

“The Truth Will Set You Free”

The Twenty-Ninth in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 8:31-47; Genesis 3:1-5

There is faith, and then there is *faith*. Throughout the public ministry of Jesus there has always been a group of people to whom God has granted eternal life and who are said to “believe” in Jesus. They are completely devoted to his messianic mission and continue to follow him through difficult times. There is also a group of people (the Jews in John’s Gospel) who see Jesus as a threat, and who oppose just about everything Jesus says and does. These people do not believe—and Jesus grants them no quarter whenever he encounters them. And then there is a third group; those who are said to “believe in Jesus” and are even called “disciples,” but who eventually demonstrate that they do not truly believe in Jesus, and never really have. These people are following Jesus out of desperation. They believe Jesus to be a miracle-worker who can help them in crisis. Some of them see Jesus as the prophet foretold by Moses because no one else could do and say the things Jesus says. Then there are others in this group who see in Jesus someone who can lead the nation into battle against their Roman oppressors. These are people who want to make Jesus king (Messiah). But people in this third group tend to fall away when Jesus utters hard sayings (as in the “Bread of Life” discourse), or when Jesus does something which does not meet their expectations (he claims to be God, he challenges their self-righteousness, or exposes their sin).

Therefore, not everyone whom John says believes in Jesus, *really* believes in Jesus. Not everyone who follows Jesus is truly his disciple. In fact, in John 2:23-25, John introduced us to such people when he wrote of them, “*now when [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*” There are people whom John says “believe” in Jesus, but who over time prove they do not. They are mixed with those following Jesus who really do believe the gospel because God has given them eternal life. What are we to make of this problem? How do we tell who is who? Who is the true believer?

We continue our series on the Gospel of John and we are in John 8, working our way through the so-called “conflict phase” of Jesus’ ministry (chapters 7-10)—that part of Jesus’ messianic mission which is characterized by increasing conflict between Jesus and the religious leadership of Israel, the Jews. We have seen that this conflict takes place during the Feast of Booths when Jesus goes to Jerusalem and declares himself to be the one who will give the people of God living water (the Holy Spirit), before declaring himself to be the light of the world (the Messiah, whose message of salvation will shine to the ends of the earth). John tells repeatedly us that Jesus’ hour has not yet come (which is why the Pharisees’ plot to kill Jesus has not come to fruition). John also reveals that Jesus is now telling his disciples that he must leave them, and that where he is going, no one can come. Those who know how John’s Gospel turns out in the end, know that Jesus is referring to his coming death, resurrection, and ascension (when he returns to the Father) before sending the Holy Spirit (Pentecost).

We left off last time with Jesus declaring himself to be light of the world at end of the Feast of Booths (vv. 12-30 of John 8). Each day of the Feast, the festivities ended with the lighting of torches which illumined much of the city of Jerusalem. The ambient light was visible for miles around. When Jesus claims to be the light of the world, this scene was fresh in people’s minds. Furthermore, Jesus makes this declaration with extensive Old Testament background in mind, in which light is often associated with the

truth of God's word, God's power, God's salvation of sinners, and especially with the extension of God's kingdom during the messianic age.

When Jesus made this declaration, the Pharisees were now present and tried to catch Jesus in a lie (they used a statement made earlier by Jesus in attempt to trap him). They also hoped that Jesus would make the kind of mistake that would discredit him in the eyes of the people. In responding to the Pharisees' false accusations, Jesus refutes them from the Old Testament, and when speaking to them repeatedly uses the "I AM" (*ego emi*) formula (YHWH's own self-designation). Jesus continues to speak of going away to a place where people cannot go (he is referring to his coming death, resurrection, and ascension). And all the while the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees is on-going, the people listening are struggling to make sense of just who Jesus is, and what it was he was trying to accomplish.

In response to a direct question about his identity, in John 8:28-29 Jesus told the crowd that his person and work will make sense "*when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.*" When Jesus suffers and dies for our sins upon the cross (the next Passover) then all people will see his perfect obedience to the Father's will, and then they will know that everything Jesus said was from God, and that he is, in fact, that one promised throughout the Old Testament. Yet another reoccurring theme in John's Gospel is that Jesus' obedience to the Father will inevitably take him to the cross.

Despite all of the opposition Jesus faced from the hostile Pharisees, and even as the people were struggling to figure out Jesus' true identity, when we left off in verse 30 of chapter 8, John told us that "*as [Jesus] was saying these things, many believed in him.*" This has been the case throughout Jesus' public ministry. Jesus preaches the words the Father has given him, and people believe. Yet, as we have seen early on in Jesus' ministry (cf. John 2:23-24) and in the aftermath of the "Bread of Life" discourse, such faith was not always genuine. When Jesus turns out to be someone other than people expected, many said "to believe" quickly abandon Jesus. The saddest case of this will come on Palm Sunday. Huge crowds welcome Jesus into Jerusalem as the conquering messianic king, but by Friday morning they are in Pilate's palace demanding that the Roman governor put Jesus to death, and that Pilate instead release to them a noted criminal and murderer named Barabbas.

