

The Gospel of John (54) The Son who sets Sinners Free

Introduction:

It is our intention today to advance further in our study of this fifth discourse of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John. Of course every word that the biblical writers penned was directly inspired by God, the Holy Spirit having governed their thoughts and writing in order to give us an infallible, inerrant Holy Bible. But though every verse of the Bible is God-inspired, some statements of Scripture appear to be weightier and more significant than others, in that the Lord has more greatly and frequently used them through history in His vanquishing of the devil's kingdom and the expansion of His own realm. For example, some verses in John's Gospel seem to be more frequently called upon than, say, the genealogy of 1 Chronicles 1 through 8. And it would seem that John's Gospel has a great number of these weighty verses, words spoken directly by our Lord Jesus. This requires us to proceed slowly and carefully through these passages so that we may receive maximum benefit through understanding His Word that He has so wonderfully placed before us. May the Lord continue to help us in our study.

Last Lord's Day we left off with John 8:30, but since it provides the setting and background to what we have before us today, we will begin there. Here is **John 8:30-41**:

³⁰As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.

³¹Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³²And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

³³They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, 'You will be made free'?"

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. ³⁶Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

³⁷"I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. ³⁸I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father."

³⁹They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."

Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. ⁴¹You do the deeds of your father."

In these words of our Lord Jesus we may draw our attention to a number of very significant matters. First, we may consider the importance and nature of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ (v. 31). Second, we may consider the promise that God's truth will bring liberty to disciples of Jesus Christ (v. 32). Third, we may consider the hideous nature of sin, particularly in its ability to bind its practitioners in spiritual slavery (vs. 33-35). We will see that sin also has the rather curious feature of binding people even while they wrongly believe they are free. Fourth, we read of the ability that Jesus Christ possesses to set people free from sin (vs. 36) And then fifth, we may consider the distinction and differences between Abraham's physical descendants and his spiritual offspring, who are disciples of Jesus Christ in this present Gospel age (vs. 37-41). And so, the outline of these verses that we will use to assist us in our study is as follows:

1. The importance of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ (v. 31).
2. The promise that God's truth will bring liberty to the disciples of Jesus Christ (v. 32).
3. The power of sin to enslave those who indulge in sin (vs. 33-35).
4. Jesus Christ is able and willing to set people free from sin (vs. 36)

5. Abraham's true offspring, the Israel of God (vs. 37-41).

I. The importance of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ (v. 31).

As our Lord Jesus taught the Jewish crowds in the temple in Jerusalem, even as He also engaged and refuted the Jewish leaders who had attempted to discredit Him before the people, we read that many believed on Him. Verse 30 records, "As He spoke these words, many believed in Him." Now we might assume that at this time these people became true Christians, that because they "believed", they had become justified before God through faith in Jesus Christ. But although that may have been true for some of them, it was not necessarily the case for all of them. For then Jesus told these "believers" that they must prove themselves to be His true disciples. We read **verse 31**, "*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.'*" They would prove themselves to be the disciples of Jesus Christ by *abiding*, or *continuing* in His word. Or to say it another way, the only way that these "believers" could legitimately show themselves to be Jesus' true disciples was if they continued to hear, believe, and do His words—to order their lives according to His will. If they demonstrated in the way they lived that Jesus Christ was their Lord, then they would be His disciples indeed.

Now it is important for us to understand that although these people had "believed" on Him, only those who were truly His "disciples" would receive salvation from their sin. All true believers in Jesus Christ are true disciples of Jesus Christ. Again, we read in verses 31, "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed."

According to the Bible, to be a Christian is to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ. To be a true disciple is to be a Christian. A disciple of Jesus Christ is not an extremely dedicated believer, one "who is sold out for the Lord." A true disciple of Jesus Christ is a true Christian. Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is not the result progressive sanctification; it occurs decisively at the outset of the Christian life. The commitment to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is concurrent with saving faith itself—they are inseparable. And so, the life of a true disciple of Jesus Christ is the way of life for the true believer, the one who has salvation through Jesus Christ. All who claim to have faith, but are not demonstrating that they are true disciples of Jesus Christ, do not possess or manifest saving faith. They will not inherit salvation. Their faith is dead, being alone. As James wrote, "So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17).

The reformed pastor and writer, **James Montgomery Boice** (1938-2000), wrote of this matter. He is now with the Lord. But in his ministry he served faithfully at the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He published over 50 books and he was a model leader among reformed pastors throughout the English speaking world. He wrote these words about the nature of true saving faith and discipleship.

