

John 8:30–47

Introduction

Throughout chapters seven and eight the tone has been one of constant resistance and even animosity toward Jesus. Whether it's the "crowd," or the "Jews," or the "people of Jerusalem," or the "Pharisees," everyone seems to be opposed to Jesus. But then we read in verse 30 of chapter eight:

I. John 8:30 — As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.

Finally, a positive response to Jesus. "*Many came to believe in Him.*" Why? Not because of His signs, but because of the things He was saying ("As He *spoke* these things..."). They were convinced that Jesus must be speaking the truth. And so they believed in Him and they wanted to identify themselves with Him as His disciples. And we want to celebrate, don't we? We want to be glad that many came to believe in Jesus. But we remember these verses in chapter two:

- John 2:23–25 — When [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many *believed in His name*, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

We remember, too, what happened in chapter six:

- John 6:66 — Many of [Jesus] *disciples* withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.

Believing in Jesus is apparently not always what it might appear to be.

Finally, we remember that there *were* some people who were saying, "This truly is the Prophet," and others who were saying, "This is the Christ" (7:40-41)." All of these people were believing in Jesus; but then we have to ask, "Were they *really*?" The question isn't, were they believing in Him *enough*, but rather, were they believing in *Him as He was revealing Himself to them*.

II. John 8:31 — Therefore Jesus was saying to the Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples;"

Here is a warning not to confuse a superficial *believing* that's only temporary with the believing that submits wholeheartedly to Jesus' word and is therefore permanent. To abide in Jesus' word is to be rooted permanently in His word so that it's His word that shapes and defines us. Maybe we could say in human terms—because of the weakness of our flesh—that to abide in Jesus' word is to be "slaves" to His word with our consciences "bound" by His word (cf. Rom. 6:17-19). Anything other than this is not true discipleship, and therefore not truly believing in Jesus as He has revealed Himself.

But even in Jesus' warning, there's an invitation and a promise. If I'm abiding in His word then I am truly His disciple. And if we speak of this—because of the weakness of our flesh—as a *kind* of “slavery,” then we must also be able to see that in *this* “slavery” is the only true freedom.

“If you abide in My word,” Jesus said, “you are truly My disciples...”

III. John 8:32 — “...and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

To be the “slave” of truth must be a fundamentally different thing from being the slave of a lie. A “lie” is a cruel master that kills and destroys, but the truth that is in Jesus is a master that sets us free from the tyranny of lies and gives us the deepest kind of happiness and joy. Whatever we are to call this “abiding in His word”—whether a *kind* of “slavery” (because of the weakness of our flesh) or the ultimate freedom, it's the only escape from tyranny. It's the only place where we can have peace.

In the midst of the warning, there's a promise and an invitation: “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

IV. John 8:33 — They answered Him, “We are Abraham's descendants and have never been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’”

The Jews aren't denying the fact that they've been politically and physically enslaved to many different nations and empires. Their point is that as Abraham's descendants, they already know the truth because it was to them that the Law was given; therefore, whatever their outward status may be among the nations they are fundamentally at all times and in all places the freeborn “people of God.” “We are Abraham's descendants and [therefore, by default] have never been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’”

Now are these Jews abiding in Jesus' word or are they believing in Jesus only because—and therefore only for as long as—He fits the truth they think they already know? As soon as Jesus challenges their most cherished assumptions, how quick they are to contradict His word! Even as they deny that they've ever been enslaved to anyone, they show that they are, in fact, enslaved. As one commentator says, “There [must be] some powerful spiritual force holding back the[se] would-be believer[s] from what [they have just] recognized as the right course of action. Anyone in [this] position is not free but a slave” (Morris). And the depth of this enslavement is seen in the fact that one thing the lie does is deceive its slaves into believing they're “free.” “We are Abraham's descendants and have never been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’”

V. John 8:34–35 — Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever.”

It's difficult to overstate the spiritual privilege that belonged to the Jews. The Psalmist celebrates:

- Psalm 147:19–20 (cf. Deut. 4:7-8) — He declares His words to Jacob, His statutes and His ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His ordinances, they have not known them. Praise the LORD!

