

Freedom

John 8:31-59

Key Verse: 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.’”

Freedom is something has driven people to America ever since Europe realized its existence. This past Thursday, we celebrated Thanksgiving...a uniquely American holiday that was started in the 1600's when the Pilgrims came to the New World. After a brutal winter and help from the native population, the Pilgrims celebrated their first harvest by giving thanks to God for getting them thus far. These Pilgrims came to North America from England seeking religious freedom. The Pilgrims were persecuted in England because they were Protestant and not Anglican. In order to worship freely, they came here, but they were not alone. America revolted against England in order to gain its freedom to control its own destiny. We are a nation of immigrants who came to in search of opportunity. At the base of the Statue of Liberty there is a poem by Emma Lazarus that ends, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” We are a nation that loves freedom. It defines our very core, but not many Americans or anybody on this world really know what it means to be free. Today, Jesus shows us what it really means to be free.

This passage has some concepts that are intertwined and I'm going to try my best to untangle them and present them separately. In the previous passage in John's gospel, it was after the Feast of Tabernacles and Jesus was in the temple courts talking to a crowd of people. There was a lot of discussion going back and forth between the crowd and Jesus. He would say something and they would not understand. They were walking in darkness, but there were some of them in the crowd who came to believe in Jesus as he spoke. In this passage, Jesus turns to those who believe and begins to talk more directly to them. **“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.’”** (31-32) It almost seems like Jesus brings up this whole topic of freedom out of nowhere. Some number of people just started believing in him and now he is telling them about how to be free. The problem is that just believing does not make you a disciple.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait, wait, wait! Did I just say that just believing does not make you a disciple of Jesus? John 3:16 says, **“For God so loves the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall have eternal life.”** There's that word “believe” and believing leads to eternal life. It's right there in the verse. But now Jesus is saying that holding to teaching makes a person a disciple. Is faith in Jesus alone not enough for salvation? That is absurd. What Jesus is pointing out here is that the fruit of believing is holding to his teaching. If you do not hold to Jesus' teaching, then how can you say that you really believe? What we have here is a group of people who say that they believe in Jesus. They are a bunch of church-going Christians. Every Sunday they are in the service, listening to the sermon, singing the songs, giving their offering and have big smiles on their faces. They are dressed all nice and are clean-shaven, because that is what Christians do, and they say, “Yeah, I believe in Jesus. I believe that he is the Son of God.” They sound like good people. We might want to be like them, but there is a problem. The Bible says, **“You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.”** (James 2:19) By saying that you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and saying no more, you will have just equated yourself to a demon. Demons

don't deny that Jesus is the Christ, but demons also don't follow Jesus' teaching. Despite knowing who Jesus is, demons still try to go against him. What Jesus is teaching here is to help those who say that they believe to understand really what it means to believe.

To Jesus' words, the people respond that they are Abraham's descendants. They say that their belief in God is because they are Abraham's descendants. They believe because their dad and their granddad and their great-granddad and their great-great-granddad believed. They were Christians because they came for a Christian family. Surely that was enough to merit salvation, you know, salvation by proxy. Facebook released a study this passed week saying every person on the planet is connected to each other by 4.74 people. What this means is that you know Bill; Bill knows Jim; Jim knows Phil; Phil knows Becky; and Becky knows Obama. Therefore, through 4.74 people, you know Obama. That's kind of like what these Jews were saying. "I know Abraham; I'm one of his descendants. And God knows Abraham. So, that means that I know God."

They actually made that connection themselves. They called Abraham their father and Jesus replied, "If you were Abraham's children, then you would do what Abraham did. As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things." (39-40) They called Abraham their father, but they did not act like it. They claimed to be a child of the man of faith, but they were going to kill Jesus. Then the people go on to say that the only Father they have is God. They said that they and Abraham were tight, and that God and Abraham were tight, so they were tight with God. But again, their actions did not bear this out.

Jesus continued, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me." (42) The people's mouths were saying one thing, but their actions didn't even support it. They claimed to believe; they claimed to know God, but they kept getting meaner and meaner. Their remark about not being illegitimate children was probably a dig at Jesus. Jesus was born out of wedlock under suspicious circumstances. But all this showed how much they did not believe. Their actions showed that the people were not children of God, as they professed, but rather as Jesus said, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. 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." (44) Jesus just flat out told the people the truth. Their actions showed that their father was the devil. They believed in Jesus but even the demons do that. The devil believes that Jesus is the Son of God. To stop there lumps you in with the devil and demons.

Everything that I have just said is just getting to the root of why Jesus is talking about freedom and holding to his teaching. It's our extended introduction that was untangled from the passage. Even though the people believed in Jesus, they weren't his disciples and they weren't free. The people weren't holding to Jesus' teaching. They were going to kill Jesus. At the end of this passage, the people were picking up stones to stone Jesus and in less than a year, their sins would nail Jesus to the cross. Jesus was talking to them about this because he knew where they would end up and that would be the same place that the devil and all his demons would end up: in hell.