There is a fatal defect in the life of Christ's church in the twentieth century: a lack of true discipleship. Discipleship means forsaking everything to follow Christ. But for many of today's supposed Christians—perhaps the majority—it is the case that while there is much talk about Christ and even much furious activity, there is actually very little following of Christ Himself. And that means in some circles there is very little genuine Christianity. Many who fervently call Him 'Lord, Lord' are not Christians (Matthew 7:21)... There are several reasons that the situation I have described is common in today's church. The first is a defective theology that has crept over us like a deadening fog. This theology separates faith from discipleship and grace from obedience. It teaches that Jesus can be received as one's Savior without being received as one's Lord... Discipleship is not a supposed second step in Christianity, as if one first became a believer in Jesus and then, if he chooses, a disciple. From the beginning, discipleship is involved in what it means to be a Christian... Is 'faith' minus commitment a true biblical faith?... If faith without works is dead—how much truer is it that faith without commitment is dead... True faith involves these elements: knowledge...heart response...and commitment, without which 'faith' is no different from the assent of the demons who 'believe...and shudder' (James 2:19).

In one of Jesus' most important sayings about discipleship...the Lord pictures discipleship as putting on a yoke. This suggests a number of things, but chiefly it suggests submission to Christ for His assigned work. It is the picture of an animal yoked to others as well as to a plow. A yoke is also the connection

between submission and subjection. ‘Submit’ comes from the two Latin words *sub* (meaning ‘under’) and *mitto, mittere* (meaning ‘to put’ or ‘place’). So submission means putting oneself under the authority of another. ‘Subject’ also comes from two Latin words, in this case *sub* (meaning ‘under’) and *iacto, iactare* (meaning ‘cast’ or ‘throw’). It means being put under the authority of another. In other words, although the first word has an active sense (I put myself under another’s authority) and the second word has a passive sense (I am placed under that authority), the idea is nevertheless essentially the same. Moreover, it is connected with ‘yoke’ in this way. In ancient times it was customary for a ruler, when he had conquered a new people or territory, to place a staff across two upright poles, perhaps four feet off the ground, and require the captured people to pass under it. By this act they passed under his yoke or submitted to his authority. When Jesus used this image He was saying that to follow Him was to submit to Him. It was to receive Him as Lord of one’s life.¹

When one becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ, it is due to having exercised true repentance from sin and turning to the Lord in faith and submission to Him. When a person exercises saving faith in Jesus Christ, he becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ. He is committed to follow Jesus Christ in faith and obedience throughout life. His end or destination will be eternal life that the Lord Jesus has promised and secured for His followers.

Here in John 8:31, our Lord Jesus emphasized the need to persevere in faith and obedience to His Word. Again, we read, “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ***‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.’***” Obedience to Jesus Christ is essential to receiving our future, final salvation. There are many church attenders who wrongly think that they have salvation regardless of how they live, as long as they ***believe*** rightly. But this is error. Now certainly we affirm that it is through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone that results in our full justification before God. It is not good works that we have done, but due to the works that Jesus Christ has done, that merits salvation for us. But to conclude, however, “All I need is to have faith ***irrespective of works*** and I will be saved” is a not biblical. True saving faith is seen in one’s discipleship to Jesus Christ.

What then is a true disciple of Jesus Christ? The Greek word for “disciple” has a root meaning of being a ***learner***. This is not just in the sense of a student to a teacher, but as an apprentice to a craftsman. A disciple of Jesus Christ is one who learns from his Master, while following His instruction and observing His behavior. And so, a disciple is a follower or adherent of another. John the Baptist had disciples (Matt. 9:14). There were disciples of Moses (John 9:28). The Pharisees had disciples (Matt. 22:16). We are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

And yet when we examine what the Scriptures say regarding those who are called “disciples”, we find that the term “disciple” of Jesus is used to describe different groups of people. First, the term is used of any and all who “followed” Jesus, even if for a short period of time, or followed Him secretly (Luke 6:17-19; John 6:66; John 19:38). Second, the term, disciples, is used of the twelve apostles (Matt. 10:1; Luke 22:11). Third, the Lord spoke of “true” disciples (John 8:31; cf. 13:35; 15:8), which suggests that there were some who called themselves His disciples but were not true disciples. Fourth, the term is also used of those who believed on Him, confessed Him, were baptized, and obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1, 2, 7; 14:20, 22, 28). Fifth, it is used of “Christians.” “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Acts 11:26). What, then, may we posit as a definition of a disciple of Christ?

