

Series: THE FREEDOM CONSPIRACY

SUNDAY APRIL 7, 2019
DABBLING IN PRISON JEWELRY
Matthew 4, Exodus 16
SPEAKER: KEN DAVIS

1. How many of you have ever taken a wrong turn and ended up where you **never** thought you'd be? When I was heading off to university outside of NYC for the first time—I was blindly following my brother's car—and we ended up 80 miles off-course! And then we had to retrace our steps! I read a great story about that recently.

"As a bagpiper, I play many gigs. Recently I was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the Nova Scotia back country.

As I was not familiar with the backwoods, I got lost and, being a typical man, I didn't stop for directions. I finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral guy had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch.

I felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. I went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. I didn't know what else to do, so I started to play. The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. I played out my heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. I played like I've never played before for this homeless man. And as I played "Amazing Grace", the workers began to weep. They wept, I wept, we all wept together.

When I finished, I packed up my bagpipes and started for my car. Though my head was hung low, my heart was full. As I opened the door to my car, I heard one of the workers say, "I never seen anything like that before, and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years." Apparently, I'm still lost...it's a man thing."

- a. I've gotten lost **plenty** of times—but, honestly? I've never done a funeral for a septic tank! I **have**, however, done some really dumb things. Here's what I know; I'm at my worst—I'm most **likely** to do dumb things—when I'm **dabbling**. BTW, does anyone know where the word **dabbling** comes from? **It comes from duck-dom!**

Dabbling is what ducks do when they're upside down feeding off the bottom of a lake or pond. When we **dabble** we poke play around with things—like **dabbling in politics**--without intending to pursue is seriously. We also **dabble** when we let down our guard—and mess with things we shouldn't. It's what a fish does with bait; it's what mice and rats do with traps. Sometimes they get away with it; sometimes they don't.

- b. The **other** part of the title is **prison jewelry**. How many of you know what **prison jewelry** is?

Try handcuffs and leg irons, prison bars. Let me just get specific, okay?

Everyone wants to be free—but sometimes we **play games, mess around with, nibble around the edges of stuff** that has a hook in it; stuff that lures us in—and traps us—and **hurts** us.

-It's a curiosity about things that **seem** innocent and harmless enough—but **aren't**. And we live in a **culture** full of people who've gotten handcuffed and chained to something that **shames** them; something they **hate!** Why? Cause they thought, "**Not me! That won't happen to me!**"

-So...here's the question: what is it that is holding you back? What is it that has its hooks in you? What is God likely **calling** you to leave behind? What would you **love** to be free from at the cross this Easter?

2. How many of you are at all familiar with the concept of **Lent**? Lent is a season of reflection and **preparation** before the celebration of Easter. By observing the 40 days of Lent—usually through some form of self-denial, Christians replicate Jesus fasting in the wilderness for 40 days and nights. My Aunt Edna used to observe Lent through **self-denial**. She would give up eating liver—which she **hated!**

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry. (Matthew 4:1-2 NLT)

-What I'd like to do, this morning, is talk about this passage—and how it's related to God's **Freedom Conspiracy**. I think you'll see some fascinating—and **challenging** connections.

- a. Now, think about Jesus and what was going on here for a minute. How do you think Jesus felt after not eating for forty days? What do you think he **thought** about increasingly during that time? **FOOD!**

A major part of the movie, **Unbroken**, is about the 47 days Louis Zamperini and two companions spent in a life raft after their B-17 bomber went down in the Pacific. Know what they spend most of their time talking about? **Food!**

Louis said he would describe in detail his Mom's gnocci—how she made it, what it tasted like—and all they had to eat was raw fish and sea gulls! Fasting—causes you to **think about food!**

-Now, has anyone here ever wondered about **why** Jesus fasted for **40 days**? It's not just random, you know. To the Jewish mind—the people who knew Jesus and wrote the record—you don't just drop the number 40 here and there. This is a **larger** story—and reflects back to the 40 years the Israelites spent in the wilderness—and what even led to **that**.

- b. The story actually starts in Genesis 1—which opens with this incredible poem about the beginning of everything. That God created it all—and then started the process of life. And it ends with this amazing crescendo.

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." (Genesis 1:27-28 NLT)

God's **blessing** on them was His love, His favor, His anointing. At this moment

- they live in what the Bible calls **shalom**. All is right with the world - and there is wholeness and completeness. They are in harmony with the One who made them - and they have a **calling** - to supervise His creation. The **path** you see again and again - is that people are **blessed by God and given a holy path and calling**.

