

JESUS IS THE TRUTH THAT SETS US FREE

John 8:31-59

Key Verses: 31-32

“To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’”

We need to be set free

On May 31st, DeWayne Craddock fatally shot 12 people and wounded 5 others before being killed in a shoot-out with police in Virginia Beach. It is another tragic story that is becoming far-too-commonplace in our supposedly enlightened, free, modern society. Virginia Beach Police Chief Jim Cervera said the gunman’s motive is a mystery to authorities – a glaring question that may never be answered.¹ People are lost trying to figure out what is wrong with our world. We try so hard to make a perfect utopian society free from all danger, hate and violence but strangely the more effort we have put into making a perfect society, the more dangerous it has become. Why? Simply speaking it is sin. If we want to change the world, we must help people to be set free from sin. We want to primarily spend time thinking about first, Jesus’ words in verses 31-32, the truth that can set us free and second, the sin that enslaves us.

1. The truth that can set us free (31-32)

Disciples must abide in Jesus’ teaching

As we studied last week, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” Many Pharisees challenged him and would not believe but “even as he spoke many believed in him” (30). Now Jesus speaks directly to the Pharisees², who believed. Let’s read verse 31 together. “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/06/02/virginia-beach-shooter-dewayne-craddock-puzzles-law-enforcement/1319550001/>

² “the Jews” is John’s unique term to refer to various groups of religious leaders throughout his gospel.

my teaching, you are really my disciples.” When they believed in Jesus, did Jesus say, “Good. Mission accomplished. On to the next group!” No, he challenged them that to truly believe, they must become his disciples. This has been a pattern in John’s gospel, when anyone believes, he presses into them and challenges them. Discipleship is not for advanced believers it is the only way to know Jesus.

Specifically, Jesus says to truly be his disciples we must, hold to Jesus’ teaching. The better translation for “hold to,” is “abide in,” which is a little bit of an old word meaning to remain in, stay in, to sojourn. In Greek the word is “meno.” It is the same word that Jesus uses in chapter 15 when he says, “If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit...[and] if my words remain in you...” (Jn 15:5,7a). Abiding in Jesus’ teachings is like living in the home of our father, where we naturally abide by the rules of the house as a member of the family.

Jesus doesn’t call us to abide in a feeling or a certain image but to abide in his teaching. We cannot separate following Jesus from following his teachings or literally here, “Abide in my words.” Which words? All of them! Jesus is “the Word.” If we want to be a disciple, guess what, there’s an instruction manual, and all of it is required reading. John 14:15 and 21 say, “If you love me, keep my commands.” Are you living in Jesus’ words? Are you willing to live according to everything the Bible teaches? If not, Jesus says we cannot be his disciples. Before going into heaven, did Jesus say, “go into all the world, and make believers? teaching them to live comfortably as they please?” NO! He said, “make disciples...teaching them to obey EVERYTHING I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20).

Actually, if we are to be his disciples, then it naturally follows that we would *want* to learn everything our master has to teach and become like him in every way. In the movie, “The Karate Kid,” Daniel LaRusso becomes the disciple of Mr. Miyagi, out of a desperate need to learn to defend himself. Daniel wants to give up when Mr. Miyagi puts him to work cleaning all week long, “wax on, wax off.” But when he realizes these have taught him the basic movements of karate, he gives his whole heart to his tasks. He spends almost every waking moment with Mr. Miyagi taking in anything the old man can pass on to him, he does this willingly and

joyfully and becomes a champion martial artist. But could you imagine if a young man became the disciple of a respected sensei, with no intention of practicing anything he learned—what would be the point? could such a person be called a disciple? In the same way, if we would grow as Jesus' disciples, Jesus must be everything to us. He must be so beautiful that we want to spend every moment we can with him! It must be our joy and diligent life goal to soak up everything that Jesus can teach us. Our supreme life passion must be to be like Jesus, then we can say we are his disciples.

Disciples will know the truth who sets them free

It may seem like a high cost to be Jesus' disciples but God never gives any command in the Bible without a promise. Let's read verses 31-32 together, "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.'" God promises that those who abide in his words will know the truth. It means that the truth cannot be learned through study, it must be lived and learned through experience. I told my kids that Shin Ramyun is spicy but they had no concept of 'spicy' so they wanted to try it—so I gave it to them. Once they knew the truth of 'spicy' they learned to flee it! We can't know the truth by saying one prayer or learning a certain doctrine. We can't say we know how to play baseball because we watched it on TV or read the manual. Until we swing a bat we don't know the first thing about it. In the book of Acts, Christians were referred to as "followers of the Way" (Ac 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14, 22). Do any of you feel you are not free? Even though we believe many times we feel we are still not free from the effects of sin: worry, despair, depression, addiction, insecurity, anger and Satan's lies. Even though we know the truth, if we don't live the truth, we cannot be free.

