

Slave or Free

HN/SS 08/05/05 pm

Reading: John 8:31f, Romans 6

Study Text: John 8:31-36

Sing Psalms: 116:1-6, 34:17-22, 126, 119:153-156

Those who commit crime in our society have their freedom severely curtailed. When their wrongdoing or sin is found out and they are convicted they are confined to prison. They are no longer free to go where they like and do what they like.

Sin against God, all of which is known by God, similarly brings bondage – bondage to sin. In fact every human being is born in sin and is therefore in bondage to sin. We were all slaves to sin and still are unless we have been set free, unless someone has secured our release and given us freedom.

In the passage before us Jesus speaks of himself, the Son, making you free. This is wonderfully clear and profound teaching – even if the Jews continue in their blindness. You must understand and accept this teaching. You must know the slavery of sin and acknowledge that you are powerless to free yourself. You must believe in Jesus who has the power to set you free, truly free, free from slavery to sin and its consequence – death.

Fickle Faith

In his ongoing teaching of the Jews, teaching them that he was sent by God the Father into this world, that he came to give light, the light of life, *many believed in him* (8:30). The leaders as we have seen rejected Jesus outright and wanted to kill him. But there were others, many others, who after seeing the signs/miracles and hearing his words believed in him. We find no fault in him, he is the Prophet, he is the Christ they said (7:40-41).

It is these who believed, it is those Jews who believed him, who Jesus speaks to in this passage. Their response to what he says to them next is amazing and unexpected for anyone who believes in him. In fact they go on to declare that he had a demon and they tried to stone Jesus. How could the many who believed in Him end up speaking and acting like this?

Some scholars seek to distinguish between ‘believe in him’ (8:30) and ‘believe him’ (8:31), and others think that Jesus is talking to a different group of Jews. But the flow of the passage does not allow this; nor does the grammatical difference overcome the fact that those who believe Jesus, or believe in him soon turn to unbelief.

What we see here is belief that is not heart-changing. It is fickle faith or spurious faith. Already Jesus has responded to such belief in 2:23f. Seeing the miracles *many believed in his name* but *Jesus did not commit himself to them*. Jesus also spoke of such fickle faith in the parable of the sower and the soils. The seed that fell on rocky ground grew quickly and looked great – for a little while. The sun soon rose to test it and having no root it soon died.

We should also remember what James wrote. *You believe there is one God – you do well. Even the demons believe and tremble* (James 2:19). James went on to say *faith without works is dead*. James was teaching just what Jesus was saying here. He said – *If you abide in me you are truly my disciples*. And then in John 15 – *If you abide/remain in me and my words abide in you...by this my father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples*.

‘It is not the beginning but the ‘continuing’ a religious profession that is the test of true grace’ (Ryle). If you abide in my word said Jesus. Profession of faith, remember, includes more than just words. True faith results in transformation, it results in being born again, in becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus. These Jews believed Jesus but their belief is shown to be shallow, not reaching the heart. They give mental assent to the truth but then go off to develop their own religious system.

‘Many of us delight to call ourselves Christians but go on to manufacture a religion of our own, perhaps taking some aspects of what the Master said and which we find attractive. But we like to keep firmly in control’ (Morris). We see this all the time. For sure we do not see so many attending church because it the proper thing to do, but we do see this tendency to take or leave sections of the Bible that suits us.

And being in firm control we can say I will go to church when we feel like it, I will read my Bible when I feel like it, I will pray when I feel like it. Is this abiding in Jesus? Is this what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus? A disciple is one who is under discipline. A disciple is one who gives whole hearted allegiance and obedience to the master. Jesus is *both Lord and Christ* (Acts 2:36). That is the truth of the gospel.

The Jews said *this is the Christ* but they were far from saying *Jesus is Lord*. Abide in my word, abide in my teaching, abide in me, said Jesus. Here is total submission to the will of God, a submission Jesus himself practiced. *I always do those things that please him* (8:29).