- c. But by chapter 3 in the text, they are faced with a choice. They can stay **within** this blessing—this path they’ve been called to—**or** they can do their own thing. Satan enters their space with his own conspiracy of **un-freedom**. The first thing he does is cast doubt on whether or not God is good—and whether or not they’re free. He flat out calls God a liar. And Eve fell for it:

She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. (Genesis 3:5-7 NLT)

-What I want you to do is **notice the pattern** with Adam and Eve. There’s a blessing and a calling. Notice that it’s a temptation to **give in to a craving centered around food**. And when they give in, the whole creation project goes south—and human kind gets dragged off course.

3. The narrative of the **Freedom Conspiracy**—the story of a God who **refuses** to give up on humanity picks up again in Exodus. After 400 years of slavery, God breaks his people out of jail. And He takes them **through** the sea on dry ground—and uses that same sea to drown the enemy. And later on, He pronounces this blessing over them:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:4-6 NIV)

- a. Now, do you understand what’s going on here? Their freedom—their **nation** isn’t just about them having a good life. They have been called as descendants of Abraham to **bless the nations** as an example of the goodness of God—and what He does when He is allowed to lead a people.
- b. But it’s in the wilderness—ironically, the **Wilderness of Sin**—where they get pulled off course. Guess how? By their craving for food. When they got to the other side of the sea—they’re doing the tambourine dance with Miriam. Listen to what happens **one month later**:

There, too, the whole community of Israel complained about Moses and Aaron. “If only the Lord had killed us back in Egypt,” they moaned. “There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death.” (Exodus 16:2-3 NLT)

-The whole nation had been blessed, washed and set free for a **purpose** of revealing **who God is** to the world. And it **all** devolved into a campaign of grumbling, whining and complaining about...**FOOD!**

- c. You see the pattern, right? Adam and Eve have everything they need **and** - a blessing and a mission. But they get pulled off track by their appetites. In the wilderness, the Israelites have a blessing and a mission - and they get pulled off track by...**FOOD!** To the point where they're quite willing to trade their **freedom** to have their **cravings** satisfied. These cravings ultimately led to them spending **40 years wandering in the wilderness!** Later on, Moses is reflecting on this. He says:

Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands.

Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2-3 NLT)

-You understand, right? Like them, we've been called to a high and noble life—but our **steering** rod is bent toward the ditch—toward gambling with our freedom to satisfy our appetites, our lusts and our cravings. We **dabble**—and this pulls us off course. And sometimes we **never** get back on course!

-Moses is telling these people that life is **not** just about getting our needs met—and satisfying our urges. That's what animals do. We have been made in the image of God; there is this **huge** dimension in life to live out our blessing, our calling. **Humans do not live by bread alone...!**

4. And that brings us back to Jesus experience in the wilderness. Remember, Jesus is **very hungry**—he hasn't eaten for 40 days—and it's likely all he was thinking about. And **that's** where the devil goes after him. "You don't **have** to be hungry! This is a **solvable!** You can **do** something about this!"

During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:3-4 NLT)

-How many of you have ever walked into **Panera Bread** when you're hungry? Did you order a **salad?** **Jesus faced the temptation involving food**—this human bent toward being lured into, distracted by our appetites and cravings. The goal is **always** that we will **fail to be what God has called us to be!** And his **answer** to that is, "They did—I **won't**—because man doesn't live by bread alone—but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. There are things in life that **sustain us beyond our next meal!** This is especially powerful when you think about what the Father has just said to Jesus.

- a. You find that in the previous chapter. Jesus has come down to the water where John is baptizing—and asks to be baptized. John calls him the **Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!** Jesus who didn't need to be washed from his sin—submitted to baptism.

After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” (Matthew 3:16-17 NLT)

-Do you see the significance of the timing in all of this? Before the Israelites were tempted by food, they **came through the water**—and were blessed. They gave into their cravings and failed—Jesus is succeeding. He passes through the water—and is blessed by the Father. **This is my SON!**

- b. And **that’s** where the tempter picks up: **Hey, if you’re the Son of God, why not turn these rocks to bread and feed yourself?** You get it, right? This temptation isn’t really about food, it’s about **trust**.

-Here’s the deal; central to this **Freedom Conspiracy** is the fact that God has spoken over **all** of us. God has called us to a mission—a life **beyond ourselves**. We are **co-creators** and **co-blessers**. We are loved beyond anything we can imagine—and are worth more than we’d every dream. The question—**do you trust God**. His invitation to me...and to you...is to live as the person that God insists that you are!

5. How many of you are **craving-less**. Like, you’ve **never** had a craving in your life—for great food, sex, a nice car, a cup of your favorite Starbucks, some hot just-out-of-the-oven bread—or chocolate? I didn’t think so. We’re **all** different—but **everyone** has cravings. Adam and Eve were obviously created with **cravings**. Look at what the record says about **why** Eve ate the fruit.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. (Genesis 3:6 NIV)

-I think this narrative shrinks the time frame. See, I know how cravings work. I don’t think Eve had like one conversation about the fruit, thought about it for a minute or two—and then jumped. Most people don’t do that. I think she **dabbled!**

- a. You know my thing with boats, right? So, when we first moved here in 1992 our only boat was the 12’ fiberglass boat I’d stolen as a teen from a boat dump. (I made that right—it wasn’t cursed). The first family experience wasn’t too bad. The second was scary for two reasons. First, the wake from another boat almost swamped us; second—it soaked Lori!

