

*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed in Him, "If you live in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will free you." "We are Abraham's descendants," they answered Him, "and have never been anyone's slaves. How can you say, 'You'll be freed?'" "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered them, "everyone who lives in sin is a slave to sin. A slave doesn't stay in the home forever. A son stays forever. If, then, the Son frees you, you will really be free." – John 8:31-36*

There seems to be a kind of unwritten outline for political speeches in our country. First, you hear all the bad news about unemployment, injustice, inequality, or whatever the speaker's hobbyhorses might be. But then comes the encouraging part of the speech – the good news, if you will. You hear something like, "But this is America, the land of the free." Of course, there is such a thing as outward, civil freedom – freedom to raise your children without the government micromanaging your home, or the freedom to own and manage your own property without overburdening regulations. These are certainly good things. It's a blessing to be free in this way. St. Paul says to slaves, "If you have a chance to gain your freedom, then take it! (1 Cor 7)" But we should not assume that such freedom is some kind of spiritual characteristic inherent in being American. We should be on our guard against any kind of social gospel, which teaches us to trust in political forces for freedom. The freedom Jesus speaks of is a much deeper freedom. In fact, it's so deep that one can be a slave, have his business seized by the government, or have bossy know-it-alls try to micromanage his home-life, yet still be freer than any other man. Jesus says that if you abide in his Word then you are truly his disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Knowing the truth is what makes you free. But what is the truth? The first part of this truth is that you are by nature not free. The natural man is bound to sin and the devil. It is only by the blood of God's Son that we are set free from these chains and set at peace with God. Only when we know this can we begin to see how God provides for everything we need. Only when we know that God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all will we start to recognize how he gives us everything else in this life, including our civil freedom.

If we forget this truth, then it doesn't matter how free we think we are. We will fool ourselves into thinking that we are free just because we are Americans, or just because we own expensive stuff. But is it freedom when media and state-sponsored secular propaganda have more influence on children than their parents do? If they aren't taught it in health class, they are certainly taught it in every corner of entertainment and culture to do whatever their carnal desires drive them to do. Meanwhile, parents slave away paying off their debts to those who taught them to leave God's Word out of the public square. But they will go on imagining that they are free, because they have the internet, cars, and other luxuries. Forgetting that all good gifts come from God only makes us calloused and nearsighted, imagining that we are free when we are in reality slaves. Then any suggestion that we are not free becomes an affront to us. Why do I need to be set free? I haven't been enslaved to anyone! I'm my own person! I make my own decisions! Is that so? You can keep telling yourself that as you conform to the trends of this dying world, but it won't make it true.

People naturally think that freedom is doing whatever your desires want. If you want to sing out, sing out. If you want to be free, be free. Because there's a million things to be. You know that there are. With these words Cat Stevens captured the spirit and resilience of our degenerate generation. I suppose there are a million things to be in this world. This is what we are often told. You can be whatever you want when you grow up. Shoot for the stars. Believe in yourself. But all of these things

are completely in vain. Even the good things we find ourselves doing are harmful and evil if we think they are going to last forever. Because if we don't know the truth about our sinful condition, then we will inevitably rely on the things of this world. We remain slaves to our own sin if we think that we can rely on ourselves. If we think that what we determine to do cannot fail, then we remain slaves. That which is born of the flesh remains flesh, and like the lilies in the field, it dries up and is blown away with the wind.

But Jesus teaches us that true freedom is first found in knowing that you need to be set free. You need to be set free from your sinful nature. You need to learn to fear God and not rely on yourself. You need to be told that death is knocking at the door and it is there because of your sin.

The slave can accomplish lots of things. He can be a million things he wants to be. He can use his talents in this life to gain recognition from the other slaves and feel like he has lived a fulfilling life. He can take advantage of God's good gifts, which he bestows on the just and the unjust alike. But in the end, the slave does not remain in the house. He remains a slave to the sin, which he refuses to acknowledge.

