

“Slaves and the Offer of Freedom”
John 8:31-38
January 26, 2020
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
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We continue in the Gospel of John this morning, coming now to John 8:31-38.

Jesus is teaching in the temple in Jerusalem at the Feast of Booths. Some are asking him questions. Some are seeking to arrest or even to kill him. And some, we are told in verse thirty, “believed in him.”

We will return later to the question of the nature and the quality of this belief, but it is to those who were interested in what Jesus has been saying that Jesus addresses his next words.

And with that in mind we come to John 8:31-38.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{8:31} So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³ They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’”

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. ³⁸ I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

We praise you, Lord,
and we ask you to teach us your ways and your truth.
Help us to take your Word into our hearts and onto our lips.
Make us to delight in your testimony more than in riches.
Help us to meditate on your precepts,
and to fix our eyes on your ways,
Grant us to delight in your truth,
and to never forget your Word.
In Jesus’s name we pray. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:12-16]

In our text this morning, Jesus continues his conversation with the Jews gathered at the temple during the Feast of Booths. And in chapter eight Jesus addresses four powers set in opposition to him – four powers that battle against him for the hearts of those he speaks to.

In our text last Lord's Day morning Jesus spoke of this dark world. In today's text Jesus speaks of the power of sin. In the passage after this one Jesus will speak of our relationship to Satan. And then finally, in verses forty-eight through fifty-nine, Jesus will speak of death.

The world, sin, the devil, and then death.

This morning we come to the passage in which Jesus addresses sin.

And when it comes to sin, the conversation between Jesus and the Jews who had begun to believe in him focuses on three things. Here we see:

- the pattern of the slave,
- the power of the Son, and
- the path of the disciple.

The pattern of the slave, the power of the Son, and the path of the disciple.

Let's begin with the first.

The first thing we see in our passage this morning is the pattern of the slave.

In verses thirty-one and thirty-two Jesus tells them how they can be set free. Which, of course, implies that they are *not* free. And the Jews there pick up on this – they say in verse thirty-three: “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

Jesus says that they are slaves. They deny it. And then Jesus says “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”

And right away here we see two things about the pattern of the slave. First, we see that sin enslaves the one who sins. And second, we see that we have a tendency to deny that slavery.

Let's consider what each of those look like.

The first thing is that sin enslaves the one who sins.

That's what Jesus says in verse thirty-four: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”

Sin is rebellion against God. It is breaking God's law. It is doing what we know we should not do, or failing to do what we know we should do.

And the Bible tells us that if we step back and think about it clearly, we should see clearly that sin makes us a slave to sin. Because it makes us do what we don't want to do. Which means that we are not free.

Let me mention two ways you can think about this. One is that if you are a Christian – or any religious conservative, actually – then you know that God has told us what he wants us to do and what he wants us not to do. He has given us his law. And if you profess faith in and love for the God who has given his law, then you agree that you should obey his law. And yet, you don't obey it. You know you don't. You break his law. You sin. Despite your intention to obey, despite your desire to obey, you have not obeyed. You have sinned. And you've sinned when you didn't want to sin. Which means you've acted like you're not free. You've acted like a slave – a slave to sin.

And the Bible tells us that you know this even if you do not know or even believe in the revealed law of God.

Francis Schaeffer, drawing from the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans one, put it like this: He said, imagine if every human being had an invisible audio recorder placed around their neck at birth. And this audio recorder was programmed so that it only recorded the moral judgments which you made about other people. Every time you said “Hey, you shouldn't do X.” or “You really *should* do Y.” or “I think it's terrible that Frank did Z” – every time you made a statement of what someone should or should not do, regarding their conduct, it would record that sentence. And you wear it all your life. And then you die. And you stand before your Maker. And Schaeffer writes “Suppose, then, God simply touched the tape recorder button and each man heard played out in his own words all those statements by which he had bound other men in moral judgment. He could hear it going on for years – thousands and thousands of moral judgments. Then God would simply say to the man, though he had never heard the Bible, now where do you stand in the light of your own moral judgments?” [Schaeffer, 41-42]

And where you'd have to say that you stood was that you knew there were certain things people should not do ... but you did them anyway. And you knew there were certain things people *should* do, but you didn't do them. And maybe you wanted to do what you knew was right. Maybe you hated that you did what you knew was wrong. But in either case you sinned – you broke moral laws that you yourself applied to others ... and as you did, you acted like a slave to those sins – you acted like someone who was not free to do what they wanted to do.

