

## John 8:31-59

We are continuing this morning in our resumed series on the Gospel of John, picking up where we left off last week, at verse 31 of chapter 8, and working through to the end of that chapter. Now John's Gospel, as many of will know, was written for the express purpose of serving, essentially, as an *evangelistic tract*. As John writes,

**John 20:30-31** *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

So, John's agenda is to promote faith and belief in Jesus Christ. As part of that agenda then, John wants his readers to understand what it *means* to believe in the Lord Jesus. He wants them to know what true, *genuine* belief looks like as opposed to false, shallow, or what has been called *spurious* belief. This latter sort of belief is what he expressly *doesn't* want to see in his readers - believing that is temporary and nothing more than a shallow response that is eventually shown to be like a plant that has no real roots and so, at the first sign of difficulty, gets blown away, and topples over, and dies. It is this contrast between true and false believing that can be found at; the heart of the passage before us this morning. Before we look into that any further, let's pray together....

(Pray)

Now, before we begin thinking about the passage itself, let me just set things up a little bit. As we saw last week, one of the practices that Jesus engaged in, with regard to his ministry, was to live very opportunistically - taking advantage of his context and environment to assist and enhance his teaching. Most recently, Jesus has been making use of one of the bigger events on the Jewish liturgical calendar - the Feast of Booths - to communicate some important truths about himself. He has already made use of the water rituals attached to the Feast and employed them as a jumping off place to talk about himself as the true and living water that refreshes and restores. He then used the lighting ceremonies attached to the Feast to talk about the fact that he was the true light, the light of the whole world, so that those who follow him might not walk in darkness.

And now, at the end of all that, even though his word has been rejected and continually resisted by many, there were some - we are told in verse 30 - that are said to have "believed" in him. And from that point on, through the rest of chapter 8, it is these Jews who have expressed some sort of belief in Jesus that are now the focus of Jesus' attention. Indeed, everything else that is said from verse 31-59 arises out of, and is a commentary upon, what is said in verse 30. And so, with that bit of further introduction, let's listen to the passage itself.....

(Read John 8:31-38)

As soon as Jesus sees that some have "believed" in him, he sets himself to the task of not only explaining what "believing" in him really means but he also decides to *test* - if you will - whether the professions just made by these people have any substance to them.

And so Jesus, proceeds to say a few words about what a true response - a disciple's response - to him would look like. In short, what he says is this: "abiding in his word" is what true belief is all about. In other words, the person who makes not only an *initial* response to Jesus but also shows an *ongoing* responsiveness and receptivity to his word - that person is the one who shows herself to be a true follower. Why? Because she is *living* by his word, abiding by it, not just momentarily reacting to it.

Well, in addition to saying something here about the *abiding* nature of true belief, Jesus also gives us at least two *consequences* of true belief - *knowing the truth* and *being set free*. And in thinking about these things it is important to keep the context in mind so that we understand that when Jesus talks about those who abide in his word "knowing the truth" he is not making a blanket statement - as if to say that those who follow him will be free from error or will know the truth about *everything* - but rather the context shows us that Jesus has in mind that his followers will know the truth *as it relates to sin and salvation, bondage and deliverance*. Likewise, the freedom that is spoken of is not a general sort of freedom or even a physical, outward freedom but is, instead, *freedom from the bondage that sin creates*. .

Now, as we've already seen, Jesus' agenda here is to not only talk about what true believing looks like but to also clarify and reveal whether the response he is currently getting from some in the crowd is the real thing - or whether it will prove itself to be otherwise.

Sadly, Jesus doesn't have to wait very long before the early indicators begin to trickle in - signaling an overall trend that is not hopeful. In response to what he has just said about abiding and truth and freedom - especially freedom - he gets a pretty strong reaction. His listeners are apparently very put out by the suggestion that they are in any sort of bondage.

Now, it's not immediately clear when, or even IF, his listeners "get" that he is not talking about actual *physical* bondage and deliverance. On the one hand, their *words*, on the surface at least, seem to indicate that they are thinking about physical enslavement. On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that, given the repeated and lengthy captivities that Israel had endured throughout her history (Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks), that they could seriously assert that they had never been physically captive to anyone.

But perhaps they are only thinking of their current situation when they make their assertion. Even then, however, it would mean that they were not regarding their current subjection to the Romans as a "true" enslavement since they had been given a great deal of relative freedom to look after themselves. However you look at it, their response does not demonstrate a great deal of reflection or profundity.

And so, in response to the suggestion that they are in some sort of bondage - the Jews to whom he is speaking very quickly pull out their "Children of Abraham" card, and start flashing it all around, announcing their spiritual superiority and privilege to all who will hear. "We are offspring of Abraham", they say, "and have never been enslaved to anyone".

