why? I was out of touch with the truth. I was out of touch with the truth of how deep the channel was.

I was out of touch with the truth of where I was. Maybe somebody lied to me. Maybe I would just miscalculate it, but either way I was out of touch with reality.

I was out of touch with the truth, and the truth would have set me free. And only the truth would have set me free. And you see, the idea, the modern idea that you have to get away from the truth somehow to be free and get out from under the truth and stop, get away from the truth to be free is silly.

It's actually stupid. Only the truth will set you free. Being closely in touch with the truth and living in accordance with the truth will set you free.

Ah, you say, well, maybe that's true in the empirical realm, you know, the scientific realm, but not necessarily in the moral spiritual realm. Oh, really? There you can live any way you want. Oh, yeah? I think I can say without fear of contradiction, if you live for money and only for money, if you live only to make money, if you live only to spend money, if you live only to have money, nothing else matters to you.

You will shrivel your soul. You will destroy all your relationships. You might work too hard and ruin your health and your body.

Why? Because you have run aground on the rocks of a moral spiritual reality that's there every bit as much as the Bristol Channel was there. It's there. It's the way things are.

You are out of accord with the truth of how human beings ought to live. Only the truth will set you free. Truth is much more important than you know.

Freedom comes from submission to the truth, not getting away from it. Well, you say, now that leads us to a question. Wow.

I guess I always thought of freedom as being able to create your own truth, so now you're saying that freedom is submission to the truth. Why? How's that? Well, you see, what we're getting to is point two, fortunately. And point two is, freedom now is much more complex than you think.

Paul gets up to Jerusalem and has this debate, has this discussion, and everybody says, yeah, you're okay. Your mission to the Gentiles is legit. And so they shake hands, and we see down here in verse nine, it says, so we all agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, they to the Jews, but then look at verse 10.

All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. Well, we can't, I think I've told you, in this series, we don't go that deeply into these passages, but there's a lot there, and here's what it is. Paul was going to the Gentiles, and that was a place where the power was and the money.

And what the apostles in Jerusalem were trying to remind him of is the Judean Christians, and in fact, you know, the people of Judea had far less money and far less power, and what they were saying is, remember what the Bible says about the poor. You know, you can win them to Christ, but they have to see what the Bible says. They have to care about the poor.

And suddenly you begin to realize something really weird. In verse four, Paul says we're free in Christ. We're free, free.

But now in verse 10, we see that Paul says, yes, of course, we are still restricted to the biblical ethical norms. You can't live any way you want. You can't spend your money any way you want.

You have to tell the truth. You can't commit adultery, all that. So now wait a minute.

Here in verse four, we're free, he says, but in verse 10, we're restricted. We're still restricted to certain living in certain ways, and our response as modern people is, wait a minute, I thought that freedom is the absence of restrictions. I thought freedom is the absence of all constraints and boundaries and restrictions.

The more, the fewer restrictions there are, the more free I am. Freedom is not having any restrictions on anything I do. Wrong.

Oversimplification. I'm here to try to show you that. Freedom is much more complex than that.

Let me give you a couple examples. First of all, as you get older, as you will find, you can't just eat anything you want. And at a certain point, the doctor will say to you, now look, there's a lot of these things that you love eating.

You can't eat them anymore. And so what you're going to have to do is you're going to have to restrict your freedom. You're going to see them on the table.

You're going to see them on the shelf. You're going to get near them, and you're going to have to go, no. And you restrict your constraint.

That's constraint. That's restriction. So you have to give up your freedom to eat anything you want if you want to be released into the richer, deeper freedom of good health and long life.

Or if you want to, you can just eat anything you want. No restrictions. Be totally free.

And then you will lose both your health and probably have a shorter year. You can't have them both. And obviously, the freeing, the liberating restriction of freedom is to be restricted here so that you can get that richer and deeper freedom of good health and long life.

Let me give you another example. See, it's not as simple as just loss of restrictions. A lot of you have musical skill because this is New York City.

And at some point in your life, you made a decision. And that is you were going to restrict your freedom because you were going to practice, practice, practice. You're going to practice every day.

You're going to practice a long time every day. You're going to practice, practice, practice, which means all kinds of stuff that other people can do you can't do. You don't have time.

So you're restricting yourself now, but only if you restrict yourself then would you eventually be released into the far richer, deeper freedom of being able to perform, being able to express, being able to thrill a crowd, being able to compose, all kinds of stuff you could never even begin to do if you didn't restrict your freedom here. You could never be released into that freedom there. Oh, you're starting to say, okay, I see it, I see it.

So this naive idea that freedom is an absence of restriction, no. Discipline, restriction can release you into a greater freedom. So discipline is a good in itself, right? No, no, no.

