

January 25, 2015

Sunday Morning Service

Series: John

Community Baptist Church

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*To Ponder . . .*

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from John 8:31-38.

1. How does a person abide in Christ's word?
2. How does the truth set us free, and free from what?
3. Why did the Jews argue that they had never been enslaved?
4. How often does a person need to commit a sin before being enslaved?
5. How do people you know respond to you if they do not know God?

### **FREE TO BELIEVE JESUS**

**John 8:31-38**

This past Monday was a national holiday. Children did not go to school, many government workers did not go to work, some folks got together to celebrate, and speeches and commemorations were heard in many public venues. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. day. It is a national holiday on which the nation is supposed to pause for a moment and remember the man who was made famous for preaching about freedom.

In probably his most famous speech, delivered on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., Mr. King ended with these now famous words:

and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*

There have been many different races, ethnic groups, and, members of religious sects or religion in general who have cried out for freedom from bondage, repression or persecution throughout the history of humanity. One of the most heinous expressions of the sin nature is the practice of one people group to enslave another people group against their will.

But for all the talk, speeches, demonstrations, papers, lawsuits and tears for freedom, how many people ever truly achieve it? Part of the dilemma is that often the people who most desperately need to be given freedom are the very people who think they are already free. Try to transport yourself back in time about 160 years ago to a plantation maybe two hundred miles from here. Finding yourself in a cotton field, suddenly, to your horror, you see a wicked foreman of slaves whip a young man for not picking enough cotton. Now imagine you run over to the beaten slave and with all your compassion flowing you say, "Oh my poor fellow human! Don't you wish to be free?" Now imagine he looks up at you with stunned confusion and says, "What do you mean? I'm already free. I'm cool man!"

You would be shocked and rightly so. In a very similar manner, Jesus came to His own people, the Jews, who were not only under the repressive rule of the Gentile Romans, but even in bondage to rules established by their religious leaders that their God never intended for them to keep. Jesus presented to those people the opportunity to be free. They responded with as much confusion as our mythical but beaten slave of a century and half ago. They said, "What are you talking about man? We're Jews! We are always free. We have never been in bondage!"

To such confused and proud people Jesus still explains through His teaching that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. It really doesn't

matter what your lineage is, or who your parents are, or even if you were born in Barge Hospital as one of the world's most unusual babies. If you are living in sin, you need freedom more than you can imagine. And it ought to be clear to you that you are living in sin because you are doing the work of your "father."

It is not difficult to imagine that Jesus' very direct, very pointed, very inflaming accusation did not sit well with those religious folks. Nor does our suggestion that an individual is enslaved to sin because he lives like the devil sit well with our friends and relatives. So how do you soft pedal such a drastic need? If Martin Luther King, Jr. would have gathered a handful of close friends around himself in a coffee shop that August day many years ago and quietly said to them, "You know, you guys really ought to think about pursuing freedom," there would have been no national holiday last Monday.

So in our text we hear Jesus make an very direct and offensive statement because He was offering the difference between eternal life in God's presence versus eternal suffering away from God. Nothing is bigger, more valuable, or more important than that decision.

### **Believers Abide in Christ's Word (v.31-32).**

While teaching in the temple area during the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus taught that it was possible for "believers" to abide in His word. *So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples"* (v.31). That someone who believes in Jesus might abide in His word sounds like a contradiction of sorts. What did Jesus mean?

Christ taught that it is possible either to abide or not abide in His word. In response to Jesus' teaching that He had come from God and taught only what He learned in God's presence, John noted that *many believed in Him* (v.30). That many people believed in Jesus is always encouraging news to us. We who believe in Jesus long for everyone to believe, just like we do. But a conflict rises when we learn that six months after this event nearly everyone in the crowd at the Feast of Passover was shouting for Jesus' crucifixion. Obviously, people who believe in Jesus are not going to demand His death. What happened?

The word **believe** in this case can be used to describe anything from being convinced about certain facts, to fully entrusting oneself to Jesus. It appears that most of the *belief* in this case amounted to people believing that Jesus was unique, that He in some special way had come from God (though no one could explain that), or that He was at least an authoritative teacher. Because that is not saving faith and only intellectual assent, the so-called believers could change their mind about their conclusions based on the popular pressure of the moment. It is a reminder that perseverance in faith might be the most important outward trait of true believers.

