

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

John 8:31-59

Key Verses: 8:31-32

“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.’”

Today’s key verse ends with the word “free.” We love this word. As the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington has come, many have remembered Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech: “Free at last, free at last! Thank God Almighty I am free at last.” He was speaking of freedom from racial oppression. There are many kinds of freedoms. The first amendment mentions freedom of speech, the press, religion, petition and assembly. These freedoms are precious to us; we are willing to sacrifice to gain and keep them. However, there is a deeper and more fundamental freedom that we cannot attain by our own effort. It is freedom from sin and death. This is the most important kind of freedom. In today’s passage Jesus teaches us how to obtain this freedom. It comes from knowing the truth. The key word in this passage is “truth,” which appears seven times (32,32,40,44,44,45,46). Jesus speaks the truth, and Jesus is the truth (Jn 14:6). We can divide today’s passage into two parts. In verses 31-36 Jesus teaches us how to know the truth and the consequences of knowing the truth. In verses 37-59 Jesus contrasts the truth that comes from God and its characteristics with the lies that come from Satan and their characteristics. Let’s listen to the truth so that we may have the real freedom that only Jesus gives.

First, knowing the truth and its consequences (31-36). At the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus declared, **“I am the light of the world.”** There were two responses. Many Jewish leaders remained in the darkness of pride and unbelief. On the other hand, many people humbly accepted Jesus’ words and believed in him. But Jesus did not entrust himself to them. He wanted them to take root in his word and grow. So he said in verses 31-32, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”** In these verses there are three phrases that we need to think deeply about. They are: **“hold to my teaching,” “know the truth,”** and **“the truth will set you free.”**

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In the first place, “hold to my teaching.” Jesus said, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”** What does “hold to my teaching” mean? The words “hold to” are from the Greek word “men-o.” “Men-o” appears again in verse 35 two times, and is translated “permanent place,” and “belongs.” It appears again repeatedly in chapter 15 and is translated “remain.” “Hold to” implies taking firm grasp of something without being moved in the face of resistance. When strong winds blow, we need to hold something that is firm and secure so that we do not go off course. When the strong winds of temptation, relativism and human philosophies blow, we must hold all the more firmly to Jesus’ teachings. By holding to Jesus’ words we can take root in them. When we take root in his word we are spiritually nourished and can grow. The point of “hold to my teaching” is to have a vibrant personal relationship with Jesus. That is why the Greek word is also translated “remain.” If we really want to know Jesus we must hold to his teaching in every season of life—while young or old, in sickness and in health, during failure as well as success, during storms as well as calm, during trials as well as blessing. Then we can really be a disciple of Jesus, that is, learner of Jesus. We can grow in his image and character constantly. We can become a little Jesus and spread his fragrance wherever we go.

In the second place, “know the truth.” If we become disciples of Jesus, then we can know the truth. Usually when people refer to “the truth” they mean “fact” or “reality.” The antonym is “falsehood.” But here to “know the truth” is to know God and his word. The truth is characterized as being unchanging, eternal and universal; it is applicable to all people in all places at all times. Where is such a thing? Everything in the world is changing. The value systems and ideas that guide the world change constantly. If we study the history of music, we can find tremendous shifts over time. Once, classical music was dominant. We heard a beautiful example of this at our summer conference from the UBF orchestra, led by Elder Jim Rarick. Now, freestyle, dynamic, interactive, feeling-oriented, loud music is in style. It requires a lot of energy and older people have trouble appreciating it. Until the last few centuries, marriage meant a social agreement between families, with little to no regard for how the bride and groom felt. In our time, marriages are seen to provide emotional and physical nourishment so that both parties feel that their needs are being fulfilled.¹ In the past, people believed that there was an

¹ <http://www.life123.com/relationships/marriage/marriage-information/the-history-of-marriage>

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absolute truth that applied to all people universally. But today, due to the influence of postmodernism, many feel absolutely that there is no absolute truth. My point is that everything in the world changes. But one thing never changes, that is, God and his word. James 1:17 says, **“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”** 1 Peter 1:24-25a says, **“For, ‘All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’”** Jesus and his word never change. Hebrews 13:8 says, **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”** When we hold to his teaching we experience Jesus, who is eternal and unchanging. We come to know the truth, and have a sure foundation for life in his word. This is amazing.