Oh, no. Hey, freedom is not the absence of restriction, but freedom is not the presence of restriction. You know, in a more liberal culture like ours, we think of freedom as the absence of constraint.

But in traditional cultures, there's a feeling like discipline is a good per se. Discipline is always good. That freedom comes through discipline.

Really? Well, for example, imagine a young guy, 22 years old, 5'3", he's 115 pounds, and he dreams of being an NFL lineman. And because he's gone to American schools all of his life, every year his teacher has said, you can be anything you want to be. And like an idiot, he believed.

And so now he gets up and he says, this is my dream. I'm going to be an NFL lineman. I'm going to practice and I'm going to discipline myself and I'm going to restrict myself and I'm going to work out and I'm going to build myself up.

And you know, he's going to waste his life. Because freedom is not the absence of restriction or the presence of restrictions. But it's freedom is the presence of the right restrictions, the ones that fit in with your nature, with who you are, the truth of who God has made you to be, the truth of your, the givenness of your nature.

And it's a great, if you find the truth of who you are, the truth of what you've been given. See, the musician, because of her aptitude, restriction releases her. The little guy who wants to get into NFL, you know, into the NFL, because he doesn't have the nature and the aptitude, restriction destroys him.

Freedom is not the presence of restriction or the absence of restriction. It's the presence of the right restrictions, the ones in accord with the truth, who God made you to be. And then when you give up your freedom, you surrender to those restrictions.

It will release you into richer, deeper freedom. The truth will set you free. This is the reason why, for example, you know, a fish out on the grass.

A fish out on the grass isn't free. A fish out on the grass has lost its freedom to move, even to live. You have to restrict the fish to the water.

And in the water, its strength returns and its power returns and it can, you know, swim away like lightning. And therefore, freedom is a lot more complex, is it not? It's the right restrictions, the restrictions that fit in with the givenness of your nature, the restrictions that fit in with the truth of who you are and the truth of how things are. And, you know, the ultimate example of the complexity of freedom is love.

Oh, my goodness, yes. You see, love is a way to get free, is it not? I mean, isn't love bringing you the freedom of security and fulfillment and joy? But Françoise Sagan, the famous French writer, some years ago when she was having a magazine interview, she was, I think, kind of up in years at the time, and they asked her, have you lived the life you wanted to live? And she said, yes, I have lived to be free. And then the interviewer said, then you have had the freedom you wanted.

And Sagan said, yes, well, I was obviously not free when I was in love with someone, but one's not in love all the time, fortunately. Apart from that, yes, I've been free. Very realistic, and I'll tell you why.

The freedoms of love only come if you surrender all kinds of individual freedom. I remember, it was very shortly after I was married, like days or maybe the most weeks after I was married, I remember I was coming home from work, and I suddenly had an idea. I don't even remember what it was, but I took a detour.

I went someplace to buy something or something, and I got home about 25 minutes late. And my wife looked at me and said, where were you? Now, you have to remember, this was before cell phones, and as some of you probably suspect, it was before phones. But the whole point was, so I should have written her a letter, I guess.

Pony Express probably would have been a good idea. But the point was, I mean, all of my life, I had, you can make a little, I suddenly realized, oh my gosh, I'm married, and therefore, my right to make even small unilateral decisions is over forever. Because the more intimate a love relationship, the less independent you can be.

The only way to get the freedoms of love is to surrender freedom, all kinds of freedom, drastically. And this is, now we've come to the place where New Yorkers really start to freak out. Because first of all, we saw what? You've got to know the truth.

You've got to know the truth, and you have to surrender the truth, and have to surrender your freedoms to the truth to get the reach of your freedom. In every area, and a lot of you are saying, and here you're being, I understand, you're saying, look, I have done that in a couple of love relationships where I gave up my independence. I gave up my independence.

I started sacrificing, but the other person didn't, and I felt dehumanized and exploited. And I'm afraid of going back into those kinds of relationships, and I'm certainly afraid of what you're trying to get me to. I know what you're doing.

You're a minister. You're a preacher. It's a church.

You're trying to get me to say, you need to surrender to the truth of God. I'm afraid. I'm afraid of being exploited.

I'm afraid of being used. Point three. Jesus is more liberating than you thought.

There's a movie. In the movie, I, Robot, it's only a couple years old, right? The movie, I, Robot, not the book, because the movie has nothing to do with the book at all. But in the movie, the main character, I think pretty much, is Sonny, who is a robot.

And Sonny the robot has been created by his maker to head off a robot rebellion. And at the end of the movie, he's already done that. So he's fulfilled his design program.

But now he has nothing to do because he wasn't made to do anything past that. And he says to Detective Spooner, who's the other main character, he says, now that I have fulfilled my purpose, I don't know what to do. And Detective Spooner says, I guess you'll have to find your way like the rest of us, Sonny.