Now that we've untangled the why, let's go back to the beginning of the passage again

and look at what Jesus was telling them. “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.’” (31-32) When the Jews heard this they said, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” (33) The people were saying that they didn’t need to be set free, they were already free, never mind the fact that they were currently under Roman occupation or were slaves in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia for hundreds of years. If you overlook those things, then maybe the people were free. In fact, their pride over their freedom sounds very American. “We’re Americans and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

Since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, we Americans have considered ourselves free. It says in the second paragraph of the declaration, “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 pursuit of freedom is baked into our culture. It permeates all of our lives. We don’t like being told what to do; we like to make our own decisions. We pride ourselves that we have a choice: a choice of what to wear, a choice of what to eat, of where to live, of what to study, a choice of who to marry; we have a choice to speak, a choice to assemble, and a choice to believe. Truly we must be free. It is not only Americans that desire these choices...these freedoms. The Arab Spring is running strong in the Middle East. Many of the people in Arab countries want the freedom to choose their leaders and the freedom to not be oppressed by the government. Since March, four dictators have been deposed in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and, this passed week, Yemen. People are seeking freedom, but are they finding it?

The freedom that Jesus is talking about runs deeper than political or economical freedom. Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” (34) Everyone has their vices, burdens and the stupid things that they have done. The Bible calls these things sins because they separate us from God and these sins enslave us in various ways. The guy who is addicted to pornography keeps going back because it brings him pleasure, but the soul is numbed as the image of humanity and sexuality is perverted. Not all sin is so pleasurable. Being afraid and worried does not bring pleasure, but you don’t trust in God. You think that you have to do everything and if you let your guard down, everything will fall apart. You have just bound yourself with a burden that you weren’t to bear. Other sins tell you that you’ve done wrong and you are going to die for it. Ultimately, that is where all sins lead, and in death is where sin’s power lies. We become so afraid of death because it has a hold on us through our sins.

For me, there are times when I don’t trust God. I become frozen with fear because of some of the strangest things. A couple of days ago, I realized that I become paralyzed with fear when having to call someone. I’ve always been socially awkward, and I used to chalk my uneasiness about calling people up to my awkwardness. I’ve always been hesitant to call people. I didn’t want to be a bother or catch them at the wrong time or I wouldn’t know what to say or what the protocol is on reasons to call people or all those things at once. But when my wife Viola asked me to call someone, I froze and couldn’t do anything for some time. It was embarrassing. I realized that I was just afraid to make the call. I’m burdened by this problem and I wonder if it will ever go away. But ultimately, I sin because I don’t hand this issue over to God and trust that he can take care of it. I’m not free.

The people in this passage weren't free either. Their pride had blinded them that they are sinners in need of salvation. They thought that because they were Abraham's children, that they had a right to go to God. They were deluded into thinking that they were all right and didn't need anything else. That's a lot like us. We think that freedom means that we can do whatever we want. That is a part of those choices we have. We are not bound by unnecessary rules, but are able to make decisions based on what is best for us. If you want to go out partying all night, you are free to do so. If you want to eat only cheese the rest of your life, you can. If you want to shave a cat and put the video in on YouTube, that's your business. You are free to do what you want. The problem is that is a lie. Freedom does not mean that we can do whatever we want because most of the things we want to do inadvertently bind us to them. If you keep on partying, then there is a good chance that you will fail out of school. If you eat only cheese, you will become fat and die because you aren't eating well. If you try to shave a cat, you will probably be bleeding. You are bound by an unfavorable consequence. If you think that your sins do not control you, then I tell you to stop sinning. Stop right now and don't sin in your actions and in your mind. Are you able to do that? I don't think you can. I wouldn't call that freedom and that's why the people in the passage weren't free either.

However, Jesus told the people that if they held to his teaching, they would be his disciples and then they would know the truth and the truth would set them free (31-32). Jesus told them that they would know the truth. When Jesus was speaking the truth, he was speaking about a few things. One of which is that Jesus is the truth. Jesus says later in John, **"I am the way, the truth, and the life."** (John 14:6) Jesus is the truth because he is eternal, unchanging and absolute. Another meaning about the truth is the truth that the people are sinners and they are bound by sins. Jesus was very blunt and he even told the crowd of people that their father was the devil. The truth was that if they kept following him, then they would end up in hell for eternity. The truth is that one of the first steps to being free from sin is to know that you are a sinner. Jesus didn't want the people to go to hell; he was trying to save them. Jesus was telling the crowd about freedom because he wanted them to have the freedom from sin and the ability to come to God.