The Apostle Paul writes:

- Romans 3:1–2 — What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

And yet what Jesus is saying here is that it's entirely possible to be physically the descendants of *Abraham* and therefore to know the law that God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai and even to profess allegiance to that law and still be "sinning" (living a life fundamentally characterized by sin). But *whoever* is sinning is by definition a slave of sin! And "the slave," Jesus says, "does not remain in the house forever." In the Old Testament, there was a real sense in which the nation of Israel was God's "house" or "household." Every Jew, whether truly regenerate or not, was born into this household and it seems that practically speaking the only way to be "cut off" from this "household" was by the death penalty. But as "real" as this household was, it was only "typological" (a shadow and a copy of the substance) and therefore temporary. The household of ethnic Israel was an anticipation of that true household in which only Jesus Himself is the true Son (cf. Exod. 4:22-23; Hos. 11:1 & Mat. 2:15) and only those who truly abide in His word are "children." The typological household of the Old Testament consisted mostly of slaves – slaves of sin. But Jesus renders that household of the Old Covenant obsolete because in the household where He alone is the true Son, there is no room at all for slaves but only for those who are free – *free* from the tyranny of sin; *free* to abide in Jesus' word. Now we should be able to better understand Jesus' words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever."

VI. John 8:36 — "Therefore if the *Son* makes you free, you will be free indeed."

"True freedom," says one commentator, "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" (Carson). True freedom is that which we can only have when *the Son* makes us free – when we are actually joined to the Son by faith, abiding in His word, and counted *with Him* as "children" in God's household. This is what it is to be "free indeed."

There's a promise here, and also a warning: Anything else, though it has the appearance of "freedom," is not really freedom but slavery – slavery to sin; slavery to a lie.

Jesus continues in verse thirty-seven:

VII. John 8:37 — "I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you."

How can Jesus say to the Jews who only a moment ago were believing in Him and professing to be His disciples that they're seeking to kill Him? The fact is that a significant number of *Abraham's descendants were*, in fact, seeking to kill Jesus. Jesus' main point isn't necessarily

which descendants of Abraham. By their failure to abide in Jesus' word, these Jews who a moment ago were believing in Jesus have aligned themselves fundamentally with their fellow Jews who are seeking to kill Jesus. When Jesus says, "yet you seek to kill me," He's speaking of the Jewish people as a whole and identifying *all* those in whom His word has no place with this ultimate collective guilt of the nation (cf. Acts 2:36; 4:10).

Jesus places those who were *believing* in Him and identifying with Him as His *disciples* in the same category with those seeking to *kill* Him. He does this because they're not *abiding* in His word; because His word has *no place* in them; because they're not freeborn children who know and love the truth, but slaves of sin. And *all* such slaves of sin are always aligned fundamentally with those who crucified and put to death the Lord of glory (cf. 1 Cor. 2:8). Jesus assigns to us in our slavery to sin the heart and the guilt of those who seek to kill Him. "I know that you are Abraham's descendants," Jesus says, "yet you seek to kill Me, *because My word has no place in you.*"

VIII. John 8:38 — "I speak the things which I have seen in the presence of My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father."

Why do the Jews do the things they do (things like seeking to kill Jesus)? First, because these are the things they heard from their father – because this runs in the *family*. And second, *because* Jesus speaks the things which He has seen in the presence of *His* Father. Apparently, *their father* harbors an inextinguishable, murderous hatred for *Jesus' Father*. So whenever Jesus speaks the things that He has seen in the presence of *His* Father, they are "*therefore*"—by the necessity of their nature—provoked to do the things that they have heard from *their* father. Are we beginning to see in this how vast—and apparently unbridgeable—is the gulf between unbelief and belief?—Between the word of Jesus having *no place* in us and actually coming to *abide* in Jesus' word?

But now the Jews have been put in a difficult spot. By not identifying who their father is, Jesus has challenged the Jews to make the identification themselves. If they do this, they must maintain that whoever their father is, he is of the same nature with them and would seek, with them, to kill Jesus. So which is the lesser of the two evils – to admit a father other than Abraham, or to claim Abraham as their father and potentially to malign and slander his name? Or is there some other alternative?

IX. John 8:39a — They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father."

The Jews want this to be their vindication. They want the *spiritual privileges* of their physical descent from Abraham to be the proof that they're also his true, *spiritual children*.

X. John 8:39b–41a — Jesus said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father."

In verse thirty-seven Jesus said, "I know that you are *Abraham's descendants* [*sperma*; seed; biological descent]," and here He acknowledges all the spiritual privileges that accompany this

descent. Now Jesus says that they must not be Abraham's "*children*" [*teknon*] because there's no family likeness; because they're not doing the deeds of Abraham, but the deeds of their "father." This is the second time Jesus has referred to their father without saying who he is. Even as Jesus exposes how vast and apparently unbridgeable is the gulf between Him and these children of a different father, He still gives them the opportunity to see their hopeless condition for themselves and to confess "on their own" the truth of His word.

But they refuse.

