

Message #33

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John

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JESUS, TRUTH, AND FREEDOM

JOHN 8:30-36

INTRODUCTION

We Americans are all about freedom. We cherish it, defend it, and celebrate it. Last month we celebrated Independence Day, our annual national reminder of the danger of political tyranny. One of the revolutionary heroes that we learn about as children is Patrick Henry, who famously cried, "Give me liberty, or give me death." The most famous of our state mottoes comes from New Hampshire: "Live free or die."

A few years after the establishment of our independence, our wise Founding Fathers enshrined essential freedoms into the Constitution. In 1791 the Bill of Rights was ratified. Amendment One guarantees the freedoms of speech, assembly, press, and religion. As Christians, we embrace those freedoms.

Over the years our constitutional freedoms have been taken in directions never anticipated by the Founding Fathers. They have been taken to include sexual freedom. In 1992, Justice Anthony Kennedy, who just resigned from the Supreme Court, ruled for the majority (PROJECTOR ON--- KENNEDY QUOTATION) in the Planned Parenthood vs. Casey decision, **"...at the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe and of the mystery of human life."** The majority of the justices took this to mean that we are free to kill a baby in a mother's womb.

More recently these freedoms have been taken in the direction of gender identity. (SHARPES) These three-year-old fraternal twins have been labeled as "theybies" by their parents in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They claim that only these children can determine their sexual identity. The parents refuse to call them either girl or boy. They are a part of a Facebook community of supposedly 200 families who have the same philosophy. So freedom has been taken to the point of defying biological reality.

Our Founding Fathers were much wiser than many of our current cultural leaders. They recognized the source of true freedom. In our Declaration of Independence (DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE) they declared, **“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”** The source of our freedom is God. We are going to examine our passage today to see what God’s Word says about true freedom. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We have been making our way through the Gospel of John in the New Testament. We have seen that the Apostle John is providing evidence from the life of Jesus that He was truly the Messiah, the unique Son of God. The setting for #7 and #8 is the Jerusalem temple and the eight day Feast of Tabernacles, which celebrates the fall harvest and reminds the Jews about how God provided for their ancestors in the forty years of wilderness wanderings after their escape from slavery in Egypt. Jesus announced that He was the fulfillment of symbolism contained in this feast by declaring that He was the source of living water and the light of the world. This has provoked a heated discussion with the Pharisees, who were the legalists and traditionalists of the religious world. They were the dominant group among the rabbis and a strong force on the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism that was allowed by the Romans to have considerable civil authority.

Last time, in vv. 21-29 of #8, we saw that Jesus identified Himself as the great “I Am,” a clear claim to identity with the God of the Old Testament. Today we shall see how His audience in the temple in Jerusalem responds to this.

I.

In vv. 30 & 31 of #8, which is p. 894 in the black Bibles, we find that TRUE DISCIPLESHIP REQUIRES ABIDING IN JESUS’ WORD. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. TRUE DISCIPLESHIP REQUIRES...) Notice v. 30: **“As he was saying these things, many believed in him.”**

Back in v. 13, the author indicated that it was the Pharisees who were arguing with Jesus. Now we are told that “many” believed in Jesus. It could be that some of these believers were Pharisees. It could be that some of them were bystanders who were listening in to this dialogue. Remember, there were thousands of religious pilgrims who came from all over Judea and all over the Roman Empire to be present for this feast.

Verse 31 tells us, **“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples...’”** The Apostle John tends to use “the Jews” to refer to the religious leaders of Judea, who have generally opposed the claims and mission of Jesus. So it would appear that some of these Pharisees and religious leaders are believing Jesus.

We must also understand that “belief” in John’s Gospel is not always the same thing as we Christians today identify as belief. Back in #2 v. 23 (JOHN 2:23) we saw that the author wrote, **“Now when he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.”** In the next chapter we find that Nicodemus is one of these people who believed. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He comes to Jesus at night to find out more about Him. We learn through this interaction that Nicodemus is clueless about the need for spiritual rebirth. He has a very limited understanding about who Jesus is. It seems clear that at this point Nicodemus has not put trusting faith in Jesus.