A disciple of Jesus Christ is a professing Christian, one who has purposed to devote himself/herself to obey the teachings of Christ. A disciple of Christ is one who has purposed to learn and obey all that Christ has commanded of His followers (Matthew 28:18-20).

Only true disciples of Jesus Christ are true Christians and only to them does God grant salvation from sin and the gift of everlasting life. A true disciple of Jesus Christ is one who shows forth his faith in the manner that he lives. He seeks to learn to do all that the Lord Jesus has commanded him in the Holy Scripture

¹ James Montgomery Boice, **Christ’s Call to Discipleship** (Chicago: Moody, 1986), pp. 13, 14, 16, 19, 21.

(Matt. 28:20). And it is though the things that he does that proves that he is a man of true faith, one who is a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

And so we may state this important truth: Although the true believer is justified by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and although his salvation is secured solely due to what Jesus Christ has done on his behalf, not on what he himself does; nevertheless, there is much that must be done by him in order to receive full salvation. These things do not contribute to, or secure his justification, which is through faith alone. But they must be done by the believer, because he is a true disciple of Jesus Christ. We may cite a number of these responsibilities that we must do in the order as true disciples of Jesus Christ. We could say that:

- * Unless you love the Lord Jesus, you will not have salvation (1 Cor. 16:22)
- * Unless you "deny yourself", you will not have salvation (Matt. 16:24-27).
- * Unless you "take up your cross daily", you will not have salvation (Matt. 16:24-27).
- * Unless you "follow" Jesus, you will not have salvation (Matt. 16:24-27).
- * Unless you enter the "narrow gate" (becoming a true disciple of Jesus), you will not have salvation (Matt. 7:13)
- * Unless you travel that narrow, difficult road (living as a disciple), you will not have salvation (Matt. 7:13f)
- * Unless you do what Jesus commands you, you will not have salvation (Matt. 7:21ff); and similarly,
- * Unless you live according to the law of God as directed by King Jesus, you will not have salvation (Matt. 7:23)
- * Unless you repent of your sin, you will not have salvation (Luke 13:3, 5).
- * Unless you show mercy to others, you will not have salvation (James 2:13).
- * Unless you forgive others their trespasses against you, you will not have salvation (Matt. 6:15).
- * Unless you sow to the Spirit, and not sow to the flesh, you will not have salvation (Gal. 6:8).
- * Unless you practice righteousness, you will not have salvation (1 John 3:7)
- * Unless you confess Christ before others, you will not have salvation (Matt. 10:32-33)
- * Unless you persevere in faith, you will not have salvation (Heb. 10:37-39)
- * Unless you love your Christian brethren, you will not have salvation (1 John 3:10)
- * Unless you continue in faith to Jesus Christ, you will not have salvation (Col. 1:21-23).

Now doing any and all of these things in no way qualifies you to enter the kingdom that the Father has prepared for those who are in Jesus Christ; nevertheless, entrance into Christ's everlasting kingdom is only granted to those who live accordingly. It is due to Christ's work alone that God qualifies us to enter into eternal life, but this is what true disciples of Jesus Christ do. Their faith in Jesus leads them to follow (obey) Jesus. This is who they are. The grace of God has made them so and they cannot be or do otherwise. This does not mean that all of these things come easily or that all of these things are done perfectly. To live in this manner takes great effort and much discipline, but most of all it requires the greatness of God's mercy toward us and the power of God's grace working in us. But our resolve should be to use all of our effort and all of the resources that our Lord has given us to live in this manner. He has prescribed a course for each of us. It is the highway of holiness (Isa. 35:8). It is an endurance race to be run and won (1 Cor. 9:24; Heb. 12:1). This is how Paul expressed his own resolve and effort to fulfill His calling so that in the end he might also receive the benefit of the gospel, even his own salvation:

¹⁶For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, *for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!* .

¹⁹For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; ²⁰and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; ²¹to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; ²²to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³*Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.* (1 Cor. 9:16, 19-23)

Paul declared that the Lord set this course before him and he must complete it. In other words, he would be under God's wrath if he failed or refused to do so, for he would have failed to live in faith to follow His Lord.

