

Truth and Freedom

John 8:31-36

Our passage reads like a riddle. Jesus spoke to those who believed in Him in order to show them how they could really be His disciples. So, we have the question, How can you believe and yet not be a disciple? Then Jesus assured them that if they would make their homes in His word then they would know the truth that would set them free. But He was speaking to Jews of the 1st century who certainly knew their Bibles, which brings us to the question, How can you know the truth and not know the truth? Finally Jesus offered freedom through this truth to a people who perceived themselves to already be free. So, we have the question, How can you be in bondage and not know that you are in bondage?

To the last question, Jesus gave the example of a slave who is a part of a household and yet who knows that his position in the household is defined by his status as a slave. He may not feel slighted or deprived. He was born into the condition that he is in and he has never known anything different. He has known the son all of his life and has come gradually to understand that the son has opportunities and privileges that he will never have and yet, this seems normal to him as he has never been exposed to anything else. A free man would look at him and possibly feel great frustration for here is a man who does not even seem to want to be free. He seems unaware that he is not.

We are invited by Jesus to compare the condition of the household slave to our own experience as sinners. He stated the principle, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." If you are a slave of sin then you are in bondage and you are not free. Similar to the household slave, the sinner, who was born into sin and has never known anything else, is not aware of his own bondage. He has no idea that things could be any different.

But, let's explore this. How is it that sin enslaves? This is easy to see in the practices that we define as vices. Take the alcoholic. The alcoholic is addicted to drinking and is in such bondage that he will continue to drink even when drinking

is bringing specific harmful consequences into his experience. Addiction to alcohol can destroy a person's career, marriage, relationship with their children, and their own health. Drinking can result in behaviors that can put a person in jail or prison. The alcoholic is enslaved. He is in bondage.

A general definition of bondage is that if you persist in a behavior that brings harm to yourself then you are in bondage. All sin fits this definition. Since we are all sinners, and since we have always been the way we are, we may have no idea of what it is to be free of the bondage of our particular sins.

Take the person who is easily angered and who punishes those who trigger his anger with cutting and harsh words. He finds that even his spouse and children have withdrawn from him emotionally. He wonders why his wife and children do not confide in him and he is always "finding out" things that "he should have been told." He has cut himself off from everyone who had been close to him but does not understand why he is so alone. He has persisted in behavior that has brought great harm and frustration to himself. He is in bondage to his anger but seems to have no idea of what he has done to himself.

The middle question was, How can a person know the truth and not know the truth? In the context of Jesus' statement, He had encountered "believers" who were not open to this teaching about truth and freedom. How could Jesus tell them about truth when they already knew the truth? Jesus did not seek to alter what they knew to be truth. He did seek to stimulate engagement to the truth so that it would have the power to transform.

Joshua 1 provides a beautiful example of truth becoming dynamic so that the one who knows it is freed by it. Joshua had succeeded Moses and had the task of leading the people to take possession of the land of promise. Moses had failed to accomplish this task. Joshua had served the great Moses and had no pretensions of the kind of greatness represented by Moses. So, how could he, the lesser of the two accomplish what the greater had failed to do?

God spoke to Joshua, "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake

you. Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or the left, that you may prosper wherever you go..."

Joshua already knew that God had chosen him to succeed Moses. He already knew that God had promised blessing to all who would follow His law. But when God spoke these words to him, what he already knew came to life and became powerful and transformative. Joshua might have feared the reaction of the people if he was too bold and if he did not show the proper deference to Moses. He would certainly have remembered the reluctance of the previous generation to risk encounters with giants just to claim their land. He led a people who had never known anything but the wilderness, would they even know what to do with their "own" land? There were many reasons for doubt but God spoke words of confidence, conviction, and courage. The truth spoken by God to Joshua set him free from fear and gave him the courage needed to step out and declare the word of the Lord to the people. If Joshua had been intimidated by his new position and fearful of what the people might think then he would have repeated the sin that had condemned the people to 40 years of wilderness wanderings. God spoke. This is My will for you. This is what I want you to do. Be bold! Be courageous! Be assured! I will prosper you. I will protect you. I will not let you fail. This truth changed Joshua's life. It set him free, free to do God's will and overcome against overwhelming odds. It was when Joshua embraced the truth and it was made his own by means of the voice of God that it changed his life and set him free.

God wants to set you free in just the same way. There is a truth that speaks to the particulars of your life. It is God's will for you to believe that truth and embrace it so that you are transformed and empowered by it to overcome that sin, that bondage that you never thought you could break away from. The truth, God's truth, will set the prisoner free.

But let's go back to the first question, How can you believe and yet not be a disciple? We have described these "believers" as those who had decided that

they were on Jesus' side in the controversy about who He was. They did not want to kill or depose Jesus. They wanted to see and hear more. They liked what they knew of Him but they were not yet committed. Jesus' word to them was an invitation to make themselves at home in His word. Then they would be His real disciples. It is His word that illumens the soul and that breaks away the chains of sin that bind and enslave every man. Through the word spoken to the heart by the voice of the spirit we encounter what is God's will for us. He gives courage and boldness and conviction so that as we are engaged by the word so that it becomes a word of God to us we then discover its power to transform and to set us free.

Freed by the truth of the word we discover a life that we never knew was possible, a life that we had never even conceived of. We find that it not only exists, it is now where we live.