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John 8:30-36

Twenty-sixth Message

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TRUE DISCIPLES

Chapter 8 of the gospel of John has a lengthy dialogue that at first glance seems fairly easy to understand. Speaking to a group of religious people, Jesus makes a claim to be the Messiah, but it's clear that his listeners do not have a clue as to what he means. How could they have missed it so badly? we ask.

But it's easy for us to stand outside the text, not in it. Where do we find ourselves in this story? Jesus says he is the Light, and as Christians we have come to that light. We are not in darkness anymore. As I reflect on my own life, however, I have to say that darkness has many layers. There can be a wide gap between how we view ourselves and who we really are, between what we know to be true and what we actually put into practice. So before we start shouting insults at the Jews of John's gospel we had better put ourselves under the light of this text and allow it to work in our hearts.

In chapters 7 and 8, Jesus makes two great claims during the Feast of Tabernacles: first, that he is the water of life, and second, that he is the Light of the world. Water and light were very symbolic during this greatest of Jewish festivals, and here Jesus is saying that he is the reality behind these symbols. Further, both water and light are extremely significant metaphors connected to the Old Testament and messianic expectations. Here Jesus is saying that he is the fulfillment of these metaphors.

Jesus' claims give rise to much debate among "the Jews," which is John's term for the religious leadership in Israel. As we saw in our last study, this debate in chapter 8 centers on the two themes of witness and authority. Jesus tells the Jews that he and the Father who sent him are both witnesses. Jesus' own testimony is true because he knows his origin and destination. His authority is validated by the fact that he is from above and speaks the words of his Father. The Jews are from below and therefore cannot hear his words because they do not know his Father. As a result they will die in their "sins," which stem from their one "sin" of unbelief. The only way to escape this death is to believe in the "Son of Man" who will be "lifted up."

In response to the debate in 8:12-29, we learn in this section that many come to believe in Jesus.

As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him. (John 8:30 NASB)

We have encountered this kind of response twice before, in chapters 2 and 6. But we have also seen that their belief was faulty. In the first instance, Jesus did not entrust himself to those who had believed because he knew what was in their hearts.

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which

He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men. (2:23-24)

In the second instance, Jesus' words were too difficult, with the result that many of the disciples withdrew from him:

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?"

As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. (John 6:60, 66)

Here in chapter 8 now, Jesus speaks to those who claim to believe in him.

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." 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?'"

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (8:31-36)

Jesus is forcing the Jews, as God's people, to define where they stand. His word separates true disciples from those who believe with a faulty faith or one based solely on miracles or signs. To those who hunger and thirst he offers life, but those who think they have life he pushes to hunger and thirst. In our text today we encounter two themes: perseverance and freedom. These are what characterize true disciples of Jesus.

Perseverance

First, Jesus says to the Jews, "If you continue, abide, remain in my word, then you are true disciples and you will know the truth." Later in this chapter, Jesus will change the word abide to "keep." Perseverance is the mark of real disciples. The quality that separates spurious faith from true faith is remaining in Jesus' teaching and keeping his word. Jesus is referring to obedience. It is not a matter of picking and choosing what we want. We cannot select the things that attract us, add them to the shopping cart and proceed to the checkout. With Jesus it is a package deal. It's all or nothing, even the things that are unpopular.

When we come to Jesus we embark on a spiritual journey. Disciples will encounter much opposition and temptation along the way, things that will challenge their faith. The true disciple stays the course no matter what the cost. The Jews who profess faith are fickle and quickly turn away when Jesus' word runs counter to their prejudices and misconceptions. There is a great cost to remaining in Jesus' word, and this drives many away. But then

Jesus runs counter to much of what we see in modern church philosophy. He is not interested in multiplying numbers if people are not genuine. He doesn't care about size or popularity.