When M. Sharon McEathron was growing up she had to put up with her Father's many vices: womanizing, gambling, drinking, extreme abuse of her mother and negligence. Because of this she wanted to become a nun. Through Bible study with S. Sarah Altobar, she met Jesus and began to live as his disciple. But even though she knew the truth of God she could not be set free from her anger about how her father had treated her mother—in her heart, she wanted to kill him. But she could not escape the truth of the Bible: as she had been forgiven she must forgive (Mt 6:15; 18:21-35). She decided to obey by faith and simply forgave him through a very tearful life testimony. Then she was set free, it was the turning

point of her life where she met Jesus very personally. She could begin to love and pray for her father. Dr. Ben Toh heard her beautiful testimony and introduced her to a very grateful man of God, who has been trying his very best to be a gentle and loving husband. In these past years God humbled her father, and he repented and little by little his behavior has changed, and for the first time in his life he brought his wife flowers and took her out for her birthday.

Also, as we begin to see the truth, we begin to hate what is evil and love what is good (Amos 5:15). People may think their lust is innocent and not hurting anyone but because of the prevalence of lust in our culture, there are disgusting sins like pedophilia and human trafficking—which are fueled in large by the pornography industry. Many people think it's harmless to view porn, but they are actually contributing to this culture—even I know early elementary school boys who are addicted because they are exposed to it constantly. We should be part of the solution, never part of the problem. Greed is glorified in our society. Excessive luxury should be viewed as a great sin but we like to gaze longingly at it on Facebook don't we? However, greed when it is full grown leads to oppression, marginalization, slavery and war. Do you have someone you can't forgive? You may feel justified but when this sin goes unchecked, it becomes hatred, violence, murder or the division of a church. Seemingly innocent sin, is the root of everything we hate about the world. When we see the horrible truth of sin and the disgusting and vile things it does to our world, we cannot continue to sin.

Yet, knowing and living out biblical truth alone is not enough to set us completely free. If knowing a certain doctrine or following certain steps were all that were necessary for freedom, then Jesus would not need to die on the cross to purchase our freedom. Do you KNOW you should control your tongue? Do you try to practice it? But do you still have a sharp tongue sometimes? Do you KNOW you should control your eyes? Do you struggle to control them? But do your eyes still betray you? What about our hearts? Tragically, there have been too many stories of strong Christians who knew more truth than I do and had a firmer decision to live by it, who were not free and fell. Knowing Biblical truth or applying biblical principles alone cannot set us free. The TRUTH will set disciples free. Jesus says, "I AM the way and the TRUTH and the life" (Jn 14:6). It is only in relationship with Jesus that we can be set free. It is because only Jesus through his death and resurrection broke the power of sin and Satan that held all people in bondage

(Heb 2:14-15). So, verse 36 says, “If the SON sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

In preparation for this message, I read the book “The Steps to Freedom in Christ” by Neil T Anderson—I highly recommend it as a necessary resource for all Bible teachers and those struggling against your sin. It’s basically a book of guided prayer. The author walks the reader through 7 steps of repentance: 1. Repenting of counterfeit gods we have worshipped. 2. Repenting of being deceived that something in the world can satisfy me and save me apart from God. 3. Repenting of unforgiveness and bitterness. 4. Repenting of rebellion against authority. 5. Repenting of pride and selfishness. 6. Repenting of bondage to the lusts of the flesh. 7. Repenting even of generational sin passed down to us. In each chapter you pray that God may bring to your mind all the sins of that category even beyond those described and then you pray repenting in great detail of all the sins you have committed and as you do, you begin to feel that sin has lost its hold on you, you are set free purely by what Christ has done. Maintaining that freedom, involves walking this pattern daily. It is only in the synergy of living out Jesus teachings and living in relationship with him that we can release God’s amazing power to free us in our lives.

Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-30). Jesus invites us to do life together with him, connected with him, working together with him, carrying our burdens together, and living out his lifestyle. It is a life of great freedom, joy, adventure and power. It is not an ideology it is a relationship, it is a lifestyle of living with and for Jesus in all you do. Jesus invites us today to be his disciples and know the truth and let Jesus the truth set us free. Will you accept this beautiful invitation to be Jesus’ disciple?

2. Sin enslaves us (33-59)

Our rebellious nature will try to keep us from the truth

First we thought about those who belong to Jesus but now we will think about those who refuse to belong to Jesus and the terrible consequences of this

decision. The response of the Pharisees should have been, “Teach us Jesus, we want to follow you, no one has ever spoken the way you do!” Instead they took offense at his words. “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” (33) Thomas Aquinas said that pride is the root of all sin.³ Pride blocks self-righteous people from admitting they need Jesus. Pride also blocks sinful people from admitting that they need to repent. They imagine that “freedom” is freedom *to* sin, not freedom *from* sin. M. Rebecca Choi told me a good example: when cars come to a stop light, red means stop and green means go, but a rebellious person says, “I can do what I want, red go!” but the consequences are deadly. Each of us must realize that in our sinful nature there is a strong resistance to this teaching and we must repent and accept it by faith.