The first thing we notice in the pattern of the slave is that sin enslaves the one who sins.

But the second thing we notice about the pattern of the slave, despite what we have just said, is that we still have a tendency to deny our slavery to sin. We still have a tendency to deny our slavery to sin.

We see that in our text, right?

It's the first thing the crowd says: “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?”

This statement is an odd one. Because if we take them as speaking on the level of being in political subjugation to others, the statement doesn't make any sense – especially with its reference to being sons of Abraham. Within three generations, one of Abraham's descendants (Joseph) was a slave. And that was only the beginning. As one commentator points out: “There

was scarcely a major power whom the Jews had *not* served: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Syria and Rome had all held the Jews in political captivity.” And at the time Jesus spoke, the Jews remained “in service to Caesar.” [Carson, 349] For that reason some commentators argue that the Jewish crowd must be speaking of spiritual slavery [Carson, 349; Wright, 122]. But that too, as we just considered and as Jesus goes on to say, is absurd. They are not free from sin – they are spiritual slaves.

Whether the crowd had political slavery or spiritual slavery in mind, either way their denial is absurd. And yet it remains a denial. Their impulse is to deny their slavery.

And the same is true of us, isn't it? We have a tendency to deny our slavery to sin.

And if you're not sure that that's true of you, let me mention a few forms that might take – four ways we can deny our slavery to sin.

One is by telling ourselves that we are not slaves to sin, because we can free ourselves.

Whatever our sin is, we can overcome it, on our own, if we try hard enough, and work hard enough. We are no one's slaves – we are the captains of our own fates. (Or so we tell ourselves.)

And so we work hard at overcoming sin – at stopping actions that we agree we should not do. And if we achieve that – if we stop doing that bad thing, then we tell ourselves (and maybe others) that we have overcome our sin on our own, and that anyone else can too.

Augustine observed this kind of determination in many of the pagans he studied. And he concluded that without God people could fight off certain sins – certain vices. But they did not, by this, win freedom from slavery to sin.

Instead, they traded slavery to one sin for slavery to another sin.

Speaking of one set of examples, Augustine writes: “For the sake of this one vice – that is, the love of praise – these men suppressed the love of riches and many other vices.” [Augustine, *City of God*, V.13 – p. 163]

In other words, Augustine is saying that when we rely on ourselves – when we claim that we can overcome our sin because we are not its slave – we really just work to be sold from slavery to one sin to slavery to another.

The person struggling with the sexual sin or the sin of drunkenness may tell themselves that they are better than this – that they are above those sins, and so they fight their sins of pleasure ... and they do it motivated by the sin of pride – of feeling superior to others. And if they succeed, they have simply succeeded in transferring themselves from one master to another – one vice to another.

Others will fight sins of laziness or unrighteous anger out of a desire to succeed in life, and soon find themselves working to become free of those sins in order to become slaves to the sins of greed or hunger for power, which they can get from worldly success.

“For the sake of this one vice [...] men suppressed many other vices.” But that’s not freedom. We remain slaves to sin – controlled by the sins we commit.

That is one way we try to deny our slavery to sin – by transferring ourselves from being slaves of less respectable sins to being slaves of more respectable sins.

A second way we try to deny our slavery to sin is by hiding it – by sectioning it off. When we are in public, when we are with others, maybe even most of the time we are on our own, we put forward a wonderful picture of ourselves. We show others how good we are. We maybe try to show ourselves how good we are. We look wonderful. We deny anything so terrible as slavery to sin.

But then, in secret – whether in our actions when no one else is looking, or in our thoughts where no one can listen – in secret, our slavery comes out. We may hate it, or we may delight in it, but either way we cannot stop it even if we try. When it’s over, maybe we tell ourselves we won’t do it again, and so we can put up the good picture again. But deep down we know it will happen again. Deep down we know we are not free. Deep down we know we are slaves.

The second way we try to deny our slavery to sin is by hiding it.

A third way we try to deny our slavery to sin is by attempting to earn freedom from our sin by obeying our sin. We attempt to earn freedom from our sin by obeying our sin.

That might sound crazy. But hang in here with me, because you probably do it.

A place you can see this especially clearly is greed. Greed is an inordinate desire for money or wealth. It’s a lack of contentment with what we have been given. And it is a very common sin. We are discontent with what we have. And the way we try to free ourselves of that desire – of that anxiety for more – is by trying to get ... “Just a little bit more.” If only we could get a little more money, a little more wealth, then we would be content, we tell ourselves. In other words, we deny our slavery to our sin, because we tell ourselves that if we just obey our sin – obey our discontentedness – just a little more, then we will have “enough” and we will be content, and freed from the greed and sinful discontentedness we feel now.