And this attitude, writes one commentator (Burge), is one that had to be addressed over and over again in the Gospels,

*“...in the first round of debate (8:31-41),”* writes Burge, *“Jesus challenges a widely held assumption in Judaism. From the earliest chapters of the Old Testament the people of Israel understood the importance of their election. They would be a blessing not only to God but to other nations. However, the sense of obligation and responsibility that this [initially] inspired was eventually replaced with feelings of privilege and protection. In the Lazarus parable the Jews expressed shock that a ‘son of Abraham’ could go after death to the place of suffering. John the Baptist announced that God could make ‘sons of Abraham’ out of Judean stones. Jesus said that strangers would be seated with the Jews in the heavenly banquet.....”*

The Jews of Jesus’ day had developed an almost impregnable sense of entitlement that derived from their racial solidarity with Abraham. The sad consequence of this was that in doing so they were ignoring distinctions that even their own prophets had repeatedly made - distinctions from *within* the community of God’s covenant people and which, if regarded, might have delivered them from the sort of religious and racial presumptions that continually got in the way of their being able to *hear* what Jesus was saying to them.

That was precisely what Jesus was dealing with here as they pulled out their entitlement card, and demonstrated their confidence in what their mere external connection to the people of God could provide for them.

Not hindered by their lack of understanding, Jesus presses forward to spell out what sort of “bondage” his comments about freedom are directed toward - namely, *spiritual bondage*, not physical bondage. Bondage that exists for all those who are held captive by sin. And please note, the greek here indicates that Jesus is not saying that every individual act of sin demonstrates that one is in bondage to sin. Rather, he is talking about those who “continue in sin” who - *abide* in it, for whom it is a pattern precisely because it is the nature of the kingdom to which they belong and the master whom they serve.

For those in this situation, says Jesus, they are in true, spiritual bondage. And the alleged spiritual superiority they think they have because of their relationship to Abraham - well that doesn’t really count for as much as they thought. They may be “sons” of Abraham in a biological sense - but in spiritual terms they are “slaves” to sin. And slaves have no certain future in the household to which they belong. Only Sons have that sort of position and certainty. And that is the sort of thing that Jesus offers through the freedom that he provides for those that come to him. Freedom and security.

But Jesus has more to say on this. Not only does he severely *discount* the value of their relationship to Abraham, he goes even further to suggest that there is another “father” in their life that is having a far greater influence on them, and which ought to be a much greater concern to them than their connection to Abraham.

With their *words* they *claim* a connection to Abraham, but with their *actions* they *demonstrate* a different paternity. If they were truly descendants of Abraham - not just physically but spiritually, then they would be acting differently. As it is, they betray a different lineage. Their anger and murderous intent are all character traits of their true, spiritual father.

And it is interesting to note that right off the bat Jesus says that they want to kill him. He demonstrates here, what he has shown elsewhere: a remarkable ability to discern what is truly going on in the hearts of men and women. And so he says what must have been some pretty disturbing words to these people who, only moments before, were said to have “believed” in him. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He has even more disturbing things to say to them.....

(Read 8:39-47)

Jesus’ listeners are obviously upset with him, and not a little bit confused over his suggestion that their lineage can be traced to someone other than Abraham. And so they continue to challenge him on this point. And, to be sure, Jesus has already conceded to them that they are - in a physical sense at least - certainly descendants of Abraham. And yet he insists that this is not enough. And in doing this, as we’ve already seen, he is only following in the steps of the prophets who also made the point that God is concerned with more than mere biological connections amongst his people. There is an attitude/behavior connection that is necessary to show a person’s true lineage. Listen to the words of Jeremiah,

***Jeremiah 9:25-26*** *"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh - <sup>26</sup> Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart."*

And so the words Jesus is using and the distinctions he is making here are nothing new. He is perfectly right to call these professing believers out on this. The card they ought to be “flashing” is not a *race* card but, instead a *character* card. They ought not be pointing to their birth certificates but rather to their *deeds* to show their kinship with Abraham. Abraham - the one who “believed God” - and then acted accordingly. But not these people. What they want to do is kill a man, simply for telling them God’s truth.

Now, at this point Jesus’ listeners say something a little unexpected. They say, “we were not born of sexual immorality”, which seems random enough, but then they add, “We have one Father - even God.”. Why do they say this? Well, as one commentator points out, these words seem to indicate that they are beginning to get “the drift” of what Jesus is saying. Jesus is questioning their lineage - and their response is to say, in effect, “we are not illegitimate children - either physically or spiritually. We ARE children of Abraham and, therefore, children of God”.

