JESUS SETS US 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.’”

What is freedom? Is it to do or say whatever we want, go wherever we want, whenever we want? As with many things, we can enjoy an outward kind of freedom, but we can also enjoy an inner freedom. Someone in a prison cell might actually be more free than somebody going around all over the place. Today Jesus promises freedom to his disciples. In this study we want to learn more about the freedom Jesus gives, and how we can have it. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

John’s Gospel has several major sections. Since chapter 5 we’ve been studying the second and main section: Jesus’ testimony to the Jews. Frankly, it’s not been going well. From the beginning the Jews have been hostile to Jesus, and in today’s passage their hostility reaches a boiling point. But in the midst of this conflict Jesus gives one of his most famous sayings. Read verses 31,32. We can find several important things here.

First of all, Jesus is inviting us to go deeper. It says these Jews “had believed him.” Verse 30 says, “Even as he spoke, many believed in him.” We tend to think simplistically: either we believe or we don’t. But John’s Gospel repeatedly shows us that believing is a process. Our belief needs to go deeper, from believing based on external things like a miracle or somebody else’s words, to believing personally, based on Jesus’ words. Those who do so aren’t just casual believers; people who believe based on his words are his disciples. Being a disciple is more serious; it’s a bigger commitment. Depth in anything always involves more commitment, right? In a sense Jesus is inviting us all to go deeper as his true disciples. But to do that, we’ve got to be more committed.

What is a disciple’s commitment? Jesus says it is to “hold to” his teaching. In Greek it says “live in my word.” It means we’ve got to commit to making Jesus’ word part of our daily lives. How do we do that? First of all, we’ve got to make time to think about it every day. If days go by and we haven’t opened the Bible and thought about it, we can’t be living in the word. Doing it once a week doesn’t really cut it. So often we say we’re too busy. But honestly, that’s an excuse. We always make time for what’s important to us. If Jesus and his words are important to us, we’ll make time for it each day. Many people do this by spending time reading the Bible alone, first thing in the morning.

But even that is not enough. In verse 37 Jesus says we have to make “room” for his word. It’s like our hearts are full of furniture, and there’s no room to put anything else. Have you ever heard a sermon and immediately forgot what you just heard? Have you ever read the Bible and immediately forgot what you just read? Why do we do that? Maybe we have a short attention span. But really, it’s because we’ve got so many other things on our minds, so many other things we want. If we’re going to make room within us for Jesus’ word, we’ve got to be intentional. We’ve got to take time to reflect on it. We’ve got to put aside our other thoughts, concerns and worries, even for a little while, and really pay attention to what Jesus said. We’ve got to learn to think more deeply about it.

But living in his word is not just about time or disciplined thinking; it’s about *believing* what he said, and, *practicing* what he taught. In verses 51 and 55 Jesus talks about obeying the word. To live in his word, we’ve got to learn to obey it in real life. What good is it if we meditate on his word, but then go out and disobey what he said? That’s self-deceptive (Jas1:22–25). Of course it’s hard to obey Jesus’ word. But if we really believe it, we’ll be doing our best to obey it.

Still, it may seem vague and overwhelming. How can we possibly be obeying everything Jesus taught all the time? It’s hard enough even to know and remember it all, much less be practicing it all, in every situation! The key word here is “disciple.” It means “learner.” No one ever knows it all, right from the start. But we can start with one teaching of Jesus and try to put it into practice. For example, Jesus said, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life…” (6:27a) What did he really mean? Basically, he’s challenging us to make a new priority, to stop focusing on making money and start focusing on growing in faith. It’s a radically new way of living. So, we need to follow through with a new and practical choice each day. Where’s my focus going to be? Jesus also teaches us to love one another (13:34,35). We need to hold to his teaching by practicing deeds of love for each other, even when we don’t feel like it.

And there’s another important point. Jesus’ word isn’t just a bunch of do’s and don’ts, rules and laws. His word is mainly about himself. He rebuked people: “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (5:39,40). To hold to his teaching, to live in his word, we need to be coming to Jesus regularly. But what does that really mean? First of all, to come to Jesus really, we’ve got to be aware how much we need him. If we think we’re fine on our own, we won’t be coming to him. If we think we can do it on our own, we won’t be coming to him. Apostle Paul is a good example. Originally he thought he could do it all. As for righteousness based on the law, he said he was faultless (Php3:6). But as he was meditating on one of the Ten Commandments, “Do not covet,” he finally found himself. He wrote, “But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting” (Ro7:8). He began to recognize his own sin as sin and see how utterly sinful he was (Ro7:13). Paul began to see that in fact, he was a helpless and wretched slave of sin, and this motivated him to cry out and really come to Jesus (Ro7:14–25). We too need to know how utterly sinful we are, not to just feel hopeless and condemned, but so that we’ll come to Jesus for his help.