Questions about the nature and permanence of true faith become an issue for the reader of John at this point (v. 31), where we read, "*Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him.*" If this is where John's account of Jesus' conflict with the Jews ended, we would have no trouble with John's description that these were *Jews* who had believed in him. But as the passage unfolds (especially vv. 39-47) and the debate becomes more and more intense, Jesus will go on to tell some of those present that they are liars and sons of the devil. How can Jesus' strong condemnations of those plotting to kill him refer to genuine believers? And how can a situation exist where one minute a group believes in Jesus, and then the next minute does not? The question which John's account raises is, "to whom is Jesus speaking?" Believing Jews? Those who believed for a short time? Those who thought they were believers but were not?

Many solutions to this dilemma have been proposed.¹ It seems to me that a good solution to this problem is to be found by acknowledging the facts which John has already given us. By this time a large crowd has gathered in the temple area. We know that there are true believers in the crowd—John has said as

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 346-348.

much. These are people who have been given eternal life and who believe that Jesus has been sent by God to deal with human sin. They are not sure how Jesus will do this, and they do not yet understand all that Jesus says (remember John 2:22—“*when therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken*”—nevertheless these are people who can affirm that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. They have been born of God (of water and the Spirit)—to use a phrase from John. They possess eternal life.

Then, as John tells us, there are others present who apparently “believe” in Jesus, but who really do not. They are moved by Jesus’ compassion, they may have witnessed Jesus perform a miracle, they get caught up in all of messianic excitement, and for a time they become “disciples” of Jesus. John has said that such people “believe.” When they start listening carefully to Jesus, they realize he’s telling them they have never kept the law of Moses, that he is one with YHWH, and when he exposes human self-righteousness (including their own), then what appears to be “faith” as is exposed as a temporary emotional response which is not true faith in the biblical sense of complete trust in the object of faith—the person and work of Jesus. This is what the Reformed have identified as temporary or historical faith. Such faith is not genuine, and these people quickly fall away when Jesus says or does something which troubles them. We also know from verse 13 of chapter 8 that a number of Pharisees are present who are openly hostile to Jesus, and, no doubt, so were many who remained loyal to them and to the Sanhedrin.

The answer to the problem raised by an audience of “Jews who believed in Jesus,” yet of whom Jesus becomes more and more critical, is to realize that based on what John has already told us that there were genuine believers present, there were “followers” of Jesus present (who believed, but not truly), and there were those hostile to Jesus. Since what follows takes place in public, near the temple, at the end of the Feast (likely in the same setting as the debate earlier in the chapter), it is not unreasonable to assume the Jesus begins speaking to directly to believers among the Jews (both true believers and those with temporary faith). This would be the group whom John identifies as “believing in Jesus.” But Jesus’ difficult words cause those in the crowd with temporary faith to question him, and after this exchange they cease following him (as in the “Bread of Life” discourse).

As the discussion becomes more heated, those who have opposed Jesus from the beginning (the Jews) jump into the debate which prompts the harsh condemnations from Jesus later on. If true, this would support the idea that Jesus’ words (about truth) are intentionally designed to drive away all those who do not truly believe. This is exactly what happened during the “Bread of Life” discourse. Jesus is opening the ground underneath people’s feet and forcing them to choose whether they are with him, or if they are following him only because of what Jesus can do for them. Those who have temporary faith, and who really do not believe, become angry with Jesus, and cease following and “believing.”

The key is found in the dialogue which follows, when in verses 31-32, Jesus tells those Jews who believed in him, “*if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*” Those who abide (remain) in Jesus’ word show themselves to have genuine faith. They persevere in faith and do not cease believing in Jesus. This is the primary way we distinguish true faith from what only appears to be faith. Those who believe for a time (who have temporary faith), do not abide. They easily give up and walk away when Jesus does something they do not like or understand.

To abide in the sense of which Jesus is speaking here is to believe that the Father has sent Jesus, and that Jesus speaks only the words that the Father gave him to say. In other words, we abide by believing that

what Jesus says in his word is true because he speaks only the words of God: what he says about sin and humanity's guilt is true, what he says about salvation from sin is true (that we are sinners in need of a savior), and what he says about discipleship is true (we must obey his teaching). Jesus can say this because he himself is truth incarnate (the Word become flesh). True believers will abide in faith, because the Holy Spirit ensures that they do. And those who persevere to the end will be saved.

