

November 6, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Continue in My Word, Live in Freedom

John 8:26 – 36

Last week we saw that the starting point for living in reality is to believe that Jesus is who He says He is, the Son of God, the very 'I AM', revealed to Moses and the people of God in the Old Testament, revealed to His people in the gospels and here in the temple as God in the flesh; and revealed to us in Scriptures today. And that revelation demands that we come to grips with our own desperate, and terminal sinfulness. And unless we believe that He is the Bread of Life come down from heaven; that He is the Living Water that quenches every thirst; unless we believe that He is the Good Shepherd who leads us and guides us; the Vine to which we are connected to the vitality of God; unless we believe that He is our Spotless Lamb, perfect Sacrifice – that He is **the** Light of Life – we will die in our sins.

Jesus was constantly driving this point home during His ministry. And John's whole intent in writing this gospel was *'...so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name'*. John 20:31 That is why Jesus responds the way He does in verse 25: *"What have I been saying to you from the beginning? In other words, 'Everything I have been saying and doing these past three years, point to the reality of who I am'. And then He continued: "I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world."* John 8:26 Jesus is saying two things here – one is seen in the grammar and the other by implication. First He says, *I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you* and these two infinitive forms – **to speak**, and **to judge** – mean that this is a continual action. He is always speaking to them, and because they reject Him, the words which were meant to be life-giving instead become judgment against them. Secondly, the fact that He talks about the One who sent Him and He is just speaking what He hears from Him, implies that when they reject Him, they reject the one who sent Him – God the Father.

In Matthew we have the remarkable picture of Jesus standing and lamenting over His people who have rejected Him: *'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling'*. Matthew 23:37 But the fact that they rejected His message, and therefore the Father who sent Him, didn't stop Him from continually confronting them with the fact of who He was. He was always proclaiming that it is only as you believe that He was the Christ that your sins could be forgiven and you could have eternal life.

When we talk to people about their need for a Savior, we shouldn't be put off by rejection. In fact, everyone I know that has subsequently come to faith in Christ began by rejecting Him. It's no wonder. The message of the gospel is ultimately offensive to the unbelieving mind. To accept the message, you have to accept a death blow to your pride. You are not good, you don't have it all together, and unless you admit your failure to live up to God's standard you'll die in your sins. That is not a particularly appealing message to people. And it is a message that is being increasingly lost in the church as large crowds are drawn by a mostly therapeutic gospel that promises to bring you joy and fulfillment and help you with your problems, without dealing with the root cause of your lack of joy and satisfaction.

But again, these people weren't making the connection: *They did not realize that He had been speaking to them about the Father*. John 8:27 And Jesus tells them that one day they will make the connection: *So Jesus said, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things 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.* John 8:28-29 Jesus was giving them another Old Testament picture here. It was the same one He gave Nicodemus. *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.* John 3:14-15 Jesus was pointing Nicodemus back to the wilderness time, when, because of their grumbling, the Israelites were overrun by poisonous snakes and they were dying like flies. And Moses made a brass serpent and put it on a pole and raised it in the middle of the camp. Anyone who looked at this serpent then was immediately healed of the snake bite. This was another of the Old Testament stories that pointed to the New Testament reality. One day the Messiah would come, born of a virgin, made in the likeness of sinful flesh, and crucified on a pole for the remission of sins for everyone who believed.

And Jesus seems to be saying here: 'When you crucify Me – then it will hit you. On that day, all that I have been doing and saying and teaching will be vindicated and you will understand that in your rebellion and willful ignorance and prideful arrogance, you put the Lord of life to death'. In his gospel, Luke records a moment that really stands out. In chapter 23 of Luke, when our Lord breathed His last on the cross, the centurion who was in charge of the crucifixion said something startling: *Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent."* Luke 23:47 This was a guy who was used to death – he had probably put a lot of people to death on a cross, and I doubt very seriously that he ever suffered a moment's hesitation that he had put an innocent man to death. But whatever he saw in Jesus that day prompted an uncharacteristic response. It might have been the unnatural darkness that covered the sun that day – or the earthquake that shook the ground and the rocks that were split, the moment Jesus died – or perhaps it was the tombs that were suddenly opened – whatever it was it inspired such fear and awe that this death-hardened veteran was moved to proclaim Jesus' innocence.

And not just him. The very next verse records the response of the crowd who came to witness this Jesus getting His just deserts: *And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts.* Luke 23:48 **'Beating their breasts'** can only infer great sorrow. In other words, whatever this spectacle was, it had the effect of causing these people to be sorry for what they did. And because Jesus had told them that *'When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.'* we can assume that at least some of them got it. We are told time and again throughout the gospels, that much of what Jesus taught the disciples only made sense to them after His death and resurrection. All of a sudden, seeing what transpired that day around the cross brought the words of Jesus into sharp focus for these people and they began to understand just who Jesus was.