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote these words, even when he was asserting and defending the doctrine of justification by God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone":

And there are many other things besides faith, which are directly proposed to us, to be pursued or performed by us, in order to eternal life, which if they are done, or obtained, we shall have eternal life, and if not done, or not obtained, we shall surely perish.²

Later in the sermon he wrote,

So are many other things besides faith; and yet nothing in us but faith renders it meet (fitting) that we should have justification assigned to us.³

And,

Obedience and salvation are connected in fact; which nobody denies...⁴

But the fact remains is this, today many who claim to teach biblical Christianity deny that obedience is in any way connected with salvation. "As long as you believe, it does not matter what you do", is often the message that is either explicitly stated or it is implicitly implied in a skewed, twisting of this doctrine. Although faith alone justifies, that faith is not a mere affirmation or assertion of who Christ is and what He has done. The faith that saves is a living vital force that shapes the course and nature of the entire life of a justified person. This is so much so, that God can say that: "the just *shall live* by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him" (Heb. 10:38). In other words there is no salvation promised to one who does not live as a Christian is to live. The nature of faith that alone justifies, will move the believer to become and live as a disciple of Jesus Christ, a follower of Jesus. And the Lord Jesus declared here that a true disciple will be evident by him abiding in His word.

Consider this significant call of our Lord Jesus to live as one of His disciples. He said these words to those who believed on Him:

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works." (Matt. 16:24-27)

And so, our Lord informed His disciples of the nature and cost of discipleship to Himself. The certain prospect of *eternal life* itself is the result. What a grand incentive for people to believe on Him, responding in their commitment to follow Him! On the other hand, the consequences of failing or refusing to follow Him are as ominous as the promise of life is glorious. For the one who refuses to follow Him will "forfeit his soul." Clearly, the Lord Jesus is saying that there is no salvation apart from following Him. Our Lord was teaching His followers that total commitment to Him, total submission to Him, total obedience to Him, is necessary for salvation. To be a true Christian is to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures do not promise eternal life to any but disciples of Jesus Christ. Certainly the Lord Jesus made that clear on this occasion. We should attempt to make the same kind of converts. The great commission is not merely "to evangelize", as it is frequently regarded in these days, that is, to get people to say they believe in Christ; rather, we are to make disciples. This entails baptizing converts and teaching them to obey all things that the Lord Jesus ever taught. We do a disservice to God and to those who see themselves as believers, if we do not fully press upon them the claims of Christ.

² Edwards, p. 623.

³ Ibid, p. 624.

⁴ Ibid, p. 642.

We desire Christians who are fully aware of the costs of their conversion to Christ. We desire disciples who are fully aware of the difficulty of their decision to follow Him. Jesus wanted dedicated followers, not fascinated crowds. He had many “followers” who were impressed with Him, but He would have them become fully committed and submitted to Him. These are the kinds of people who should comprise church membership--*dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ*.

And so, the Scriptures teach that if you are not a disciple of Jesus, you are no Christian. A believer, to be a true believer, must be a submissive, obedient follower of His Lord. Faith in Him must have its fruit toward Him. A fruitless life is a faithless life, for the fruit of obedience is the evidence of the life that He imparts to His followers. If Christ is known truly, obedience will be evident clearly. If submission and obedience are not present, you do not have and you will not have eternal life, regardless of what you claim to believe. This is foundational. The “disciples” were first called “Christians” at Antioch (Acts 11:26). You must be a disciple before you can legitimately claim the title Christian. Over and over again the Lord Jesus made it clear that to hear and obey Him—to be His disciple--would result in entrance into life, but to disobey Him would result in exclusion and damnation.

II. The promise that God’s truth will bring liberty to the disciples of Jesus Christ (v. 32).

Jesus declared to His true disciples, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”⁵ This is one of those verses of the Bible that is rather popular and commonly quoted by the world at large. “The truth will set you free” is a common saying in academic circles that want to promote academic freedom and the power of learning. It is a statement that many secular colleges and Universities have scribed on their plaques and buildings, by which it asserts that the truth sought and discovered at their institution will result in a free and liberated people. It is a verse that is sometimes quoted by someone who is seeking to disclose some secret or undisclosed matter, assuming that public knowledge of that thing will perhaps result in the execution of justice. News media folks like to quote this verse. And although perhaps this verse could be legitimately used as a universal principle, that is not how it is used within this context. And so, even those who are advocating the importance of knowing the truth for it will set you free, are not setting forth the statement truthfully, within its original context. Jesus Christ gave this statement to a specific people on a certain occasion in a specific place. Within the context of John 8, *Jesus was not speaking to all people indiscriminately, He was speaking to the true disciples of verse 31*. Reading this verse in context makes the meaning clear that our Lord intended to convey to His listeners. Again, we read,

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31f)

Even though our Lord was speaking before the Jewish people in the temple setting, His promise was only to those among them that were or would be His true disciples. *“You shall know the truth, and that truth shall set you free.”* And so, this is a promise to His disciples, to true Christians, that they will be set at liberty from the condition of enslavement in which they now existed. Here is the promise, the doctrine, that our Lord Jesus gave to His people: *“you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* And then our Lord declared quite strongly the same promise a little farther in the account. **John 8:36** records Jesus saying, *“Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”*

Now it is our intention to explain what this promise of Christ entails and what it does not declare to the Christian. But we will explain this matter after we read of our Lord’s affirmation of this matter in verse 36, which follows his interaction with those who opposed Him. Let us then first consider...