But even here Jesus challenges them again by saying that, if they were truly of God, if their spiritual pedigree was as legitimate as they claimed, if they were true sons of Abraham, as well as sons of Abraham’s God, then they would know the Father, and would love the things that the Father loves - namely the Son. Jesus. *Him*.

Well, at this point, since his listeners still have not grasped the full significance of what he is saying to them, Jesus takes another tack, leading them through another line of thinking. He asks, rhetorically, why it is that they still do not understand him. And then he proceeds to answer his own question. The reason they cannot understand him is because *they don't want to* understand him. They can't hear him because they *won't hear him*.

And why *won't* they hear him? Because *their father* is not Jesus or God, but the *devil*. And since the devil is their father, then they bear his likeness and share his desires. And the two main features of the devil's character - which have been seen in him from the very beginning and which are now echoed through their lives - are the fact that he is a *murderer* and a *liar*.

So, they *don't* and *won't* hear Jesus because he speaks the truth - and it is not in their nature to accept the truth - or the one who tells it. Their rejection of Jesus cannot be traced to anything else but this - least of which to any fault or sin in Jesus' own life - which is demonstrated most clearly by Jesus' challenging them to name *one single sin*. Just one. Just once. And no one can come up with anything. Which is just breathtaking when you think about it, and speaks volumes about him.

Well, at this point, the Jews abandon any more attempts at reasoning with Jesus on these matters because, frankly, they just can't keep up. They've got nothing to say, nor can they answer any of his questions, and so they resort to the only avenue left to them: *personal attacks*, name calling or what is called an *ad hominem* argument - which is Latin for "you're ugly, and your momma dresses you funny" - the sort of thing people say when they can't come up with anything rationale.

(Read John 8:48-59)

Jesus opponents - lacking anything better to say - accuse and insult him in two ways. Firstly, they call him a Samaritan, presumably because they can't understand why anyone else but a Samaritan - who was a mortal enemy to the Jew - would question any Jewish person's spiritual legitimacy. And they say he has a demon - because how else would he be saying the (as they see it at least) amazingly ungodly and blasphemous things he is saying?

Not surprisingly, Jesus is not put off at all by their remarks, and responds in several ways. He says, for starters, that far from being a demon, he is one who *honors* God - which of course is the opposite of what demons do. Indeed, what he suggests is that if anyone here has a demon - it is them since they are the ones who are dishonoring God - by dishonoring him. Having said this, however, Jesus makes it clear that his concern in responding to them on these matters is not connected to any desire he has to defend himself or glorify himself. All along the way he has resisted doing such a thing - leaving that for his Father to attend to which his Father does, and does beautifully and most clearly - on the cross.

Jesus then goes on to add one more thing which demonstrates that his word is not only “not demonic” but is, in fact *true* and even, *savingly true* and *powerful*. He speaks of the ultimate end toward which abiding in his word leads. He speaks of the ultimate freedom in which abiding in him culminates - freedom not only from sin as a master but also from sin’s consequence - *death*.

And let’s be clear: Jesus is not saying here that those who abide in his word will not experience physical death or “dissolution” - as one writer puts it. He has made it clear all along that he is speaking to them in spiritual categories and with spiritual ends in view. The death they are delivered from is the very death that was ushered IN with Adam and Eve, back in the garden, so many years before: *spiritual death* - a separation, a rift, a divide that appears between God and humankind and which, unless breached by God himself, stretches out from this life into all eternity.

Well, consistent to the end, Jesus’ opponents once again miss the importance of what he is talking about and so continue to fight him over pretty much every single thing he is saying, taking his statements as proof that they are right in saying he has a demon. And, although they are right in concluding that his words, if true, would make him one who was greater than Abraham and the prophets, they are not right in charging Jesus with “making himself out to be” something. As we’ve already seen, Jesus is not here, nor does he ever, make himself out to be anything. He just is. He just goes about doing what the Father has given him to do, and saying what the Father has given him to say. Any glorifying of him will come at the hands of his Father whom he knows, and they do not, and he would be a liar to deny it.

And it is here that the great and final irony to their whole resistance and rejection of him is seen when Jesus says very clearly that the Abraham that they claim to be from, and in whose name they are *rejecting* Jesus, is the very same Abraham that looked forward to his day - that is, to Jesus’ day - and rejoiced.

By these words Jesus is clearly indicating the fact that, in and through God’s many dealings with him, Abraham understood not only that he was the recipient of God’s *promises* but also that one day God would send a *deliverer* through his descendants who would undo the curse that came upon humankind in the garden because of sin. Again, Abraham saw that a redeemer was going to come - and was glad.

