

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 passage teaches us how we can be truly free. We live in a country where freedom is cherished by all. As Americans, we enjoy many kinds of freedom that people long for in some countries such as China, North Korea and many Islamic countries. We have freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom to choose where you live and freedom to make money and use it anyway you please. Yet many people are not really free. Some people are slaves to their own sinful desires. Some are enslaved by the fear of death and condemnation. The Constitution cannot set us free from this kind of bondage. We may be doing something we know we don’t want to do, and not doing something we really want to do. Like St. Paul, we may feel like shouting, “Who can rescue me from this bondage?” Let us open our hearts and ears to listen to Jesus to find the answer!

I. “IF YOU HOLD TO MY TEACHING” (31-41)

Look at 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.”* In these verses, Jesus teaches us the secret of how we can be truly free.

First, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” Jesus was speaking to the Jews who had believed in him (30). He told them to hold to his teaching. As we learned in John 6, many Jews had come to Jesus and were amazed at his word of life and miraculous healing of the sick. But they did not hold to his teaching. They left Jesus when they did not get what they wanted from him—free bread. They failed to make commitment to live a life of faith to obey his words. They were only interested in something that would satisfy their physical desires.

What does it mean to hold to Jesus’ teaching? A marathon runner will not be declared a winner if he stops in the middle of the 26-mile race. Likewise, faith in Christ is a lifetime commitment. To be born again one day is not an end. In fact, it is just a beginning. Just as a newborn baby needs to drink milk to grow, a Christian must drink the spiritual milk and grow in faith. St. Peter says the following: “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1Pe 2:2). This is a lifetime process. Jesus teaches us to hold to his teaching. We must hold to his teaching in our hearts and put them into practice in our daily lives. When we hold to his teaching, we can be really his disciples. This is the reason why we must study, meditate and obey God’s word on a daily basis.

Jesus says that if we hold to his teaching, we are really his disciples. The word “disciple” means “learner.” A disciple of Jesus is the one who learns from Jesus and follows him in his footsteps. Without accepting and obeying his word, no one can become his disciples. One who does not learn and grow remains childish even when he becomes old. When we hold to his teaching, we are really Jesus’ disciples. So it is imperative for us to study and remember the words of Christ and hold on to them. We may not be able to memorize all the teachings of Jesus, but we must have one word of Jesus in our hearts each time we study the Bible. In this way, we can become his disciples.

Second, “you will know the truth.” Look at verse 32 again. *“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* When we hold to Jesus’ teaching, we come to know the truth. What then is the truth? Truth is what is true. There are two distinct characteristics of truth. Truth is something that never changes, even when human circumstances change. Truth is also universal, applying to everyone in the world—men and women, white and black, the rich and the poor, Democrats and Republicans, and so on. Where is such a thing in this world that stays constant forever and applies to all people? Everything in this world is temporary. Nothing in this world stays constant forever. Nothing in this world can be everything to everyone. Therefore the truth cannot come from this world. The truth comes from God who is eternal. 1 Peter 1:24,25 says: “All men 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 stands forever.” The word of God is the truth. Nothing in this world is worthy of holding. They will all pass sooner or later. Only God’s word, which is eternal, gives us eternal life.

Jesus is the truth. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). His love for us never changes. John 14:6 says, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” The word of Jesus is the truth. He spoke the truth. Jesus often began his teaching by saying, “I tell you the truth.” He said to Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (Jn 3:3). He also said, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned” (Jn 5:24). Indeed, Jesus’ teaching is worthy of holding. It gives us eternal life and the hope of the kingdom of God to those who believe in him.

There have been many eloquent speeches given by great men in history. Consider, for example, Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, which was given on November 19, 1863 at the national cemetery in Gettysburg. In his speech, Lincoln spoke about the “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” His speech is considered one of the best in American history, if not in world history. His speech contributed much to the advancement of democracy in many nations. However, it has also become a cradle of secular humanism. Under the flag of democracy, the moral fiber of our society has been declining steadily, especially since 1960s. Lincoln’s speech was good, but it was still the words of a mortal man. Only the word of God gives life.