The various Gospel accounts help us understand this kind of shallow belief by giving us several helpful illustrations. For example, when Jesus did miraculous works in Jerusalem in the early days of His ministry, many people *believed*. But Jesus knew that their belief was shallow, not genuine, and certainly not faith unto salvation (John 2:23-25). Again, when Jesus fed the 5,000 men plus women and children, many people were ready to make Him their king on the spot. But the very next day the same "many" rejected His teaching and left Him (John 6:15, 66). Apparently their faith was not very sincere.

Maybe the best illustration of belief that does not save is the story Jesus told about the Sower and the seed. Jesus taught that the responses of the various kinds of soil to the seed sown is typical of the human response to the truth of His word (Matthew 13:18-23). Therefore, when Jesus sowed the seed of truth, some of it landed with people whose souls were like hard dirt and the truth could not take root before Satan snatched it away. In a similar way, some people who heard the word were like rocky soil who believed what they heard but, not entrusting themselves wholly to the truth, the truth did not take root and it died out. Also, some people believed what Jesus taught, but being like soil infested with the weeds of worldly view failed to entrust their souls to Christ's word alone. Then there were some people who heard Christ's word and, being like fertile tilled soil, they fully embrace the truth, lean wholly on the truth, and prove they are abiding in the truth by the fruit they bear. Those were the real believers.

Jesus taught that real believers abide in His word, His teaching. He told the people, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples*" (v.31b). It is sad but true that many people hear the truth

of the Bible but do not abide in it. The word means to remain or to stay put. It is the word Jesus used to describe the relationship between the branches (us) and the vine (Himself) (John 15:1-17). Therefore, to abide in Christ's word is to be in continual fellowship with it, to be infused with it, to depend on it as the indispensable resource of life eternal.

Religious people as a whole are not in that kind of a mode of living. They are familiar with the Bible. They can quote some truths from the Bible. They claim to hear the Bible preached on a fairly regular basis. But they do not **need** the Bible. They do not regularly read it because they do not understand it, neither do they comprehend a reason to read it. They do not sense any lack or hunger or need if they are absent from the Bible for long periods of time. Therefore, we can say with the certainty of Jesus that those people are not abiding in Christ's word.

Real followers of Christ remain in His word. A real follower of Christ can rightly be called a disciple. The ancient practice of the teacher/disciple relationship established the principle that a disciple has forsaken all in order to become like the teacher. In the supreme example before us, the Teacher, Jesus Christ, has described Himself, taught about Himself perfectly and completely in the Bible. Therefore, we disciples are convinced that we do not even know how to be like Christ unless we remain under the influence of His word. We meditate on the truths we read so that our lives will be conformed to those truths. That conformity is quite opposed to being conformed to our natural desires or conformed to the examples of a dying, sin-infected world.

Christ's conclusion is concise and easy to understand: The person who does not need the Bible and does not depend on the Bible is not a follower—period. So what does your relationship with Christ's word say about you?

I am familiar with several of Charles Dickens writings. I especially like *A Christmas Carol*, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. I have read those stories and have watched a few of them portrayed in movies produced by the BBC. However, I would be remiss to claim to be a disciple of Charles Dickens. Yes, I have read some of his works; and yes, I think about what I read on occasion. But I really do not have a desire to be like him. In fact, I

really don't know him at all. I know about him by reading biographies men have written. But I don't know Charles Dickens intimately. While it is true that I think about his stories on occasion or might even see an example in life that is similar to what he wrote about, I do not meditate on his works. I do not depend on his word. Frankly, I don't need any of Charles Dickens' words. No, I am not a disciple of Charles Dickens, and in the same way many people with whom I am acquainted are not disciples of Christ because they do not abide in His word.

Jesus also taught that people who do abide in Christ's word experience freedom. Remaining in Christ's word not only proves genuine faith but it also delivers genuine change through genuine power. Jesus promised, "*And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*"(v.32). He taught that "Abiders" know the truth. The verb translated **know** means to acquire information, often through personal involvement or experience. Therefore, this word speaks about knowledge gained through intimate association or relationship. This Greek word (*ginosko*) is equivalent to the Hebrew *yada*. That is the verb we find used to describe Adam's intimate relationship with Eve: *So Adam knew his wife Eve, and she became pregnant . . . (Genesis 4:1)*.