-So, I convinced myself we **needed** another boat, despite really tight finances. It’s **amazing!** I **found a boat**—14’ aluminum—and a **great** motor—a 25 hp Evinrude. So, every chance I had, I stopped to visit it—and the engine. I’ll bet I stopped there 10 times—before I finally took the bait and bought it.

-It was **great...**at first. The three problems were, 1) I wasn’t honest with myself; 2) I wasn’t honest with Lori; 3) I lost my shirt when I needed to sell it 3 years later.

- b. Here's what I think. I think Eve walked by the tree thinking, "The snake can't be right! Why would I believe a snake?" Then she didn't just happen to walk by the tree—she intentionally took detours that passed by the tree—and paused—just a second.

-At first she just thought, "For an off-limits fruit—it sure is **beautiful**"—and noticed every detail. She saw the texture, the color, the leaves. Eve thought, "That sure would look great in the fruit bowl in the dining room—right next to the mangoes."

-One day, the breeze was blowing just right—and she caught the **scent** of the tree—and thought, "Well it sure doesn't **smell** toxic!" She felt something wet on her neck and realized she'd been **drooling**! (Actually? No—I just thought it added a nice touch to the story)

-**Then** she thought, "So--I **wonder** what the actual difference **is** between good and evil? And why wouldn't God want us to have the whole picture? And she **dabbled** with that in her mind—along with the flat-out lie she'd heard, "God doesn't want you to have the fruit because He's afraid if you're like **Him**—you won't **need** Him anymore!"

-Does this sound familiar to **anyone**? Over time, the fruit was **all** she could think about. And the battle was on. And instead of talking to her lover, co-worker and partner—and to the One who made her about this inner battle, she suddenly caved one day. Actually? She wasn't even **surprised** about how easy it was to give in—it seemed, well, **natural**!

- c. Let's get back to **dabbling**. Remember the imagery at the front end? Dabbling comes from...**the world of ducks, right?**

When ducks are **dabbling** they've **got their heads in the mud, feeding off the bottom (aka "bottom-feeders") and their butts in the air—exposed**. There's one thing about bottom feeding, upside down, head in the mud—you **can't see anything except the slime and bugs you're slurping up!**

6. What Eve experienced pretty much summarizes the realm of appetites doesn't it?

***Physical pleasure: It tastes good or feels good**

***It's pleasing to the eye: "I gotta get *me* one of those!"**

***Desirable for gaining wisdom: It'll stoke my ego--others will be impressed with me.**

-These aren't bad things. Not at all. Cravings and desires are **good** things. But if we let them drive our lives, they pull us **right into the ditch—or oncoming traffic!** John the apostle warns us about **loving** them—that is, letting them make our decisions and drive our lives.

Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you. For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world. And this world is fading away, along with everything that people crave. But anyone who does what pleases God will live forever. (1 John 2:15-17 NLT)

- a. Has anyone noticed that just about every ad is baited with something that appeals to your pleasure center—the craving for food, sex, money, power, pride and self-importance? Why? Well, it's the same reason we bait mousetraps with peanut butter—**it works!** Every company that makes fishing lures makes them to look like something that will appeal to a fish's—**appetite!**

-I just finished a book called **Cold Case Christianity**—written by J. Warner Wallace. Wallace is a cold case detective from California—and actually solved a murder case for someone in our church.

He said that the motive for **every** crime he's ever investigated is the desire for money, sex or power. Same three things—different words.

- b. Now, you understand what God is saying to us through all these stories and images and people, right? He's created us with all the sensory equipment to **thoroughly enjoy life**. Sin is twisting how we **use** the sensory equipment.

-Fire, for example, is an amazing tool; it heats, it melts, it's used to create things—and purify things. **Fort McMurray in 2016** was about **fire** that got outside of the boundaries. We can't **live** without water!

The tragedy of New Orleans and hurricane Katrina is about what happens when water gets **outside** of it's boundaries. So does going to bed and leaving a faucet running!

- c. See, we **dabble** in things that have the power to handcuff us to the wall and lock us in prison. You **know** that, right? And that's been true since the beginning of time—long before there was crack or meth or weed. See, thousands of years ago, **people also experienced physical and emotional and social pain**. And, like us, the tendency was always to escape, or numb themselves or indulge.

-Please understand, I'm **not** talking about enjoying good food or great music—or living life to the fullest. This is about some of the things we do so we **just don't have to deal with the present**. It's avoiding reality.

