

## John 8:31-36

<sup>31</sup>So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup>You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

<sup>33</sup>“We are Abraham’s descendants,” they answered, “and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be set free?’”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>But a slave does not remain in the family forever. A son does remain forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free.”

## The Truth Will Set You Free

### I.

Have you ever heard this one? “That’s just *your* truth.”

Today is Reformation Sunday, so I will use some of the most famous words of Martin Luther: “What does this mean?” What does this mean: “That’s just *your* truth”?

Society has decided that truth is subjective. Politicians’ statements get “fact checked,” and the fact checkers announce their determination of whether what the politician stated was true or not. However, fact checkers often selective in the material they use for their fact checking. They have their own biases, and therefore they cherry-pick the “facts” that will give them their preferred version of whether what the politician said was true or not.

Of course, politics is just the beginning. History books are written and re-written, grabbing certain facts and leaving others out, in order to put the history in the perspective desired by the editor.

Truth is an important concept in today’s gospel. Right alongside it is freedom. Freedom is precious to us as Americans. We have the freedom to vote. People are planning to cast their votes in just a few short days across the country. We cherish that freedom. One of the most precious freedoms enshrined in the US Constitution—especially for Christians—is the freedom of religion. We have the freedom to worship our God as we choose, and not face restrictions in the ways we do so.

### II.

Jesus says: “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32, EHV). Notice the article: “the.” Jesus isn’t talking about “your” truth or “mine.” He isn’t talking about some subjective kind of truth determined by individuals or fact checkers or societies. He isn’t referring to a scientific process to determine whether something is true or not—a process by which the factoid of today might receive some illumination in the future which will change the entire construct. No. Jesus says “*the* truth.”

Last week I spoke about Martin Luther’s book: “The Bondage of the Will.” Now we are celebrating Reformation Sunday. Luther was constantly fighting against the false theology that by one’s self a person can choose to do something good before God. The whole concept meant that people were constantly trying to contribute to their salvation in some way.

That’s what we heard the rich ruler trying to do last week. He said: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18, EHV). He thought that he had been admirable in his life as a believer; he was convinced he had kept all the commandments of God since the time he was young. Jesus had to show him that, in fact, his riches were his God, and he hadn’t even kept the First Commandment to have no other gods beside the true

God.

Those standing around observing and listening wondered who could be saved. Jesus gave the answer: “What is impossible for people is possible for God” (Luke 18:27, EHV). Salvation is possible *only* because of what God has done. We can contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation.

That’s the same thing Luther was saying in his “The Bondage of the Will.” We can do nothing that will assist in our salvation. That’s why the word “bondage” is in the title.

“The truth will set you free” (John 8:32, EHV), Jesus says. He is implying that by nature you were not free. By nature you were in bondage—you were a slave.

Those listening understood. They didn’t like it. “‘We are Abraham’s descendants,’ they answered, ‘and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say, “You will be set free?”’” (John 8:33, EHV). The history of the people of Israel was intimately connected to their slavery in Egypt. Everyone knew this history of the Jews. As for their history of that moment, while the whips of slave drivers weren’t driving them to build pyramids at the time Jesus spoke, they were under Roman domination; they didn’t have political freedom.

Why did they say: “We have never been slaves of anyone”? They insisted that *spiritual* slavery had never been a part of their nation.

*That*, however, was *their* truth, not *the* truth. “Jesus answered, ‘Amen, Amen, I tell you: Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin’” (John 8:34, EHV).

Slavery is a reprehensible fact of the history of the human race, and of our country. As evil as slavery was and is, slavery to sin is even worse. It is, to paraphrase Jesus from last week, impossible for people to break free from. Sin keeps our will in bondage, as Luther spoke about it in his book. As hard as we might try to quit sinning, we cannot do it. Sin keeps us enslaved.

King David said in the Psalms: “There is no one who does good. There is not even one” (Psalm 53:3, EHV). King Solomon says in Ecclesiastes: “There is surely not a righteous man on earth who does good and does not sin” (Ecclesiastes 7:20, EHV).

No one on earth is without sin. It included the Jews Jesus was speaking to; it included Martin Luther more than 500 years ago; it includes you and me today. Sin is pervasive. Sin is everywhere. Sin enslaves us; it keeps us in bondage.

### III.

“The truth will set you free,” Jesus said. Let’s look at that phrase in the context in which Jesus spoke it. “If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup>You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32, EHV).

At the beginning of his gospel account, John called Jesus himself the Word: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1, EHV).

*The* truth—the objective truth that stands for all time—is Jesus. God’s Word, the Bible, is the only thing that can truly set you free.

God’s Word contains two main doctrines, or teachings—Law and Gospel. The Law shows us exactly what Jesus was speaking about when he called us slaves to sin. The Law shows our sin and how helpless we are without God providing a Savior. As Jesus said last week, the Law shows us that salvation is impossible for people.

While Jesus says exactly that in today’s reading, he concentrates on the Gospel teaching. *The* truth will set you free.

“If the Son sets you free, you really will be free” (John 8:36, EHV). The family ties to Abraham the Jews pointed to were not what was really needed for true freedom. What was

necessary was the truth about the Son of God himself, and what he had done.

God the Father sent his Son to be the substitute for every human being. The Son of God became a man. This God-man, Jesus, lived a perfect life for each person. He took the sins of every one of us on his shoulders and carried them to the cross. He paid the penalty of hell for every single sin as he hung there, separated from the Heavenly Father.

God raised him from the dead. In so doing, God the Father let it be known without a doubt that he accepted the payment of Jesus for the sins of the world.

*That's* the truth. That's objective fact. *That* is what God says.

#### IV.

“If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup>You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32, EHV).

It costs nothing to become a disciple of Jesus. Jesus has done it all. He has provided the truth that sets us free, and has sent the Holy Spirit to work faith in our hearts to believe it. Jesus has done all the work; we receive all the benefits.

Discipleship, however, is a lifelong endeavor. “*Remain* in my word,” says Jesus. Again, the good Lutheran question: “What does this mean?”

“Remain in my word” means that the word of Jesus is what is to guide your life without any additions or subtractions. When Luther wrote “The Bondage of the Will,” it had become accepted that people had to add good works to their quest for salvation. Luther insisted that to remain faithful to God’s Word meant to recognize that salvation is by Christ alone. As Jesus said last week, salvation is impossible for people; it’s only possible for God. *He* did it all.

Really think about that word “remain.” Sometimes Christians get the idea that they have finished once they are confirmed. Come to church once in a while. Receive communion occasionally. If you do these things, that’s probably good enough. To remain in the word of Jesus is not that superficial. Remain is something you do every day. To be a disciple means to be a follower. It’s impossible to keep on following if you don’t keep listening to what Jesus has to say.

Jesus wants us who are free to remain in his Word—the truth—so that we will continue to know and believe the truth, and the truth will keep us free.

Jesus said: “Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34, EHV). All who do not know and believe the truth are slaves of their own falsehood and their own sin. But Jesus said: “If the Son sets you free, you really will be free” (John 8:36, EHV). We want *that*. Not just for ourselves, we want that for those who are still slaves to sin. We want them to “Know the truth, and the truth will set [them] free” (John 8:32, EHV). Amen.