

INTRO:¹

So we're continuing our *"That You Believe"* series through the EVER-famous Gospel of John - a book of the Bible that even if you're not familiar with the Bible as a whole, ya need to be familiar with this book BECAUSE we get so much of our historical, and of course, theological information about Jesus from it... And IN this book/if you've been with us throughout this series, you know that since about ch.5, we've seen conflict growing around Jesus, as He's been telling people about what God's really like. Cuz we all know/we see this all the time **right**: if there's ANYTHING that gets people fighting, it's differing viewpoints over ultimate things. What's the purpose of life; Who are we as people; Is there a God; If so what's He really like; CERTAINLY, What it means to be free... And I think it's maybe THAT last question that seems **the question of our time**, given ALL the discourse about setting limits/OR NOT on who we are as people and what we should be able to do. This very modern question of **freedom as the question of our time** that perhaps not surprisingly, Jesus actually dealt with YEARS ago.

TEXT:

Cuz look with me starting in **v.31**. Jesus is still at this festival we've discussed the last couple of weeks, known as the Feast of Booths. And AT this festival He's been teaching/even arguing with the religious leaders, who at this point, are quite openly, trying to kill Him. BUT even as they're moving further away from Him, you see OTHERS are drawing CLOSER to Him - *"many,"* it says, *"had believed in Him."* ...Cuz that's kinda the thing with Jesus. Even if it's popular/sometimes even principled to wanna be non-committal and "open-minded" about things, the deal with Jesus is: It's impossible to ULTIMATELY remain neutral about Him. Cuz as we've seen throughout *John*, He's been very clear in His assertion to being God. Such that NOT deciding whether you believe He IS God or not is ACTUALLY deciding against it. As Jesus says in *Matthew 12*, *"whoever's not with me, is against me."* Every one of us is free to decide whether or not to take Jesus at His word. But given the claims Jesus made, what we're NOT free to do, at least logically speaking, is remain neutral toward Him. This is why C.S. Lewis famously said, *"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be (just) a great moral teacher. No! He'd either be a lunatic - on the level of a man who says he's a poached egg - or else he'd be the devil of Hell. You have to make a choice. EITHER Jesus was, and is, the Son of God or else He's a madman or something worse."* There's no ability to ULTIMATELY remain neutral with Jesus. Which is WHY you see the polarization around Him growing.

And so Jesus starts speaking to these aspiring disciples and tells em, **v.32**, *"If you abide in my word, you're truly my disciples, and you'll know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* And we'll unpack exactly what He means there in a second, but just notice up-front: Jesus makes an assumption about these *"believers"*/these disciples/these church-goers if you will. Which is... that even THEY need freedom!... Little Pastoral tip here for ya: If you ever wanna start a fight,

¹ Works consulted:

- "What is wrong with us? Reflections on "You Are Not Your Own: Belonging to God in an Inhuman World" by Alan Noble - Jim Denison
- "Two Families; Two Humanities" - Gospel of John, Part 1 - June 30, 1991 - John 8:42-59 - *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (NYC: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).
- "Sent to Bring Freedom" - John 8:31-36, 56-59 - Sep-Oct 2016 - *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (NYC: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).
- "Truth, Himself, Will Set You Free" - 10/18/22 - #67 - <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/larkcast/id1339351918?i=1000583009903>
- D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991).
- Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here Is Your King: With Study Guide*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 131-32.

just tell a group of religious or “moral” people that their religion and morality isn’t enough. Bound to get a response. Which you see in **v.33** is exactly what happens. These Jews say, *“Please! We’re offspring of Abraham. We’ve never been enslaved to anyone.”* In other words, *“Don’t you know, Jesus, our moral and spiritual status? Don’t you know what schools we went to and the kinds of families we were raised in? Haven’t you seen our resumes and the number of followers we have on the Gram. Come on bro!”* In their minds, their ancestry and attainments gave them no reason NOT be spiritually confident and self-assured. *“We’re good Catholics/good Christians/good people...good-to-go!”* **Sound familiar?**