We tell ourselves that we’re not really slaves, because if we just obey our sin a bit more, we will be free of it.

And we do the same thing in other areas, whether the desire for praise from others, or for preeminence over others: we aim to be free of the sinful desire by satisfying it – by obeying its demands rather than by resisting it.

And we see that tendency in much more short-term temptations as well.

When we struggle with desire for sinful pleasure – whether sexual sin, or drunkenness, or drug abuse, or gluttony, or something else – at some point, when we are struggling with desires we don’t even want to have, the thought pops in our head – maybe, if we just give in, then we will be free of the desire – then we will be satisfied.

Of course, whether it is for greed, for praise, for power, or for pleasure, obedience to our sin never gives us the freedom we hope for. Giving in to our sin, never leaves us satisfied. The wealth, the praise, the power, the pleasure – it's never enough. If anything the desire just increases. We become even more enslaved. As one author puts it: "What fire dies when you feed it?" [Wallace, 389] And yet so often, that is our approach. We try to deny our slavery to sin by attempting to earn freedom from our sin by obeying our sin.

Fourth and finally, one more way we deny our slavery to sin is by embracing our sin – by claiming both the sin and our bondage to it as something we own and value.

We celebrate our sin, and in so doing we try to convince ourselves and others that we're not really enslaved to it.

We see this in the man who sees his use of and objectification of women as something to brag about. We see it in the woman who sees her unrighteous anger as something to be proud of. We see it in the individual who sees their sexual sin as something to take pride in. We see this in the executive who sees his or her greed as a career asset.

We see it whenever men and women take a sinful tendency that degrades them and hurts those around them, and embraces it as something they will take pride in.

To borrow a phrase from one author – these celebrations become like "the song of the prisoner who's come to love his cage." [Wallace, Interview, 49]

Maybe you love your cage ... or at least you tell yourself that you do ... but you're still a prisoner – a prisoner to greed, or power, or lust, or pride. You may try to love your captor – but you are still a slave, not a family member

The fourth way we deny our slavery to sin is by embracing our sin.

So – zooming out again, the first thing we see in our text is the pattern of sin. And the pattern that we see is that though we try to deny it, sin enslaves us when we sin.

The second thing we see is the power of the Son.

That comes out in verse thirty-six. Jesus, the Son of God, says that though they may be slaves, "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

And he gets more detailed than that in verses thirty-one and thirty-two – he says: "If you abide in *my* word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and *the truth will set you free.*"

Jesus tells them that as the Son of God, he has the power to set them free. And he can do that because of who he is, what he does, and how he connects to us as his people.

He's able to accomplish this first because he is the Son. He stresses that in verses thirty-five and thirty-six. Jesus does not present himself as just another wise man offering his wisdom – he presents himself as the only-begotten Son of God, who has authority that no human being – no creature – has.

He then accomplishes what he promises by his own action. In verse thirty-six he doesn't say that he teaches us a method so we can achieve our own freedom. He doesn't say that he'll help us set ourselves free. He says that it is he – the Son – who sets us free.

It is the work of Jesus Christ – his life, his death on the cross on our behalf, and his resurrection in victory over sin and death – that accomplishes our freedom from sin.

Jesus can save us because he is the Son, he saves us through his own action – his own work – and then finally, he applies the freedom from sin he has purchased for us, by his relationship with us. We are united to Christ as we follow him, as we trust him and his word, as we believe the truth that he speaks to us. In verses thirty-one and thirty-two he says: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” As we are united by faith to Christ, trusting the truth he speaks to us, we receive the salvation he accomplished on our behalf, and are freed from slavery to sin.

The Apostle Paul says the same thing in Romans six – he explains that we have been united to Christ by faith, and so “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”

Those who trust in Christ – who are united to him by faith – share in the benefits of his victory over sin, by his death and resurrection, and are therefore set free.

This is what Christ offers. This is what he offers to the Jews gathered at the temple in the first century. This is what he has offered to all who trusted in him for the centuries since then. This is what he offers to you and me today. Christ offers to free us from slavery to sin, if we would trust his word, and be united to him by faith.

We are enslaved to sin. And while we do not have the power to free ourselves, Jesus, as the Son of God, does.

