

Reformation: Sola Scriptura
November 5, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

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.

"Set Free"

Children scurry around the playground, chasing after each other. "Tag, you're frozen." "I got you. Now I'm hauling you off to the jail." Simple games, requiring no equipment, only imagination. No one wants to be trapped. But when you find yourself in this tricky situation, you need someone to come rescue you. You need to be set free.

Jesus has an interesting challenge in front of him in John chapter 8. Up to this point Jesus has been getting attention. His impressive miracles attract crowds. Those crowds hang on his every word. And so Jesus wants to help those crowds get off the fence. He truly wants them to have his Word in them; He truly wants them to be free. He holds out this hope for those who are tagged and frozen, those trapped and put away in life: **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** (John 8:31,32)

The problem is, Jesus is teaching to a mixed group. It's not a playground full of energetic children who simply aren't playing nice with him. It's something closer to a heated public hearing or an open forum on a major public proposal, with emotional constituents on both sides. Some are open to hear what Jesus has to say. Others have their minds made up before Jesus even opens his mouth. And so his offer of freedom is met with the same polarizing reactions. Some weigh his words carefully. Others act like Jesus has just slapped their mother.

They are insulted by Jesus' offer of freedom. Because if Jesus offers to set them free, well, what does that say about them now? You can just hear the indignation, the ruffled feathers in their words: **"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"** (John 8:33) Slavery is such a loaded word. You can feel the sting of the word even if you aren't being hauled off to some plantation down against your will. Teenagers want to be emancipated their parents, aching for a time when those menacing meanies stop telling them what to do with their lives. First graders dream of the day when they can set their own bed times and decide to eat candy for every meal instead of vegetables.

That's the default mode of every human being. No one wants to give up control of their life. No one wants to admit they are answerable to anyone. And so we live our own lives. We abide by our own rules. And that doesn't mean we are perfect. It just means we are doing the best we can with what we have. After all, you and I can reason, we are just using the power we have to become what we are supposed to be. We're not perfect, but we are trying.

A few weeks ago I met a man named Raleigh Sadler. He started an organization called Let My People Go. It works to fight human trafficking. Raleigh had been shocked by how many people are vulnerable to exploitation, how many people are at risk of being used by another person for financial gain. His organization estimates that there are 48.5 million people who are exploited globally through modern day slavery. The point is, slavery is more common than you think. You don't have to look very far to find signs of it. And most people don't realize they are trapped in actual slavery until it's too late.

We can usually recognize that enslavement in other people. We can see people who think they are free, but are really just being controlled by their lusts and passions. They have been deceived into thinking they can get rid of mean taskmasters telling them what to do, but just going along with the prevailing morality of our culture. We can shake our heads at people who refuse to let their lives be dictated by the words in any book, but whose hearts are easily manipulated into finding all sorts of false gods in work and money and rest and hobbies. We see it in others, but it's hard to recognize in ourselves.

Have you heard of the term virtue signaling? It's related to online or hashtag activism. The term was coined by a British journalist for all the times when people signal their outrage at something nearby or around the world that is an uncorrected injustice. Signaling has many forms. And signaling is especially dangerous among Christians. We are sending subliminal signals all the time. I'm not just talking about wanting our children to look nice and behave (or at least be clothed and fed when they head off to school). We want others to recognize we are mature and responsible as we go to work (or at least that we put in enough effort not to wear our pajamas all day). We give a smile and show kindness to someone who is having a rough day (or for me it just might mean I've had the bare minimum amount of coffee to be around other people).

Christians do it in our own way. We sigh at the consequences of a changing definition of marriage. We let everyone know how dedicated we are to helping our families. We let slip a humble-brag about how busy we are at church.