But as He spoke in the temple that day, apparently some believed Him: *As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.* John 8:30 But based on the rest of this chapter, I seriously doubt that this was a saving belief. Because Jesus begins to hone in on the reality of saving faith in Him, and He tells us two things about real and genuine faith. **Real faith is persevering faith – and genuine belief is liberating.** In other words, if you really believe in Jesus, you will continue in His word and know the truth, and that truth will liberate you completely. *So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.* John 8:31-32 And we want to spend a little time this morning just here answering the questions 'What does it mean to continue in His word? And how does that relate to being a true disciple of His? And how does that help us know the truth? And how does that truth set us free? What does that look like?

First of all we need to understand to whom Jesus is saying these things. John says that He is talking *to those Jews who had believed Him.* And if we don't dig any deeper than that, we won't really understand the importance of His words. Apparently there were some Jews here that believed Him. But I think we've seen this often enough in John to be a little cautious about thinking these guys were genuine believers. One of the reasons I say that is that at the end of chapter eight, these guys who believed Him were picking up rocks to stone Him. I think that says a little about the nature of their belief. I'm not sure what it is that they believed, but it was evidently **not belief that led to a saving faith.** Otherwise they wouldn't be tempted to kill Him at the end of chapter eight. And Jesus knew that. Which is why He qualifies who the genuine believers are: *If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine. What that implies is that there are those who call themselves disciples who are not really disciples.*

What does Jesus say constitutes the mark of a true disciple? He says **true disciples continue in His word.** The word is *meno* – and it means to remain, abide, not to depart from, to stay, even to be held or kept continually. **If we continue – if we abide – if we stay – if we do not depart from – if we are kept continually in His word – then we are true disciples.** This is not a case of **becoming** a disciple by means of working hard to be in His word. That is not what this says. What this says is that the evidence that we **are** true disciples is that we continue in His word. A true disciple is word oriented. Everything in his life and actions and thinking is referenced to the word of Christ. His is a Psalm 1 experience: *But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.* Psalm 1:2

What place does the word of God hold in your life? Could you say that you are abiding in it? Staying in it? Kept continually by it? **If you are continuing in His word, you are always learning more of Christ.** The Word of God **points to the God who is the word** – it is always taking us to Christ to learn of Him. That's what disciple means – learner – student – pupil. A true disciple is a learner. He is one who is continually sitting at the feet of Jesus saying, 'Teach me Lord – open my eyes to see the wonderful truth in Your Word. Show Me more of who You are'.

To continue in His word means that you are convinced of its truth, you are attracted and held by its beauty; you consider the word of God your vital food and drink without which you would dry up and blow away. Your life is shaped by its grace and power, and when its bright light of revelation shines on your disobedience, you submit to its demands and repent, turn and go the other way – you obey. To continue in His word means that you never stop being awed by the beauty of His word; you never stop being fed and sustained and nourished by the word; you never stop being convinced of its truth or stop being shaped and transformed by its power and grace; and you never stop walking in its light. The mark of a true disciple is a lasting, permanent, persevering and enduring and continual holding to the word of God.

Continuing in His word means not only that we are truly Christ's disciples – but it also means that **we live in freedom because we know the truth**: *and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*. What is freedom? What does it mean to be free? What is Jesus talking about here? Jesus tells us that if we continue in His word, we will know the truth, and that truth will set us free. Free from what? Well, He goes on to tell us: *They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You will become free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin."* John 8:33-34

This is the point at which their believing was beginning to be exposed for what it was. They were beginning to get offended. And often when we are offended we say things that are not exactly the truth. They responded by saying they had never been slaves of anyone. But had they forgotten the story of the Exodus? Had they forgotten the years of slavery under their Egyptian taskmasters? Were they unaware that they were even now under the thumb of the Romans, and that their fervent hope was in a Messiah who would come to free them from their hated rule? This was yet another indication that they were not true disciples at all. The kind of believing they had did not enlighten their thinking at all – they were still in the dark. So Jesus tells them plainly that the slavery He is talking about was the slavery to sin.

The 'Aha' moment for every one who embraces the gospel, is that moment when we realize that before Christ, we are all slaves to sin. Paul puts it this way in Romans: *'But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin...'* Romans 6:17 That is, before you trusted Christ, your condition was that of a slave – a slave to sin. The status of every man, woman and child, apart from the grace of God, is that of slavery to sin. That means that sin is not just an evil thought, or a malicious act, or bad deeds. Sin is a power that causes us to sin. We sin because we are sinners – we are sold into slavery to it. And Paul says that there are only two kinds of people in the universe, and both kinds are slaves – one to sin and one to righteousness: *'...and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness'*. Romans 6:18 So you are either a slave to sin, or a slave to righteousness. Or in the words of that great pop theologian, Bob Dylan – 'You gotta serve somebody'.