The heart of these Jews was not changed by their belief in Jesus. Their faith was shown to be false and superficial. They were still full of pride and self – righteousness as we see from their response to Jesus.

Slaves to Sin

Can you imagine what life as a slave would be like? Every day being made to work by a task master standing over you. But it is not the hard work – it is the lack of freedom that is the worst. The slave cannot leave.

In India many people live as bonded labourers. They or their family are deeply indebted to a rich man who makes them work for him to pay off their debt. They work for no pay so never get free of this debt – their children may even inherit the debt. They are bonded – they are not free to go and work somewhere else.

When Jesus told the Jews who believed him that the truth would set them free they protested – *we have never been in bondage to anyone*. This is a strange statement coming from a people who spent generations in slavery in Egypt, who lived as exiles in Babylon and were now living under Roman rule. Were they oblivious to their bondage? Sin can of course make men blind to their true situation.

But their reference to being children of Abraham makes it more likely they were thinking of religious freedom. They were the chosen people of God (Deuteronomy 7:6) and despite all the oppression they still maintained their freedom to worship the God of their fathers. They had the law that Moses gave them and proudly upheld this law and the traditions of their fathers. They were not in bondage to anyone!

Most people today make the same proud claim. I am free to do what I like. I am the master of my own destiny. This is the teaching of this world. Children are taught this and then we get upset when they actually believe it. Teach them all about safe-sex, all about drugs, all about crime and let them decide for themselves. But when they decide to take drugs we shout in despair ‘how could my child do this’!

Children of course grow into adults believing the same teaching of the world. ‘I am free to do what I like. I am just a social drinker, I just have a flutter on the races sometimes, I just dabble in pornography or horoscopes’. But what happens when they try to stop, when they try to break these habits? Are they really free? Are they not enslaved by this habit? Addiction is slavery.

Jesus solemnly declared *whoever commits sin is a slave of sin* (8:34). This means to continue in sin, to live in sin. We are all born in sin. We are all born as slaves to sin. Our father is the devil as Jesus told these Jews. Satan rules by satisfying the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life. He came to Jesus offering to satisfy such lusts – even though Jesus was not born in sin. We are powerless to resist the master of evil.

Being the master of deceit, Satan, makes sin look attractive and even promises us the freedom we desire. Young people believe that by drinking and smoking and swearing and the like they are actually asserting their freedom. They are led to believe that such behaviour symbolizes their freedom. But the reality is they are starting habits that will destroy their lives. They are becoming more enslaved by sin.

Liberty in the Lord

The truth shall make you free (8:32). *If the Son makes you free you shall be free indeed* (8:36). The only way you can be set free from slavery to sin is if Jesus sets you free. He is the only one who can pay the price, the ransom price for your freedom. How did he do this? By his death on the cross! *Our old man was crucified with him that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin* (Romans 6:6). We become a new creation in Christ Jesus, the old has gone and the new has come. We are born again as Jesus told Nicodemus.

Social workers in India tried to help bonded labourers. They gave them food and clothes and medicine and even money. But this was of little use because the landlord would take it all in

payment for their debt. The social workers realized they had to free these people by going to court and paying whatever debt they owed.

How do people come to know they are slaves to sin? God gave the law – by *the law is the knowledge of sin* (Romans 3:20). God sent Jesus, the light of the world. Jesus is the truth, the truth that not only reveals sin but shows the way to righteousness. The Son makes you free.

What is this freedom that Jesus gives? It is not a freedom to do what you like. That is the deceptive freedom Satan gave you. Although Paul writes that we become *slaves of righteousness* (Romans 6:19), Jesus actually preferred the word ‘son’, because a son abides in the house forever. Free indeed means totally free and free for ever.

‘One is free not when he can do what he wishes to do, but when he wishes to do what he should do’ (Hendrickson). Abiding in Jesus you have liberty not to indulge the flesh but to bring forth fruit, *fruit to holiness and the end, everlasting life* (Romans 6:22). Has the Son made you free? Do you know this glorious freedom found only in Jesus Christ?

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