

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 Would it Mean to be Free?

Do you ever feel like a slave at work? Work can feel that way. We’re chained to our desk or to our station at the factory. We would rather take a break and chat with the person next to us, but that slave driver of a boss won’t let us. Do you ever feel that way? You know what? That idea of being a slave at work goes way back in American history. I know I’m showing how big of a history nerd I really am here, but it’s true. Before the Civil War, when people in the north criticized the south for slavery, southerners responded by saying that they had slavery in the north, too – it was just wage slavery. People were enslaved to their low paying jobs until they couldn’t work anymore and then the boss fired them. Southerners claimed that their system was better because they took care of old slaves when they couldn’t work anymore. Now, obviously, that was nonsense. But that idea of wage slavery stuck around, even after the Civil War. And it still spooks around today. Now if we’re honest, as much as we feel chained to our jobs, we’re not really slaves. But we can feel trapped in a dead end job. We can feel like someone else is in control of our lives and there’s nothing we can do about it. Jesus, who lived in a society with real slaves, used that feeling of powerlessness to teach us about the real gift God gives us through the gospel. In essence, he’s asking us to consider **what would it mean to be free?**

I.

Jesus wasn’t talking about ending slavery in his society. He was talking about ending spiritual slavery. So, **what would it mean to be free? Sin doesn’t own us anymore.** John tells us that Jesus was talking to Jews who had believed him. This discussion was not with his enemies or with unbelievers. It was with people who were probably new to the faith, but who had heard Jesus’ message and believed it. If you remember that, Jesus’ next words might surprise us just as much as they surprised those new Christians. He 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.”** Jesus’ listeners immediately objected: **“We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”**

They didn’t understand what Jesus was talking about. Just like in our day, words like *freedom* and *slavery* were highly charged terms that provoked an emotional response from these new followers of Jesus. They had trouble understanding the new spiritual perspective that comes with faith. They had trouble seeing themselves as slaves. So, Jesus said, **“I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”** This wasn’t about political or economic slavery. He was telling them that they were slaves to sin and they needed the freedom that would come from “the truth.” They would need to hold to that freedom as long as they lived. Even after that clarification, it was hard for them to accept his point.

Is it hard for us to believe that we are slaves to sin? What would that mean? Well, let me ask you, can you stop sinning? I can’t. I want to. I’ve tried – at least, there are specific sins that I commit regularly that I have worked for years to overcome. And I still fall into them. Is that true for you? Do you have to admit you have a special weakness for arguing with your spouse or for gossiping or for drinking too much or for websites you should avoid? Are you a slave to at least that sin? There’s more: do you feel guilty regularly? God designed guilt to warn us that we’re sinning and that we need to repent. But in this broken world, guilt can torment us. Some people drink or use drugs to silence their guilt. Some people push other people away because they feel guilty. Some people torture themselves because they’re convinced of their own guilt and they can’t stop themselves. Are you a slave to sin? There’s another way to look at it: do you think that God loves you because you go to church? Do you think that you’re going to heaven because you’re a good person? You know

what? Anyone who thinks that way is a slave to sin, too, because they're trying to earn their way to heaven. Eventually, that person will have to deal somehow with falling short. Are you a slave to sin?

In one sense, we're all like those new Christians Jesus was talking to. We live in this sinful world. Our hearts are sinful – we were born that way and we can't escape the sinner inside us until we die. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. It makes us guilty before God and it makes us feel guilty. It dominates our lives, even when we resist it. And finally, all human beings are born slaves to sin in the sense that sin kills sinners drags them down to hell where they will suffer forever.

But 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.”** Free first of all from hell and punishment. The truth of Jesus says that even though we deserve it, hell never gets to touch us. God has forgiven all our sin because Jesus stood in our place. He stood in our place in Bethlehem when he was born to be one of us. He lived and loved and obeyed God perfectly so that God could write Jesus' name into our records. Then Jesus died so that his blood could wash away our sins. His blood is flood that sweeps through God's archive where he keeps all the records of all our thoughts and feelings and desires, all our words and deeds. That flood washes all the sin away. All that is left there is Jesus. Jesus died to make that happen. He rose to tell us that it's true. He rose to tell us that hell is not waiting for us. He rose to set us free.