Then in #6 Jesus performs the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes by the Sea of Galilee. There are 5000 men plus women and children who witness this. John describes them as disciples. In #6 v. 64 (JOHN 6:64). Jesus says, **“But there are some of you who do not believe.”** Jesus has said some difficult things about what it means to follow Him. Then in v. 66 (JOHN 6:66) the author writes, **“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.”**

So it is important to understand that in the Gospels, especially in John, believing in Jesus does not necessarily describe a trusting faith that results in eternal salvation. Also, being a disciple of Jesus does not necessarily mean that one is a genuine convert, that he or she is born again. Judas Iscariot is said to be one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Along with the other eleven, he was given the power at one point to heal people and to cast out demons. But in the end, we find out that he was destined for hell. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In His discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus explained that eternal salvation and spiritual rebirth come as the result of trust in Jesus. There is no work or merit that is necessary to receive this gift. Discipleship is in a different category. Jesus says that discipleship requires abiding in His word.

To abide means to remain, to continue, to persevere. Some Christian theologians and commentators argue that true Christians will continue to follow Jesus as disciples. Perseverance is the work of true faith. It seems to me that there are a number of passages in the New Testament which describe

Christians as not always walking closely with Jesus. Sometimes genuine Christians do not seem to abide in His word and act like committed disciples.

The Apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to members of a church who were pretty messed up. He accused most of them of acting like mere men, of being carnal, or fleshly. He does not seem to doubt their salvation. He recognizes the eternal security of the genuine Christian. But Christians may not always do a good job of abiding in His word. We do have a perfect Heavenly Father. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews argues in #12 that God disciplines Christians, especially when we get off track, when we are not abiding in His word.

Jesus exercised some of the characteristics of a first century Jewish rabbi. He had a set of disciples like other rabbis did. Of course, He was also claiming to be the Messiah and the Son of God. But His invitation here was perhaps not all that much different from an invitation that other rabbis might give to prospective disciples. The understanding of those expressing some kind of belief in Jesus was very limited. But the first step and initial invitation was to keep listening to the teaching of Jesus and to respond to His claims.

Wherever we are in our relationship with God and with Jesus, the invitation applies to us. The key to being a follower of Jesus, to being His disciple, is staying close to His word. That would seem to mean studying it and memorizing it and applying it. Doing that on an individual and regular basis is foundational. But we also offer various opportunities around here to study it in a group setting. You might consider taking advantage of one of them.

II.

In v. 32 we find that ABIDING IN JESUS' WORD LEADS TO KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH. (PROJECTOR ON--
- II. ABIDING IN JESUS' WORD...) Jesus says at the beginning of v. 32, **"...and you will know the truth..."**

The entire statement, including the bit about freedom, has been used down through history in a number of different contexts. (UT LIBRARY) It has appeared in libraries. This saying appears on what was originally the library at the University of Texas at Austin. Certainly truth of any kind can be liberating. But this is not what Jesus is saying in this context. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The problem in our current culture is that there are doubts about the existence of absolute truth. Life, however, cannot be conducted with any degree of success without the understanding that there are absolutes in the world in which we live. Science cannot be conducted without the assumption that certain physical laws are true.

In philosophy one current system in vogue among some thinkers is postmodernism. One of the central tenets of postmodernism is that there are no absolute truths. I always find that somewhat amusing, because the claim that there are no absolutes is itself a claim to absolute truth. Unfortunately this postmodernism has had an effect on the younger generation. A Barna poll conducted in 2016 found that 74% of millennials surveyed agreed with this statement: **“Whatever is right for your life or works best for you is the only truth you can know.”** This is relativism. How can we know if anything is right for our life if there are no moral absolutes?

The specific truth involved in the context of our passage relates to Jesus and His message. He is claiming to be the Messiah. He is claiming to be the source of living water and the light of the world. He is claiming to be the Son of God who has been sent from heaven. He is claiming that listening to His message and obeying His instructions will lead to a right view of reality. It will lead to the correct understanding of who human beings are and where they come from and who God is and how we can know Him and how we can have meaning and purpose in life and how we can have hope for life after the grave.

III.

