

“Lord God, you have appointed me as a pastor in your Church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had lacked your help, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument -- but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.”

“Sir, I would see Jesus.”

JESUS OFFERS FREEDOM THROUGH THE TRUTH

Gospel – John 8

³¹So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. ³²You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³³“We are Abraham’s descendants,” they answered, “and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be set free?’”

³⁴Jesus answered, “Amen, Amen, I tell you: Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵But a slave does not remain in the family forever. A son does remain forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free.”



It was the year of a presidential election. A man stepped onto the podium in New York City to deliver a speech. He was a tall man with a top hat and a full beard, and it was February of the year 1860. Do you know who that was? Yes, Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln’s opponent, Senator Stephen Douglas, also from Illinois, had made the point that the Framers of the Constitution understood the issue of slavery than the people of their own time. **So Abraham Lincoln decided to base his speech on that point: the Framers of the Constitution understood the issue of slavery than the people of his own time.**

Very carefully, Honest Abe talked about how in every instance a new territory was added to the Union, the federal government limited slavery—the Northwest Territory (MI, OH, IL, IN, WI, parts of MN), the Louisiana Purchase, Tennessee (ceded by S. Carolina), Mississippi and Alabama (ceded by Georgia). In every instance, some of the original 39 framers of the Constitution were involved in designing the governments of these territories. **Twenty-three of the original 39 framers of the Constitution helped make regulations on slavery in these new territories.** Some of them voted twice or three times. No new slaves could be freshly imported into those new lands of Louisiana (with its already old, old slave city of New Orleans), Tennessee, Mississippi and Alabama, whether from Africa, the Caribbean, or anywhere else. And no slaves could be owned in the Northwest Territory.

Lincoln’s point in a 17-page speech was that, if you’d like to say what his opponents were saying (the Framers understood the slavery situation better than the politicians and voters of 1860) you may do so. **But then the argument goes in favor of the federal government regulating and limiting slavery.** The Framers knew what they were doing, according to Lincoln. They understood the issue of slavery better than the people of Lincoln’s time.

Today, let us say confidently that **Jesus understands what it means to be enslaved better than the people of our time.** And if we start with that thought—that Jesus understands slavery and freedom better than we do—we may understand what slavery he is talking about and what freedom he offers. Jesus in our sermon text was referring to a deeper slavery than the shackles, chains, and bonds of any government in this world. And Jesus was appealing to a deeper freedom than this world can offer.

We may not be enslaved in America, but there is a deeper, more destructive slavery Jesus was referring to. The slavery of sin and the bondage of human will. It is much worse than any historical slavery that might scare you. You may feel that bondage routinely in a certain pet sin you've been grooming, a bad habit, or a vice you cannot escape. But it is just when we get tied up (with the concerns of this world and its governments) that we begin our theme for today:

What On Earth Are You Doing For Heaven's Sake?

[1. Remain in His Word]

[2. Remain in Jesus]

[3. Nothing, God's Son has set you free]

You will thank God for Jesus' answer to that question today. **The first thing Jesus tells us to do on earth for heaven's sake is to remain in his Word.** He spoke these words (and he said them to believers): *If you remain in my Word, you are really my disciples.* Jesus tells us with these words that in our personal time we need to wrap ourselves in the pages of his gospel. When you go to bed at night, your blanket is a devotion with God's Word. Or when you wake up in the morning, you are invited to open to what God has to say. Or maybe it's lunch or some quiet time at another point in the day. But Jesus tells us to focus some personal time on hearing what he has to say and praying his words and your worries right back to him. You may have started your week in God's Word with public worship, but Jesus says continue in the same way. Keep reviewing promises that you know so well in Bible memory work of days past. Keep on hearing the sermons of the faithful pastors of this world, because it brings results.

What results? If you do this—if you hold to his teaching—or, more to the Greek: *“if you remain in his Word”—you are really his disciples.* In truth, when you open up the Scriptures and bury yourself in your Bible, Jesus tells you that **you are as near and dear to him as Peter, James and John.** You are his friends just as the original 12 disciples were his friends. He will show you greater things than His careful watch over you, and he will open his heart to your life here and now. St. John says it this way: 2 John 9, *“Anyone who goes on ahead and does not remain in the teaching of Christ does not have God. The one who remains in this teaching has both the Father and the Son.”*

Notice in our text that Jesus shows us **it is possible to remain in His Word**, because there His Word is true and good and real. Meanwhile, we could say the opposite, that there are false teachings that are false and bad and make-believe. Jesus says to avoid those, but stick with His Word. Why? So a disciple can know the truth. **God wants to let us in on the truth.** He wants us to truly be His disciples who know truth. We need that. We need to know that if the world is topsy-turvy and upside-down, we are not in outer space. We need to know that when the world haunts us on Halloween or with crooked campaigns and morally imperfect political parties, we have something true to say instead. We have a foothold to reality—eternal reality.

So why don't we do this? The Word is so very near us, so accessible. The Bible is the most widely distributed and best-selling book of all time. But more than half of American adults (58%) say they wish they would read their Bible more often.

