

“The Truth Will Set You Free”

Believing a lie doesn't make it the truth. That seems like it should be fairly obvious, but in today's world, it really isn't. The postmodern concept has taken over so much of the thinking in society, the idea that says, “What's true for me is true for me, and what's true for you is true for you.” The biblical example often cited for such a view is Pontius Pilate. Jesus stood before him and said, **“Everyone on the side of truth listens to me”** (John 18:37). But instead of listening, Pilate dismissed his claim and answered, **“What is truth?”**

The idea seems to be that it really doesn't matter what you believe. If it helps you to believe something, wonderful. If it makes you feel better to believe something, great. Believe whatever you want to believe, as long as you don't offend anybody by it.

The Bible says something very different. It makes it clear that there are things that are true and other things that are lies. The Bible teaches that the truth is very important, especially in spiritual matters. And this teaching concerning truth shows up very clearly in the promise that Jesus shares in our sermon text this morning. He promises, **“The truth will set you free.”**

Jesus had been speaking the truth. He had been preaching and teaching large crowds, and some in the crowd put their faith in him. They believed what he said, and they trusted in him. To them Jesus offered the promise, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** As believers, then, the same promise is ours. The truth is found in the teaching of Jesus, and the truth sets us free.

Jesus was more than simply someone who taught the truth. You can go onto a college campus like the one right here in our backyard and find any number of professors who teach the truth. You can learn about math or history or geography and hear all sorts of facts, all sorts of true things. But Jesus is vastly more than a truth-teacher. Jesus testified, **“I am the way and the truth and the life.”** Jesus is the truth. And he went on to say, **“No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6). Jesus is the true way, the only way, to eternal life and salvation.

We've heard this truth in several ways already today. In our second lesson from Romans we heard the truth that all have sinned and that all fall short of the glory of God. All. It doesn't matter if we want to believe that people are all basically good. It doesn't matter if we feel that some people are better than others, or nicer, or more worthy of our praise. All have sinned. No one can look at the demands of God without acknowledging how far we have fallen short of them. The truth of our lives is the truth of sin.

As sin affects all people, it was certainly present in the crowd to whom Jesus was speaking. Even though his promise specifically addressed the believers, there were many who were offended by his remarks. **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?”** They thought that their birth into the nation of Israel was what was important. They thought that they had the inside track to heaven. They couldn't conceive of being slaves, even though their nation at the time was under Roman rule, and even though centuries earlier their ancestors had spent some 400 years as Egyptian slaves.

But Jesus wasn't talking about physical slavery. He was talking about spiritual slavery. **Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”** Just how bleak is our natural spiritual condition? We are carried away into slavery to sin. There is nothing that we can do apart from the approval of our master, sin. And there is nothing that we can do to escape unless someone else sets us free.

Jesus immediately turns our attention to this setting free: **“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.”** No Israelite in the crowd that day, and no man, woman or child sitting in these pews, would be freed from slavery to sin by the things that they have done. The Son sets you free. The Son of God, Jesus Christ

himself, lived a life free from sin in our place. Every demand of God under which we live was placed on him, and he fulfilled them all. Every sin that we have or will ever commit was placed on him and he carried them to the cross and suffered and died for them. As Romans recounted: **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood”** (Romans 3:23-25). He died for our sins, and his righteousness becomes ours.

Anything else is not the truth. Any other way devised by which people might be saved is a dangerous lie. For the Jews in Jesus’ day, it was being a Jew, being a descendant of Abraham. That’s what they trusted.

Almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther battled against another falsehood. Within the Roman Catholic Church it was taught that God was a vengeful God, looking to exact payment for sins from the sinner. But instead of pointing to Christ as the escape from God’s wrath, the church taught that people had to do works of penance. They had to work through the guilt of their sin. And if they had not completed the process in this life, they would have to complete it in the afterlife.

Luther himself knew the fear of trying to appease God by his own actions. It led him to become a monk. It led him to be a meticulous monk, trying to obey every letter of every law he knew. But it didn’t work. The more he tried to save himself, the more he realized his own sin. The more he understood God’s righteous demands, the more he knew he had never lived up to them and that he would never live up to them. He realized that he was a slave to sin.

Only later did God lead Martin Luther to recognize his Savior and to know freedom from sin. But God did lead him there, through the words of the Bible. In God’s Word, apart from the corruption of false teachers, Luther found Jesus’ teaching. He found freedom. He found the truth that set him free. And he held firmly to that teaching. When popes and princes threatened him, he refused to give up. He did everything he could to make sure that more and more people could hear and learn and know what he had come to believe: that if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Today we celebrate and commemorate how God accomplished his purposes through the work of Martin Luther. Through Luther, God preserved the truth of his Word so that many would hear it, including us today.

But that doesn’t mean that we are immune from Satan’s attacks. There are plenty of false teachers and false teachings that would threaten to take our eyes off of Christ and instead to focus on what we do. Our own sinful natures prefer to build ourselves up. The thinking might go: “I am a pretty good Christian. I do a lot of good things. I give generously in my offerings. I go to church every Sunday. Sometimes I even go twice on a Sunday. I sing in the choir; I serve this way or that way. At the very least I do more than many of the people I see around me.”

And so many of these things are well and good, but not for salvation. If we turn away from Christ, the Son, we are left as slaves to sin. We are outside of God’s family.

Only the Son sets us free, and only his Word, his teaching, gives us that precious truth. That is why we always want to hold to it. That is why we want to learn more and more. That is why we gather week after week and spend time in our busy schedules gathered around the Word. That is why we send our children to Sunday school and teach them Bible stories at home. That is why we give our offerings to support the work of our own congregation and of the missionaries who take that Word to places we can’t go.

This Reformation celebration we hear Christ’s promise: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” May he, by his grace, grant this to us all.

Sermon Text: John 8:31–36 (NIV84)

³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

³³ 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?”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.