That's what it means to be free. And the movie's script writer has perfectly enshrined the modern understanding. What it's saying is this.

If there is a design program, if there is a set of divine directives from your maker that you have to comply with, you're just a robot. You're dehumanized. You're not free.

You're only free if there's nothing you were made for. If there's no purpose that you have to comply with, no design purpose that you've got to submit to, then you're free because then you can live any way you want. And of course, it's disorienting to say, oh, I'm not made for anything.

I have no purpose in life. But at least you can create your own purpose, then you're free. But the gospel writer John, gospel writer John, John chapter 1, verse 1, reads this.

In the beginning was the Word. Now that doesn't grab you probably. That's the English, what it says.

But in the Greek, and the original readers read it and they were amazed. It said in the beginning was the logos. That's what it says in Greek.

And John deliberately used an absolutely loaded Greek philosophical technical term when he said in the beginning was the logos. What is the logos? Well, the logos, you can see the word. The logos means it's related to our word logic or reason.

But it's not talking about reason in general. It's talking about the reason for life. And the Greek philosophers were asking this question.

What is our reason for life? What is our reason for existence? What were we made for? Look at the fish. It's so obvious that the fish is designed for the water. And when you put the fish in the water, it experiences freedom.

What were we made for so that if we give ourselves and surrender to it, we'll experience freedom? What is our logos? What is the absolute truth, the absolute reality that we were made for, that we put ourselves into that? That's the environment that we experience freedom. What is it? And they had debated for years, centuries actually. And some of the Greek philosophers had said, it's this.

This is the logos. This is the absolute truth that we were made for. And some said, no, this is the absolute truth.

This is the logos we were made for. By the time of Jesus in the New Testament, a lot of Greek philosophers had gone the way of Detective Spooner. A lot of them had come up and started to say, maybe there isn't any absolute truth that we're made for, and that's the best we can do.

We just have the freedom of knowing that we're not made for anything. There is no design purpose that we're made for. But along comes John, and in John chapter 1, first of all he says to the skeptics, he says, no.

A, there is a logos. There is an absolute truth. In the beginning was the absolute truth.

But he then says to the traditionalists, it's not an abstract absolute truth. It's not a set of divine directives that comes down from God and that I have to comply with or else be destroyed. He says, there is an absolute truth, but it's not an abstract absolute truth.

He says, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and we beheld His glory. And John says, there's an absolute truth, but it's not an abstraction. It's a person.

The absolute truth has become a person, a personal absolute, an absolute person, not an absolute principle, an absolute person. And here's what you were made for, Him, to love Him, to know Him, to serve Him, to enjoy Him. This is the bombshell in the history of philosophy when John said, we're not relativists.

There is an absolute truth, but the absolute truth has become a person to know, a person to hug, a person to love. And you say, well, what's the big difference between there being an absolute truth that's an abstraction versus a person? All the difference in the world, friends, because if the absolute truth is an abstraction, it is dehumanizing, but if it's a person, it's liberating. Let me show you what I mean.

Go back to the love thing. We said, and we already hinted at this, that if you enter into a love relationship, you have to surrender your independence. But two people have to do it together.

You both have to do it. Each of you has to surrender. And if each one of you says to the other, I will give up my independence for you, I will adjust to you, I will sacrifice my needs for you, and the other one does it too, it's heaven.

But if one of you does the surrender and the other one does not, you hold on to your own life, then you're exploited, then you're dehumanized, and it's almost worse than having, it's certainly worse than having no relationship at all. And that's the reason why for Nietzsche and Foucault and maybe Detective Spooner, all relationships with God have to be dehumanizing because they're one way, right? There's God up in heaven, and He says, here's the Ten Commandments, here's this, here's that, thou shalt not, thou must, thou shalt not. And if you have a relationship with a God like that, it's only one way.

You do all the shifting. You give up your independence, now you have to live according to His rules. You give up, you do the adjustment, you do all the sacrificing, it's one way, so it's exploitative and it's dehumanizing.

And Nietzsche would say, relationship with God is dehumanizing by definition, but not with this God. Not with this God. Look, there's a lot of gods put out there by these various religions and philosophies, but the only one, Christianity, there's only one Christianity that says, God, the absolute truth, became a person and went to the cross.

And on that cross, Jesus Christ, God, said, I will lose my independence for you. I will adjust to you. I will sacrifice for you.

And guess what? He was exploited. See, Jesus comes to you and says, I already did the surrender part to the human race, and I was killed for it. My arms are open to you.

I've already done the surrender. Now I'm just asking you to surrender to me. How could you possibly ask anything more from a God than that? How can I trust God? Here's a God who's lost His freedom for you.