That truth sets us free from guilt. We human beings have all kinds of solutions for guilt: trying harder, making amends, drinking, getting therapy or having friends tell us how good we really are, burying ourselves in work or in entertainment – anything to shout our consciences down. But the only real solution to guilt is forgiveness. The person we have hurt or wronged tells us that they have put our sin away and they no longer desire any payment from us. God has put all our sin away. God has erased all our punishment. God loves us in spite of all our guilt. That forgiveness sets us free from slavery to guilt. And it even gives us the power to fight against those sins that are so hard for us to resist. They don't own us anymore. We may still wrestle with them here. They may still clamp onto our hearts and drag us into sin. But now we are fighting them. And every little victory is a sign of freedom, a sign of God working in us.

And all that freedom comes to us personally in one way: through the gospel, the truth about Jesus, the promise of love and forgiveness. Now, God gives us that promise in lots of ways. He sends guys like me to stand up here and proclaim it to you and to sit in your home or my office and apply it to you personally and specifically when your heart is troubled. And I encourage you to bring those struggles and that guilt to me so I can do that. God gives us communion and baptism which apply that message to us personally and individually. God gives us Christian parents and spouses and friends to tell us over and over again that Jesus has forgiven us. That is the truth and it is the source of all freedom from sin. That truth is yours. As I already said to you at the beginning of the service, I forgive you all your sins. That's what God called me to do. Luther reminded us that when we say those words to each other, when our pastor says those words to us, it is as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ our dear Lord had dealt with us himself. You are forgiven. You are free.

II.

So, freedom then means that we're released from something. When the Civil War ended, slaves in the south were free to leave their masters and go where they wanted. In our day, if you had unlimited money, you would be free to give up work altogether. One of the members at my last church was stuck in a dead end job, so he started taking classes that got him a skill that enabled to walk away from that job. He was free. But what do we do with our freedom? Jesus also touches on that today. **What would it mean to be free? We belong to God's family forever.**

Jesus mixed his metaphors a little bit – which is not a criticism. He didn't lose his train of thought. He introduced the idea of slavery and then he kind of riffed on that a little bit. He said, **“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.”** A slave is only as valuable as his or her work. Jesus lived in a society where slavery was very common, so he knew what he was talking about. In spite of the claims that apologists for the south made before the Civil War, being a slave was not a great retirement plan. You can well imagine that as slaves got older and sicker, owners tried to unload them to other owners for whatever they could get for them. And I really don't think most owners spent a fortune on food and health care for retired slaves. Slaves came and went based on their usefulness to the master. That's true in any slave-owning society.

But a son belongs to the family forever. Jesus was probably thinking of the fact that in a large Roman household, you might have two children grow up together, one a slave and one the son of the owner. They might even play together and become close friends. But one day, someone offers the father a good price for that child and he's gone. But no loving father would sell his son into slavery. Even if that son grew up and fought with his father during those difficult teenage years, even if the son moved out and didn't speak to his father for years, a son belongs to the family forever. There is always the chance of reconciliation. Even if doesn't always work out that way in this life, the point is true with our Father in heaven. He always loves us. He wants to treat us as his own dear children, forever.

Jesus riffs again from that: if the son, who belongs to the family, set you free, you will be free indeed. Legally, in Roman society, once a slave gained his or her freedom, the owner couldn't force them back into slavery again. They were free. Once God has set us free from slavery to sin, we are free from all guilt and punishment. That's what the Son of God did for us. In truth, he changed our status. He moved us from being slaves to being sons. We're now part of God's family. Last week, we had our Welcome Home Sunday. We spoke about this as our spiritual family and our spiritual home. We made the point that what makes this our home and our family is Jesus. The Son has set us free and we are free indeed. Free to enter God's house and experience his love and forgiveness. Free to sit down at the head table with the Father and share in his love for all eternity. Free to come to him in prayer and ask him to deal with all that hurts and all that is hard in this life. Free to call him our Father and to trust in his care every day until we reach heaven.

Only Jesus, God's Son, could give us that freedom. And he has. Because he has, we are also free to serve our God by loving our neighbor. That, too, is part of what Jesus makes us: sons, children, have responsibilities within the family. Today, we are celebrating the Lutheran Reformation. Luther understood being a slave to sin. And once God set him free, he treasured that freedom. That led him to confess, boldly and at great risk, what God had done for him. Being free in Christ enabled him to marry and raise children as a Christian husband and father. Being free in Christ empowered him to teach and preach and lead the Christian church of his day. Being free in Christ enabled him to serve God's family. Without Jesus and his love, Luther would have been nothing. But once the Son set him free, he was free indeed. And so are we. We are free to live as God's children. We are free to love and serve each other. We are free to confess and to trust and to look forward to that day when we go home to Jesus. We are free indeed. Amen.