It's what we take or do to numb ourselves or take the edge off of our pain and anxiety. It's what we know is excessive or addictive—and destructive.

- d. You get it, right? It's like repeatedly sticking your finger in a rat trap—at some point you're going to get caught. The first instinct we give into is weariness. Or curiosity. Or we get a jolt and think, "Oooo! I **liked that!**"

-And then we start lying to ourselves. We tell ourselves things like:

"This is just for a season—then I'll stop

"I can quit this any time I want to

"No one will ever know about it—I'm too smart for that.

"This is normal. I'll bet everyone does it.

“I **need** this little thing on the side; why, if I didn’t have it—who **knows** what would happen!”

“See, I have **needs**...and those needs aren’t being met. If God **cared**—He’s meet them!”

- e. And it doesn’t have to be alcohol or sex or drugs or gambling. It can be something that’s just taking up too much of our time. It’s the hobby that is sucking the time out of our lives. Sometimes it’s a social media thing. I mean we’re checking our iPhones or Macs or iPads or something else with pixels from the moment we wake up until we go to bed. Think of it; life passes you by while you’re super-glued to a 2X6 screen!
 - f. Sometimes this stuff gets into how we use our mouths. I mean, speech is an incredible gift—but it’s possible to use our words in destructive ways—malicious ways. To judge, gossip and slander others—to assume the **worst** about others, then look for it and criticize them. The hook in this is our pride, our need to be right, our need for revenge—and it’s just as addictive as crack cocaine!
7. When **any** of this stuff gets imbedded into our lives—like a barbed hook, it’s possible to spend time and money you’ll regret—and waste your health...for **what?** To satisfy a craving, a lust—and sidetrack your life—hurt people you love. Here’s what you know. **You’re better than that!** We’ve been called to use our time, our energy, our money - our **lives** in redeeming ways.

-It’s possible that in this season of life, the Spirit of God is whispering to you—**You need to leave it behind! This is the anchor holding you back! Just ask for help—and I’ll show you the way out!** In his letter to the Corinthian church—a **very** difficult group of people, Paul warns them about **learning from the past**:

I don’t want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. All of them ate the same spiritual food... Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did... (1 Corinthians 10:1-3, 5-6)

-**That** was the surgery--this word of hope is the bandage:

The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure. (1 Corinthians 10:13 NLT)

- a. See, your identity in Christ is **way** different than just being a victim of your cravings. That’s who you **really are!** And I want to ask—are you living in any way—a destructive pattern that **contradicts who God made you to be?** Have you become a griping, complaining murmuring follower of Jesus? See, that’s a sinful, addictive pattern as well. That just makes you a **victim of the present circumstances**—and **you’re better than that! You’re called to more than that!**

-See, my life isn't about me and my comfort level and my pride and my little cluster of cravings, needs and desires; my purpose in life is **greater** than that. I've been blessed by God, I've been washed by Jesus, and God has **spoken** over me something way, way, WAY better than that. And He's done the same for you!

-The old way of talking about this—which is what I grew up in—was, “You shouldn't do this...you shouldn't do that—you need to do this—you need to **think** like this.” That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about **WHAT LIFE COULD BE** if you and I were cut loose from just chasing our cravings!

- b. The **amazing** news about Easter is that **Jesus succeeds where everyone else has failed**. When Jesus carried the cross up to Golgotha, he took the history of humanity on **His** back and said, “**I'll do it!**”

-Here's what I know. This life is **so far** beyond what I as a frail, weak, and sometimes **really dumb** human can do! **I can't do it!** But if I surrender to a power **that is not mine**—well, **then** I claim God's promise to Paul—and to us: **My strength is made perfect in weakness!**

8. Jesus once asked a very odd question—and I want to pass it on. This guy had been crippled for 38 years. Jesus found him waiting beside this pool day after day after day after day—38 **years**. 456 months. 13,870 days. Over 333,000 hours. And Jesus' question is: **Do you WANT to get well?** Strange question, isn't it? And yet very true.

-After the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years—imagine—manna, dryness, living in tents—hearing your neighbors fight--for **40 years**—they came back to the same river, the Jordan, that—out of **fear** they had refused to cross before.

-And the unasked question was, “Do you want to go into a new scary land? It will mean battles. It'll mean risking. It'll mean doing things you've never done before. Do you want to cross the river—or **wander aimlessly and get buried in the desert?**”

-And that's what I want to ask you. Do you **WANT to get well? Yes or no?** Do you want to wander—or move on? What's holding you back? What are you dabbling with that has the potential to chain you in a prison?

-In a week and a half, Good Friday, we're going to give you an opportunity to bring that—or something symbolic of it—to the cross where Jesus gave his **life—for you to be free!** And on Easter Sunday—**it will be gone**. Do you **want** to be well—and live out the words God has spoken over your life?