We cannot be free until we admit we are slaves

Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (34). Anyone who gives in to any kind of temptation one time knows that even if they don’t do it again, the itch is always there—we become enslaved. This is why the idea, “I’ll just try it once” is so dangerous. Until we admit that we have a problem, we cannot find the solution. People say “I can stop anytime, I can get out of it when I’m ready.” But can they really? CS Lewis, in his book “Mere Christianity” said, “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good...Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later.” The reason people do not know they are enslaved is because they don’t resist their sin. This is why it is good to help each other expose our sin, but with grace and love. Until we try to turn from our sin, resist and be free we don’t know sin’s incredible power, or how utterly powerless we are to free ourselves. Even the Apostle Paul—a former Pharisee—cried out, “I do not understand what I do...For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Ro 7:15,19,24)

³ St. Thomas Aquinas. The Summa Theologica. (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Jesus sets us free to be God's children

If these Pharisees had joined themselves in union with Christ to abide in his word they would not need to be freed, they would be made into a new creation but because they claimed to be free, they in fact were slaves. A slave, has no authority or power to change their status as slaves (35a). However, Jesus as a son in the family has both the authority and power to change our status from slave to child of God (35b; Jn 1:12). Verse 36 says, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." This change of status is not just freedom *from*, but freedom *to*. Not just freedom *from* anger but freedom *to* be happy, not freedom *from* unforgiveness but freedom *to* truly love, not freedom *from* gaming and entertainment but freedom *to* live a real and full life. Jesus frees us to live as his children.

If we don't belong to Jesus we belong to the devil

Jesus gave these Pharisees, such a beautiful promise and invitation but ultimately we see that their original belief was false because they refused to come to Jesus to be set free. People try to imagine that if we don't belong to God we just belong to ourselves but this is a delusion. If we don't belong to God we belong to the devil. They claimed to be Abraham's children and God's children but did their behavior look God's family? They were slaves and children of the devil as evidenced by their lies and murderous intent. While Jesus was telling them the truth he heard from God, they were doing what they heard from their father the devil (38). They were doing the works of their father the devil (41), and they were carrying out the desires of their father the devil (44). Jesus said, "you have no room for my word...you are UNABLE to hear what I say" (37-43). Verse 47 says, "Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." In fact, Jesus said in verse 44, "You belong to your father the devil." This should be a strong warning to us: when we do not obey God we come under demonic influence, hearing his voice, doing his work and carrying out his desires. When we actively disobey God and reject his word, we give Satan permission to enter us as he tragically did in the case of Judas, who was filled with remorse for what he had done. We must ask ourselves: what do my inner motivations and actions reveal about who I really belong to? Are we more willing to obey God or obey my sinful desires? Do I obey God with the same willingness that I obey the urges of my flesh?

Jesus is “I Am”

At this point logic went out the window, and they resorted to name calling, “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?” (48) As you know, in a debate, once one party resorts to making personal or emotional remarks, they’ve already lost, it means they can no longer defend their claim. It shows that Jesus precisely touched their deep root problem. Jesus knew who he was before God, so he did not need to defend himself, he trusted God to judge and to glorify him (50, 54). In fact, he offered them even one final invitation, verse 51 says, “Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.” How beautiful it is to abide in Jesus’ word! We become his, we know God the truth, we are set free and we have eternal life!

This should have been the moment to believe but they simply could not see because they did not know God (55). They incredulously asked, “Who do you think you are?” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!” (58) There are seven metaphorical “I am’s” that we are memorizing in John’s gospel but this is the one absolute, explicit “I am.” This was God’s own self-identification in Exodus 3:14 by which he said Moses could identify him to the Israelites. If his other claims of divinity left any doubt, this was absolutely explicit: “I am God.” Jesus is the light of the world and the bread of life whose words set us free and give eternal life because he is the I AM, who is and has always been and will always be—Jesus is eternal God. They immediately understood the meaning and no longer looked for ways to kill him, they picked up stones to stone him on the spot “but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds” (59).

Conclusion

Today we learned that apart from Jesus we are slaves to sin and belong to the devil hearing his voice, doing his works and carrying out his desires. But if we will choose to abide in Jesus’ words, and practically live with him and learn from him, he will set us free and give us eternal life. It is not a magic bullet method, it is not a 10 steps ideology. It is about drawing near to Jesus, the great I AM. May we choose to live as his disciples today. Amen.