In vv. 32-36 we learn that KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH LEADS TO FREEDOM FROM SIN. (PROJECTOR ON-- III. KNOWLEDGE OF THE TRUTH LEADS...) Abiding in Jesus' word leads to knowledge of the truth. Knowledge of the truth leads to freedom from sin. **“...and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** Such are the words of Jesus.

If indeed Jesus is the Son of God sent from heaven, then the truth that He is describing must involve answers to the big questions of life: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? How can I know God? How can I have hope for the future, especially for what lies beyond the grave?

Jesus specifically promises that the truth which He provides results in freedom. The implication in the immediate situation is that His opponents, the Pharisees, lack this freedom. They take offense at this.

Thus in v. 33 we read, **“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’?”**”

On one level, it seems odd that they would claim that they have never been enslaved to anyone. A superficial review of Jewish history shows that at many points in their history, the Jews have experienced political oppression. The Feast of Tabernacles itself reminded them about their earlier slavery in Egypt. In more recent history, they had been oppressed by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and now the Romans.

It would seem that the Pharisees must be talking about something other than a political and external slavery. Indeed there were writings in the first century where Jewish leaders claimed freedom because they had God as their leader. For example, a guy by the name of Philo (PHILO QUOTATION), who lived at the time of Jesus, wrote, **“For in real truth that man alone is free who has God for his leader; ...that man is even the ruler of all others...”** (Philo, “Every Good Man is Free,” III.20) A famous rabbi by the name of Akiba is quoted as saying that all Israelites are king’s sons, no matter what their outward circumstances are. (PROJECTOR OFF)

It is clear that the Pharisees and their fellow religious leaders were confident that they had an “in” with God, largely because of their descent from Abraham, and because of what they regarded as their devotion to God’s law. Their fundamental problem was that they did not see a problem.

In Mark #2 the scribes of the Pharisees, who may have included some of these same men in our passage, criticize Jesus for hanging out with sinners. In #2 v. 17 (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 2:17) Jesus responds to the criticism of these religious leaders, **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”** These Pharisees did not see themselves as sinners. They were confident that they were on God’s side, and that he was on theirs. They saw themselves as already free. (PROJECTOR OFF)

According to v. 34, **“Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.’”** In John and the other Gospels, the words “truly, truly” precede a pronouncement that Jesus regards as very important. The issue here is identified as sin. As we see by the reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus hanging out with sinners, they did not see themselves as falling into the category of sinners. Yet last week, we saw that Jesus characterized them as being of the world. We saw from the Apostle John that in his First Epistle, he understood worldliness to involve the lust of the flesh, the lust

of the eyes and the boastful pride of life. This characterization indeed marked out much of the behavior of the Pharisees.

The problem today is similar. The cultural elites promote the idea that people are generally good. The problems of our society are due to a lack of education, to poverty, to intolerance and to Donald Trump. But the Bible says that the problems of society go to a sinful heart. In Romans #3 vv. 10 & 11 (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 3:10-11) the Apostle Paul begins a longer description that contains quotations from the Old Testament. He says, **“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.”**

In v. 34 of our passage Jesus describes the problem as sin. He says that sin is addicting. When we commit one sin, it becomes easier to commit the next sin. Sin starts in the mind. Then it moves to behavior. Left unchecked, it can become addicting and enslaving. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus continues in v. 35, **“The slave does not remain in the house forever, the son remains forever.”** The Pharisees and other Jewish leaders are descendants of Abraham. By virtue of that relationship, they have a certain connection to the household of God. But Jesus accuses them of being slaves to sin. Slaves in a first century household had an insecure position. They could be sold. They could be sent out of the house. They had no security. Their future was uncertain. They were in a precarious position.

The son in a wealthy household had security. He was guaranteed an inheritance. Jesus claims to be the Son of God. As such, He is in a unique position to have authority in His household. He ultimately will have a say in what happens to the slaves in God’s household.

In v. 36 Jesus says, **“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”** The sons in a wealthy household were often raised with slave children. Often when the father died and the son took over leadership of the household, the son would free former slave children.