Well, these statements about knowing Abraham lead to his opponents’ further incredulity and evoke from them the comment that Jesus is not nearly old enough to have known Abraham - to which Jesus makes a *deliberate* and *calculated* response - saying that he not only *knew* Abraham, but he preceeded him - “Before Abraham was, I am”. With those words, and that particular construction of words, Jesus is making a clear reference to his own divinity and oneness with the Father. He could have made his point here in a thousand different ways. But he deliberately chose THIS way so that they would definitely get the point. And they do. The rocks in their hands are clear evidence of that.

Well, now the events have come full circle, haven't they? At verse 30, even as many were rejecting him, some were said to have believed - to have made an initial response to Jesus. But through the course of verses 31-59, we are shown that, in spite of their initial response to Jesus - they do not *abide* in that belief but turn very quickly from being his supporters to his critics to, finally, his attackers. They show their aversion to truth and their propensity for murder - just as their father, the devil, has always done.

Now, as you continue to reflect on this passage through the week, there are any number of points that I might highlight. Here are just a few:

1) *Notice the difference between spurious faith and true faith*, between momentary believing and abiding believing. It is not enough to have once made a profession of faith if that profession is not accompanied by anything else. Fire two guns, side by side, and simultaneously. Name one of the guns "spurious faith" and the other one "true faith". And as they are fired, film the whole thing and afterward, play it back in slow motion. What will you find? Well, you will find that, at first, it is difficult, if not impossible to tell any difference between them. Both appear to be heading in the right direction. However, later on, as the trajectory of each bullet becomes more obvious, it becomes clearer and clearer that only one of them is actually going to hit the target. John's gospel here shows us that not all professions of faith end up being indicators of true conversion. He has shown us this before in chapter 2, and again in chapter 6, and he shows it once more for us - right here. And these things ought to affect the way we talk to people about responding to Jesus and should give us some caution with regard to the sorts of assurances that, in my view, we sometimes too quickly hand out to new believers.

2) Notice Jesus' pattern here. He is never interested in multiplying converts for the sake of numbers. *He is only interested in the multiplication that comes from genuine belief* and therefore insists on forcing would-be disciples to count the cost - he puts them to the test straightaway. As Carson puts it, "John, like Jesus, must present the gospel in such a way that spurious professions of faith are soon unmasked before they flood the ranks of the messianic community with people who have never been born again." Jesus' pattern here is one that gives us something to think about. I think that, in our own day, we sometimes worry too much that we have to "protect" new Christians from allegedly "harder" truths - like election, or the extent of the atonement for fear that we might "drive them away". But Jesus did this sort of thing all the time. And the thing that we have to remember is this: if a person is a believer, then that means that the Spirit that is now dwelling within them is the very same Spirit that authored these so called "harder" truths. And the effect of exposing them to it ought to draw them in, not drive them away.

3) Notice that *the proper expression of Christian freedom is not independence but dependent obedience*. Those whom Jesus liberates from the tyranny of sin are really free. And true freedom, then, as one writer put it is "not the liberty to do anything we please, but the liberty to do what we ought; and it is genuine liberty because doing what we ought now pleases us...."

4) Notice that *it was pride in their spiritual pedigree that made it so difficult for the Jews to “hear” and respond to the truth* that Jesus was saying. As one writer puts it, “this reflex is a timeless problem that bears on us as well”. And the questions we need to ask ourselves, especially us ‘reformed’ types, on a regular basis, are: “To what extent do our traditions become impediments to hearing God’s voice? To what extent do we rely on our religious heritage too (“I am a son of Luther” or “I come from a long line of Presbyterians”) and use it to insulate ourselves from a prophetic word from God? Have we gotten to the place where our gut reaction is to side with our tradition - over against, and even in spite of, Scripture?” That is always a dangerous and deadly place to be.

5) Notice that *whenever the church is embattled over its claims to truth at the heart of it all are Jesus’ claims to unity with God, his authority, and his uniqueness as God Son*. Those are the things that set his enemies off in this passage, and they are the very things that set his enemies off today. Put any Christian on Larry King, let Larry ask them his customary question, “Do you think that Jesus is the only way to God?” And let the Christian answer faithfully, which seldom happens. But when it *does* happen, and when they say “yes”, as they rightly should - what do you get? You get John 8 all over again. You see the fangs start to appear. You see people looking around for large rocks.

Jesus is the unique Son of God in whose word his true disciples must, and will continue, to abide. His word, and His alone.

Maybe you’re not comfortable with that truth.

And maybe there’s a reason for that.