So – the first thing we see is the pattern of the slave. The second thing we see is the power of the Son.

The third thing we see is the path of the disciple.

The path of the disciple.

But – we need to see the path of the disciple in the context of the other possible paths. And our text holds out three paths altogether.

There is the path of the scoffer, the path of the fickle, and the path of the disciple.

The first is the path of the scoffer. This would be much of the crowd gathered in the temple, which we have heard from earlier on in John chapter seven and chapter eight. It would include the chief priests and the Pharisees who are seeking to kill Jesus. These are those who dismiss Jesus's claims – who mock them or take offense at them – who defiantly proclaim that they are

not slaves to sin – who tell Jesus they don't need him, and when he says they do, they turn away from him, or make plans to eliminate him.

Maybe that is you this morning. Maybe you find the words of Jesus in this passage ridiculous or even offensive. Maybe you boldly assert that you are no one's slave.

If that is you, Jesus stands firm with his claim that you are enslaved. That you sin and you cannot stop. You are a slave to sin – a slave to rebellion. And can you really deny it? Can you really shrug it off? Jesus challenges you to take an honest look at yourself. And then he continues to offer you freedom. Ask him this morning to help you see yourself as you really are. And when you do, ask him to help you reach out to him to be freed.

One path of response is the path of the scoffer.

A second is the path of the fickle. And in a lot of ways that path is featured in this text. Jesus, we may need to remember, is speaking to the Jews in the temple who – in some way at least – would seem to believe in him. We see that in verse thirty-one. But Jesus challenges them. He tells them that it is only if they abide in his word – if they remain in his instruction – if they hold to his teaching [Carson, 348] – it is only then that they will know that they truly are his disciples. In other words, Jesus says that some of them may have fickle faith – faith that is more of an interest or a fascination with him, than a commitment. Faith that may have a lot of enthusiasm at the beginning, but that does not endure. Interest, curiosity, excitement, even enthusiasm – these are good starts ... but they are not yet the path of discipleship. That takes more.

One commentator reminds us that Jesus “is never interested in multiplying numbers of converts if they are not genuine believers, and therefore he insists on forcing would-be disciples to count the cost.” And so he reminds them that “we come to know the truth, not simply by intellectual assessment, but by moral commitment.” [Carson, 348]

There is a difference between an admirer of Christ and a disciple – a follower – of Christ. The fickle will admire him for a time. But they will not commit. They will not make a moral commitment. They will not persevere. They will remain enslaved to their sin.

And it is worth pausing to ask yourself if this is you. Are you fickle? Are you an admirer of Christ, rather than a disciple? [Note: The “admirer” vs “follower”/“disciple” distinction comes from excerpts of Soren Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity*]

Maybe you are and you know you are. If that is you, then I'm glad you're here with us this morning ... but know that where you are is not yet far enough. Interest, curiosity, admiration, excitement – these are good starts. But Jesus seeks disciples. He seeks followers. If you do not follow him, then you will neither know him nor receive what he offers.

And for the rest of us, it is worth pausing, and reflecting on the question of whether we ourselves might fall into that category as well. In other words: Are you an admirer of Christ or a follower?

I'm not asking if you're perfect – none of us are perfect. But do you hold fast to Christ's teaching? Do you seek to follow him? Do you see some evidence in your life that the truth has set you free?

If not – if you attend here on Sundays, but Christ has no impact on the rest of your life ... if you admire Christ in worship, but disregard him in how you live your life: how you go about your work, how you relate to your family, how you make moral decisions ... then maybe you are an admirer more than a follower.

And if that is the case, then Jesus urges you to turn and to follow. He urges you to not just ponder his word, but to *hold fast* to it – to abide in it. He urges you to truly be his disciples. *Then* you will know the truth, and *then* the truth will set you free.

One false response is that of the scoffer. Another is that of the fickle – the mere admirer.

Finally, there is the path of the disciple. Jesus makes that clear in verses thirty-one and thirty-two.

The disciple abides – holds fast – to Christ’s word, and so is a true disciple. And she knows the truth. And the truth sets her free. And the disciple whom the Son sets free will be free indeed.

Now ... most of us will feel a bit of a disconnect here. Most of us who are Christians – who have believed the word of Christ, who have trusted his promises in the gospel, who have followed him, who have tried to hold fast to his word – most of us will feel a disconnect ... because despite all this, we don’t always feel so free from sin. In fact, a lot of what we heard earlier about slavery to sin might have resonated with us.

So where does that leave us?