St. Augustine said that of all the bondages that exist, sin is the worst, because we take it with us wherever we go. Yes, there are other chains: death, hell, Satan, doubts. But the root of all our woes is sin. In the Bible, sin is personified as a harsh, domineering master who has a stranglehold on us. Every sin binds us tighter in its headlock. And once we are slaves to sin, we cannot free ourselves.

Why don't we remain in His Word? Answer: Possibly the worst part about being a sinner is that we can constantly forget how much of a slave-driver sin is. It works like a slave-driver to exercise control

over our will. In our text, Jesus wasn't talking about prison bars, cells, or chains. He was talking about the slavery of sin. Sin restrains us from seeking and remaining in what God has to say.

This slavery is what made Martin Luther such a gift to the Church. Luther's conscience was sharp and biting. He was plagued by various sins, so that it nearly drove him mad, especially since the prevailing view of God was a stern Judge and constant enemy. Relying on his own abilities to become free continuously left Luther in agonizing guilt. When many dodged their guilt and hid from the weariness of sin, Luther understood and FELT that he could not be stronger than that slavery. **Luther was constantly wondering if he was doing enough for heaven's sake.** But by wondering that often and aloud, he found solace in a chained-up Bible. He began to read a little story about a boy named Samuel, who said to God, "*Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.*"

Here! Here was freedom.

When church fathers conflicted and papal decrees disagreed with one another, Luther discovered the freedom of simply remaining in the Word of Christ. In fact, Luther abandoned his life on the island of the Bible. He learned that if careful study of the Bible drew out truths that meant something; then it was slavery to contradict that truth, and it was freedom to live in that truth.

II. But more and more, Luther realized that he was abandoning himself on Jesus, who is the Word and the Truth. So we truly we are to **remain in Jesus.**

That is why there are those who cannot stand on the Bible today, because they cannot stand to learn about sin and grace. They say that Jesus may be for the addict or the needy, but not for one of my intelligence and influence. They suggest we have progressed beyond the need for such a wise man, and by now, in our day, his freedom would enslave us. Indeed, **even we Christians may be tempted to wonder if we really need Jesus?** Can we instead shut our eyes and imagine we never heard of sin and then we will progress beyond this stale religion? Do not be deceived, friends. Many have tried to shut their eyes and ignore sin, but they still feel its consequences all too acutely. Even famous unbelievers voice essentially what Jesus said about this slavery.

- Seneca declared that no bondage is harder than that of the passions;
- Plato, that liberty is the name of virtue, and bondage the name of vice.

These impulses and desires are descriptive of nothing than sin.

The truth sets us free. How so? The truth is the contents of the Word of Jesus; the substance of what He conveys to our minds and hearts. Jesus says, "*I have given them your (Father's) Word,*" John 17:14. Jesus even identifies Himself with the Word, "*If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you,*" John 15:7. Once Luther discovered the essence of Jesus' teaching, the gospel of justification by grace through faith, he knew the truth. And the truth set him free, free from the guilt of sin that haunted him for so much of his previous life. Appeal to the truth of God instead of your fallen reason, and you aren't subject to our desires and impulses anymore.

As for those sins you seem to be grooming? Those habits you cannot break? Those vices that you cannot quit? Go to the Bible and hear. Go to the cross and see. Follow the chain of promises God fulfills. Fill your heart with His good news. Discover over and over again that in the gospel of His Word, God does not wear you out and beat you up like those vices and habits. He does not whip you and use you like those slave-driving sins. He simply longs to forgive you and free you. In that forgiveness you will find something that pursues you more strongly than your sins—His life for yours—His eternal, faithful love.

[III.] So when it comes to what on earth we are doing for heaven's sake, God's Son tells us today that there is one more thing: nothing. **We can do nothing on earth for heaven's sake, because Jesus has done everything we need for heaven.** By faith alone and by grace alone and by God's Word alone, it comes to us once-for-all, free-for-nothing.

How is that so? You know how. God's Son was arrested and bound for us. He was imprisoned for us. He was hurt and despised for us. He was paraded to the cross and shamed for us. He was blamed for us. He did salvation's work for us and died for us. But the slavery of sin couldn't hold a perfect man. God freed His Son from death.

But that free life again wasn't just for God's Son; it is for all his sons and daughters. It was for Martin Luther, whose conscience was finally put at ease when he found this freedom. It is for you and me, who can discover the same thing; Jesus has declared the work of salvation finished.

God's Son has set us free. How free? So free that we can listen to our Prophet, who preaches still through faithful pastors something so sure that the world can't rob us of it. **How free? So free that** we can present our burdens of guilt and wrongdoing on the shoulders of our Great Priest, who wrestled them into His grave once-for-all. **How free? So free that** we can trust Jesus our Great King, who reigns over us in the universe, in our hearts, and in heaven.

When Abraham Lincoln stepped off that podium in New York City in February of 1860, his nomination for presidential candidate was no longer questioned. Honest Abe was *it*, and eventually his opponent, Stephen Douglas, would lose the election. In fact, Douglas barely lived another year. Slavery would be abolished in the United States and Lincoln's name would be stamped in history. But our slavery needed a different Savior. When the Son of God came down from that cross, our slavery was removed and our sin was paid for. Our enemies were defeated and our freedom was won. Sin's effect on us will not survive our time on earth. Our Savior's effect on us will mean heaven forever, because ... **for heaven's sake, if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.** Amen.