

John's Gospel - the Way of Freedom

by John Vissers

Jesus teaches that knowing the truth through a relationship with Him will lead to freedom from the lies that enslave us.

Duration: 35:21

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 8:31-34, John 8:45, John 8:47

Topics: "Freedom"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the theme of freedom as expressed by Jesus in John chapter 8. Jesus tells his followers that if they hold to his teachings, they will truly be his disciples and will know the truth that sets them free. Some of the listeners object, claiming that they are already free as descendants of Abraham. However, Jesus explains that everyone who sins is actually a slave to sin and that true freedom comes through discipleship with him. The preacher emphasizes that we never truly had freedom before coming to Jesus, as we were enslaved to sin, but through his grace, we can experience the freedom he offers.

Transcript

Good evening and welcome to our evening service tonight. Let's turn to our text for tonight. We're reading in John chapter 8, and at verse 31 we're continuing to plod our way through the Gospel of John.

And tonight we want to look at the theme of freedom, the way of freedom, as Jesus expresses it, remembering that he's been teaching in the midst of the Feast of the Tabernacles about the fact that he is, he gives living water, that he is the light of the world. And now in response to that we have some further teachings, some further comments by our Lord. So reading then God's word at verse 31 of John chapter 8. To the Jews who believed him, who have believed him, 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. 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? Jesus replied, I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

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. I know you are Abraham's descendants, yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word.

I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father. Abraham is our father, they answered. If you were Abraham's children, said Jesus, then you would do the things Abraham did.

As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things, you are doing the things your father does. We are not illegitimate children, they protested.

The only father we have is God himself. Jesus said to them, If God were your father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own, but he sent me.

Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him.

When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? He who belongs to God hears what God says.

The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God. So far, then, the reading of God's word tonight to the end of the 47th verse of the 8th chapter of the Gospel of John. Let's bow in prayer.

God our Father, we thank you for your word tonight, inspired, infallible, through which you reveal yourself, the person of your Son, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Speak to us, we pray tonight, by your Spirit. Help us in these moments together to understand the glories of your word that we might be strengthened to obey you as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, not only this night, not only in the week to come, but indeed throughout our lives.

In the name of Christ we pray. Amen. I arrived on the campus of the University of Toronto as an undergraduate student in September of 1975, 17 years old.

I was registered at Victoria College, and a number of my classes were held in the old Vic building. And the motto of Victoria College is enshrined there on that building in a kind of glorious way. The motto is, the truth will set you free.

It's a noble statement, of course, for any college, for any higher institution of learning. The assumption is that a disciplined learning, a disciplined education, disciplined learning in the pursuit of truth will lead to freedom. And the assumption, of course, is that there is truth to be pursued, and that a university, in fact, is a very good place, in fact, an excellent place to pursue that truth, a place to find it.

And the assumption is, of course, that there is also freedom to be found, and that the truth acquired in a good education somehow will liberate us, and somehow will open up the truth to that freedom. And so we have these two wonderful values, truth on the one hand and freedom on the other, in many ways, wonderfully modern values. And for generations now, we have assumed that if we just have the right kind of education, if we can just gather together the right kind of knowledge, if we can just mature in the right kind of way, if we can just progress in all sorts of ways, and perhaps through the right technology, if we can gather together all of this, then we're going to know the truth, and somehow we're not only going to be able to know that truth, but also we're going to find freedom.

And of course, freedom has become an ideal for which all of us strive. We want to be free from the oppression of others. We want to be free from the things that enslave us.

And in fact, in this service this afternoon, we were reminded of the struggle of our African brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ for their struggle against injustice and oppression to find freedom. So we have these values, these wonderful values of truth and freedom, but we're also living at an interesting time in history, because we're living at a time when many people doubt, in fact, that there is such a thing as truth. There are many people who have forsaken the journey to find truth.

They think no longer, perhaps, that truth may be apprehended, or that there isn't any form of absolute truth which may be understood. And of course, many people today continue to be discouraged by how little freedom they experience, whether it is political freedom, and as we look around our world today, one would think that given our knowledge, given the values in our world, there ought to be a great deal of freedom. And yet, so many people are still in oppression.

And in oppression, all kinds of things, whether it's political oppression or chemical dependency or some other form of oppression. In short, truth and freedom don't seem to mean what they once did. Many people still find themselves wondering whether they can find truth, whether they can find freedom.

And that's what makes this statement I suggest to you in John 8, this statement of Jesus as we come to it, so important for us to think into together. Notice what Jesus says in verse 32. He says, Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Or in verse 36, He says, So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. And then notice if you drop down a bit further into verse 45, Jesus says, Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. And of course, He accuses some of the Jewish leaders who are accusing Him of being children of lies, children of the father of lies.