Look in **vv.34-38**. How Jesus strikes at the root of that assurance. Cuz He effectively says, *“You’re not good to go. Cuz you’re NOT actually children of God. Rather, regardless of how good, moral, and accomplished you think you are, you’re actually living in opposition TO God by the very fact that you sin. You’re not Sons, He says. You’re slaves.”*...And what Jesus is doing here is reiterating 2 principles we find THROUGHOUT Scripture. **First**, that as imperfect, broken people, we don’t BECOME sinners BECAUSE we do wrong things and commit sins; we commit sins BECAUSE we’re sinners! Which, I KNOW, in our self-esteem culture, isn’t popular. Cuz as Reinhold Niebuhr said a generation ago, *“no amount of contrary evidence seems to disturb (our) good opinion of (ourselves).”* And yet the contrary evidence is all over the place **right?** From the global horrors of things like wars and corruption to just how quickly we can get offended, hold a grudge, wanna put someone in their place! We don’t become sinners BECAUSE we commit sins; we commit sins BECAUSE we’re sinners! That’s the first principle. And the **Second** follows, which is that AS sinners the only ULTIMATE difference between us/between ALL people then...isn’t cultural, but theological...That things like race, class, gender, education, politics - while important - are ultimately superficial. BECAUSE if we’re all by nature sinners or *“slaves to sin,”* then the only thing that ULTIMATELY ever differentiates us is whether or not you’ve moved from slave to son, because THE Son has set you free. Or more specifically, whether or not you’re believing Jesus or living in unbelief TO Jesus in some area of your life. Cuz throughout John/we’ve seen this **right?** When sin’s mentioned, it’s almost always synonymous with unbelief. Just last week, we saw Jesus tell the religious leaders that they were gonna *“die in their sins.”* Now obviously He didn’t mean that they were gonna die in their tax evasion or something **right?**/some specific sin. No! He said, **v.24**, *“unless you BELIEVE that I am he you’ll die in your sins.”* Sin being synonymous with unbelief. So that again, while cultural differences among us might be important, in the final analysis, they’re not ULTIMATE. What ULTIMATELY differentiates us is simply whether or not you’re depending on and believing Jesus for every area of your life OR operating out of a kind of independence that says, *“I’m live the way I want.”*...That’s what Jesus is saying. Which is WHY you see in **v.39**, these Jews clap back - *“Abraham’s our father.”* - Again asserting their status and morality, because isn’t it just so freakin hard for us to believe that we might not be the hero of every story. That we might not be TOTALLY self-sufficient. That we might, in-fact, be dependent beings who are made not to BE served, but to serve. People, who as Martin Luther said, have human wills, which like horses, are dependent upon who our rider is - be that God or the Devil.

Which is why in **vv.40-47**, Jesus tells these Jews that their TRUE spiritual father isn't in-fact Abraham, BUT the Devil. Cuz if it WAS Abraham, they'd be doing what Abraham did, which is to say BELIEVING in Jesus. Cuz of course, the main thing Abraham's known for is faith **right?** That's why he's called the "father of the faith." Cuz going all the way back to **Genesis 12** he believed that God would one day send the Messiah and that belief, as Scripture says, "*was credited to Him as righteousness.*" So "if like father like son," then these Jews should be modeling their father Abraham's belief. But they're not! SO that must mean their spiritual father's ACTUALLY...the Devil! - The Chief unbeliever or "*father of lies.*" And you say, "*Hold up. Devil-talk? Really?*" And I know, but if I might just get you to consider two things: **One**, these are JESUS' words here. HE'S the one who brings up the Devil-talk and asserts that the Devil's real. And so if you're inclined to believe Jesus on anything: love, morality, grace, heaven; why wouldn't you also believe Him on the Devil? Unless of course you're just being narrow-minded...But then **Two**, Jesus calls the Devil "*a murderer,*" "*a liar*"/"*the father of lies.*" **Let me ask you:** Doesn't it make sense, given the brokenness we see around us and HAVE seen throughout history, that there would be that kind of presence operating in the world? Like how do you explain...the Holocaust, or the Cambodian Genocide under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, Rwanda, The African and European Slave Trades, Pinochet in Chile, and Castro in Cuba. **Like, how do you explain that if not for some truly dark force operating behind everything?** I mean is it REALLY that logical to think evil like that is merely due to a lack of education, financial resources, or bad parenting or something? I mean sure, those things might trigger evil, but are we really saying that they're the CAUSE of it? To me, that almost takes MORE faith than to believe there's ACTUALLY a Devil whose primary way of dealing with us isn't through fang marks on the back, like in the movies, but falsehoods in the heart. Ya gotta consider that!

And so Jesus says all this to these folks, and instead of it convicting them, you see in **vv.48-59**, it leads em to OPPOSE Him further - to basically move straight to bigotry and personal attack. Call Him a "*Samaritan*" and "*demon-possessed.*" Samaritan being a kind of short-hand for heretic or worse "a half-breed," given the theologically and socially mixed origins OF the Samaritans. And I love Jesus' response there. He's basically like, "*Nope! I don't have a demon. I'm just trying to honor God. I'm not even seeking my own glory. I'm just telling you that your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. (And) He saw it and was glad.*" To which they're like, "*You ain't even 50 years old bro. You telling us you saw Abraham/Abraham saw you?*" And Jesus says, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.*" At which point, it says, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus slips away into hiding. Cuz what He's saying is NOT "*before Abraham was BORN, I was,*" but rather, "*Before Abraham WAS, I am.*" Meaning just like God, whose literal name "Yahweh" meaning "I am," was always before Abraham...so to Jesus! JESUS once again claiming to be God and THUS the principal arbiter...of freedom!