Jesus' point is that if you truly believe that Jesus has been sent from God, then believing that he is (that he is truth) will set you free—free from all false religious claims, ideas, and superstitions which always leave people under the guilt of their sin and in bondage to their sinful nature. To believe that Jesus is the truth, is to be set free from bondage to sin. It is to be delivered from the deception of self-righteousness. It is to admit that we are sinners in need of a Savior. But you must know the truth before you can be set free, and this is what Jesus is doing throughout what follows—revealing the truth, and forcing those in the crowd to decide. The true believers will abide in his word. False believers do not.

One sure sign that not everyone in the audience was tracking with Jesus' message, is the question they ask Jesus in verse 33 in response to his statement about freedom. *“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?’”* The people cannot be asking about political freedom—the four towers of the Antonia Fortress (and its garrison of Roman soldiers) are quite visible next to the Jerusalem temple, and therefore it was self-evident the Jews were not free (politically) and were under Roman occupation.

The Jews saw themselves as the chosen people of God. They had been given God's law. They think they have faithfully maintained the traditions of the Fathers. They saw no need for any “religious” liberation. What kind of spiritual freedom could Jesus offer them in which they would be interested? They were free to be Jews and practice their religion. They have a great history that even the Romans were forced to respect. At least they did not think Jesus was speaking of political liberation from Rome when he spoke of freedom—they got that much right.

Jesus quickly exposes how far Israel has fallen from the faith of Abraham—whom the Jews claim as their father. *“Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.’”* Israel's history was a testimony to bondage to the neighboring world powers—one immediately thinks of Egypt and the Pharaoh, Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, Rome and Caesar. God allowed the Israelites to experience such bondage because of covenant curses meted out upon his disobedient people, and because of his mysterious providence. Regardless of the reason, throughout redemptive history Israel's bondage to the surrounding nations became a powerful metaphor for the consequences of sin—sin enslaves us, it takes us and holds us captive. It deceives us into thinking we are righteous. Sin oppresses us—and in ways far worse than being dominated by a foreign political power.

Based upon Jesus' declaration here, not even being the historical child of Abraham (apart from Abraham's faith in the promise), or possessing the law of Moses—none of these things—can solve the fundamental human problem from which all other human problems arise. Anyone who sins is a slave to sin. And this means everyone—since we all have sinned in Adam in addition to our own actual sins. No one is free until we are freed—whether you be a Jew or a Gentile. Sin enslaves us all. In making this assertion, we see Jesus reveal the very heart of his messianic mission. He came to deal with human sin, its curse, its consequences (death and guilt) and its bondage. This is what true faith grasps.

Slavery was a very common institution in Jesus' day. It was the perfect image to describe the bondage of sin, just as freedom from slavery (redemption) was the perfect image to describe Jesus Christ's saving

work. Greco-Roman slavery was not race-based as in America, but anyone who was on the losing end of Rome's skilled and powerful army found themselves taken into slavery—if they were not killed outright by soldiers or wild animals in the Roman circuses. The families of such slaves (who could be bought and sold) became a large social caste who performed all of the labor for the civil engineering tasks of the Roman empire, or else served the empire's wealthy families and merchants. The Jews may think of themselves as the children of Abraham and servants of YHWH, but in reality they are slaves to sin.

Jesus presses this point home in verses 35-36. *“The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* Jesus (the son) remains in God's household forever. But for the Jews, that is not necessarily the case. If they come under the covenant curses they will indeed be removed from the household of YHWH as well as from the land. It is Jesus, not Abraham, who alone can set the people free from their true bondage—to sin and its consequences. And once Jesus has set us free from sin, we are free indeed. We are not free to do as we wish, but we are free from the sentence of death and from the wrath of God. We have been set free to obey (live a life of gratitude). The Christian life is that of a freed slave learning to live as a freedman.

Jesus now explains to the Jews their true relationship to Abraham. *“I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”* In one sense the Jews are descendants from Abraham. Historically, they trace their history and religion back to the great patriarch. Yet those seeking to kill Jesus (Jesus is clearly speaking to those loyal to the Pharisees) cannot claim to be followers of Abraham when they do not believe what Abraham believed—a point which is raised again later on in this debate. Jesus is saying that these Jews cannot claim Abraham as their father, because they reject the words of Jesus (which is the very definition of unbelief). Jesus has received these words from YHWH, his Father. The Jews are only doing what they have heard from their father—and their father (as we will see) is not Abraham. Their true father is the devil.