And so truth and freedom together, in fact, are important themes in the Gospel of John. And they weave themselves through the Gospel of John just like a number of the themes that we've looked at throughout our study of this marvelous Gospel. If you go back again to the prologue, to John 1 and verse 14, do you remember those wonderful words John says? We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father.

And how does Jesus describe there? How does John describe Him? Full of what? Grace and truth. And then in verse 17 of the prologue, John says, For the law was given through Moses, but what? Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. And throughout the Gospel of John, one of the interesting things is that in His conversations with the religious leaders, in His conversations with would-be disciples, He's always emphasizing that He is telling the truth.

At least 25 times, if you go through the Gospel of John, in conversations with the leaders and with some of His disciples. In John 1, verse 51, He tells Nathanael, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. I tell you the truth.

And then Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3, verse 3, I tell you the truth, unless someone is born again, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. And at least 25 more times through the Gospel of John, you find this phrase, I tell you the truth, I tell you the truth, I tell you the truth. Jesus keeps hammering it home in the context of His conversations and His teachings.

And then in John 4, Jesus tells the woman at the well whom He met there that those who worship the Father must worship in spirit and in truth. And then in John 14, if we go a bit forward in the Gospel, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, as the One who would lead the disciples into all truth. And then there's that wonderful statement in John 14 where Jesus describes Himself as the way and the truth and the life.

You see, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is understood as someone, as One in Whom truth resides. He is full of truth. He is the One who is full of truth.

He is the One through Whom truth comes to us. He tells the truth, and He is Himself the truth about which He speaks. And now, in John 8, Jesus connects that truth to freedom.

In v. 30, we read that some who listened to the teaching of Jesus at the feast of the tabernacles put their faith in Him. For them, John says, for those who believed, Jesus now returns to the idea of truth. He speaks to them about knowing the truth.

He speaks to them about experiencing the truth in their lives as a liberating power, and about the centrality of faith in finding this freedom and in knowing this truth. And so I'd like for us to think together into these particular phrases of Jesus very briefly and try to lift up their application for us as believers and as disciples of Jesus today. Now, the first thing I want you to notice is v. 32.

Here, Jesus talks about what it means to know the truth. Now, Jesus is talking here to the religious leaders and to the people who responded to His discourse at the feast of tabernacles. And those who hold to the teaching of Jesus, He says, are really His disciples.

Now, we've already seen in the Gospel of John how many started to follow Jesus. You remember how they started to follow Jesus, but then when Jesus started to give hard teachings, when Jesus started to tell them the truth, when Jesus started to unfold what it was going to mean to be a disciple, then they turned away from following Him. And Jesus is saying now to these would-be disciples, to these who have responded to His discourse in the temple, to those who are coming to Him because He says, I am the light of the world, to those who are coming to Him because He says, I can give you living water, streams of living water will flow if you come to Me.

He says, now if you want to experience that living water, if you want to know Me as the light of the world, if you want to be My disciple, you must hold to My teaching. And by holding to My teaching, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. Now what is Jesus saying here? What He's saying, and I want you to understand this point very clearly, He's saying that we know the truth as we enter into discipleship.

That we know the truth as we give ourselves to obedience, to the obedience of Jesus' will and His way. You see, when we think about truth, we often think about it in some abstract form. But what Jesus offers here is not an abstract form of truth, not some rational set of propositions around which you organize your life, not a kind of set of truths, but the truth that Jesus offers is offered in the context of a relationship with Himself.

The truth of the Gospel, the truth of faith, the truth that shapes our lives is a truth not simply that we learn through a kind of rational cognition. The truth that Jesus is talking about in the New Testament is the kind of truth that is known in relationship with Himself. It is known in discipleship.

It is known in community. It is known by those who follow Jesus, who gather around Him, who organize their lives around Him. And the idea of truth, you see, in this passage is really truth in the Hebrew sense, not in a kind of abstract, Greco-Hellenistic sense, but truth that means walking in the way of righteousness.

That is, truth is something not just that you know, but that you live out. It is not just some intellectual act of understanding or knowing something or knowing the meaning of something. It is rather a truth which transforms your life.

It is what the Bible describes as truth in the inner person. And so when you welcome Christ into your life, you are welcoming the truth. A new center.

A new reality rooted in the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You see, the truth of His Gospel and His grace changes your life and you grow in grace and truth as the reality of Christ more and more shapes your life. You have now a new way of looking at the world.

A new way of apprehending reality. A new way of organizing your thoughts. A new way of establishing priorities.