Now that is true freedom. Freedom is not the ability to do whatever we want. Freedom is the ability to live a life for its intended purpose. Freedom is being able to let go of whatever hinders us from reaching perfection. Freedom is the ability to take eternal life. Freedom is the ability to be near God. In Jesus, we are free to worship...there is nothing that holds us back. There is no fear about what other people think because we are so focused on the one who saved us. We don't need to have anybody talk to God for us. We are free to open our mouths and talk to the creator of everything. In Jesus, a whole new world is opened to us.

Nevertheless, the people didn't want to have any of it. They called Jesus a Samaritan and demon-possessed. The people started calling him all the dirty names in the book, but Jesus kept going. **"I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death."** (50-51) Jesus is pleading for the crowd to obey his words so that they may have life and not see death. Peter said a couple of chapters ago that Jesus' words were words of life. That means that following Jesus' words would mean that you would gain life and salvation from sins.

Unfortunately, the people were still unconvinced. **"At this they 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) The people were still obsessed with Abraham. They knew that only God could grant eternal life and they called Jesus out on it. Jesus replied back, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." (56) Jesus knew that Abraham was waiting for Jesus' day. Abraham knew that one from his line would bless the whole world. Abraham knew that Jesus would come to save his people.

Sadly, the people still weren't following Abraham, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!" (57) The Jesus that was standing there was born around a little more than thirty years prior. He was fairly young. How could he see Abraham who lived a few thousand years prior? It would be like Orlando saying that he saw Jesus in the flesh. It would be absurd. He looks so young. How could he be over two thousand years old? It was a wacky, crazy thing to say that could easily be proven false.

"Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (58) This was a very bold statement. It would have been a bold statement to say, "before Abraham was born I was". That would mean that Jesus existed before Abraham, but Jesus uses, "before Abraham was born, I am!" This statement is much bigger than saying Jesus merely existed before Abraham, and you could see it because the people picked up stones to stone him. The "I am" in that sentence refers to God. God used those same words when he referred to himself when talking to Moses through the burning bush in Exodus. The "I am" is the name of God that is translated into English as "the LORD" in all caps. Jesus was saying that he was the voice in the burning bush – he was saying that he is God. That's why they wanted to stone him. Jesus was claiming to be God, and if it weren't true, it would be an offense punishable by death.

But Jesus is God. He is the author of life, the maker of heaven and earth and all things on the earth. It was Jesus' voice that called light out of the darkness and his hand that gathered the waters into seas. This in true not because Jesus said so, but in his actions. "He spoke with clarity. Walked across the sea. A single word would calm the storm. His touch could heal the sick but He was called a hypocrite. Laid behind the stone. His death was shortly mourned He left the curtain torn." (*Hero* by Abandon) That was a verse from a song by a band called Abandon, but if you look to where we came from in John's gospel, you see that Jesus changed water into wine, healed the sick, and fed five thousand men with some biscuits and sardines. Before the end, Jesus would make the blind see and the deaf hear, and raise the dead from their graves. When Jesus himself would die, he would not stay dead. Death had no power over Jesus because he is the author of life, the living God.

Jesus says that he is God to show his authority to grant freedom. "Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (35-36) Only Jesus is able to give us the freedom to be perfect. Only Jesus sets us free from our bondage to sin. Only Jesus can restore us to God because only Jesus is God. Think about that for a moment. All the fear that you have that holds you back from freely worshipping God can disappear. All the burdens in your heart and all the addictions in your soul can be gone. The storm in your spirit can be quieted. Pain and weariness can be expunged. Broken hearts can be mended. My social fears, as irrational as they are, can be wiped away all because Jesus is God and his words set us free and that is the truth.

I hope you are as excited as I am about this. This is huge. Could you imagine anything like this? How can we know if it really is true? **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** (31-32) We are free when we know the truth and we know the truth because we are Jesus’ disciples. Jesus’ teaching is truth. By holding on to Jesus’ teaching, we show ourselves to be Jesus’ disciples because we look like little Jesuses. It’s not that we have to follow a list of rules to become Jesus’ disciples. That’s not true. It means that when we are his disciples, then we will know it because we hold to his teaching.

So what is his teaching? It is right here in the Bible – the whole thing from beginning to the end. The religious leaders in Jesus’ time liked to talk about what their teachers taught them and their teachers talked about what their teachers taught them, but they were far removed from the original source. Jesus spoke directly the word of God and one of the most important things that he taught was that he is God. Jesus is the author of life, the one who sets us free and it is the most important teaching that we need to hold on to. A lot of people like to think that Jesus is their friend and pal, but Jesus is also God. He knows you on the inside and the outside, and we can’t forget that. We can’t choose to follow some of his word and not others because we don’t like what it says. Jesus knows what we need to be set free because he knit our bones together, so know that truth and be free.