Over the years I have seen many people who professed Christ begin the journey enthusiastically but then fall away because following Jesus interrupted their lifestyle. At times those who were most enthusiastic fell away, and others whom I thought would not continue ended up being faithful. Time will tell. Life in Christ is not a sprint but a marathon. At the beginning of a race we cannot judge how a runner will fare.

When I became a Christian, my family thought I had gone off the deep end. My wife's family thought the same thing about her. On one occasion, when I was talking to her father and a neighbor about our new faith, they told me that eventually I would get over it and become skeptical and realistic like them. They were even willing to put up money to back their point of view. I told them that I only bet on sure things, so I took their bet. The only evidence that would convince our families that what we believed was real was seeing the results over time. Early on I learned that with families especially it is a low-key, long-term thing. Eventually, when several family members saw the results of faith in our life, it convinced them that what we believed was real even though we were far from perfect.

The reason we are to remain in and keep Jesus' word is because of God's salvation in our life. We don't obey in order to be well thought of by our boss. We obey in response to the grace that has been poured out on us. The Law of Moses was given after God had delivered Israel from Egypt. Keeping that law was intended to be Israel's response to God's compassion and faithfulness. Jesus has delivered us from death. Abiding and keeping his word is our response to our salvation. If we know little of God's grace we will waver, but if we grasp the full measure of what we have been given we will be motivated to persevere. As we saw in the last section, we come to know this grace when we truly see the Son of Man lifted on the cross and we begin to deal with life in light of that.

Marriage is a good analogy. We meet someone, we fall in love, we get married, and we expect to live happily ever after. Romance isn't a bad thing. In fact, as David Roper writes, "infatuation is part of the order God established in creation and one of the ways He 'tricks' us into marriage, as C. S. Lewis once observed."¹ But romance alone will not sustain a relationship over the long haul. Commitment and obedience are what hold a marriage together. Feelings come and go, but that does not mean that a marriage is over. The vows we take are "for richer and poorer, in sickness and in health."

The same dynamics surround our relationship with God. We have times of wonderful intimacy in worship and prayer, but there are occasions when God seems to have abandoned us and we must walk by faith not by sight. We do what is right not because we feel like it or that it will bring pleasant results, but because we know the truth. I am not suggesting that we have to gut it out all the time. We persevere, we stay the course.

This runs counter to our society and our flesh. It is much more natural for us to make a change in our life rather than continu-

ing to be faithful where God has called us. We change jobs, or friends, or churches, or spouses. We waver in our allegiance to Jesus. After I had worked as an engineer for a couple of years I wanted to do something more significant, so I went to law school. I didn't really want to be a lawyer; I just wanted a title. A couple of months later I quit law school. I felt guilty over that for quite some time, but in a strange way that experience shaped my life. It has helped me to persevere when I felt like running.

If God has his mark on you, you can't get away. You can shake your fist at God, you can yell at him and vow to not follow him any longer, but if you know him and you are his, you won't be able to walk away. You will wake up the next morning and hear a quiet voice inside saying you can't leave, you can't walk away, you can't quit. You know in your heart that you are God's and there is no place else you can go for eternal life. That is an indication to you that no matter how you feel you are a true disciple.

So the first mark of a true disciple is perseverance in the word of Jesus. This will become a very important theme in the Upper Room Discourse.

Freedom

The second mark of a true disciple is freedom – and the foundation for freedom is truth. When a disciple remains in Jesus' word, he or she comes to know and experience the truth. So what is the truth? On one level, truth is the word of God. Knowing the revealed truth of God helps us know the difference between right and wrong, how to live the way God intended and becoming aware of the lies of the world.

There is great freedom in knowing this truth. But it is more than that. The truth is Jesus himself. In chapter 1 we read that "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). Later, Jesus will tell his disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). The truth is Jesus. He is the Light of the world, the Lamb of God, the bread of life, the Son of Man. Jesus is also the truth of God revealed in humanity. He is the complete and truthful representation of God. Knowing the truth about Jesus comes from abiding and remaining – the truth as it is in Jesus. Experiencing this gives freedom. In fact, this is the only thing that can grant freedom.