The crowd becomes more defiant. According to verse 39, *“they answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’”* These people have not realized that arguing with Jesus (whose day Abraham saw and then rejoiced—v. 56) was a losing proposition. We read that *“Jesus said to them, ‘If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works your father did.’”* Abraham believed God's promise and God reckoned to him the righteousness of Jesus (this is the very heart of the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone). According to James, Abraham demonstrated that he had already been declared righteous through faith, when his good works proved this was the case. If the Jews want to claim Abraham as their father, they must do the good works Abraham had done. But they are not doing the works of Abraham. Rather, they are doing the works of that one who is their true father (whose identity they have not yet figured out). Jesus says this because he knows that there are people present who are trying to kill him. You cannot desire to kill Jesus, and then claim to be a child of Abraham!

Those whose unbelief is now exposed protest with even greater vehemence. *“They said to him, ‘We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.’”* There can be little doubt that the reference to “sexual immorality” is a not too subtle attack upon Jesus—it is likely when Jesus claimed YHWH was his Father, those from Galilee who heard stories that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father reported that fact to the Pharisees, who were only too happy to make a veiled accusation that Jesus' own birth was illegitimate. If Jesus will not let them claim Abraham for their father, then they'll claim YHWH as theirs, just as Jesus has done. The Pharisees mistakenly they've turned the tables on Jesus.

They haven't. *"Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here.'*" Jesus uses their point (God is their father) to expose the degree of lying and self-righteousness of the Pharisees. There are people present who are actively plotting Jesus' death (or implicitly approving of those plotting it). They first claim Abraham as their father, and then YHWH. Since the Father has sent Jesus, if YHWH was truly their father, they would surely love and honor the one YHWH sent to save them from their sins—Jesus, the Son of God and Israel's Messiah.

Jesus tells them yet again, *"I came not of my own accord, but he sent me."* Jesus is the only person who can claim that God is his Father—he is the eternal Son of God. In verse 43 Jesus explains to them why this is so difficult for them to grasp. *"Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word."* Jesus speaks the words of YHWH, therefore he speaks the truth. If only they believed the truth, that truth would set them free, but they will not. The root cause is not ignorance, but open hostility to the Son of God who has come to grant his people freedom. The Pharisees prefer slavery to sin (when everyone thinks they are paragons of righteousness) to freedom (because they must renounce all forms of self-righteousness).

Since God is not their father, Jesus now reveals who is. *"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."* These men are completely deceived. They have been taken in by the devil just as Adam had been—as we saw in our Old Testament lesson in Genesis 3 and the account of Satan's seduction of the first couple. It is not as though these men are innocent parties to the devil's deception. They have willingly embraced the devil's lies, and they reject the Son of God with great hostility because they do not like what Jesus has been teaching—that they are self-righteous false teachers plotting to kill their own Messiah.

Jesus spells this out with great clarity in verse 45. *"But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me."* The truth hurts. The truth cuts deep. The truth exposes things we don't want exposed. Jesus tells us the truth (that we are sinners in need of a Savior, that our own righteousness condemns us), and yet these men hate Jesus for telling them this. They would rather do the will of Satan (and kill Jesus), then be set free by the truth Jesus has brought them. They would kill their own Messiah before they would chose to be set free from the sin and bondage which enslaves them. Surely, this is what John means when he tells us in John 3:19. *"People loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."* The Pharisees are of the devil because they reject God's truth and gladly embrace Satan's lies.

Jesus calls their bluff. *"Which one of you convicts me of sin?"* If the Pharisees think Jesus is guilty of a capital offense, then let them prove it using the well-established code of evidence required to put anyone to death (the testimony of witnesses). And if they cannot provide such proof, they find themselves on the horn of another serious dilemma. *"If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?"* Jesus has just exposed the motivation of those who will not believe even though the Messiah is standing before them with sufficient miracles and biblical support to prove to anyone that his claims are true. If they can't produce proof that he deserves to die, and if they refuse to believe in him when he speaks the truth, there can be only one explanation. *"Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."* They will not believe and they cannot understand because God has left them in their sins. By their actions they have demonstrated that they are not of God. They are of their father, the devil.

Jesus' point is that he speaks the word of God which is the truth. That truth (that we are sinners in need

of a Savior; and that Jesus is that one who will save us from our sins) will set us free. Those who truly believe will abide (remain) in this truth no matter how difficult Jesus' teaching is to accept. We know that there is nowhere else to go, and that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. But those who do not truly believe in Jesus will, at some point, find him more of an offense than a Savior, and they will turn away. The answer to that question we posed at the beginning of the sermon, "Who is the true believer?" is now clear. The true believer accepts the word of Jesus as coming from God and therefore "truth." True believers hear God's voice in Jesus' words. And they abide (remain) in the faith until the end of their lives (because the Holy Spirit preserves them in this faith). Those who are not true believers demonstrate that they are not of God when they choose bondage to sin over the glorious freedom of the Gospel.

Beloved, it is exactly as Jesus says. "The truth will set you free."