

Set Free

John 8:31-38

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³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.” – John 8:31-38, ESV

What is Freedom?

On the façade of Old Cabell Hall at the University of Virginia is inscribed, in Greek, part of the words of John 8:32, “The Truth Will Set You Free.” Old Cabell Hall was built in 1898, but the inscription reflects Thomas Jefferson’s love for the Greek language and for the words of Jesus. Sadly, it also represents a very common misunderstanding of this verse, one of the most famous sayings of Jesus and one that is very often yanked out of its context and made to say something that Jesus would never have said.

The University of Virginia inscribed these words on Old Cabell Hall to promote the ideal of academia, that education can free you from the bondage of ignorance. I love education, and the Bible is definitely not an anti-education book, but the idea that our greatest bondage is ignorance and that our greatest need is for a well-rounded liberal arts education is not something Jesus ever taught.

UVa is not alone in wanting to co-opt Jesus in support of their mission. Many people have quoted “The truth will set you free” and their understanding of this phrase is determined by their understanding of what true freedom is, which in turn is determined by what they think is the nature of our bondage.

So, what is freedom? Does freedom mean having the government get off your back and leave you alone? If so, then “the truth will set you free” becomes a right-wing, libertarian slogan. Does freedom mean having independence from corporate America and the 1% at the top of the economic ladder who seem to run everything? In that case, “the truth will set you free” can become a left-wing Occupy Wall Street, anti-corporation slogan. Maybe if you’re a kid or a

teenager, you might think of freedom as being able to do what you want instead of what your parents tell you.

But is ignorance, government overreach, corporate power or parental control the true source of our greatest bondage? Can freedom be defined educationally, politically or economically? Let's see what Jesus is saying and what He really means together . . .

A. Good News: *If you abide in My word, 31-32*

In verse 31, Jesus is responding to those who have believed in Him. At the end of last week's passage, we read in verse 30, "*As he was saying these things, many believed in him.*" Jesus now engages these who have made some outward sign of faith with a challenging and yet gracious invitation to true liberation: "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"

First of all, Jesus gives these professing believers a condition: "If you abide in my word . . ." He's saying that true freedom only comes to those who remain in His word, who continue in the truth of the promises He has made and the revelation He has given of who He is. What is Jesus' word that they must abide in? Well, in the broader context of John's Gospel, Jesus Himself is the word. In the closer context of the teaching Jesus has done in this section, His word includes His self-identification: "*I am the light of the world*" and "*Unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins*" along with His precious promises, "*If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink*" and "*whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*"

Those who have heard the words of Jesus and have responded in faith must continue to believe what Jesus has said about Himself and the promises He has made based on who He is. Because He Himself is the source of living water, He can promise rivers of living water will flow from those who come to Him. Because He is the light of the world, He can promise the light of life to all who follow Him.

Here, in verses 31-32, Jesus says that those who abide in His word will show that they are truly His disciples. Many people have professed to be disciples of Jesus. Judas Iscariot was known as a disciple of Jesus for years. It is those who remain in the word of Jesus, who hold fast to His person and His promises, who are His disciples in truth, in reality.

Jesus explained this in the parable of the Sower, or the Four Soils, recorded in all three synoptic Gospels- in Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8. In this parable, which is in many ways the key parable for understanding all of Jesus' parables, the seed of the word falls of four different kinds of soil: the path, where it is eaten up by birds before it can take root at all; the rocky ground, where it has only shallow soil and so withers in the heat of the day; the thorny ground, where it is choked by the thorny vines; and, finally, on the good soil, where it puts down deep roots and brings forth fruit. What is clear and often missed is the fact that the soils are already in the condition they're in when they receive the seed of word. The Holy Spirit is the One who

must do the preparatory, cultivating work in the heart to prepare the soil for the word, that it might bear fruit.

In our passage, the Pharisees and religious leaders are mostly the path, and their hearts are hard to Jesus' words. The rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and turns away sad because He had much wealth is like the thorny soil. Jesus speaks the way He does to this crowd because He's concerned that many of them, perhaps even most of them, are like the rocky soil, and they will not endure under the heat of persecution.

So, to be clear: It's not that we **become** Jesus' true disciples by remaining in His word, but that we **show ourselves** to be true disciples, to have been true disciples from the beginning, by abiding in His word. It's not that Judas Iscariot was, at one point, a true disciple of Jesus and then fell away from true and saving faith; it's that he never was a true disciple, but only had a false and empty faith.

Where do you stand with Jesus this morning? Are you a true disciple? Are you abiding in His word – that is, are you trusting in His promises, believing the Gospel, persevering in faith in who He is and what He provides us in Himself?

Those who abide in Jesus words, those who are truly His disciples, will know the truth and the truth will set them free. How so? Will this happen because, if you stick around Jesus long enough, He finally shows you the tricks and techniques for achieving real freedom? No. Jesus will make clear later in this passage and repeatedly throughout the rest of this wonderful Gospel that He is the truth and that He is the One who sets us free. He says in John 14:6, "*I am the way, the truth and the life,*" but He also says right here in verse 36, "*So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*"

B. Bad News: Everyone who sins, 33-34

At the mention of being set free, this group of professing believers balks: They are good Jews, children of Abraham, and they have never been enslaved to anyone. Obviously, this was not true on a physical, political level: Abraham's children had been made slaves in Egypt and were made slaves again in the Babylonian exile, almost 1,000 years later. Here in time of this passage, the Jewish people were in bondage to the Romans, who occupied their land, exacted heavy taxes from them and restricted their freedoms.