When Jesus tells these Jews that he will set them free, it really piques their interest. They respond, "We are the seed of Abraham. How can you say this?" Their tone is challenging and ugly. They do not see their need to be liberated, since they were the seed of Abraham and already saw themselves as free. They could not have been referring to political freedom, because they had been ruled for generations by a number of nations. They were talking about a spiritual, inner freedom and privilege. Even though they had been slaves of foreign oppression, inwardly they had maintained their faith and identity as the people of God and their desire to worship Yahweh. Further, they were taught that the study of law was what made them free.

Jesus explains that what he means by freedom has to do with slavery to sin. He defines slavery as moral failure, rebellion against God, worshipping the creation rather than Creator. If one practices sin, one becomes a slave of sin. Jesus speaks of an undeniable

freedom. Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a destiny. Jesus said that the result of sin is death: “I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come” (8:21).

The problem with being a slave is that a slave’s status in the house is tenuous, shaky and fragile. Slaves can be sold, therefore they don’t abide in the house forever. Sons on the other hand do abide in the house forever. The word “son” (*huios*) is John’s term for the Christ, the Son. The Son has the authority to liberate a slave and change his status in the house from temporary to permanent. If the Son sets you free you are free indeed. Jesus is the only one who can do this. Later, Paul will apply the term “son” to believers as well. In Christ we become sons and daughters through the one Son, and we relate to our heavenly Father in the same way that Jesus does.

Jesus’ words present a huge problem for the Jews. They did not see themselves as sinners; the Gentiles, yes, but the Jews were sons of Abraham. They viewed themselves as sons, not as slaves but permanent members of God’s household. Jesus is saying they have it all wrong. They are slaves. They cannot be honest about their sin. They are the older brother in the story of the prodigal son. He couldn’t recognize the fact that he was a slave even though he lived in the house. He couldn’t see clearly that his relationship with his father was not what he thought it was. When the younger son recognized his slavery and returned home, the father made him a son. The Jews’ security as sons of Abraham is their biggest obstacle to receiving the gift of freedom.

The only way to be set free from the law of sin and death is through Jesus. He had just said to the Jews, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (8:24). The reason Jesus came, in the words of Isaiah, was “to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners” (Isa 61:1). If we believe that Jesus is “I am,” the Son removes our shackles and allows us to live in freedom.

Jesus’ statement, “the truth shall set you free,” is one of the most quoted lines in the Bible. Frederick Beuchner defines freedom this way: “Free from sin, he explained when they pressed him. Free from imprisonment within the narrow walls of your own not-all-that-enlightened self-interest. Free from enslavement to your own shabbiest instincts, deceits, and self-deceptions. Freedom not from responsibility but for it. Escape not from reality but into it.”²

Freedom is what we all long for. This is what Jesus gives us, but it often evades us, even as believers. As Laura Hillenbrand says in her book *Seabiscuit*, “Man is preoccupied with freedom yet laden with handicaps.”

The main handicap we have is sin. Enslavement to sin keeps us from being who we want to be and who God designed us to be. Do you know what it is like to be the slave of sin, a slave of drugs or alcohol, sex or pornography, perfection or self-hatred, jealousy or anger, intellectual pride, athletic pride, stubborn pride? Maybe you are like me and you could check “all of the above.” I am acquainted with most of these things, except drugs. (I never inhaled!)

Do you feel bad about feeling good? Do you feel guilty about not feeling guilty? Do you hold on to regret and remorse? Do you wake up in the morning hoping that something has changed but find yourself still chained to the same prison wall? We identify with the lyrics of Paul Simon, “Like a rat in a maze the path before me lies, and the pattern never alters until the rat dies.” Or the words of Johnny Cash, “I’m stuck in Folsom Prison and time keeps draggin’ on.” The sad thing is that most of us can more readily identify with our slavery to sin rather than our experience of freedom. I think that is why Princess Diana garnered the affection of the world. Here was a princess who was human and broken, just like us.

