

Welcome Home: Where You're Free to Be Yourself!

A sermon based on John 8:31-36 - ***To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."***

³³ They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

³⁴ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are you familiar with Martin Luther's tower experience? After he had hammered the 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door (which we celebrate as the Reformation), did you know Luther continued to struggle with rightly understanding the grace and righteousness of God? It wasn't until a couple of years later when God finally revealed to him what his grace truly was – God's righteousness given/credited to his account through the gift of faith in Jesus.

Anyways, that all took place one day as he was studying God's Word in his room in the tower of the cloister he served at, thus the name the "tower experience." But, according to tradition, Martin wasn't just in his tower room, pouring over Scripture when this epiphany came. As the story goes, he was actually using the restroom at the time. You see, he struggled with constipation; he was all stopped up. But, at that moment, when God revealed the true meaning of his grace to Luther, his heart opened up. The burden of carrying all the guilt of his sins, which he knew he could never do enough good on his own to appease the guilt, the shame...that burden was lifted. He even said of the moment, ***"I began to understand that [Scripture] means that the righteousness of God is revealed through the Gospel...that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The righteous person lives by faith." All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates."***

Well, again, according to tradition, at that moment, guess what else opened up, too?!?

I know, a little gross. But, the point? When Martin Luther finally discovered the truth of Scripture, how God's grace alone saves through the gift of faith in Jesus alone – a gift the Holy Spirit works in a person through Scripture alone, the shackles came off. The shackles of guilt and doubt and worry and fears of never being able to be good enough for God and for heaven – these shackles holding him captive to sin – finally came off. And he was free, free to finally be himself...free to be who God wanted him to be – not even primarily the great reformer, but a precious child of God and a light for Christ.

Whether or not that revelation actually opened up his bowels or not, that's for the tales. What matters is this total, complete freedom which impacted his entire life.

It's a freedom Jesus speaks of in our verses for today. Here's what he says, ***"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."***

Do you understand? Do you understand what Jesus is saying? How would you say that in your own words?

Let's work backwards. What is the truth that sets you free...from sin? The gospel – the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for you...the message of forgiveness that releases you from your sins.

How do you know the truth of the gospel...like, really know it...with your head, yes, but also with your heart, that you cling to that truth and believe it with all your heart? By staying connected to God's Word, holding fast to Jesus' teachings (which means listening to, and learning, and living according to those teachings).

Because doing that shows what? We are who Jesus wants us to be. We are his disciples. We are his children who long to sit at the foot of our Savior and listen to him speak.

That's true freedom – being Jesus' disciple, holding to his teachings (which includes listening to and learning them and living according to them), and, as a result, having confidence in the truth of the gospel...that it's for me.

Is that what freedom looks like in your life? If you think about your discipleship right now, does it follow that pattern – knowing the truth and holding to his teachings (listening, learning, living)?

You see, that phrase **“holding to [Jesus'] teaching”** implies both a sense of quality and quantity. Let me explain what I mean. In regards to quality of the teachings you're holding to, putting your faith in man-made teachings, human reason, or scientific hypotheses that deviate from Scripture doesn't qualify as holding to Jesus' teaching. We understand that.

But, I think for us today, a huge struggle is submitting our own reason to the truth of God's Word. For instance, living life on your own terms and doing what you want (though, maybe sinful) because you say “God just wants me to be happy,” it sounds good, but that's not what the Bible says. Reasoning, “Well, God would understand” to dismiss or even validate a sin you're caught up in (even something we might think minute, like “God knows I can't give offerings right now,” or “God would surely understand if I take a break from worship for a while because I'm not feeling up to it, or I'm too tired or too busy, or I have to work...but God understands”), that's simply not true, and not true to God's Word. There's this constant threat today, just as in Luther's day, and in Jesus' day, to include human teachings and our own reasoning (what we think and what we want God's Word to say) along with the teachings of Jesus. That's not how it works. The quality of Jesus' teachings is important.

Now, the quantity aspect of “holding to Jesus' teachings” is important as well...as in, how much of God's Word am I getting? And for that, there's a question I think it's time we struggle with....and that is, “Am I sinning if I'm not coming to church or to Bible class, if I'm not bringing the kids to Sunday School, or if I'm not studying God's Word on my own? Is that sin?”

What do you think? Now, more importantly, what does God think?

That's easy enough to know. I mean, he tells us in his Word. Here are a few pertinent verses to chew on...

Psalms 122:1 – **“I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.”**

Hebrews 10:24-25 – ***“Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess...Let us not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”***

1 Peter 2:2,3 – ***“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”***

2 Peter 3:18 – ***“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”***

2 Timothy 3:14-15 – ***“Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of.”***

What did you hear? I heard things, like, we rejoice in the opportunities to come home and worship God. Being here, regularly, that’s a good habit. God’s Word, we should crave it like a newborn needs that milk. God wants us to want to keep growing in our knowledge of him... to continue being in his Word, which happens here.

What does that mean on a practical level? It means, outside of very few legitimate excuses (like, definitely the precautions you might be having to take right now with the virus, but even more so, I mean excuses you would feel comfortable in making if God were standing right here and you’d be confident they would hold up)...outside of that, I want to make every effort to be in God’s house every Sunday. It means Bible study doesn’t stop at confirmation (contrary to what 90% of our congregations seem to think!). It doesn’t stop when you hit some specific elderly age, either. It means getting the kids up early on Sunday for church and for Sunday School isn’t a chore, but a blessing and a joy to “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them,” as Jesus said. And, as a parent or even just an adult, it’s my joy and privilege to model that attitude for them. Holding to Jesus’ teaching means we will “hear, read, learn and take to the heart” the Word of God on a regular, yes, even a daily basis...or, when Pastor introduces these Branches small group Bible studies, or asks you if you want to join up with an existing group, instead of counting the costs – the sacrifices of “well, I’d have to give this up to come,” it’s a “Yes! I will make this work out!”