But's our Lord's words give great comfort and set the mind at ease for those who know that their natural desires and works are enslaved to sin. These are those who know that the reason they have made mistakes in life is not simply because they are human and not perfect, but because they are by nature sinful and unclean. They say with Isaiah, "I am lost. Woe am I. I am a man of unclean lips, and I come from a people of unclean lips." He speaks to those who fear God's wrath, who know that they deserve to be cast out of God's house. And he says to them, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free." And why? Because the Son dwells in the house forever.

A few years after Martin Luther was condemned as a heretic and an outlaw, he found himself in a debate with a prominent theologian named Erasmus. Luther taught that man by nature is so sinful that he has no good quality or free will to make any choice to come to God. This is what the Bible teaches. Jesus says that the flesh avails nothing (John 6). But Erasmus disagreed with this. He taught that if God says, "You shall love me with your whole heart," then this must mean that we actually have the power to love God with our whole hearts. If God commands us to do it, then we must have the ability to choose the good and reject the evil. But Luther taught that the law does not give us any ability to follow the law. Luther taught that the law reveals that we are lost and dead in sin. "The Scripture has said that everything is a prisoner of sin, so that the promised blessing might be given to believers through faith in Jesus Christ. (Gal 3:22)" Only the gospel, which reveals to us the Son of God who died to take away our sins, has the power to replace our stony and sin-bound hearts with the freedom of faith.

It was the popular teaching -- and it still is today -- that if you just do what is within you then God will reward you with grace. Luther understood the truth of Jesus' words. We are not by nature free. "I have no quality within my heart at all," Luther said, "call it faith or charity. Instead of these, I set Christ himself before me and say, 'There is my righteousness.'" There, in your baptism where the blood of Jesus cleanses you through the washing of water with the Word; there, in the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins; there in the Word of your Lord, which makes you his disciple; there in the truth of Christ, which sets you free from sin and hell; there is your righteousness.

What do you want to be? Do you want to sing out? Do you want to be free? If you follow what you want, if you follow your carnal desires, then you will only sing the praises of the world that is passing

away. But you won't find the ability to sing God's praises within yourself. You won't find any freedom in your own desires. It might seem like you do. You might find yourself very successful in this life. But Jesus teaches us what is truly within us. He knows what is in man. He knows the sin, the selfish ambitions, the apathy for his pure Word and doctrine, the vainglory that boasts in the works and praises of men, and all the wicked inclinations that dwell within our hearts. He knows the truth. And as the Son of God he bore that truth as he died on the cross. He bore God's fierce wrath against your sins. He fulfilled the truth by doing and feeling and singing and confessing and suffering everything that God required. He died to sin, and he is alive to God. And he did this all for you.

So now he gives you the ability to sing God's praises, to trust in God, to confess your Savior, to suffer for his sake, and to worship your Lord without fear of condemnation. None of this comes from you or any worldly movement. No law, no amendment, no bill of rights can give you this. It only comes from his Word, his Word of the cross, which is foolishness to the world, but it is the wisdom of God and the power of salvation for you who believe. This is not human freedom, which is here one day and gone the next. It is the freedom of knowing that God's wrath has been turned away and the righteousness you need to stand before him is bestowed on you for Christ's sake.

Now, if God has given you some of this outward, civil freedom, then this is good. Give thanks for the land, the family, and the companions he gives to you. And put it to good use. Because good and just laws may curb and ward off threats to your bodily freedom, but only love flowing from faith and a clean conscience can compel you to promote the true freedom of Christ. When you do your duty, when you serve your neighbor, honor your parents, are faithful to your spouse, comfort your fellow saints, and pray for your enemies, these works are pleasing to God, not because of how worthy you are, but only because your faith rests in the Son who set you free. To know this is to know the freedom of the gospel. So be free. Sing out. As the hymn goes, "He rescues me from sin and breaks the chains that bind me. I leave death's fear behind me. His peace I have within." In Jesus' name. Amen.