Philippians 2 says, Jesus Christ did not hold on to His Godhood, but rather His equality with God, but He emptied Himself and became a slave and was obedient even under the death of a cross. Here is a God who was the ultimate free being, and He was bound, and He was nailed, and He lost His freedom, and He opened Himself, and He adjusted, and He surrendered His freedom. God surrendered His freedom so that you could know you can trust Him.

And this is liberation. Think. If God just gives us an abstract truth, a set of rules, and says, Now obey it, and you will go to heaven.

I'm obeying it. Why? Out of fear. I'm driven by fear.

I'm a slave to fear. I better do this. I better do that, or else God's not going to... He's going to get me.

He's going to punish me. He'll send me to hell. He won't answer my prayers.

It's all out of fear. See? I'm a slave. But if, instead of God giving me an abstract truth that I have to obey in order to save myself, I have a personal truth that comes down and lives the life I should have lived, and dies the death I should have died on the cross, and saves me by sheer grace, that's liberating.

And only if the absolute truth is a person who's done that am I liberated. That's the reason why here at the very end, Paul can look at Peter and go after him about his racism. Do you see that interesting case study? At the very end of the passage, we see that Peter, though in principle, he agreed that the Gentiles are acceptable in Christ.

He agrees in principle. But first of all, did you notice there, out of fear of the circumcision party, a certain group of people, and out of probably just the habit of being told all of his life that Gentiles are unclean, unclean, unclean, he stopped eating with the Gentiles. Which, of course, in that culture was major social rejection.

So he was falling back into racist habits. But you don't see Paul going to him and saying, Peter, you're breaking rule number 18 in the Bible against racism. He could have, because there's lots in the Bible against racism, but he doesn't go that way because he doesn't treat truth that way.

What does he say? Verse 14. I love verse 14. It's changed my life, by the way.

In verse 14, Paul says, Peter, you're not walking in line with the truth of the gospel. You're not thinking out the implications of the gospel. You're saved by grace.

You're not saved by your pedigree. You're a sinner saved by grace. How can you feel superior to anybody else? But here's what he's really saying is, Peter, you're a slave.

You're afraid of what those people think, the circumcision group. You're afraid of what this person thinks. You're anxious.

Peter, think. In Jesus Christ, you're an absolute beauty in the eyes of God, the only person whose eyes matter. Think.

You're absolutely loved. You're absolutely valued by the creator of the universe. You should be, if you really understood the gospel, if you really understood the gospel, you shouldn't be afraid of anything.

You wouldn't be a slave to anything. You're not a slave to anxiety, a slave to being afraid of criticism. You wouldn't be a slave to anything.

You should be absolutely free, Peter. If you're a racist, it's because you're not thinking out the freedom and experiencing the freedom that you've got in the gospel. Think, Peter, until there's enough joy in your heart.

Think, Peter, until you have enough fullness as to what Jesus has done for you. Think, Peter, until the racism is squeezed out by the joy and then you'll be free. If you understand the truth of the gospel, it frees you from everything.

How about you? Has it freed you? Has it freed you? Do you know, in 2 Corinthians 5, 21, I think it's 1 Corinthians 5, someplace, where Paul says, the love of Christ constrains us, constrains us. The only thing that constrains you in a way that doesn't feel oppressive, the only thing that moves you to do the things you should be doing, and yet it feels like, it feels like heaven, is the love of Christ. The love of Christ, what He's done, the loss of freedom so we could have freedom, constrains us.

And John Newton puts it in his hymn, Our pleasure and our duty, though opposite before, since we have seen His beauty, are joined apart no more. To see the law by Christ fulfilled, and hear His pardoning voice, transforms a slave into a child, and duty into choice. Let's pray.

Father, it is true that claiming to have the truth can be a terrific way to destroy freedom, and yet, there is a truth that we've got to have to be free. It's the truth of the gospel. It's the truth of Jesus Christ, the ultimate free being, losing His freedom for us, surrendering to us, adjusting for us.

And if we take that into the center of our being, that makes us so free from fear. We're not afraid of death. We're not afraid of people's disapproval.

We're not afraid of anything. We want to live that kind of life. And we ask, therefore, that You would show us how to bring into the center of our hearts Your gospel truth so that we would be set free.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. You've been listening to the From the Pulpit in Classic Sermons series.

This week you heard Tim Keller with his message, Absolutism. Don't we have to find the truth for ourselves? Tune in next week to hear Chuck Smith talk about Beware of Ambition on the From the Pulpit in Classic Sermons.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/27/SID27396.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/from-the-pulpit-&-classic-sermons/absolutism-dont-we-all-have-to-find-the-truth-f-or-ourselves-tim-keller/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net