III. The power of sin to enslave those who indulge in sin (vs. 33-35).

⁵ Perhaps the ESV is a bit better in translating v. 32: “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Now let us remember the setting in which our Lord declared these words to these “believers”, challenging them to show that they were truly His disciples by abiding in His word. Jesus was speaking in front of a mixed crowd of those who “believed” on Him and many who did not. When He declared to them who were favorable to Him, to them who “believed in Him” (v. 30), “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”, He was implying that all who were standing before Him were presently not “free”, but rather they were in a state of slavery. This is what generated the reaction to Jesus by the Jews, which is recorded in verses 33 through 35.

³³They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free?’”

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever.

These Jews were as many Jews in John’s Gospel, when they heard Jesus speak of spiritual matters, they misunderstood His meaning. They thought that He was speaking of physical or worldly matters rather of spiritual truths. Whereas Jesus was speaking of spiritual slavery to sin, they thought that that He was speaking of physical or political bondage or slavery, which they vehemently denied.

Now aside from their rather ludicrous claim, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone”, they ignorantly and errantly challenge Jesus: “How can You say, ‘You will be made free?’” The fact is that these Jews, although the physical descendants of Abraham, had often been in bondage to many peoples through the centuries. They were in bondage in Egypt of 400 years. They had been repeatedly under bondage to the Canaanites during the period of the Judges. They came under bondage for an extended period of exile under the Assyrian and Babylonian Empire. They had been under Seleucid domination in the few centuries before their time. But even when they made this claim, they were under the rule of the Roman Empire. It was quite a false and absurd claim on their part, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone.” And so, our Lord could have easily won the argument by challenging them regarding their protest, but their entire assumption of what He was promising His disciples was not understood by them. He was speaking of their slavery, their bondage, to sin, of which they were totally ignorant. We read in verse 34, “Jesus answered them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.’”

Here we see a clear difference between the way that God views mankind in its sin, and the way that mankind views itself in sin. Fallen man thinks he is free, when in actuality he is in slavery to sin. Fallen man thinks he is most free when he can commit his sin without any restraint or without anyone preventing him or condemning him. He loves his sin. He loves to indulge in his sin. He does not see his sin as oppressive of him from which escape must be made into a state of liberty, in which sin no longer controls him. He foolishly and wrongly believes he is free. In short, a fallen man generally has a rather high opinion of himself and his abilities. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once spoke of this:

There is one thing so deeply entrenched in human nature that it never varies and never wavers, and that is our good opinion of ourselves. We like a gospel that interests us, that charms us, that appeals to our emotions and sentiments, we like it in so far as it presents ideas and the ideal of life, but when it promises to ‘free’ us and to give us liberty, we stumble at it and object, because in promising us freedom it implies our present bondage. Yet this is what Christ offers and what Christ says, and our whole difficulty concerning it centers round our false conception of freedom.⁶

The Lord made this statement very strongly. He declared, “Most assuredly, I say to you...” “Most assuredly” is yet another occurrence that is unique to John’s Gospel, in which Jesus repeated the word, “Amen.” We have already seen this a number of times in John’s Gospel. It is translated in the KJV as “Verily, verily”, in the English Standard Version (ESV) as “truly, truly”, and in the NIV translation, “Very truly.” This double worded exclamation is only in John’s Gospel, and it occurs a total of 25 times. That our

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, **Evangelistic Sermons at Aberdavan** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), p. 57.