There is something worse than spotting unrecognized slavery in someone else. There are worse things in our own lives than sadness and disappointment. The worst thing is to find out you are a fraud. You build your entire identity, your life, your sense of purpose around trying to construct this image of you you are, what you've worked for, what you've sacrificed to become - only to find out you aren't that person you want to be. Your kids don't match up with how you want to be seen as a parent. Your career isn't earning you the respect you deserve. You haven't been as kind and generous as you want to be.

And so Jesus has words for people like you and me. Jesus has a harsh wake up call for people who use their freedom to construct a life and an identity, but never achieve it. Here's the standard Jesus sets: **"Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."** (John 8:34) If you are someone who does sinful things, then you are a slave. Jesus is blunt. Jesus is brutally honest. The things we work so hard at, aren't bad or evil or sinful. But we are constantly driven by the need to show our moral superiority. You have to reveal your efforts to be God's teacher's pet. I am motivated by a need to see myself as better than someone else. That's slavery. You and I are enslaved by this little Pharisee stubbornly stuck inside our hearts always comparing myself to other people.

Jesus has good news for everyone trapped and frozen, every human heart enslaved by sin. Jesus is your freedom. See, Jesus wants to push followers and admirers off the fence. When you despair of the you you've been trying to become, then you can see the good news of who Jesus is and what Jesus does for you.

Today as we celebrate the Reformation, I promise not to worship Martin Luther. But there are some things from his experience that can be very valuable for us 500 years after he first posted the 95 Theses. See, Luther was pretty good at measuring up to the standards the church had set for him in his time. He dedicated his life to serving God as a monk. He followed all the rules. He went above and beyond those expectations and even caused himself physical suffering. But he was still unable to find peace. He was working and obeying, doing and trying, sacrificing and suffering. He was still convicted as a sinner before God.

Until freedom came to him. Unexpectedly. Not by concentrating on his efforts or comparisons to other people or painful sacrifices. He explains: "For a long time I went astray [in the monastery] and didn't know what I was about. To be sure, I knew something, but I didn't know what it was until I came to the text in Romans 1 [:17], 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' That text helped me...when I discovered the proper distinction—namely, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another—I made myself free."¹ There is the righteousness demanded by God's law as the moral standard for every human being. Then there is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that brings freedom.

True freedom comes from the Word of Jesus. The Word tells us the truth of what Jesus did in His life. Jesus had no need for signaling or broadcasting his morality. He was completely perfect without a single flaw or failure. The Word of Jesus lets you know Jesus suffered death and hell on the cross to set you free from sin and the condemnation of a holy God. Jesus says: **"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** (John 8:36)

You are free from trying to do your best in God's sight. You are free from trying to be your own defense attorney, finding any loopholes and offering your best plea bargains. You are free from trying to live life on your own terms. You are free from what seems like an honest effort to do what God demands. You are free from being a god over your own life under the

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 54: Table Talk*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 54, pp. 442–443). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

pretense of serious and obedient responsibility to God. You are free from fooling yourself into believing you are or ever can be free. You are free from trying to compare yourself to other people and make yourself look better. You can't look any better than perfect. And that's what you are in Jesus.

You are free to embrace the truth about your identity. You are a disciple of God. Even better, you are a child of God. You are part of God's household and share in the glories of God's infinite inheritance. And what you have, Jesus wants you to keep: **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."** (John 8:31,32) You are in his Word. You embrace that Word. You are free to live in that freedom.

Luther discovered the freedom he had in the good news of Jesus. Then he used that same Word to do his greatest battles. He trusted in God to do God's work. One of his more memorable quotes came from a sermon he preached after some members of the Reformation movement took matters into their own hands and went too far trying to make changes: "In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philips and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything... I did nothing; I let the Word do its work."²

God's Word works. God uses his Word to give you the truth of the salvation you have in Jesus Christ. To those who have been tagged by guilt and shame over what they've done and what they haven't done, Jesus sets them free. To those who have been trapped by their own expectations or deceived into following their own standards for life, Jesus sets them free. You are a disciples. You have his Word. You have been set free. Amen.

² The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit