

The Life *The Gospel of John*

How Jesus Sets Us Free *John 8:31 – 37*

Introduction: Jesus the Liberator

One of the things that my kids like to do is to look through old pictures of little Mommy and little Daddy: pictures of Ming and me when we were kids. One of the things that stand out to me when we do that is how thin my wife Ming was when she was in 7th grade. She was anorexic. She would compare herself to other girls, or pictures of women and models and such, and think that she was too fat. She was kind of stuck in this cycle of always comparing herself to someone else. In high school, this continued, and the problem deepened. In part because she was the only Asian girl in a White high school, she thought she'd be more attractive if she stayed skinny. She became bulimic, which means that she would binge eat, and then go throw up. She felt very alone in this struggle, knowing that there was something wrong with her, yet ashamed to share it. She hid it from her parents. When she got to Harvard, she became a part of a Christian group. It was there that she felt like Jesus loved her, but also challenging her tendency to compare herself to other women. She felt Jesus calling her out of the deeper inward attitude that led to the outward problem. She let Jesus into her struggle and told a few people about it. And at that point, she became free. Almost instantly, her eating patterns changed and she became a much healthier person. After Ming graduated, she came on staff with InterVarsity. During her first year on staff, she felt Jesus opening up a way for her to lead a women's group focused on eating disorders. She was able to tell other women how Jesus had set her free. Just a few weeks ago, she was on a panel at Wellesley sharing the same thing. I'm grateful to Jesus for many things, but one of them is that, years ago, he set my wife free.

Relevance:

The question before us in John 8 is: How does Jesus set us free? In what sense? What have we been enslaved to?

Context:

We are in the Gospel of John again. Three weeks ago Dan led us through the time Jesus called his disciples to him in John 1. He said, 'Come and see...and you will see greater things than these.' Two weeks ago I led us through the conversation Jesus had with a ho, the scandalous Samaritan woman at the busiest place in town, and the transformation he caused in her. Now we're looking at John 8, verses 31 – 37.

Continue Listening: v.31

³¹ So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of mine.' This is the definition of what it means to be a disciple. In chapter 1, Jesus said to the people who became his first followers, 'Come and see.' But now his language changes. He says, 'Come and continue.' In some translations, he says, 'Come and *abide*.'

To *continue* or *abide* means *to remain in, to walk in, to live in, to marinate in*. These people in v.31 were in danger of not remaining with Jesus. They had started to follow him, and their interest was casual. They had already started to fall away in John 6, when many left Jesus. Jesus was looking toward to his death and resurrection for the renewal of the world, his impartation of his Spirit to make that a living reality for anyone who believes in him, and his mission to bring renewal worldwide.

Jesus specifically says, 'If you continue in my word.' At the end of this section, in v.37, he comes back to the importance of his word, reminding us of the fundamental importance of abiding in his word. Jesus has set forward a realm of new life, of new being, and he calls us to abide in it, to live in it, to remain in it at all times. That realm is the realm of his word, the fullness of his teaching.

Illus: If you've seen the Disney version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, you see this in the concept of 'sanctuary.' In the movie, Quasimodo was a gypsy's child. Although he was gentle and kind, it was Quasimodo's crime to have been born hideously deformed. Frollo, the mayor (I suppose) of Paris is

systematically hunting gypsies, trying to rid Paris of them. But when Frolo and his men approach the cathedral of Notre Dame, the priest clutches the baby Quasimodo to his chest, holds up his hand, and utters a word, 'Sanctuary!' With that word, and in that place, Quasimodo is safe. That word spoken in that place carves out a realm of freedom – freedom from Frolo's destruction, freedom from fear, freedom from guilt so that life may flourish. The word 'sanctuary' is called out again later in the movie by Esmerelda, the beautiful gypsy girl that Frolo is hunting. She says, 'Sanctuary!' And once again that word carves out a space of freedom, protection, and safety.

I thought that's a beautiful spiritual parallel. Similarly for us, Jesus spoke his word, and by his word he has carved out a space for us – a space for us to be free from fear, free from guilt, and free from sin, even our own sin. This realm where his word is the defining reality is the place where we are transformed by Jesus. As we remain in his word, we will find Jesus continuously transforming us. We're going to look at how Jesus does that.

Why is this so important? For at least three reasons given in this passage. First, in order for us to be disciples at all. A disciple is a learner and by direct implication, a listener. Jesus has always wanted *disciples*, people with whom he develops a deep and dynamic relationship. A disciple is someone who is always listening and always learning from Jesus. If you are not constantly listening and learning from Jesus, then chances are you are listening and learning from other people and other things. The danger with that is that many of those statements are probably lies.

Know the Truth: v.32a

That brings me to the second point. Second, we abide in his word in order that we might know the truth. Jesus says, ³² 'and you will know the truth.' Morpheus said to Neo, 'I only offer you the truth.' And from there, everything falls into place. Jesus tells you the truth about yourself, about what healthy relationships are, about the world, about reality, about the nature of things. That claim to objective truth has always scandalized people, but it is worth repeating. Jesus tells us the truth, and Jesus himself is the truth. We have been told a lot of lies.

Experience Freedom: v.32b – 33

That brings me to the third point. We abide in his word in order that we might be free. Jesus says, ³² 'and the truth will make you free.' Why does Jesus bring up the issue of freedom here? We'll see in just a moment. But instead, the Pharisees deny that they are enslaved to anyone. ³³ They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free''? So they deny it. Jesus suggests that they are enslaved. They say, 'No, we're not.'

Think about that for a moment. What about that little time in Egypt? Back in the time of Moses? What about being overrun by the Philistines during the Judges and during David's kingship? What about being taken over by the Assyrians? The Babylonians? The Greeks under Alexander the Great? What about the Roman Empire? Weren't they under the Romans *at that very moment*? How can they say 'We have never yet been enslaved to anyone'? It's really strange, and in some sense, inexplicable. Maybe they are just defensive when Jesus says this. Maybe they've gotten used to a lifestyle of enslavement.

It's interesting how easily this happens. In the movie *The Matrix*, Cypher chooses to go back into the matrix because he prefers it to freedom. He sells out Morpheus, Trinity, and Neo. In the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, the inmates get used to being in prison. So that even when Brooks goes free on parole and goes to a halfway home, he can't handle freedom. He hangs himself. It's the same in Jack Nicholson's movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. A few African Americans, after being freed from slavery, wanted to go back to the Southern plantations. Three thousand years ago, God freed Israel from Egypt. But their response to this new freedom was, 'Let's go back – at least we had food back there in Egypt.'

Why do we do this? Why do we go back into slavery? Because it is easy to believe lies and not the truth. Imagine that you, God forbid, develop an acquaintance with cocaine. For a moment, it makes you happy. It makes you forget all your problems. And then you land. Ordinary life seems boring. So you get high again. Again, it gives you this happy feeling. You might even say it gives you a powerful feeling. You feel more than alive. And then you become more than acquainted; you become dependent. You feel like

you're the most free and the most alive when you're high. But you're actually enslaved to it. All sin is fundamentally like that. In fact, all sin is fundamentally the same. It is an addiction: excessive video game playing, reading romantic novels, looking at pornography, getting drunk. Pretty soon, you stop living in reality. And the worst thing is that we call our slavery freedom.

I want to touch on two potentially risky areas. Think about greed. Again, imagine that there was a drug that you could take to feel better about yourself, but that places you in a bubble where you hallucinate, unnaturally isolates you from the reality of suffering in the world, and that removes you from a sense of moral obligation to others. What do you call that? That's a drug, right? But that's what money does. That's why you think you need to shop to have fun, why you think you need to have a lot of money to have a happy marriage, why you think you need to do 'better' than our parents. We live in an unhealthy dependence on money. Some of you come from very privileged backgrounds and really need to let go of it. It's as if you were born a crack baby, and you inherited your parents' addiction to money. But Jesus' truth is that God will care for us – Matthew 6, Luke 12. Maybe not at cushy levels, but God will care for us! So why don't we trust Jesus to tell us the truth? Why don't we let him have our whole lives?

I think we often believe the lie that we are insignificant beyond our ethnic group. Now don't get me wrong, I am completely in favor of developing spaces of ethnic-specific community. But as I look at how cliquish we can get, as I look at how political Asian-American churches can get, as I look at how angry Asian-American men can get because we don't feel effective anywhere else, I can't help but feel like we believe a lie. So we form our communities defensively. We believe we're trapped in our little circle. And it leads to fear of outsiders, exclusiveness, frustration, anger, and control. That can get passed down from generation to generation.

No wonder that the human sinful condition is described by John as cyclical. In John 4, we met the Samaritan woman who was trapped in cycles of sin, going after man after man after man. In John 5, we find a crippled man who was trapped in cycles of self-pity, playing off of peoples' pity so that he didn't really understand what it meant to not manipulate others anymore. Now in John 8, we find Israel being reminded that their existence was a cycle of sin: Starting with Moses, cycling through the Judges, cycling through Kings. They repeated the exile of Adam and Eve by being exiled themselves.

A Stern Warning from Jesus: v.34 – 36

So what does it take to shake us out of it? A stern warning from Jesus. ³⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. 'Let's define slavery' he says. If you obey it, then you must be a slave to it. If we demonstrate self-centeredness, then we must be enslaved to self-centeredness. It's as simple as that. Therefore, all of us were at some point slaves to sin.