But when the Jewish people protested that they had never been anyone's slave, they probably weren't thinking about politics. They were thinking of the well-known and widely-accepted truth that if someone was a true child of Abraham, a disciple of God, a student of Torah, he was truly and inwardly free. He could never be enslaved to anyone.

In a political sense, the Jewish people were hoping and longing for Messiah to bring them freedom. But they knew Jesus meant something different, something deeper, and that's why

they balked. To their protestations, Jesus responded with some sobering words: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*”

Jesus’ use of “truly, truly” – that is, “Amen, amen,” to introduce this teaching indicates that what He says is absolutely true and reliable, and thus something that we need to hear, understand, and believe. Everyone who practices sin – literally, everyone who does or makes sin in a present ongoing action – is a slave to sin.

Our culture celebrates its sin as a true badge of freedom. We want to be able to not only do whatever we please but also to be able to be whatever we say we are. But John Calvin said it well hundreds of years ago: “The greater the mass of vices anyone is buried under, the more fiercely and bombastically does he extol free will.”

Sin is not a toy we play with or a pet we keep. It is not freedom. It is a harsh master that enslaves us. We think of sin as something we choose to do, which we can also choose to stop doing. No lie is more dangerous or farther from the truth. Sin is enslaving, and only Jesus can set us free.

C. Good News: *If the Son sets you free, 35-36*

The good news is that Jesus can and does set us free from sin. Jesus said, “*The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*” The position of a slave within the household is an insecure one: dereliction of duty or the sale of the estate can put the life and status of the slave in serious jeopardy.

The Son of a family is much more secure. The Son has the security of belonging to the master of the estate as family, as the heir. His place is secure, and in the case of Jesus, He remains the Son and heir forever and ever.

As Jesus does throughout John’s Gospel, he connects who He is with how He benefits those who trust in Him. As the Son who remains forever, He is able to set free the slaves and make them sons, just like He is. As Romans 8:14-17 says:

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (ESV)

So, how does Jesus set us free from the slavery of sin? Well, He does so in three distinct stages. First of all, in our justification, He sets us free from the guilt and condemnation of sin. He does this immediately when we come to true faith in Him: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Secondly, in our life-long sanctification, He sets us free from the enslaving, dominating power of sin. By the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in us, we are free to walk in obedience, in newness of life. We are free to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Finally, in our coming glorification, He sets us free from the very presence of sin and the desire for sin. Sin and its desire will be removed completely, permanently and perfectly when I John 3:2 is true: *“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”*

The basis for all three stages of our freeing from sin is the death of Jesus in our place on the cross, and the One who sets us free at each stage along the way is Jesus Himself, our Redeemer and our King. Those who have come to know Him truly are those who remain in Him. They have been released from the penalty of sin, they are being freed from the power of sin, and they will be freed from the presence and passion of sin forever!

Though we experience this as an ongoing reality, a process still in progress, it is really a finished work, a fixed reality in the eternal plan of God:

- *By one sacrifice, He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. - Heb. 10:14*
- *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. – Romans 8:29-30, ESV*

D. Bad News: My word finds no place in you, 37-38

Sadly, this is not a fixed reality for everyone, not even for all professing believers. Many call Jesus “Lord, Lord” to whom He will say, in the end, *“depart from me, for I never knew you.”* (Matthew 7:23) For these people, Jesus has these words in today’s passage: *“I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”*

They are making a pretense of salvation based on a hereditary claim. Jesus acknowledges their hereditary claim but then points out the incredible inconsistency of claiming to be a child of Abraham while at the same time seeking to kill an innocent man who is speaking the words of God. In other words, who you really are is shown much more in your desires and actions than in your DNA.

George Hutcheson says in his commentary: “The true difference between spiritual slaves and those who are made free cannot be drawn from the enjoyment of external privileges of the church, which the one may partake of as well as the other.” These Jewish people were worshiping in the Temple. Many had memorized and could recite and sing large portions of

Scripture. They had the external privileges, but not the internal reality of those privileges written upon their hearts.

Does His Word Abide in You?

The question we thus need to ask ourselves is a deep and penetrating one: Does His word have any place in us? We have heard His word with our ears, but have we received it into our hearts?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism has two very helpful questions and answers on this topic, #89 & 90 –

Q. 89. How is the word made effectual to salvation?

A. The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching, of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

Q. 90. How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?

A. That the word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

So, does His word have any place in us? Do we receive it with faith and love? Do we lay it up in our hearts? Do we practice it in our lives?

Jesus has some very sobering words for those who have no room in their hearts for the word. They are not children of God, though they may be external children of Abraham. He will make it abundantly clear later in this chapter whose children they truly are, but He is hinting very strongly at the truth already, at the end of verse 38: *“I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”*

Are we prepared to hear this truth from Jesus applied to us, if indeed we find that His word has no place in us?

I pray that each of us would cry out to God in faith and would plead with Him, that he might prepare the soil of our hearts for the seed of His word, that His word would abide deeply in our hearts, that we would abide in His word, so proving to be true disciples, who know the truth found in Jesus and who know the true freedom only Jesus can give!