In this case, the Son of God will gain authority by virtue of His death on the cross. He will pay the penalty for the sins of the world. By virtue of faith in Jesus, people will gain freedom from their slavery to sin. The details of that are not explained here. At this point in the story of Jesus, the coming death of Jesus and the impact it will have are not yet clear. But the Apostle Paul will later declare (PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIANS 5:1) in Galatians #5 v. 1, **“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”** In Romans #6 and #8 Paul will explain that, because of the death

of Christ and our trust in Him, we Christians are no longer bound to sin. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can resist sin and experience true freedom. (PROJECTOR OFF)

When the Emancipation Proclamation came into effect on January 1, 1863, and the victory in the Civil War followed a couple of years later, slavery was outlawed in this country. Yet some freed slaves continue to live like slaves. They were legally free, but they acted as slaves. To be fair, they sometimes faced very difficult circumstances that made it hard to live as free men and women. The point of the application for us is that we Christians have been freed from our slavery to sin. We have been given authority from God and the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet sometimes we live like slaves to sin. We fail to experience the true freedom that Jesus has promised.

The original word for “free” in our text is never used in the New Testament of political freedom. Also that word is never used in the Bible to describe a power or right that people have to do with themselves and their lives whatever they want. One Greek dictionary (PROJECTOR ON--- DNTT QUOTE) explains, **“True freedom lies in life with God, lived as it was originally intended by God for man.”** (*Dictionary of New Testament Theology*)

Some of you remember the illustration that I have used of having an expensive sports car. Imagine if you came into possession of a Lamborghini. You own it outright and have no lien on it or debt to be paid in regard to it. So you are free to do with it what you will. If you want to drive it along the beach by the ocean, you can do that. If you decide to drive it in a rocky pasture, you can do that. If you choose to ignore recommendations in the owner’s manual about oil changes and other maintenance procedures, you can do that. But there will be consequences. Salt from surf by the ocean may do bad things to your engine. Driving in a rocky and muddy field may mess up your vehicle. Failing to maintain your Lamborghini will eventually have negative effects upon its drivability. Your best experience with that car in the long run will come from using it as it was intended to be used and operating within the manufacturer’s recommended parameters. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So it is in life. Our manufacturer has given us an owner’s manual called the Bible. We can ignore it if we wish. But we will experience negative consequences if we do. Real freedom comes from living within the parameters of life that God has given to us. True freedom involves release from the power of sin. It means trusting the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome temptation to sin, to go against our owner’s manual.

Earlier in our study of John I talked about the life of Martin Luther. I explained that he lived under a certain bondage. He became a monk, but he constantly felt the power of sin in his life. He spent hours in confession about his sins. He tried to do good works to earn favor with God. Finally, as a result of his study of the Book of Romans, he discovered that eternal salvation comes as the result of faith in Jesus.

Thus Luther began his battle against the false teaching of the Roman church. At a certain point he recognized that he would probably be killed because of his opposition against the establishment. But this gave him a certain freedom. He said that he felt like he was being blown along by the Holy Spirit.

So Luther began to call himself Eleutheros. The Greek word for “free” in our passage is *eleutheros*. Latin was the primary language of the church. “Eleutheros” sounded like a Latinization of his own name. So Luther began to act like “the free one.” He had become free from the bondage of sin, and he acted freely in promoting the true gospel in the face of opposition from the Church.

One of the essays that Luther wrote was entitled “Concerning Christian Liberty.” (PROJECTOR ON--- LIBERTY QUOTATION 1) In it he wrote, **“A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.”** In one sense we Christians are free. We are free from the bondage to sin. We are free from condemnation and eternal judgment. On the other hand, we have an obligation to follow our owner’s manual, to serve our fellow human beings as well as God.

(LUTHER QUOTATION 2) Luther also wrote in “Concerning Christian Liberty,” **“Here is the truly Christian life... when a man applies himself with joy and love to the works of that freest servitude in which he serves others voluntarily... himself abundantly satisfied in the fulness and riches of his own faith.”** Freedom comes from living in the way that our Maker intended us to live.

True discipleship requires abiding in Jesus’ word. Abiding in Jesus’ word leads to knowledge of the truth. Knowledge of the truth leads to freedom from sin. May we know and experience that freedom from staying in God’s word and trusting in Jesus and His Spirit to overcome temptation.