Lord followed up this initial exclamation with the words, “I say to you”, gives further force to His words. He was asserting, driving home to His hearers the factualness of His claim. As one wrote:

The double “amen” is the seal of truth for what Jesus says (compare the term in 1:51); “I say to you” is the voice of authority based on absolute knowledge and truth. This preamble marks the weight of what follows. It is in the nature of a moral maxim: “Everyone who does sin is the slave of sin”... This is true of men everywhere, at all times. The effect of sinning is as certain as the mathematical law that two plus two equals four. Jesus does not say outright that all men are sinners and the slaves of sin, but His application to the Jews includes the thought.⁷

Sin is by its very nature enslaving. We speak of “addictions”, and substances that are “addictive.” But the Bible declares that all and any sin is “addictive”, or better, *all sin is enslaving*. Sin is at first enticing to the fallen man. It troubles his conscience at first, for the Lord had placed that inner voice in him to give him warning. But when he yields first to a sin, there is often a lessening of objection and resistance to it. The second occasion of that sin take place with less resistance. Before long, the seriousness and the sense of evil associated with the sin is abandoned. The sin is indulged in more frequently, perhaps even more openly. The sin is soon excused, and then justified. By then the sinner has usually been captivated and placed in the spiritual chains that has been with that sin all along. Oh yes, weariness in doing the sin may occur. A measure of shame exists, especially if found out. Regret or remorse of consequences of the action may trouble him. But by then there is no real desire to escape, for the sin is necessarily believed to be enslaving. That is, unless and until that enslaved one attempts to break free. He thinks that he can do so any time, he really cares to do so. But when he makes effort, he soon discovers that he has been shackled and rendered unable and impotent to escape. But thank God that He sent His Son to be the Savior and Deliverer of sinners. And Jesus assured His true disciples that He will set them free through the spiritual truth that He proclaims and embodies as they believe it and obey it.

And so, our Lord affirmed very strongly their helpless and hopeless condition and the certain outcome of their bondage to sin. Again, we read verses 34 and 35:

³⁴Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever.

What was Jesus saying in verse 35, “And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever”? Jesus was declaring that these Jewish leaders, and all those Jews who were not His disciples but were enslaved in their sin, would have their privileged place and position in the household of God removed from them. Jesus, the Son, was about to assert His role and authority within and over the family of God. Only He and those He sets free from sin, who will abide with Him, will continue to dwell and rule in the household (family) of God forever.⁸ This is Jesus’ announcement of the end of national and ethnic Israel as the covenant people of God. With the coming of Jesus the Son of God, only He and His true disciples will abide in spiritual Israel forever. Take note that the “true disciples” in this context are themselves Jewish people, the promised remnant that God had spared for Himself in order to be true top Abraham’s physical offspring (Cf. Romans 11:1-5). And before long great numbers of Gentiles will join with these ones set free to take their place in the household of faith.⁹

IV. Jesus Christ is able and willing to set His people free from sin (vs. 36)

⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Augsburg Publishing, 1942), p. 634.

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⁹ Later the apostle Paul will say of these Gentile believers in Christ: “Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—¹²that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

To strongly encourage His disciples as well as to refute and repudiate the others, our Lord reasserted His promise in **verse 36**, *“Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”* But what does this mean? I suspect that there have been many sincere Christians through the centuries who lived in very oppressive societies, who were enslaved to their masters, who read this verse and wondered, “Lord, why have you not set us free?” Or there may be true Christians, who are thinking of their great struggles and continual defeat of sin that seems to have them in the bonds of spiritual slavery. They ask, “Lord, why do not I experience and enjoy the freedom from sin that you have promised me as your disciple?” “Perhaps I am not a true disciple at all, for I am anything but free, as you have promised!” And so, it would serve us well to understand what our Lord was promising and what He was not promising His disciples that knowing the truth would bring them.

It was fortunate for us that I found a sermon on John 8:36 that was once proclaimed by **John Flavel** (1627-1691), a puritan of the 17th century. It was entitled, “The Liberty of Believers Opened and Stated.”¹⁰ It is quite good. He wrote of this liberty true disciples possess and enjoy:

The devil persuades you, that the ways of obedience and strict godliness are a perfect bondage. But ever if God regenerate you, you will find His ways, “ways of pleasantness, and all His paths peace.” You will “rejoice in the way of His commandments as much as in all ‘riches.’” You will find the worst work Christ puts you about, even suffering work, sweeter than all the pleasures that ever you found in sin. O therefore open your hearts at the call of the gospel: Come unto Christ, *then you will be free indeed.*”¹¹

Flavel wrote of the liberty into which Christ delivers His people based on verse 36, “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed”:

In which words have two parts; viz, 1. A supposition. 2. A concession.

First, a supposition: The womb of nature has cast you forth into the world in a state of bondage! In that state you have lived all your days; servants to sin; slaves to your lusts; yet freedom is to be obtained: and this freedom is the prerogative belonging to the Son of God to bestow: “If the Son shall make you free.”