People who abide in Christ's word will know for certain, from personal experience (not second hand testimony), the truth. We understand the gospel. We understand God, His person, His character, His plan to redeem the fallen creation, the person and purpose of Jesus Christ, and on and on. Because we know the truth, we are remaining in it. That is the essence of the very important doctrine named *the perseverance of the saints*. It is quite obvious that experiencing truth is far more than knowing what is true!

But wait! There's more! Not only do "Abiders" know the truth, but along with that privilege, "Abiders" are also set free. Satan's lie is that the truth of the gospel, the truth of the Bible, the word of Christ, is enslaving. He argues that if you abide in Christ's truth, you will not be able to enjoy the pleasures of sin. He argues that the truth of the Bible will hinder you from being open-minded. The reality is that Christ's truth frees us from all that is associated with sin and Satan. Truth frees us from the blindness Satan imposes on people. Truth frees us from chains of sin that bind us through habit and

addiction. Truth frees us from the penalty of sin and fear of facing our Creator. Truth delivers us from spiritual death and dumbness.

Our forefathers who risked life, limb, and fortune to sail to Plymouth Colony where they could worship in truth proved that abiding in the truth is to be set free. The late, great nation of America grew out of the seed of freedom planted by pilgrims who were determined to remain in the truth of Christ. You cannot help but notice that the further their posterity moves away from fellowship in the Bible, the less freedom we enjoy in every aspect of life.

“Oh,” but someone argues. “I am all about being free. I just pursue a different kind of freedom than what Jesus taught.” That person is again blinded by a lie from Satan.

### We Are Either Slaves or Free (vv.33-36).

There is no condition called “somewhat free” or “somewhat slave.” Each of us is either in one condition or the other. It can be confusing because some people think they are free when they are not. According to tradition, Jesus’ adversaries were free—at least that is what they thought. *They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone”* (v.33a). It is certainly true that they were Abraham’s posterity. As such, they claimed that they had never been enslaved to anyone.

No doubt these folks were more than a little ticked off that this craftsman from the hills of Galilee implied that they were not true believers and needed to be set free. But what a ridiculous claim this is! They had been enslaved by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Syrians, and now Rome. The very festival they were celebrating was a commemoration of their deliverance from bondage in Egypt.

Maybe the people weren’t talking about political freedom when they responded as they did. It is likely that the people referred to their spiritual freedom which was the very thing Jesus implied they didn’t have. These people had been taught that all the children of Abraham were sons of the kingdom. They were convinced that they would be the first people of the world to enter Messiah’s kingdom. That is why they were so anxious for Messiah to come and establish His kingdom.

Even the disciples illustrated this mind-set by laying claim to the chief seats in the kingdom. That they would get in was not up for debate! Therefore, Jesus telling the people that they were not free was tantamount to Him telling these children of Abraham that prostitutes and tax collectors would enter the kingdom before they would (Matthew 21:31).

But, if they were already so free, I guess they didn’t need to believe Jesus, did they? People who think they are free see no need for “freedom.” That is how these people saw it. They responded, “*How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’*” (v. 33). This retort was an affront to Jesus’ authority and person. They were implying, “How could this mere man from Nazareth dare say that the children of Abraham needed spiritual freedom?” Only God could make that assessment—and He wasn’t God in their estimate.

So, too, natural born sinners in our sphere of influence take offense at being told they can find freedom if they will just embrace the truth of the gospel. They are quite sure they are already free. They are free to commit any sin they feel like committing. They think that devout Christians are the people who are not free!

The entire argument boils down to this point, “People who are slaves to sin are not free.” Jesus taught that sinners are slaves who do not possess the inheritance. He said that everyone who sins is a slave. *Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin”* (v.34). Religious people think they are free because they do religious things and say religious things. Jesus pointed out the hopeless condition of sinners who do not trust His word. Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin regardless of what they say about themselves or think about themselves.