Coming to Jesus isn’t just about knowing that we need him; it’s about believing he can really help me. Jesus promised that he’s the bread of life, that when we come to him, we’ll never go hungry, and when we believe in him, we’ll never be thirsty (6:35). So we need to believe he’ll really satisfy my soul like no one and nothing else can. Jesus promised to give us rivers of living water flowing from within us (7:37–39). So we need to believe he’ll give us the Holy Spirit to live in us and help us experience life to the full. Jesus promised that he’s the light of the world, that if we follow him, we’ll never walk in darkness but have the light of life (8:12). So we need to believe he’ll give us this amazing inner light to guide us out of all kinds of darkness. Holding to his teaching, living in his word, means believing what Jesus promises and coming to him each and every day.

Read verse 32 again. Here Jesus promises that we’ll know the truth. What does he mean? He’s talking not just about knowing what’s true or false, what’s real or fake, but about a specific kind of truth. It’s the kind of truth that sets us free. What is *that*? It’s knowing Jesus himself (8:36). Jesus says later, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). Knowing the truth means knowing Jesus, the only one who can set us free from our sin and connect us with our Father God. We may know he can do this theoretically, but we don’t really know or experience it until, through the process of holding to his teaching, living in his word, we really come to him personally. Our sin always makes us think we’re hopeless, that God would never accept us, that we’re guilty and useless and can never change. But that’s not the truth. Jesus shows us the truth of his saving grace, his wonderful forgiveness of sins and the gift of a right relationship with God. It’s the truth of how much God loves me, that he gave his one and only Son to save me from my sins and bring me back to live with him forever. We can experience this deeply only as we hold to his teaching, live in his word, let it show me the truth of who I really am and the truth of what Jesus can do for me. When we experience the truth of his saving grace, we need to hold onto it, in the best of times, in the worst of times, all throughout our lives, to the very end, no matter what (1Ti1:15; Ro1:17).

Jesus says that knowing this truth sets us free. Free from what? Look at verses 34–36. He’s talking about freedom from our sin. He says sin in our lives makes us slaves. At first we may think about this only in terms of addictions, things we can’t stop doing. We may think, “I don’t have any of those.” But there’s other kinds of slavery. There’s the slavery of self-righteousness, which these Jews seem to have. There’s the slavery of pride. There’s the slavery of unbelief. On our own, we can’t get out of the slavery of our sin. No amount of cleverness, effort or self-discipline can do it. We all need Jesus to set us free.

But how does he set us free? He gives us the Holy Spirit (2Co3:17). Only the Holy Spirit can set us free from condemnation and from the power of sin and death (Ro8:1,2). Only he can give us the freedom to serve God, not based on our own legalistic ideas, but in the new way of the Spirit (Ro7:6). Only he can set us free from being ruled by our sinful nature. He gives us inner freedom, the freedom of life and peace, freedom from fear, freedom to come close to God, our loving heavenly Father (Ro8:4ff.). The freedom Jesus gives through the Holy Spirit is freedom from biting and devouring each other, freedom to serve each other humbly in love (Gal5:13–15). Through the Holy Spirit we crucify our sinful nature with its passions and desires (Gal5:24; Ro8:13). The freedom of the Spirit helps us grow in love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal5:22,23). He doesn’t promise us freedom from suffering or problems or commitments, or unlimited human freedom to do whatever we want, but the most beautiful thing in the world: spiritual freedom.

The people in today’s passage don’t respond well to Jesus’ offer. Their pride is offended. They insist they’re Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. Actually, they’d been slaves in Egypt, slaves in Babylon, slaves of Rome, and definitely slaves of sin, but were too proud to admit it. When Jesus tries to help them go deeper, they start lashing out. They imply that he was born an illegitimate child (41). They call him a Samaritan and demon-possessed (48,52). They ask him, “Who do you think you are?” (53) They make fun of his claim to have existed before Abraham (57) and pick up stones to stone him (59). What’s wrong with them? As mentioned earlier, Jesus says they “have no room” for his word (37). Even worse, Jesus says they’re listening to their real father, the devil (38,41,44). Because of that, they’re full of lies and the desire to murder him (44). They can’t hear Jesus because they do not belong to God (47). So why is Jesus even talking to them? It’s because God sent him to do it. Even though the outcome would not be good, Jesus obeys his Father’s will. Despite their hostility, Jesus still gives them an amazing promise. Read verse 51. He’s talking about spiritual death now, and eternal death forever. Obeying his words of life gives us eternal life. He believes that even among these people there might be even one person who will accept what he says. Let’s read verses 31,32 again. May God help us to live in Jesus’ word and experience the truth that he sets us free.