Second, a concession: Christ’s concession upon this supposition, “Then shall ye be free indeed,” i.e. you shall have a real freedom, and excellent and everlasting freedom: No conceit only, as that which ye now boast of is: If ever therefore you will be free men indeed, believe in Me. Hence note:

Doctrine: That interest in Christ sets the soul at liberty from all the bondage whereunto it was subjected in its natural state.

Now as we attempt to understand more clearly and precisely what our Lord meant by these words, it is important that we address the following: (1) What true disciples are not freed from by Jesus Christ in this world; (2) what that bondage from which every true disciple is freed by Christ; and (3) what kind of freedom

¹⁰ John Flavel, **Works of John Flavel, The**, vol. 2 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), pp. 269-278. What we say about this matter I gleaned from him. Flavel wrote this introduction to the text of verse 36: “From the 30th verse of this chapter unto my text (v. 36), you have an account of the different effects which the words of Christ had upon the hearts of His hearers: Some believed, verse 30. These He encourageth to continue in His word (v. 31) giving them this encouragement (v. 32), ‘Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’ Hereat the unbelieving Jews take offence, and commence a quarrel with Him (v. 38), ‘We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man.’ ‘We are no slavish extraction; the blood of Abraham runs in our veins.’ This scornful boast of the proud Jews, Christ confutes (v. 34), where He distinguisheth on a two-fold bondage; one to men, another to sin; one civil, another spiritual: Whoever committeth sin is the servant of sin, then tells them (v. 36), ‘The servant abideth not in the house for ever, but the Son abideth for ever.’ Wherein He intimates two great truths, viz. that the servants and slaves of sin may for a time enjoy the external privileges of the house or church of God; but it would not be long before the master of the house would turn them out of doors. But if they were once adopted children of God, then they would abide in the house for ever. And this privilege is only to be had by their believing in, and union with the natural Son of God, Jesus Christ: which brings us fairly to the text; ‘If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.’”

¹¹ Ibid, p. 278.

that is which begins upon our first believing and commencing to follow Him. And then (4) we will briefly explain the great blessing we enjoy in our present spiritual liberty.

1. What true disciples are *not* freed from by Jesus Christ in this world

We should not think that the liberty we have in Christ frees us absolutely, from everything in this world and with respect to our duty to our God.

(1) The Lord Jesus does *not* free believers from their obligation to obey His moral law. Paul the Christian could say, “So with my mind I serve the law of God” (Rom. 7:25).

“It is true we are no more under it (the law) as a *covenant* for our *justification*; but we are, and must still be under it, as a rule for our *direction*”... This is a sure truth, that they (disciples) are freed from its *penalties* are still under its *precepts*. Though believers are no longer under its *curse*, yet they are still under its *conduct*: The law sends us to Christ to be *justified*, and Christ sends us to the law to be *regulated*... It is excellent when Christians begin to obey the law *from* life, which others obey *for* life; because they *are* justified, not that they *may be* justified.”¹²

(2) The Lord Jesus has *not* freed His disciples from the temptations and assaults of satan.

“Even those that are freed from his *dominion*, are not free from his *molestation*. It is said indeed, Romans 16:20, “God shall shortly bruise satan under your feet.” But meantime he has power to bruise and buffet us by injections (2 Cor. 12:7). He now bruises Christ’s heel (Gen. 3:15), i.e. bruises Him in His tempted and afflicted members. Though he cannot kill them, yet he can and doth afflict and fright them, by shooting fiery darts of temptation among them (Eph. 6:16). It is true, when the saints are got safe into heaven they are out of gunshot; there is perfect freedom from all temptation. A believer may then say, “O thou enemy, temptations are come to a perpetual end. I am now arrived there, where none of thy fiery darts can reach me.” But this freedom is not yet.”¹³

(3) Christ has *not* yet freed believers in this world from the motions of indwelling sin.

“These are continually acting, and infesting the holiest of men (Rom. 7:21, 23, 24). Corruptions, like Canaanites, are still left in the land to be thorns in your eyes, and goads in your sides. Those that boast most of freedom from the motions of sin, have most cause to suspect themselves still under the dominion of sin (i.e. unsaved).”¹⁴

(4) Jesus Christ does *not* free believers, in this world, from inward troubles and exercises of soul, upon account of sin.

“God may let loose satan, and conscience too, in the way of terrible accusations, which may greatly distress the soul of a believer, and woefully eclipse the light of God’s countenance, and break the peace of their souls.”

(5) Christ has *not* freed His disciples, in this world, from the rods of affliction. Hebrews 12:8 reads, “But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.”

¹² Flavel, p. 271.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 272.