XI. John 8:41b — They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God."

First, the Jews point out that they were not born of some affair that Sarah had out of wedlock, but rather of Sarah's union with *Abraham*: "We were not born of fornication [so therefore we *are* descendants of Abraham]." They pretend to believe that Jesus is denying they are *biologically descended* from Abraham – even though Jesus Himself just said: "I know you are Abraham's descendants." But then in the very next breath they admit that they do know what Jesus is talking about: "we have one Father: God." Are they still saying that the *spiritual privileges* of their physical descent from Abraham are proof that they're the true *spiritual children of God*? But what about the things they *do*? What about their seeking to kill Jesus? Is this really what God does? The Jews still haven't answered Jesus.

XII. John 8:42–43 — Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for it is from God that I went forth and from Him that I have come. For I have not come on My own initiative, but that one [*that very one whom you claim as your Father*] sent Me. Why do you not understand my speech [*lalia*]?" It is because you are unable to listen to [to receive] My word [*logos*]."

If the Jews can't make sense of what Jesus is saying, it's not because Jesus is vague or unclear but because their own "values [and commitments]... make them constitutionally unable" (*ou dynamai*) to ever know the truth – to ever *abide* in Jesus' word (cf. Carson). We're not neutral people who are equally capable of choosing what is spiritually evil *or* choosing what is spiritually good. We are already, Jesus says, slaves of sin. And we have values and commitments as the slaves of sin that make us constitutionally unable to ever receive Jesus' word. Where do these values and commitments come from? Jesus answers:

XIII. John 8:44a — "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father."

Are we seeing even more how vast—and apparently *unbridgeable*—is the gulf between unbelief and belief?—Between the one and only Son of the Father and the children of the devil? We can't restrict the application of Jesus' words here only to the Jewish leaders or to some worse class of sinners than we are. We are *either* the **children of God** who love Jesus and know the truth and abide in His word *or* we're **children of the devil** who are fundamentally aligned with those who hate Jesus and seek to kill Him. Jesus is addressing these words not to the Pharisees, but to those who were just now believing in Him and identifying with Him as His disciples. Paul says that we

were *all* by nature slaves of sin (cf. Rom. 6). Therefore, we were all at one time children of the devil, bearing the family likeness, carrying the family nature, and *wanting to do the desires of our father*. Can we ever really comprehend what this means? Jesus says of that one who we all once owned as our father:

XIV. John 8:44b — “He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

What does this mean for us who were by nature the children of a liar and the father of lies? Jesus answers:

XV. John 8:45 — “But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.”

Jesus doesn’t say, “*even though* I speak the truth” or “*in spite of the fact that* I speak the truth.” He says, “*because* I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.” It’s the truth itself that provokes and hardens our unbelief, not because of any fault in the truth, but because of our own enslavement to sin as children of the devil. As children wanting to do the desires of our lying father, we did not believe and could not believe in Jesus precisely *because* He speaks the truth. So Jesus concludes:

XVI. John 8:46–47 — “Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears [and receives] the words of God; *for this reason* you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”

Conclusion

Do you see how vast—and apparently unbridgeable—is the gulf between unbelief and belief. Slaves of sin. Children of the devil. Wanting to do the desires of our father. Believing lies and characterized by the lies we believed. Unable to believe in Jesus precisely *because* He speaks the truth – because His word has *no place* in us. We were not of God; therefore, we could not receive His words; we could not know the truth.

Is there no escape? Augustine, a bishop in North Africa who lived some sixteen hundred years ago, wrote these words: “At times a man’s slave, worn out by the commands of an unfeeling master, finds rest in flight. [Where] can the servant of sin flee? Himself he carries with him wherever he flees. An evil conscience flees not from itself; it has no place to go to; it follows itself. [Indeed], he cannot withdraw from himself, for the sin he commits is within. He has committed sin to obtain some bodily pleasure. The pleasure passes away; the sin remains. What delighted is gone; the sting has remained behind. Evil bondage!” (Quoted in Morris) This is what Martin Luther meant when he spoke of the bondage of the will. And this is what Jesus speaks of here in John chapter eight. It’s this “evil bondage” that explains the necessity of God’s miracle-working, sovereign grace (cf. John 6); the grace that gives us the new birth (cf. John 3) and opens our hearts to know the truth—to receive and abide in the word of Jesus—and be free. “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (Lk. 18:27). What we are wholly unable to do, God does.

- Romans 8:1-2 — Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

“The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. Therefore,” Jesus says, “if the *Son* makes you free, you will be free indeed.” Are you “free indeed”? Are you living every day *as* one who is free?