

# THE FIRST SUNDAY IN END TIME – REFORMATION SUNDAY

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## Freedom? Freedom!

### John 8:31-36 (NIV)

<sup>31</sup> To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. <sup>32</sup> Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." <sup>33</sup> They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" <sup>34</sup> Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. <sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

In John's Gospel account, we're picking up in Jesus' third year of public ministry. He had come to the Feast of the Tabernacles in Jerusalem, a festival near this time of the year celebrating the completion of harvest and commemorating God's goodness to his people during their desert wanderings. About halfway through this weeklong celebration, Jesus had started teaching the people that he was the Son of Man, sent by God the Father, who did everything that pleased the Father, everything that the Father told him to do, and that he would be lifted up to die for everyone's sins, as well as many other things. John recorded the peoples' reactions: "Even as he spoke, many believed in him." (John 8:30)

The Gospel seed had been planted. Now it was time to water it and make it grow. Jesus wanted to solidify these peoples' fledgling faith in him. Enter our verses for today: To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (verses 31-32) Jesus urged them, challenged them to hold to his teachings, to God's Word, to God himself, the Word made flesh, to Jesus since he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

This created a different reaction - maybe some confusion - among the Jews who had believed Jesus. They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" (verse 33) I don't know about you, but I immediately want to point out to these Jews that they are conveniently forgetting a whole slew of their history where they have been political slaves to other peoples, to other nations. However, that's not the tone of this conversation.

By claiming Abraham as their father in this setting of a religious festival, they are not really talking politics but religion. The Lord had promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. The Messiah, the Savior of the world, would come through Abraham's family line. His descendants were God's chosen people to do this, the ones from whom the Messiah would come and the ones who were to carry this promise on to others. This was signified by circumcision, by their annual festivals. These Jews believed that they were freely following the faith of Abraham, freely choosing to be here in Jerusalem, freely worshiping the Lord at the Feast of the Tabernacles. No one had usurped their heritage, their religion, their faith from them and chained them to another set of beliefs. They were not religious slaves to anyone. So, how can you say, Jesus, that we will be set free? Maybe we think we have the same kind of religious freedom, that we chose to be here, that we are not pushed or coerced to do so, that we too are free.

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (verse 34) These Jews didn't see themselves as bound to anyone but themselves. They thought no one coerces them or controls what they do when it comes to their faith. They thought that they could move from messing up and committing a sin to then being spiritually neutral and actively deciding between good and evil without any tug or pull in any direction since they were of the lineage of Abraham.

Yet Jesus tells them that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Without having to spell it out, no one there would claim to be perfect; they all would have claimed to sin. This means that Jesus is putting a hard truth in front of them that they are not free, that their will is bent and contorted by someone else, that they serve and are enslaved to a master called sin.

Do we think that we have the same freedom? We do enjoy many freedoms here. We don't have mandatory military service. We're not forced to live in a certain place, vote for a certain person, hold a certain job, marry someone we don't want to. We aren't forced to worship a certain God in a certain place. We have freedom, choices free from mandates and coercion of others.

But does this mean that we are free our spiritual life? Do we too think like these Jews that we are morally neutral, that we can always choose good and are free from any coercion, any push, from evil, from sin? When told to do something in order to help others, to curb and change your behavior, to restrict yourself in order to put others first, does it raise your hackles that your freedom is being taken away? Does a voice rise up in your head saying, "You can't tell me what to do. You don't control me. I'm going to do whatever I want. And if you don't like me doing what I do, you can go to hell."? This attitude is not freedom.

An insistence of freedom while refusing to change your behavior for the sake of others does not make you free; it makes you a slave to selfishness, a slave to your sinful self. A true spiritual freedom, freedom from any kind of pull or coercion, doesn't exist because we are sinful from birth, sinful from the times our mothers conceived us. We can feel it when we want to hold on to self and put me first ahead of others. We feel enslaved to that pull, that it has a hold on us. This is why Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (verse 34)

Whenever we sin, we are aligning our allegiance to sin. It is what we allow to coerce us, control us. It's what we serve. This is why the Jews were not spiritually free by virtue of being Abraham's descendants. Sin still pulled on their hearts, bent their actions, their worship. In the same way, we are not spiritually free when we do whatever we want and won't listen to anyone but ourselves. And, sure, sin likes to promise you a big personal payout, that your life will be better if you're always thinking of yourself first, that you are your own master. But sin lies to us. It promises pleasure and enjoyment, but it's fleeting. With sin as our master, ultimately, there will be only sadness, pain, and heartache as it leads to our eternal separation from God.

This is not what God wants for us. He wants to change our status. Jesus said, "Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (verses 35-36) He wants to free us from the dismal and depressing end that being a slave to self, a slave to sin, will merit. He wants us to live free of the control of sin and death and instead to live as a permanent member of God's family. This only happens as we hold on to Jesus.

Just as Jesus had taught the Jews there at the Feast of the Tabernacles, so we have gathered around him and his teaching today, to hold on to these truths. He is the Son of Man and the Son of God, sent by the Father to do his will, to live perfectly for all humanity, for every person, in our place. His actions on our behalf are not something that he was coerced into doing. No, he used his freedom from sin to give up everything so that we could benefit. In his freedom, Jesus came to sacrifice his life in place of ours - to take the guilt of all our sins, all our selfish desires that make ourselves the master in the name of freedom, and put it on himself and then be lifted up on the cross. With his freedom, Jesus substituted his life for our to pay the penalty of our selfish sins and to free us from being controlled by selfish sin as he covers us with his perfection.

The Son had set these Jews free. The Son has set you free. Sin is not your master. So, who will you serve? Will you go back to being a slave to sin, to a life where you are the master, that you serve yourself above others? Or will you, as a person freed from the slavery of sin, hold on to Jesus, hold on to his teaching? Will you seize moments of changing your behavior for the sake of other people as something that you get to do with you freedom since you are no longer controlled by selfish sin?

Do you have freedom? Absolutely! Not to put yourself first, not to be pushed around and bound to sin, but to put others first just as Jesus in his freedom did for you. Christ has set you free from sin's slavery with his perfect life and sacrificial death. You belong to God with a permanent place in his family, looking forward to eternal life with him. You are free to serve God, free to serve others ahead of yourself. The Son has set you free indeed. Hold on to the freedom Christ won for you. Amen.