Well ... here it may be helpful to go back again to Romans chapter six. We heard from that passage a few minutes ago. And there we heard how all who are united to Christ – all who trust in him by faith – all share in the benefits of his death and resurrection. And among those benefits are his defeat of the power of sin. Therefore, the Apostle Paul wrote that since we are united to Christ in his death “our old self was crucified with him [...] so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”

There it is – sin has no enslaving power over us – we are free.

But then ... in the very next paragraph Paul writes:

“¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

“¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ [...] For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to

more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”

Paul here tells us a couple things.

One is that though we are technically free from sin, we can still *act* like slaves. While sin has no rightful authority over us, we can still *act* like it does – we can still present ourselves to it as if we are slaves.

The picture here is of a liberated slave – one who has been set free. But it is as if the old slave master suddenly shows up. And he begins to make demands. And he begins to make threats. And soon, the former slave is obeying again. Maybe out of fear. Maybe out of habit. Maybe out of doubt that he really is free. Maybe because obedience to his old master is familiar. Maybe because in some ways it feels safe and predictable.

The Apostle Paul tells us that this is our temptation: to act like slaves to sin, even after we have been set free.

The second thing we learn from Paul’s words is that spiritual freedom is not easy. It’s hard. It is not freedom from work, but freedom from slavery to sin. And if we do not begin serving someone else – if we do not focus on serving righteousness – on serving Christ – then we will feel a tug to return to the familiar ways of slavery to sin.

Living as Christ’s free people is not easy. The daily spiritual battle is real. But the thing to remember is that Christ has given us the key. *He* has set us free, and so we are free indeed. Our calling is not to achieve our freedom, but to live out the freedom he has already achieved for us.

And how do we do that? By abiding in his word. By holding fast to his teaching. By persevering in his gospel. By remaining in the faith. By seeking to obey his commands.

In other words: we work. But we no longer work as slaves to sin leading to death. We now work as adopted sons and daughters in the household of God, leading to sanctification and eternal life.

That is the path of discipleship.

We see in our text this morning the pattern of slavery to sin, the power of the Son to save, and the path of discipleship.

That phrase in verse thirty-two gets thrown around a lot: “The truth will set you free.”

It’s usually used in a way that implies that when we “get” something – when a truth about the world clicks in our minds, then we will suddenly be free of our wrong thinking and wrong actions – as if having the right information will solve everything.

But as we look more deeply at this text, we see that Jesus both offers more than that, and he demands more than that.

He offers us true freedom from sin – not through some new method or some realization, but by purchasing us with his precious blood.

And he demands not just our attention or our intellectual assent, but our deepest allegiance. He demands that we abide in his word – that we be transformed by it. He demands that we let it work on us – let it say to us truths we don't want to hear, let it make demands on us that we struggle to believe we can bear, and let it proclaim to us magnificent promises of God's love for us that we tremble to believe.

As one author put it: “The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you.” [Wallace, 389]

Even so, there is nothing more valuable than the freedom Christ offer us.

And so if you are a scoffer, then put away your scoffing. Stop denying your slavery to sin, and instead see it for what it is. And then cry out to Jesus to help you follow him, and to set you free by his grace.

If you are a fickle admirer of Christ, then put away your indifference and your minimizing of your enslavement to sin. See your need and then cling to Christ and call on him to hold you fast.

And if you are a disciple, be reminded this morning that the difficult path of discipleship is worth it. See again the ugliness of sin, the oppression that slavery to sin brings, and the spiritual death it leads to. Be reminded again that Christ has set you free, and that no matter what the tempter tells you, you need not, and you must not give yourself to sin as if you are its slave. Instead, lean on Christ your king as he helps you walk the path of discipleship.

Abide in Christ's word, so that you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Augustine. *Homilies on the Gospel of John*. “Tractate VLI.” Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. First Series, Volume 7.

Augustine. *The City of God*. Introduction and Translation by William Babcock. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012.

Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.

Schaeffer, Francis. *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: Christian Worldview, Volume Four, A Christian View of the Church*. Second Edition. Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982.

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 1996. [An important disclaimer: While I have drawn from this work in this sermon, I would not recommend this book for most readers. It contains disturbing content that many would find troubling, and caution and wisdom must be exercised by Christians in knowing what would be profitable for them to read and what they should personally avoid.]

Wallace, David Foster. “Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace” by Larry McCaffery, 1993. In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Stephen J. Burn. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2013.

Wright, N.T. *John for Everyone: Part I*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.