No one really likes the idea of having a master – no one really thinks a slave-master relationship is appealing. And the world would tell us that true freedom is having no master – *I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul*. But Jesus is saying *'True freedom is having the right master'*. **In reality, self-rule, self-mastery He says, is the suicide of the will.** Whatever you live for you give yourself to and whatever you give yourself to becomes your master, and that is what controls you. No one really controls himself or herself. Everybody decides what they will live for, everybody decides on some purpose in life – and what you live for, whatever your purpose is becomes your Lord, your controlling factor. You live to please whoever or whatever your Lord is. And what Jesus is saying here is that **every choice you make as a slave to sin is only ever sinful**. Whatever you call freedom here is really only slavery. And that slavery can lead to only one end – destruction. The end of slavery to sin is death. The only way you can really know freedom is to know the truth about yourself – that without Christ, you are doomed to a lifetime of slavery to a brutal master called sin, and an eternity in abject servitude.

And the only way to really live in freedom is to have the right Master - to know the truth that the only way out of this mess is to exchange your slavery to sin by becoming a son. *The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever*. John 8:35 Even though Paul calls us slaves of righteousness – when we exchange the bitter chains of slavery to sin for the sweet cords of slavery to righteousness, we do that in the context of sonship. The son still has a Master – his Father. But this master is one that has the best interests of the son at heart. Slavery to him is not bitter but sweet. The world will tell you, 'Real freedom is not having a master – real freedom is doing what I please – real freedom is not having anyone tell me what to do'. But the gospel says that **true freedom is having the right master – true freedom is living to please Him – true freedom is having Him tell me what to do and how to live'**.

Jesus says, *"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.* John 8:36 **The way He makes us free is that He makes us His sons.** *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name..."* John 1:12 If we are sons of the Father, we are **free from the guilt of sin and the power of sin and the penalty of sin.** That means that we live no longer under the shadow of the wrath of God – as Paul says in Romans: *Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Romans 8:1 We stand before God as sons, not condemned criminals. It is as though we were in court for murder and we got the death sentence. And there we were, the penalty hanging over our heads, our future looking bleak, and someone steps forward, addresses the judge and says, 'I already paid the penalty for this – let them go' and he does. I think that would make me fairly giddy at that point. If you do not have a vast sense of relief and heartfelt gratitude that Christ paid the penalty for you – I don't think you really understand the situation.

When the Son makes us free He also frees us from the guilt and power of sin. Sin has a power – it has a life of its own. In Numbers 32 there is a little verse that my mother liked to quote to me: *'...be sure your sin will find you out'*. Numbers 32:23 And what she meant was, 'I know you did something wrong, and I can't prove it yet, but I'll find out pretty soon!' And she surely did sometimes. But this doesn't say 'Others will find you out' or 'the world will find you out' – they may, they may not. But that isn't what this is talking about. What this says is that sin has a power – it has a life, a vitality of its own and if you keep giving way to that sin, it will find you out. You are lying there in bed, and suddenly the the whole ugliness of your sin comes crashing in on your consciousness and it's found you – you can't get away from it – the deception, the meanness, the lustfulness leers at you. It taunts you, it teases you, it probes you and pierces you and you can't get away from it. Your sins will come and they will find you out. What are you going to do about it?

If the Son has not made you free, there's nothing you can do about it. But this is why the Gospel is good news. Here is where we wield the sword of the Spirit to give sin a death-blow. This is where continuing in His word pays off. We speak to our souls the good news of the gospel. We tell ourselves: *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* 1 John 1:9 We declare: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.* Galatians 5:1 We speak to our souls: *But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption* 1 Corinthians 1:30 **We rehearse the gospel as sons of God and no longer slaves to sin.** There is no other way to deal with the guilt of our conscience. There is no other way to handle the condemning of our hearts, and the lies of the world, the flesh and the devil than to overwhelm them with the gospel. **Know the truth – let the truth of God's word set you free.**

If you are here this morning and you realize that you are still a slave to sin, that you've been a slave all your life and you are longing for freedom, the gospel is your way out this morning. The Bible tells us that the gospel is the power of God that results in salvation – saved from the guilt of sin, the power of sin, and the penalty of sin. Salvation from the awful tyranny of sin's slavery into the glorious freedom of the Son. Come to Christ this morning and throw off the shackles of sin and step into the freedom in Christ. This morning we are going to celebrate the freedom that Christ won for us on the cross as we take communion. This is for everyone who knows the glorious freedom of sins forgiven, the penalty paid, sin's power over us broken and the wonderful love of the Father for those He has made His own. If that is not you this morning, participation in this communion is not for you. But as we take some time now to let this word settle into our hearts and minds, let the truth of who Christ is and what He has done for you, bring you to the cross and surrender to Him in glad submission – and then join in and rejoice with us as we celebrate the gospel of freedom.

Our gracious Father,

Thank You for Your word of truth. Set us free this morning by the liberating power of the gospel. For those who labor under sin's tyranny this morning, come and set them free. Let Your gospel bring good news to the afflicted; let it bind up the wounds of the broken-hearted; let it proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners; let it make slaves of sin into sons of God. Grant that we would find Jesus as the power unto salvation; may we see His death and resurrection the center of all our faith and the source of all gospel blessing. Lead us to the cross to receive mercy and find grace; let us find there faith to grasp eternal life, hope to lift our heads and love to bind us forever to Him who died and rose for us. Let us delight in God through Jesus Christ this morning, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.