And it's not simply a matter of learning a few things. It is being engaged in a whole new way of looking at life. A way that cuts through what Jesus describes not simply as untruth, not simply as falsehood, but as lies.

The lies of the evil one. The truth of Jesus helps us understand the way that things are from God's perspective. To see the real world, that is, the real world from God's eyes.

And that's why Paul can say, of course, that the Gospel is foolishness to the Greeks. It's foolishness to those who are perishing. Because what Jesus is saying here is that if you want to know the truth behind the world, if you want to reason about reality, if you want to understand the world, if you want to understand your life, you do so fundamentally by taking a step from outside the circle of discipleship to inside the circle of discipleship.

That's how you know the truth. We think about truth, of course, in abstraction, in isolation from the rest of reality. Those of us who have given ourselves to graduate study over the years, we spend our lives learning more and more about something until we know absolutely everything about nothing, as the saying goes.

We focus in more and more on some narrow focus, some narrow discipline of understanding. And graduate study and study is important. But never let us be fooled.

The truth that is going to change our lives is the kind of truth in which Jesus Christ is not only the center, but the sum and substance. It shapes your life. It transforms your relationships.

It is the truth of Jesus learned in a relationship with Him. And what we need is Christian men and women and young people. People who are willing to think into a relationship with Jesus Christ and then engage the world as disciples of Jesus with the mind of Christ.

That's what the Apostle Paul means in 1 Corinthians 2. That we might have the mind of Christ. Romans 12. That we might be transformed by the renewal of our minds.

That we might think Christ's thoughts after Him through entering into a relationship with Him. So we know the truth by entering into discipleship and in obedience to His Word and His way. And then Jesus goes on.

Secondly, I want you to notice in verses 32 and 36. And He begins to talk now about what it means to experience this truth in your life. Jesus says, then you will know the truth if you step inside the circle of discipleship, if you enter into a relationship with Jesus, if you give yourself to obedience to His Word, you have this relationship in which the truth is established.

And He says, then you begin to experience that truth in your life, working itself into your life and out of your life, and that truth will set you free. And Jesus says, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. You see, Jesus here is saying that the kind of truth that comes through discipleship sets you free.

And again, notice that it's not abstract. It's not a formula that sets you free. It's not a kind of set of propositions.

It's not a 12-step program that's going to set you free. What it is, is this real relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus is the truth through whom we are liberated.

And Jesus teaches that to follow His way as a disciple, then, means to experience the reality of freedom. And this freedom is inseparable from truth. There cannot be freedom without truth.

There cannot be freedom without righteousness. Think back a few weeks to the woman caught in adultery. She experiences the freedom of Jesus.

She experiences freedom because of the fact that Christ's righteousness, His truth, has made possible her freedom. Jesus' intervention, Jesus' handling of that situation sets her free, and Jesus says, go, be free, and sin no more. And that's what Jesus here is saying.

When you enter into a relationship with Me, when you encounter the truth as you have it in the revelation of God my Father in my life and ministry, then you are set free to be what God wants you to be. You'll be set free from the lies that enslave you. Now this, of course, bumps us up against the irony of the Christian faith.

Because the irony of the Christian faith, or the paradox of the Christian faith, is that real freedom is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord. When we acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus, when we give ourselves to discipleship, when we are willing to obey Him, when we bow down before Him, that's when we experience real freedom. And the Apostle Paul, the great Apostle of liberty, hammers this home again and again and again.

It's the theme of that great book, his letter to the Galatians. He says, in Christ Jesus, we are set free. We're set free from sin.

We're set free from death. We're set free from the law. We no longer have the law hanging over us as a curse and we can now give ourselves to joyful obedience to the will of God.

Why? Because we've been set free. You see, in the Bible, freedom is not freedom to do what you want. It's not freedom to do what you want when you want, how you want to do it.

That's the way we define freedom in our world. But in the Bible, freedom is being liberated to do what God would have you to do. It is being given the ability, the strength through the power of God's regenerating

grace to live in the fullness of the life that the Lord wants you to have.

And so the irony, the paradox is that you find freedom by giving yourself to Jesus Christ. That's why the Apostle Paul can talk about himself as being the most free of all men and yet being a bonded servant of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, he can say, I have been set free.

I have been liberated. And yet at the same time, he says, I am a bond servant of Jesus Christ. And this only begins to make sense when you understand that in sin, under lies, in the context of a fallen world, there is no such thing as freedom.

There is only bondage. Bondage to the fallenness of our world, to the sin which enslaves us. Rather, the freedom comes when we enter into discipleship with Jesus Christ.

Now the text says that some of those listening to Jesus didn't understand this. They already thought that they were free. They objected to this.