If we hold to Jesus’ teaching, we come to know the truth. For example, the Pilgrim Fathers held to his teaching in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” When they arrived in the new land, they confronted many difficulties as pioneers. Forty-five of the 102

Mayflower pilgrims died in their first harsh winter in the New World (1620-21). But they built their churches before their own houses. It didn't make much sense to human eyes that they put God first when they had to worry about so many things. But they found out that his teaching is the truth. When they held to his teaching, God blessed their faith and this nation abundantly.

Third, “the truth will set you free.” Look at verse 32 again. *“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Many people feel they are free when they live according to their sinful nature. To them freedom means doing whatever they feel like doing, whether right or wrong. The motto of today's young people seems to be “when it feels good, do it.” However, people find out that unlimited physical freedom does not give them real freedom. They become slaves to their own flesh desires. They may enjoy sinful pleasures for a while, but they suffer much from their guilty feelings and eventually the condemnation. Man cannot be truly free until he is free from sin and death. Who can set us free from sin and death?

Jesus says, *“... the truth will set you free.”* When we have Jesus' teaching, we come to know the truth and the truth sets us free. The gospel of Jesus sets us free from our sin and death. Jesus died on the cross and was raised on the third day to set us free from sin and death. Jesus paid the highest price, his life, to secure our freedom. Only Jesus' teaching is the life-giving word of God. We can be truly free only in Jesus our Lord, just like a bird is free in the air. If you put a bird in the water, it would not be free. A fish is free in the water, not in the desert. Likewise, we cannot be truly free when we follow our sinful nature. It's a wrong place to be. We can be truly free only in Jesus, our Creator God, Savior and Shepherd.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was a slave to his sinful desires despite his intellectual success. He was a spiritual wanderer at a time when the Roman Empire was about to collapse. Out of his frustration, he indulged in drinking and womanizing. He could not get out of his hedonistic life. No one could help him. But the truth set him free. His soul was awakened by the word of God spoken through St. Ambrose (340-397; author, composer, and bishop of Milan). Then one day he thought he heard a voice saying, “Pick up and read.” He picked up the Bible and read the random page that was opened to him. The passage was Romans 13:13-14 which read: “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” He took this scripture to his heart and held on to it. Then he was changed from a corrupt man to a saint in God's redemptive history. He was set free from his bondage. When we come to know the truth, a fundamental change occurs in our life.

Fourth, “everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (33-43). How did the Jews respond to Jesus? They said, “We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” The Jews were proud of being Abraham's descendants. They prided themselves as the chosen people of God. This pride helped them in keeping their identity through many sufferings in their history. Unfortunately, their racial pride made them stubborn. They were self-righteous. They were spiritually blind. In Jesus' time they were under the bondage of the Roman

Empire. They also had been slaves in Egypt and Babylon. But they even denied the historical facts. The Jews were slaves to their racial pride. More importantly they were slaves to their sinful nature. And when they denied that they were slaves, they could not be set free.

Despite their proud attitude, Jesus wanted to help them. Look at verses 34-36. *Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 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."* They were slaves to their sin of pride. Jesus told them that they had no place in the house of God as long as they remained in sin (35). Jesus wanted them to empty their pride and accept the word of life. Jesus really wanted them to have places in the glorious house of God. Of course, Jesus recognized that they were the physical descendants of Abraham. But what they did was not like Abraham. Instead of being a blessing like Abraham was, they were ready to kill Jesus (37,40).