But even more importantly, Jesus says, 'Look at where your life is headed!' He defines the destiny of a slave: ³⁵ 'The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever.' Jesus is talking about the 'house of God.' The house of God is a way to describe God's presence both now and for eternity. Jesus is saying that he as the Son rightly belongs there. He is the permanent resident in this house. People who are fundamentally slaves to sin don't belong there. In fact, all of us who remain slaves to sin will eventually choose to not be there, because we won't like the way the house is organized around the Son. We've constructed life so that we are at the center, so why would we accept an eternity where we are not at the center?

How then do we become free? Jesus gives an answer to this in v.36. ³⁶ 'So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.' If we receive him via his word, Jesus makes us free. He'll cut through the lies that we've believed. He'll de-tox us from our dependencies. Thank God there is a way out of this horrible slavery!

What Jesus is saying here is that all of human choice boils down to one choice: Who will be our master? Either sin will define us, or Jesus will. Let me say something to anyone here who does not know Jesus or who has just started to get to know him. As Jesus weans us off our self-reliance and self-centeredness, you may go through withdrawal. You may long to be enslaved again. But the more we walk in Jesus' word, the more we realize that Jesus' commands are not only possible, they give life. The purpose Jesus taught

was to liberate us, to show us a way of living free from sin, so that, empowered by his Spirit, we would have the power to walk in that freedom.

For the Christians here, these verses ought to be startling to you. It ought to be a reminder to take Jesus' word seriously for ourselves, and also for the sake of the non-Christians around us. If this isn't a wake-up call to share Jesus with others, I don't know what is! Others need to see how Jesus' truth has set us free. Sometimes some of you give the impression that obeying Jesus is life-draining. It's as though you're still in the withdrawal phase, as if you want to go back to your old enslavements. We need to get through the withdrawal phase, where being free is a joy.

Coming back to how Jesus can free us from the lie that Asian Americans can't be effective outside our little cliques: Jesus said in Matthew 28 that he goes with all Christians, including Asian-American Christians, into the world, to bring all nations under his lordship and his teaching. Here are some ways that I see that happening. Back in January, Dan and Cathy attended an InterVarsity gathering discussing how effective Asian-American missionaries are overseas, especially in Asia and the Pacific, but I've heard of stories from other places too. That's Jesus freeing us from the lie and working through us. My co-Area Director Greg Fung is Chinese American but supervises White and Black staff for the Multi-Ethnic fellowship. He supervises Paul and Liz Joyal at BU ME. He's discovered Jesus freeing him from the lie and working through him. I've experienced that as I've lived in a Mexican immigrant community for 5 years and then in a Black community for 5 years. I've experienced Jesus free me from the lie and work through me. I hope that means something to you. I hope that proves something to you – proves something about Jesus, that is.

Make Room for His Word: v.37

In the end, the first practical thing I have for you is to make room for Jesus' word in your life. In v.37, we have the Jewish leaders doing the very opposite, making no room. Look at v.37: ³⁷ I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill me, because my word has no place in you.

Jesus takes their argument and turns it ironically around. The Jewish leaders said back in v.33 that they were Abraham's children. Jesus says, 'Well, the irony of that is that Abraham obeyed God's word, but you're not making space in your lives for my word. Instead, you're trying to kill me!' Ultimately, it's either one or the other. Jesus' word either gives us life and truth and freedom, or it brings us too much hassle, and disturbs our illusions so much that we want to shut him up.

This brings us back to Jesus' call to continue in his word. Another way of putting that is to let his word continue to be in us. The phrase 'has no place' is the same root word as 'having room for' or 'holding.' Back in John 2:6, when Jesus turns water into wine, the jugs of water 'had room for' the water. Likewise, we must have room for Jesus' word within ourselves. And when we do, it gives way to freedom and even celebration.

In his novel *In the Beginning*, Chaim Potok describes the impact of Simchat Torah (Joy of Torah), the celebration of the completion of the reading of the Torah. That celebration has an impact upon a Jewish boy named David and his Italian friend Tony. They are standing outside a synagogue watching the people dancing inside: 'The little synagogue was crowded and tumultuous with joy. I remember the white-bearded Torah reader dancing with one of the heavy scrolls as if he had miraculously shed his years. My father and uncle danced for what seemed to me to be an interminable length of time, circling about one another with their Torah scrolls, advancing upon one another, backing off, singing.' Beneath the night stars, with the reverberation of the music under his feet, David says, 'I wonder if the gentiles ever danced with their Bible.' He then turns to Tony and says, 'Hey, Tony. Do you ever dance with your Bible?' (Chaim Potok, *In the Beginning* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 399)

Jesus is God, and he speaks God's Word. It's my prayer for myself and each of you that as you make room for Jesus in your life, in the morning when you get up and in the evening when you want to talk about your day with someone, that you'd study his teaching and let those words sink into the deepest parts of you. Then, let him live it out through you. He'll set you free. You'll want to pick up your Bible and dance with it. Not because you've memorized verses and interesting facts, but because Jesus works through his word

to impact you. The more you trust Jesus as the fundamental truth of all of life, the more you will experience him as the one who gives you true *freedom*.