So **3 Things** this passage **Tells You ABOUT Your Freedom: First, It's More Complex Than You Think.** Back in 1992, the Supreme Court ruled that "*The heart of liberty - freedom - is to define one's own concept of existence and meaning of the universe.*" That to be free, in our modern thinking, is to be without ANY constraints or limitations on how you choose to live and ultimately understand life. That's basically how we understand freedom **right?** But what you

gotta notice is: Jesus - the most free person to've ever lived - sees it differently! Cuz HE says in **vv.31-32**, *"If you abide in my word, you're truly my disciples, and you'll know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* **What's He saying?** He's saying, *"if you think freedom is found in the ABSENCE of constraints - ya know, throwing off all authority and truth claims over your life - then you'll never actually be free.* According to Jesus, freedom comes ONLY IF, as He says, *"you abide in His word."* That's what these Jews didn't get. They were focused on asserting their independence and status. But the Greek word for "abide" there is the word "*meno*," literally meaning to "sit-in, rest-and-remain-in, be dependent-upon" BOTH Jesus' teachings, but also just Jesus Himself, since throughout John, Jesus is called "the word" **right?** So according to Jesus, freedom/**listen** is found NOT in the independence from constraints, but DEpendence on the RIGHT constraints...I'll give you a very simple illustration: Food! As human beings we're of course/for the most part, free to eat whatever we want **right?** And like me, you probably have a certain food that when you eat it, you don't just like it, it actually brings you joy. That's one of the great things about great foods. But let's say, your doctor comes along and says, *"Look I'm sorry, but that food you love? You gotta cut it. It's killing your cholesterol/blood pressure/doing all kinds of damage that if you DON'T, you're gonna have a heart attack and die."* Now, you've got two choices **right?** On the one hand, you're absolutely free to ignore your doctor and keep eating that food, cuz ain't nobody gonna tell you what to do. BUT that'll prolly kill ya. On the OTHER hand, you're also free to listen to your doctor, impose a constraint on yourself, cut that food, and live a healthy life. In other words, you've got two freedoms. And that's really how life works. True freedom isn't found in just doing whatever you wanna do and throwing off all constraints. It's found in choosing the right constraints - constraints that'll ACTUALLY liberate you. And **Friend**, there's no better person or thing for knowing what those things are than Jesus - the ONE person who not only knows you best because He created you, but who was HIMSELF perfectly free...**Listen:** To the degree that you're trying to find freedom by throwing off constraints, PARTICULARLY, the constraint of God/Jesus/His Word, that's the degree to which you'll ACTUALLY find yourself MORE enslaved. **Where in your life are you saying, "God I got this."** Or **"I'm gonna live the way I want?"**

Because the **Second** thing you see here is that **Your Slavery and Mine/Our LACK of Freedom Is Actually DEEPER Than You Can Imagine.** Cuz, ya know, the sort of I'd say prevailing thought with respect to our constraints is that they're brought about from the outside **right?** Like if there's something keeping you back/something prohibiting you from getting ahead, it's out there! Maybe some group of people, or structure, or set of policies; maybe it's your job, your boss, a certain professor, even your spouse. That's what we assume **right?** Jesus says, *"No! It's deeper than that."* Your slavery is not ultimately a function of anything out there; it's a function of your unbelief IN HERE! Cuz look at everything He says, **V.31**, *"If you ABIDE in my word, you're my disciples...and'll be set free."* **V.34**, *"I say...everyone who practices sin - again sin being rooted in unbelief - is a slave to sin."* **V.43**, *"You don't understand what I say because you cannot bear to hear my word"* - literally, you refuse to receive and believe it. And **v.45**, *"I tell the truth, you do not believe me."* Those are ALL indictments on their belief. Because what Jesus is showing you is that the thing that holds you back isn't out there, but an impulse in here - deep within your heart where you say, *"Nobody's gonna tell me how to live, least of all God."* And we

all have that impulse. If you don't believe me, just think about the last time someone told you you needed to do something. **What was your gut reaction?** "*Psst. Eating healthy. Dumb doctors! They don't know what they're talking about.*" **Right?** What keeps you back/what keeps you from enjoying true freedom is what St. AuGUSTine called being "curvatus in se": curved in on yourself, in a such a way as to say, as Frank Sinatra did, "*Ima do it my way/I'M gonna ascend!*"