Even though we might identify with the story of Diana, that is not the kind of life we want. The story that thrills and chills us is the tale of the one who has come out of darkness into light, out of slavery into freedom. That is the story we want, and in truth that is our story. Even though we know well the experience of slavery, the truth is that Jesus has set us free. The rat has died and the patterns can be altered. Paul tells us that we have been united in the death of Jesus so that we can be united in the resurrection life of Jesus. We can live close to our weakness and brokenness without living in slavery to these things. The only thing that keeps us from freedom is our unwillingness to admit our need and to come to Jesus. If we come, he is ready to receive us. As we sang this morning from the hymn *Jesus, I Come*, by William Sleeper,

Out of my bondage, sorrow and night,
Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;
Into Thy freedom, gladness and light,
Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of my sickness into Thy health,
Out of my want and into Thy wealth,
Out of my sin and into Thyself,
Jesus, I come to Thee.

But it is hard for us to live in freedom. We know the truth, but are we living in the truth? One reason we struggle is that we think that freedom means doing anything we like. We fight for our freedom to satisfy our desires for power, money and pleasure. What we don’t realize is that obedience to these masters only leads to slavery. Rather than being free, we find ourselves in bondage.

Here is what Beuchner says:

We have freedom to the degree that the master whom we obey grants it to us in return for our obedience. We do well to choose a master in terms of how much freedom we get for how much obedience... To obey our strongest appetites for drink, sex, power, revenge, or whatever leaves us the freedom of an animal to take what we want when we want it, but not the freedom of a human being to be human.³

We don’t think we will gain freedom by losing our life and serving Jesus. But, as Beuchner says, it is in obeying and abiding that we will find the “freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become.” True freedom is not found in having the liberty to do anything we please, but the liberty to do what we ought; and it is genuine liberty because doing what we ought now pleases us. We gain freedom by simple obedience rather than trying to decide if we should cheat on our taxes, manipulate our

boss to get a raise, or treat someone poorly because he or she has hurt us.

Another reason we struggle to live in freedom is because we are much more likely to regard our identity as slaves rather than sons and daughters living in the house. We feel tenuous, fragile and temporary, thinking that we can be traded at any moment. We live with an uncertain identity of who we are in God's eyes.

All of us have a great desire to be sons and daughters. We want home, a place where we belong. When we leave home we get homesick. We put a lot of our energy and time into finding this place where we belong, making a home and finding permanent rest. The devil takes advantage of this desire and we reach for the forbidden tree. We become slaves to sin, trying to find a place to belong. But we can't find what we are looking for in the world. It is only in Christ that we become sons and daughters. This is what will give us freedom. We become sons and daughters and then we walk in love and freedom as we abide in the word of Christ and persevere against the world that offers us a counterfeit home.

Out of the fear and dread of the tomb,
 Jesus, I come, Jesus, I come;
 Into the joy and light of Thy home,
 Jesus, I come to Thee.
 Out of the depths of ruin untold,
 Into the peace of Thy sheltering fold,
 Ever Thy glorious face to behold,
 Jesus, I come to Thee.

Freedom work is not easy. But then most things that are worthwhile are not easy. So we persevere. We keep abiding in the truth, believing that life is in Jesus, moving towards the Father who really does have our best interests in mind. And we trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, because it is he who helps us do what we cannot do on our own. This is the new covenant in Christ that was promised in Jeremiah:

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jer 31:33-34)

Even though we find ourselves weak and inadequate, we know and trust in what we sang earlier,

He is able, He is able
 He is willing, doubt no more.

1. David H. Roper, *Song of a Longing Heart* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2005), 99.

2. Frederick Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1973), 25.

3. Beuchner, *Wishful Thinking*, 33.