What was their response? They protested, "Abraham is our father" (39). "We are not illegitimate children" (41). They did not curb their pride. They rejected the life-giving words of our Lord Jesus, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 to free slaves in America. But in Jamaica, emancipation arrived much earlier, in the 1830's. Until then, horrible things were happening in this island of the Caribbean Sea. A slave would not survive more than 10 years after he was captured. Plantation owners found it cheaper to work their slaves to death and replace them with new ones than maintaining them with food and health. They forced them to work 12 hours straight without a break under the hot sun. So jubilant shouts rang out when the emancipation proclamation was read on August 1, 1834. Sadly, however, some slaves in the remote areas of the island did not know about the proclamation. Their evil owners kept the truth from them. These slaves did not know the truth and they were not free. In Jesus' time, the pride of the Jews (and the devil) kept them from the truth that Jesus came to set them free. Today, Satan still tries to hide the truth from people. It is our mission to bring the news of freedom to young people of our generation!

II. "IF GOD WERE YOUR FATHER, YOU WOULD LOVE ME" (42-47)

Look at verse 42. *Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me."* Jesus made a distinction between biological children and spiritual children. The Jews were biological children of Abraham, and they were proud of the genetic heritage. But Jesus taught them that the true children of Abraham would do what Abraham did (39). Abraham obeyed the word of God. So if they were Abraham's children, they would obey the word of God. On the contrary, the actions of the Jewish leaders revealed that they were children of Satan. Their actions showed the traits of the devil. First, they did not love the Son of God, even though the Son had demonstrated God's redemptive love and purpose through his messianic ministry. Even a blind beggar recognized Jesus as the Son of David (Mk 10:48). But the Jewish leaders despised and rejected him. Second, they did not accept the word of the Son of God. They heard Jesus' teaching, they knew that Jesus was the Son of God, but they hardened their hearts in their pride. Third, they

were the devil's children because they had the two main characters of the devil. They wanted to kill Jesus (44). They had an intention to murder Jesus, which they later carried out. They were also liars. They said and did whatever was expedient for their selfish ambition. We learn here that those who do not speak on the basis of God's word are liars and children of the devil. The devil is the one who does not hold to the truth (44). Children of the devil do not believe even when they hear the truth (45). They do not believe in the Son because they do not belong to God (46-47).

III. "BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS BORN, I AM!" (48-59)

The Jews should have accepted Jesus' teaching. Instead, they insulted Jesus, saying, "You are a Samaritan and demon-possessed." But Jesus was very patient with them and said, "*I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death*" (51). Jesus really wanted them to have eternal life by accepting his word. Jesus was a good shepherd for the proud people. What was their response? The Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he 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) Their racial pride blinded their spiritual eyes and they could not see the Son of God.

The Jews did not know God's plan of world salvation through Abraham. So Jesus explained how Abraham kept God's promise concerning the coming Messiah. Look at verse 56. "*Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.*" Abraham believed God's promise when God said to him, "... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Ge 22:18). It was a hint about the Messiah that would come from the line of Abraham. Based on this promise, Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeking the Messiah. By faith he foresaw the promised Messiah coming into the world to save people from their sins. By reminding this, Jesus wanted to help the Jews to realize the long-term redemptive plan of God that had begun with Abraham and was completed with the coming of Jesus. Jesus wanted them to repent of their spiritual pride and accept the Messiah as their personal Savior.

Look at verse 57. "*You are not yet fifty years old,*" the Jews said to him, "*and you have seen Abraham!*" They had no spiritual understanding. Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" (58) Jesus plainly told them that he is God. Actually the Jews had been waiting for the Messiah. But when he came, they rejected him. It was a tragedy. Jesus still wanted them to open their spiritual eyes to see him as the eternal God. He said, "*I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!*" Not only did Jesus say that he was there before Abraham, he also applied God's holy name (*I Am*, Ex 3:14) to himself. At this, they picked up stones to stone him. May God help us not to reject the Messiah because of our spiritual pride!

In this passage, we learn that if we hold to the words of Christ, we can be true disciples of Jesus. Then we will know the truth and the truth will set us free. May God help us to study and hold on to his words so that we may know the truth and be set free! May God help us freely serve the holy mission that the Lord entrusted with us!