“All the children of God are made free, yet what son is there whom the father chasteneth not? Exemption from affliction is so far from being the mark of a free man, that the apostle there makes it the mark of a slave.” “To be free from affliction would be no benefit to believers, who receive so many benefits from it.”¹⁵

(6) “No believer is freed by Christ from the *stroke* of death, though they are all freed from the *sting* of death (Rom. 8:10). The bodies of believers are under the same law of mortality with other men (Heb. 9:27).”¹⁶

2. What that bondage from which every true disciple is freed by Christ;

(1) All true disciples are freed from the *rigour* and the *curse* of the law.

“The rigorous yoke of the law is broken off from their necks, and the sweet and easy yoke of Jesus Christ is put on (Matt. 9:28). The law required perfect working, under pain of a curse (Gal. 3:10), accepted of no short endeavors; admitted no repentance; gave no strength. It is not so now; proportional strength is given (Phil. 4:13).”¹⁷

(2) All true disciples are freed from the guilt of sin. “It may trouble, but it cannot condemn them (Rom. 8:1).”¹⁸

(3) Jesus Christ frees all true disciples from the dominion as well as the guilt of sin (Rom. 6:14). We are delivered “not from the *residence*, but from the *reign* of sin.”

(4) Jesus Christ sets free all of His true disciples from the power of satan, in whose right they were by nature (Col. 1:13). “Satan had possession of them, as a man his own goods; but Christ dispossesseth that strong man armed, alters their property, and recovers them out of his hand (Luke 11:21f).”¹⁹

(5) “Christ frees His disciples from the poisonous sting and hurt of death: Kill us it can, but hurt us it cannot” (1 Cor. 15:55f).²⁰

3. What kind of freedom that is which begins upon our first believing and commencing to follow Him

Liberty may be regarded as available in two forms: there is *civil* liberty, and there is *sacred* liberty. “As to civil liberty, it belongs not to our present business.” But there is a consummate liberty, that which will be granted us one day in glory. “The liberty believers have at present is but a beginning liberty; they are freed in part from their spiritual enemies; but it is a growing liberty every day, and will be consummate and complete at last.”²¹

4. We will explain the great blessing we enjoy in our present spiritual liberty.

First, we have a wonderful liberty, for which we could never value enough and express enough our gratefulness to God for the liberty He has given us in Christ.

How could it be imagined that ever those who owed unto God more than ever they could pay by their own eternal sufferings; those that were under the dreadful curse and condemnation of the law, in the power

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 273.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. p. 274.

and presence of satan the strong man armed; those that were bound with so many chains in their spiritual prison; their understanding bound with ignorance, their wills with obstinacy, their hearts with impenetrable hardness, their affections with a thousand bewitching vanities, that sight their slavery so much, as industriously to oppose all instruments and means of deliverance; for such persons are set at liberty, notwithstanding all this, is the wonder of wonders, and will deservedly marvelous in the eyes of believers forever.²²

Second, the freedom of believers is a peculiar (special and rare) freedom. We enjoy “a liberty which few obtain; the generality abiding still in bondage to satan... How many nobles and great ones of the world are but loyal slaves of satan, and their own lusts!”²³

Thirdly, the freedom that true disciples of Jesus Christ enjoy is due to the purchase of the blood of Jesus Christ. The Roman soldier said to Paul of his freedom as a Roman citizen, “With a great sum I obtained this freedom.” The cost of his free status was a trifle in comparison to the value of Christ who purchased us with His own sufferings and death.

Fourthly, the liberty disciples possess is a growing and expanding liberty. They increasingly gain power to resist and overcome sin. They grow nearer each day to the time when their liberty will be enjoyed fully.

Fifthly, the liberty that the true disciple enjoys is one that is enjoyed greatly even as it lifts the lowly to a glorious state. Even a Christian who may have been a household slave, could regard himself as the Lord’s freeman. (1 Cor. 7:22).

Sixthly, the liberty enjoyed by true disciples of Jesus Christ is a perpetual and final freedom. They that are once freed by Christ, are forever free. “Sin shall never have dominion over them any more: it may tempt them and trouble them, but shall never more rule and govern them (Acts 26:18).

V. Abraham’s true offspring, the Israel of God (vs. 37-41).

³⁷“I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. ³⁸I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father.”

³⁹They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.”

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham. ⁴⁰But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. ⁴¹You do the deeds of your father.”

We will need to address this next Lord’s Day, Lord willing.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant,
equip you with everything good that you may do his will,
working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb. 13:20f)

²² Ibid, p. 275.

²³ Ibid.