In the third place, “the truth will set you free.” People long for freedom. They want to live as they please, without restriction or limitation. The prodigal son thought that he would be happy if he left his father and abandoned morality and indulged his flesh with money. But he ended up in a miserable bondage. Real freedom can only be enjoyed in the truth. For example, fish can enjoy freedom while in the water. To the fish water is not a restriction, but necessary to swim around freely. If a fish wants to be free from water, it dies. In the same way, we human beings can enjoy freedom in Jesus, the truth. Jesus’ words of truth do not bind us; they give us real freedom. The woman in chapter 8 experienced this, as have many others. Yesterday, in her baptism testimony, Ruthie Thompson shared that she had been bound by meaninglessness and sinful desires, especially last year. Then she read Romans 3:22-24 and heard Jesus’ word that he loved her, had forgiven her freely by his grace, and given her eternal life. At that moment, all the darkness vanished, and she was set free. Then, through 1 Peter 2:9, Jesus called her a chosen person and a royal priest, especially for Russia. Tomorrow she returns to her mission field with great vision and hope. Jesus’ words do not bind us; they set us free. It is because Jesus’ word is the truth.

Upon hearing Jesus’ teaching, **“the truth will set you free,”** the Jews protested, **“We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”** (33) Actually, they lied. Historically, they had been slaves of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece, and were currently under Roman bondage. They could not say

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that they had never been slaves of anyone. It came from their pride as Abraham's descendants, God's chosen people. They reveal a concept of freedom that was political, social, economic and military. Jesus did not correct them with a history lesson. Rather, he exposed the tragedy of their present bondage and invited them to the freedom they really needed. He said in verse 34, **"Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."** Here Jesus explained the nature of sin; it binds people and makes them slaves. When counseling Cain, who confronted the power of sin, God told him, **"...if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you...."** Sin is like a crouching lion ready to strike its prey and devour it. People think that sin is enjoyable, not knowing the power of sin. When we know the power of sin, we cannot enjoy the pleasure of sin freely. Karl Heim, an influential 20th century theologian, said, "Sin is like a prison cell. We have a key to enter the cell freely. But once we enter, we have no key to escape from it. We are bound." This why the thought, "I will just try it once," has led many people into a bondage they never expected.

How can we escape the bondage of sin? In verse 35 Jesus explains that we need a change in status from slaves to family members. He said, **"Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever."** A slave's status in a family does not change no matter how hard he works or how his condition improves. Slaves might become tutors or managers. But they could not become family members. However, a son belongs to the family forever even though he makes many mistakes. Moreover, a son, as heir, has the power to adopt slaves into his family. Jesus applied this to himself and said in verse 36, **"So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** Jesus, the Son of God, can set us free from slavery to sin. Only Jesus, who is the truth, can change our status from slaves of sin to children of God. To do so, Jesus gave his life and died for us. 1 Peter 1:18-19 says, **"For you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ."**

Many prestigious American universities, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Northwestern were founded primarily for training ministers of God who proclaimed the truth of the gospel. But now these institutions are more secular than sacred in nature. Students go there to pursue many kinds of truth: philosophical, scientific, psychological, economic and so on. These truths are important and valuable, but they cannot set us free from the power

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of sin and death. Many students who have a brilliant grasp of academic truths are still living in the darkness. Many are slaves of greed or sexual immorality. Many are addicted to alcohol, drugs and trivial pursuits. They are suffering from wounds due to unhealthy family life. The truth they gain in universities cannot solve their real problems. So many consider suicide and some actually do it. Others, as Thoreau said, live lives of quiet desperation. They really need the truth, Jesus. They need Bible teachers who can show them the way to Jesus. This is why we teach the Bible to students. Let's pray to share the truth of Jesus with many students on Chicago area campuses in this new fall semester.