After all, they weren't in prison. They weren't slaves. But in v. 34, Jesus says that everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

You see, you don't lose your freedom when you come to Jesus. In fact, you never had it because you were a slave to sin. But Jesus invites us into the freedom of His grace.

Malcolm Muggeridge puts it this way in one of his books. He says, All other freedoms, once won, soon turn into a new servitude. Christ is the only liberator whose liberation lasts forever.

I have often quoted the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in my sermons and in preaching from this pulpit in this congregation. Bonhoeffer is one of my favorite writers, one of my favorite theologians, a Christian who was arrested in Germany by the Nazis, imprisoned, and finally then executed just weeks before the end of the war in April of 1945. And throughout his letters and papers from prison, Bonhoeffer is writing.

He's putting down his thoughts on paper. He's writing. He's writing letters to friends, writing letters to his fiancée, writing letters to his parents.

And one of the themes that comes through again and again and again is here is this 39-year-old man. Here he is in prison. He doesn't know whether he's ever going to get out of prison.

In fact, he didn't get out of prison. He was hanged. But he writes again and again and again about the freedom that he experienced in that prison cell.

Because, you see, he had something that even the Nazis could not take away from him in life, in prison, and not even in death itself. Freedom in Jesus Christ. And that's the freedom that Jesus here is talking about.

And we have wonderful testimonies from Christian men and women today around the world who are persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ, but who give eloquent testimony to their liberation and to their freedom in Christ. When I was at Lausanne II in Manila in 1989, a great conference on world evangelization, the most moving moment came when a pastor from China got up and gave his testimony. He had been in prison for a number of years, and he was such a pain to his guards and to those who imprisoned him that finally they wanted to put him off by himself so he wouldn't make any more trouble.

So they gave him the worst job in the prison camp. They made him clean the septic tanks every day. And he said, there he was, living in the waste of that prison camp, day in and day out, cleaning it out.

That's what he did. And he said, you know what? They thought that they were putting me down. They thought they were making my life miserable.

But, you know, there I was by myself. No one else to bother me. No one else to persecute me.

And I could sing the praises of my Savior with the kind of freedom that I had not enjoyed anywhere else. And then he broke out into song and he said, you know what I sang most of all as I was in that septic system? I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses and the joy that we share as we tarry there, the Son of God discloses that He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own and the joy that we share is like none other I've ever known. That's freedom.

When you can sing the praise of your Savior in that kind of a situation, that's freedom. And then finally, Jesus stresses the importance of believing the truth in v. 45. He says, Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me.

Can any of you prove Me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe Me? He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason that you do not hear is that you do not belong to God. Truth and freedom are rooted in faith.

And faith has to do with belonging to God. It has to do with being owned by God and with owning God. It has to do with hearing what God says.

You see, truth is not just something to be accepted. It's not just something to be known. Freedom is just not something to be experienced or to be thought about.

It is to be believed. And what the Gospel calls us to is to risk our lives for the truth that matters. To risk our lives for the freedom that matters.

To risk our lives, to entrust our lives to Jesus Christ in whom we truly find freedom. What Jesus says here, of course, is a foreshadow of what is yet to come in the Gospel. Because what is to come in the Gospel of John is this reality.

Jesus is the One who gives up His freedom. And Jesus is the One who gives up His freedom so that you and I might be set free. And Jesus is the One who is cursed as a liar who takes on the falsehood and lies of the world so that you and so that I might know the truth.

And so when you begin to see on the horizon of John 8, when Jesus is talking about truth and freedom, that these are the very things that He Himself, in a very real sense, gives up and takes upon Himself a lack of freedom. He takes upon Himself the lies of the world on the cross of Calvary so that we might know the truth and so that we might be set free. So when you read these words, if you know the truth, the truth will set you free.

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. They ought to point us to the reality of what Christ has done on the cross. J.S. Bach captured this truth, the truth of this text beautifully in these words.

Our freedom, Son of God, arose when Thou wast cast in prison. And from the jurants Thou didst choose, our liberty is risen. Didst Thou not choose a slave to be? We were all slaves eternally.

Jesus has borne the penalty of our sin that we might be set free. Do you know that freedom this evening? Do you know the truth that can set you free? Let's pray together. Lord, tonight some of us perhaps are struggling with the truth of the Gospel.

And some of us are struggling with whether in fact we can really experience freedom, freedom from all kinds of things that seem to hold us in bondage. But most of all we pray, O God, this night that by Your Spirit, through the work of Your Gospel, You would set us free in the truth of the Gospel, that we might know what it is to know the truth, to experience the truth, to belong to our Savior, and that we might obey Him and honor Him through Christ our Lord.

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