And you say, "*What's the big deal? I mean don't we need to have grit/hustle. Like why's this a problem?*" It's a problem because when you say, "*Ima live life the way I want/I'm gonna ascend,*" you're necessarily elevating yourself to the position of God and THEREBY telling God, He doesn't GET to determine how you live...But see, that's like buying a car and the manufacturer gives you an owner's manual that tells you, ya know, that you can't drive the car any way ya want. You actually have to change the oil at certain intervals/maybe even put in premium or diesel gas rather than regular, cuz if you DON'T...the car's gonna die...It's the same with our lives. As your Creator, God has told you how to live. Even more, in CHRIST, He's SHOWN you what true life and freedom looks like. So when you don't "*ABIDE*" in that/that "owner's manual," you risk killing your own soul - be it now or eternally!...I'll give you an example: God tells us we should forgive **right?** We're created in His image. He's a forgiver and so as those who KNOW His forgiveness, be it in Christ or who just represent Him as image-bearers; we're ALSO to be forgiving. Makes sense...UNTIL someone wrongs you. **THEN what do you do?** Withhold forgiveness **right?** Cuz I mean they really wronged you. And so you nurse a grudge, and playback on repeat all the ways you're gonna zing em when ya see em. And in the short run it feels good. But over time, **what happens?** You start to get bitter. Harden up to people. Be less willing, for example, to invest in and love people cuz you assume they're gonna hurt you. And so you begin to live with this kinda low-grade disappointment/even anger that - like with a car which hasn't had it's oil changed - starts to disintegrate you. Physically, emotionally, mentally, certainly spiritually! That's BECAUSE the "the car that is your life" is not being driven in the way God created it to!...So you see? **Your Lack of Freedom Is WAY Deeper Than You Think**, BECAUSE it's not ultimately about someone or something out there, but about you not trusting that God in here! **Where is that the case for you today?**

Cuz that leads me to the **Final** thing you gotta see here, which is that **Your Liberation/Your Freedom Is Actually Much Simpler Than You Could Hope**. Cuz take a look at what Jesus says. And not just that AS "*the Son, if He sets you free, you'll be free indeed*" - that only Jesus as the eternal Son of God is qualified to break your bondage to sin - your life of "*me, me, me*" and "*I, I, I,*" since of course you can't spell "SIN" without "I" in the middle - BUT look at what He says in **v.56**. "*Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.*" And as I mentioned, that's a reference not to Abraham literally seeing Jesus, but to Abraham BELIEVING that God would one day SEND Jesus for our salvation. He believed that **and what did it do?** It filled Him with gladness. In a sense, it empowered Him to undertake the crazy call God had put on His life of leaving His homeland, going to a land He didn't know, and ultimately becoming a person he could never make Himself to be - "*the father of many nations/father of the faith.*" In other words, it freed Him! **It was that simple!** Abraham **simply** looked TOWARD Jesus with faith, and he found freedom...How much more **simple** for you and I, who don't have to

look TOWARD something in faith or hope of it YET happening, but who can look BACK on something that's ALREADY happened. - Look BACK on that "day" when Jesus Christ gave up infinite freedom - left behind a kind of freedom you and I will never know, and not just in coming to earth, but as **Philippians 2** says, WHEN coming to earth, "*emptying himself, by taking the form of a servant... (and ultimately) becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*" Jesus Christ gave up freedom in EVERY way, so that you and I who were slaves to sin, could **SIMPLY** look on Him in faith, and be made sons and daughters of the God. Literally, get God NOT as a boss, or a manager, an add-on, or a philosophy...but as a Father. The "I Am" everything, became the "I'll be" nothing, so that you can have everything and lack nothing at the right hand of the Father!...**Friend**, when you **simply** behold that - maybe for the first time because you realize you need God in your life and that you can't keep living on your terms, cuz it's just not freeing. Or maybe for the hundredth time, as you continue to FOLLOW Christ - regardless - when you **simply** take that in, what you see is that God really does have your best in mind. And if He has your best in mind, then He's both willing and able to manage your life so you don't have to... You see that and it makes you realize that spiritual independence/self-sufficiency - in ANY area of life, much less over your whole life - is stupidity/insanity. It's violating your nature and leading to your disintegration! **And for what?** When **simply** turning from your anxious independence to dependence; your restless self-sufficiency to surrender; and your stubborn unbelief to BELIEF, will bring you TRUE freedom. Cuz "*if the Son sets you free, you'll be free indeed!*" **It's as simple...as...that!...Let's Pray:**