

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, "I tell you the truth, 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. (John 8:31-36)*

What Does this Mean?

"What does this mean?" If you grew up in the Lutheran church, or if you have had children go through catechism class in the Lutheran church, these words have a special resonance. In Luther's Small Catechism, he wrote explanations to the Ten Commandments, to the three articles of the Apostles' Creed and to the parts of the Lord's Prayer. And over and over again, those introductions begin with the words, "What does this mean?" In catechism class, we memorize those explanations. But 7th and 8th graders can easily blip over those words without even thinking about what they're asking. Some of them even abbreviate those words on tests and on their memory work cards with the letters W.D.T.M. – which, by the way, really, really bugs me because that question is important. It lies at the heart of being a Christian because faith is about understanding and clinging to what God says. If I don't know what his promises mean, it's hard for me to take comfort from them. If I don't know what God's commands mean, it's hard for me to live according to them. Today in our gospel lesson, Jesus makes a statement that has been quoted probably as much as any statement he ever made. But do we understand that statement correctly? **What does this mean?**

I.

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."** There are really two key words in this statement. The first is "free." **What does free mean?** That might seem like a funny question. Who knows better than we Americans what freedom means? Our country is all about freedom. For that reason, this is such a famous statement. But really, only the last part, "The truth will set you free" is famous. Most people don't know the first part. But I wanted you to hear the whole statement so that you understand it correctly. If you hold to Jesus' teaching then you know the truth and the truth will set you free. So, we're not talking about political freedom. Jesus was concerned about a much deeper freedom.

Now, the Jews who were standing there were puzzled by his statement. They asked, **"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"** In a world where people were bought and sold every day, the people Jesus was talking to had never been slaves. But they missed his point. Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."** That's the slavery and the freedom he was talking about.

Who's included in that statement? Everybody. Whether we're physical descendants of Abraham or not, whether we were born into Lutheran families or not, we were all born sinners. And as slaves, we can't help but sin. When was the last time you managed to make it all the way through the day without sinning? There has never been such a day and if you think there was, you must be changing the definition of sin. Some people do that. They say that it's only sin if I really do something. Thoughts and feelings don't count. Worse, they say it's only sin if I intentionally disobey God. Ignorance or confusion or weakness aren't really sins. But Jesus said, "Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." And perfect doesn't mean, "Do the best you can." It doesn't mean, "Be better than everybody else, or at least don't be near the bottom." Perfect means do and say and think and feel the way that God commands every second of your life. Period. By that standard, we all have to admit that we are slaves to sin. We sin every single day and we can't stop. No part of our life is free from sin.

What is the result? Jesus says, **"Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever."** Slaves are property. Now sometimes in slave-owning societies, people get close to some of their slaves. They even begin to think of them as more or less part of the family. But that can change in a heartbeat. Some business deal goes bad and the family needs money and the slave is sold or the slave disobeys

and disappoints and suddenly, it's not so well loved. The family can get rid of that slave in a way that they can't get rid of a child, even a disappointing one. The point here is that our sin changes our relationship with God. He loves us, but our sin moved us out of his family and made us slaves to sin. God is holy and he has to punish sin. Our sinful hearts and our actual sins push him to that verdict again and again. Guilt and sin own us. If that doesn't change, we will spend eternity in hell.

But Jesus says, "The truth will set you free." He's not making a general statement about being truthful people, although God certainly calls us to that. He's talking about the truth of how we were born and how that has to change and how, in fact, God did change it. Jesus says, "**So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**" Jesus shifts his metaphor a little bit here. In a slave-owning society, the master has to set a slave free. Even if someone wants to pay for the slave's freedom, the owner still has to accept the payment and release him. God owns us. He made us to be his servants, even his children. Sin enslaved us, but God sent his Son to win freedom for us. Jesus, the Son of God, has set us free.

Free from what? Free from hell. We are free from God's guilty verdict and his punishment. Why? Because the Son of God went into God's courtroom and said, "I have never sinned. Count my perfect life for theirs." And God did. But God still said, "What about these sins that were committed? Whose responsibility are those?" And Jesus said, "Mine. Punish me." God's judgment demanded a perfect life from every human being, and Jesus gave it. God's justice demanded that every sin be paid for with death and hell. And Jesus hung on the cross and suffered an eternity of hell on one Friday afternoon and then he died. And God counted that punishment for all of us. To prove it, he raised his Son from the dead. When Jesus came out of that tomb, he set us free from slavery to death and hell and guilt and sin.