How could this be true? Doesn’t everyone sin—even Christians? It is dishonest to claim that anyone, even the best Christian, can achieve a condition of sinlessness in this life. Likewise, it is foolish to reinterpret “sin” as “mistakes.” The difference between the sin of believers and the sin of unbelievers is the word *practice*. It is a present tense verb which describes a condition of life. A Christian will commit sin, but hates the sin and quickly seeks cleansing in the blood of Jesus Christ. Christians hold tenaciously to the teaching of 1 John: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is*

*faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 1:8-2:1).*

I heard a sermon recently in which the preacher listed as one of the chief fruits of the Christian life, “We are fighting sin.” I would add to that, “We are fighting sin and we are experiencing frequent victory.” In contrast to that practice, unbelievers cannot **not** sin. They must sin. They have no choice or power not to.

The sad reality in all of this is that slaves don’t get the inheritance. Jesus taught, “*The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever*” (v.35). This slavery is the chief characteristic of the person who knows what is true but does not truly believe Christ. Those people have no perseverance. John described them like this, *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us* (1 John 2:19). That is because slaves occupy a temporary positions in the house of the owner. In contrast to that position, the Son receives the inheritance and continues in the household forever.

The Jews thought they were automatically in the kingdom (the house of God). They thought that Jesus was outside the kingdom because He was an imposter. The reality is that Jesus, God the Son, was the Master of the House and they were slaves to sin.

Throughout this argument, Jesus offered wonderful news. He taught that there is freedom through God the Son. Again He concluded, “*So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*” (v.36). The Son is the inheritor of God’s kingdom. The only way anyone (especially the Jews) gets into the kingdom is through the Son. The future kingdom will be the “Land of the Free” on a greater scale than we can imagine. And only the spiritually free will inherit it. And also only complete trust in the word of God the Son will give freedom. Therefore, the conclusion of the matter is simple but direct.

### **Reject Christ’s Words and You Will Kill Him Regardless of Your Heritage (vv.37-38).**

Christ’s peers should have known better. They were indeed national children of Abraham. Jesus admitted, “*I know that you are offspring of Abraham*” (v.37a). It was true that they were the direct descendants of Abraham (which is quite an issue with Muslims today). No one had to convince Jesus about this because He came from God the Father and was involved in the creation of the race. But here is the issue: Though they were descended from Abraham, they wanted to kill Jesus who is the only provision for the sacrifice of sin. How amazing that *Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son”* (Genesis 22:8). Now here were people who boasted about being his posterity, and they wanted to have a part in killing the “sacrifice.” So then, while they loved to claim inheritance in Abraham, they were not children of Abraham at all as Paul argued in Romans 9:7.

They wanted to kill Jesus because they refused to believe Him. Jesus uncovered their sin by saying, “*Yet you seek to kill Me because My word finds no place in you*” (v.37). Jesus connected rejection of His word with guilt in His murder. It was true that the religious rulers had already plotted together about how to kill Jesus. Now Jesus included even these people who supposedly believed Him in the plot and action. Still every person who rejects the teaching and word of Jesus (the Bible) is guilty of participating in the plot and action of murdering God the Son.

Was this an accurate conclusion? Christ spoke perfect truth. He spoke from experience in perfection. He affirmed, “*I speak of what I have seen with my Father*” (v.38a). What Jesus said was highly offensive to the Jews. What Jesus said was precisely what God the Father, our Creator, concluded. God’s truth is hurtful and painful to the person who lives in rebellion against Him. God’s truth is light, life, joy, and gladness to us who live in fellowship with Him.

In contrast to Jesus speaking perfect truth, we speak based on our experience with our father. He pointed out, “*And you do what you have heard from your father*” (v.38b). By nature each of us is a child of Satan. We grow up acting and talking like him. We can do nothing other than sin, which is his essential character. Even religious people like the Jews are so known. But by God’s grace we are born again and changed forever. We live by faith in the word of God. Our lives demonstrate what we hear from God in the Bible.

Not everyone who talks about freedom experiences it. Most people are content with political freedom, or social freedom, or what they perceive to be freedom to do whatever they want to do. That is not freedom but bondage. Jesus Christ alone offers freedom to fellowship with Him now and for eternity. He grants that freedom through the authority of His Word. Are you truly free? Does your life illustrate freedom in Christ?