Does that describe you? If not, where’s the disconnect?

You remember how the Jews responded to Jesus? ***“We’re Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves to anyone.”*** They were showing their ignorance; at that time, they were under Roman rule.

Might that same ignorance reside in your hear? You know, I’ve heard the chant. I can read between the lines, the messages you send by your actions. “I don’t need to be at church every Sunday.” “The kids will be ok without Sunday School.” If I’m coming to church, that should be good enough; daily devotions, Bible class – I don’t need that. My faith is strong enough.” ‘Pastor, you can harp on this all you want; you’re not going to change my mind.” And the reasoning is “Freedom! I have Christian freedom to do that or not to do that.”

That’s not freedom. That’s the devil talking. If you don’t desire to do what Jesus tells you to do, that’s not freedom. It’s slavery to sin. Because you’re not holding to Jesus’ teachings, which I just shared with you. And, if you’re not holding to Jesus’ teachings, then the follow-up question is, how well are you really doing at being his disciple? I mean, they gave up everything to follow Jesus and to listen to Jesus and to learn from Jesus. Martin Luther gave up convenience and his personal safety to redirect people

to the truth of God's Word, which includes the importance of consistently being in God's Word. That was their life. Is that you?

I'm not there...not all the time. And, I know you aren't, either...because none of us are perfect. Not an excuse, but the reality. We still – often – find those shackles of sin wrapped around our wrists, controlling our lives.

We have been slaves to sin because, as sinners, we can't break free by our own strength. We can't!

But I want to tell you – and I get to tell you – what Jesus tells you..."you are free." "You are free indeed!"

One night, after a long hard day of work, the slave shivered curled up under the thin blanket of his cell. But hearing a noise at the door of his cage he bolted upright. "Who's there?" he demanded. The stranger replied, "Shhhh! We don't want to get caught!" And with a crack as loud as the whip that struck his back, the lock broke in two. The stranger opened the door of the cage and helped the slave to his feet. "Come on! Follow me! We're getting you out of here! You're going to be a free man!"

You see, when we were enslaved to sin and Satan, to death and hell, God sent his Son on a rescue mission. He took our place as he lived chained to the law for us. And try as it might, the whip of the law couldn't reach Jesus as he kept every one of its demands perfectly. But then, he who was totally free from sin and death, took our sin on himself and submitted to death. The Master of all, humbly became a slave. Jesus even said, "***The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many***" (Mark 10:45).

And by his death, he broke chains of sin that held us captive. By his resurrection, he shattered the doors of death! So, because of his life, death, and resurrection, we're free. We did nothing to aid in our emancipation! God did it all and gave it to us as gift! By grace alone, he made us his sons and daughters through faith in Jesus alone, with permanent places in his family, having the eternal inheritance of heaven. And we know that because the truth of Scripture alone assures us that is our reality...because the Son has set us free.

Being his children...being recipients of this awesome gift of freedom from slavery to sin, we want to clean up our act, right? We want to be better disciples of Jesus; we want our faith to be stronger. We want to live in true freedom. Now, how?

Think of it this way: Who here has a pet at home? A dog? A cat? Where's the best place for that pet to be? Free? In the wild, scrounging for food, trying to keep warm in the winter, avoiding predators, and struggling to survive? Or in the confinement of your home where that pet is well-fed, warm, and loved? And, at the end of a leash or enclosed in the fenced-in area to keep it from running into traffic or going after the moose? Real freedom for a dog or cat is found in being a pet - enslaved, if you will, by a loving master who cares for it, feeds it, loves it, and yes, even puts it on a leash to protect it from getting lost or hit by a car.

Freedom is not being able to do what we *want* to do. That is, in fact, bondage. Real freedom means we are now able to do what we *ought* to do and *want* to do it. We are now free to be ourselves...to live our lives as God originally intended – faithful to him.

And real freedom for us is found in being, well, God's slave, cared for by him, fed by him, loved by him, and yes, even curbed by his law to protect us from losing our faith in Jesus and falling away. And, so, under God's loving protection, compelled by Christ's love, we long to grow as his disciples. We long to be disciplined – taught from God's Word constantly – so frequent worship, getting connected to a Branches group or some other Bible study, getting your kids to Sunday School, getting yourself into God's Word on a more regular basis, all so we can be shaped and conformed more and more to what God wants us to be. We want that. We long to do that. We're free to do that. We love to do that.

And since you're here – and I might mostly be preaching to the choir on this, we also long to encourage and point the rest of our Light of the World family to what true freedom in Christ is...and where it's found...here, at home with Christ, connected to the truth of the gospel. This is the place where, through the gospel, you are given the freedom to be who Jesus wants you to be...the freedom to hold to his teachings.

Welcome home! You are free. Enjoy your freedom in Christ! Use your freedom to serve him in thanks! Use it to hold on tightly to his teachings – in all the ways that you can. Use it to continue to be Christ's disciple. That's who you've been freed to be. That's what we love to do! Amen.

To view other sermons, click [here](#).