He even went one step further: he set us free from the power of sin now. It doesn't own us anymore. It doesn't rule our lives anymore. When God made us believers, he put a new nature inside us, the New Man. Before, we were totally sinful. There was nothing good in us at all. But now God has re-created us as his holy and perfect children. Our lives here are all about letting that New Man out. They're all about strengthening him so that he can live for Christ. We are set free from the power of sin to rule over us. Sadly, because we do still have our old sinful nature, we won't be perfect here, ever. But we aren't slaves of sin anymore. We can fight against our own sin and dedicate our lives to serving God. That's what it means to be free. Someone might say that we aren't really free if we're still servants, even slaves, of God. That's true in a sense. But if we are free from God, then we are slaves of sin. When we are servants of God, then we are free from sin. And that, my friends, is being free indeed. Not that we have no obligation to God. But rather that sin doesn't own us anymore and it won't condemn to hell anymore. Rejoice in that freedom!

II.

How do we do that? The truth will set us free. Understanding this statement is what the Lutheran Reformation was all about. It's what Luther spent his life defending and teaching. To understand Jesus' teaching, we need to understand what he meant by free. But we also need to understand the second key word in this statement. **What does truth mean?**

Jesus tells us: "**If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**" So "the truth will set you free" is not a generic exhortation to be truthful or to seek after the truths of this life. That's the way you often here this statement quoted. It's often applied to any situation in which there is a hint of lies or deceit. In politics, it's quoted by one side when it thinks the other side is lying. And God does want us to be open and truthful people. But that's not what Jesus was talking about here. The truth is his teaching. What does that mean?

It means doctrine. We Lutherans, especially we confessional Lutherans, have a reputation for spending too much time on doctrine. People say that doctrine divides us. They point to things like our practice of closed communion and claim that Jesus accepts everybody, so why don't we let everybody come to communion? But the truth is, "doctrine" is just a fancy word for teaching. If we are truly Jesus' disciples, he says that we will hold to his doctrine. That doctrine is the truth that sets us free.

What teaching is Jesus talking about? Can we make a list? Does he mean just the gospel, the teaching that Jesus came to free us sinners from hell? Is that enough? This is actually a somewhat complicated question to answer. In one sense, you can say that there are "teachings" – with an "s" – of the scripture. There are a series of interrelated truths – doctrines – that the Bible teaches. We are all sinners. That's a teaching, a doctrine. Jesus died for all and he rose for all. That's at least one, and maybe two teachings. Jesus is the true

Son of God who came down from heaven and became truly human. There's another set of teachings. Jesus is ruling all things right now. Jesus hears and answers our prayers. Jesus takes all those who die in faith home to heaven. Jesus will return to judge the world. Jesus will raise the dead. Jesus will give us a new and perfect world that will last forever. Those are all doctrines and we could add many more: baptism, conversion, communion, confession and so on.

We recognize that it's possible to be confused about some of those doctrines and still believe in Jesus as your Savior. If you don't believe in closed communion, it doesn't mean you're going to hell, if you still trust that Jesus died and rose for you and that God promises you eternal life. But there are doctrines on that list that you cannot deny and still be a Christian. If you don't accept the Bible's teaching that Jesus is the Son of God, or that Jesus rose from the dead, or that all our sins are paid for and forgiven, you are not a believer. And in fact, even with those other teachings, if you know what God's word teaches and you refuse to accept it because you think it's stupid or it goes against what you think God should say or it just offends you, well that's different from being confused. That's refusing to hear what God says – it's unbelief. In that case, God won't call you a believer.

That's because of a truth that you see in what Jesus said here. He did not say, "If you hold to my *teachings* you are really my disciples." He did not present it as a list of separate thoughts and beliefs. He said, "If you hold to my *teaching*." From God's perspective there is only one Christian teaching, one truth that includes all that the Bible says. All that God says is his Word is equally true and valid. It all comes from him. You either hold to it or you don't.

Now, because we are sinners, we will spend our whole lives on this earth exploring that truth and growing in our understanding of it. Because we can't look at the whole universe and the whole doctrine of God in one sweep the way that God does, we do have to break it into pieces. And it is possible for us to be wrong about some parts of it and right about others at the same time. So we Lutherans will not be the only people in heaven. But God has given us one Christ, one truth, one Scripture, one doctrine that encompasses all that he has said. When we hold to all that Jesus says, we are truly his disciples. In him we find the truth that sets us free from the power and the guilt of sin. Between this moment and eternal life, God calls us to dedicate our lives to that one great truth. That's what it means to hold to his teaching.

May God give us the strength to do that. That's what it means to be Lutherans. That is the true heritage of the Lutheran Reformation. We know the truth and the truth has set us free. Commit yourself today to being Jesus' disciple, to holding to his truth. Commit yourself to a lifelong exploration of the truth that sets you free from guilt and sin and death and hell in Jesus. Commit yourself to growing in faith for as long as you live here. And look forward to the joy of eternal life with Jesus your Savior. Amen.