Second, the source and characteristics of the truth (37-59). Though Jesus had shared life-giving words, the Jews did not accept them. In fact, they reacted to Jesus out of pride that they were Abraham's descendants (33,39a). In verse 37a, Jesus acknowledged their claim. However, it was true only in a physical sense. In terms of faith and spirit, they did not do what Abraham did (39b). On the contrary, their hearts were full of murderous desire (37b, 40a). Jesus was telling what he had seen and heard in the Father's presence (38a, 40b). But the Jews were listening to and imitating a different father (38b, 41a). They claimed that their Father was God himself (41b). Yet they did not love or believe Jesus, whom God sent (42). They were unable to hear Jesus' word because they belonged to their father, the devil (43-44a). Jesus described the devil in verse 44b: **"He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies."** The devil tears down, destroys and kills; he is violent. In order to destroy, he lies. Often his lies are disguised as half-truths. On the other hand, God gives life, protects and builds up; God always tells the truth. God is sacrificial, kind and merciful. In order to give life, God gave his one and only Son. By contrasting the Father and the devil, Jesus exposed the motive and actions of the Jews. They claimed to be God's children, but they lived like the devil's. Finally, Jesus challenged them, **"Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?" (45-46)** Then Jesus explained that they did not hear Jesus' words because they did not belong to God (47).

The Jews became irrational. They badly insulted Jesus by calling him a Samaritan and demon-possessed (48). But Jesus was not irrational. He said, **"I am not possessed by a demon, but I honor my Father and you**

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dishonor me” (49). Jesus was seeking God’s glory, not his own (50). Jesus did not give up on the irrational Jews. Out of his great shepherd’s heart, he proclaimed: **“Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death”** (51). What a great promise! Who can say that? Since Adam’s fall, no one has cheated the power of death. Death has overpowered all people without exception: rich and poor, powerful and powerless, educated and uneducated, noble and ordinary, beautiful and plain. What is worse, before dying we must suffer from death’s elements: fatalism, meaninglessness, powerlessness, fear and sorrow. How can we not see death? Yet Jesus said, **“Whoever obeys my word will never see death.”** When we obey Jesus’ word, we cross over from death to life. Jesus’ words of truth set us free from the power of death. Those who hold to Jesus’ words will enjoy true freedom and taste eternal life.

At this, the Jews exclaimed, **“Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?”** (52-53) Jesus replied, **“If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad”** (54-56). The Jews were shocked and said, **“You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!”** (57) Jesus answered, **“Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!”** (58) As we studied last week, the words **“I am”** refer to God himself. Jesus boldly and plainly declared that he is God. At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds (59).

As we look back on verses 37-59 we find that the word “father” appears 13 times (38,38,39,41,41,42,44,44,44,49,53,54,56). Essentially, there are two fathers mentioned. One is the Father God, and the other is the devil. The Father God is the source of truth and life. The devil is the source of murder and lies. All truth and all life come from the Father God and belong to him. Since God is truth, we can be sure that he will keep his promises; it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18). On the other hand, the devil is the source of murder and the father of lies. There is no truth in the devil. When he

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lies, he speaks very naturally and fluently, as if it is true. People are often deceived by his lies. The idea that we can enjoy sin without consequence is one of his effective lies. The concept of evolution that denies God is another. Spiritually speaking, we are children either of God or the devil, depending on who we listen to. Which father we belong to is most important to each of us. If we belong to the devil, we are not able to hear the truth and believe. But if we belong to God, we can hear the truth and believe in him and obey his word. Jesus said in John 18:37, **“Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”**

In our times, people often misunderstand the church of Jesus Christ. They think that as it embraces all kinds of people, it should allow all kinds of ideas to circulate freely. But that is not what the Bible teaches. Paul said that God’s household is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Ti 3:15). If the church does not stand on the truth, it will collapse. This is why the devil attacks the church with clever lies. In the world, people cheat and are being cheated; they deceive and are deceived. But in the church we must speak the truth in love. We must preserve the truth, guard the truth, and proclaim the truth. So we have to discern the truth of God from the lies of the devil. Those who seek to tear down and destroy the body of Christ are doing the devil’s work, regardless of how impressive their words sound. God’s work is always to give life through the words of truth and to build up unity in the body of Christ. Knowing the truth is not a light matter. It is the most important matter for everyone. When we know the truth we can have real freedom from the power of sin. When we obey the truth we will never see death, but have eternal life. When we, as a church, guard the truth and proclaim it, the church is strengthened and the kingdom of God advances. Let’s hold to Jesus’ teaching so that we may know the truth. Then the truth will set us free.