

Because the truth will set you free
Through the Son and Through the Word

“Sanctify us by the truth. Your word is truth.” (John 17:17)

Mom and Dad would hardly have recognized him as the man they sent off to law school. It wasn't just his new haircut. It wasn't even so much the type of clothes he chose to wear. His whole demeanor had changed. He seemed tired. His eyes drooped from a lack of sleep. He was skinny, like he probably hadn't eaten a decent meal in weeks. And if you looked closely enough, you could see the scabs turning into scars, evidence of the whippings he would give himself to try to feel better about who he was and where he was going.

Why couldn't he just be happy? After all, this was *his* choice: to walk away from a career in law to pursue something he thought would give him purpose and an inner freedom that money couldn't buy. But he didn't feel free. He felt like a slave, carrying the burden of his own guilt and shackled by doubts of his self-worth. Other people could see he had talent and gifts. On the outside, he was winning the respect of his culture. His mentor even picked him for a major promotion! But at night, while everyone would be sleeping, his desire to be set free kept him awake.

Have you ever felt like Martin Luther, the man who kick started the whole Reformation? Martin Luther was a man who had extreme focus. As a monk in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500s, he was making some serious strides and accomplishments in a short time. He felt like a life dedicated to the culture, rules, and teachings of the Catholic Church would be the answer to set him free from his guilt over sins, but it only made him feel more enslaved to an angry God. That's what sin does. It makes you, me, and all people slaves to its power and deadly effects. No euphemism, no trendy philosophy, no self-medication, no hard work can set us free from that. We need the truth – about sin and about God's undeserved love. **“THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE,”** through the Son and through the word.

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Jesus had been preaching the truth to his fellow Israelites for quite some time now, and you have to be amazed at his perseverance through the swings in his popularity. He feeds 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread and two tiny fish! But when he explains how he is the Bread of Life who feeds hungry souls, a lot of people were just plain puzzled at the **“hard teaching”** (6:60). So **“many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him”** (6:66). Later on before the crowds in Jerusalem he preaches a masterful sermon on how he speaks **“living water”** (7:38)! Yet his fellow Jews were only left divided about who he was. Fast forward to just before our text and Jesus explains that in a world darkened by sin, he is **“the light of the world”** (8:12), and this time **“many put their faith in him”** (v. 30)! Then in the very next verse, verse 31, we still see some held back, still chained, still in slavery to unbelief and sin.

You can sense the tension beginning to build between Jesus and his fellow Jews. The more Jesus keeps talking to them, the more confused their faces grow. A tension exists. Jesus tells them what he heard straight from God the Father, **“You are slaves to sin,”** but for all their lives, these Israelites had heard their earthly fathers tell them, **“Abraham is your forefather. You are special. You are free.”** That's why they challenged Jesus, **“We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free (v. 33)?** Sure our ancestors were slaves in Egypt, then exported to Assyria, then Babylon, and enslaved under the Greeks, but we've never been *religious* slaves. Through Abraham, we've always had the true religion and worshiped God the true way. God promised to make Father Abraham's descendants **“a great nation”** (Genesis 12:2) who would give birth to the Messiah. That's us! If you're some religious expert, Jesus, surely you would know that. We're not slaves.”

But look at the way Jesus responds, **“You think so, huh? Then how would your father Abraham feel about the way you reluctantly shuffle to the temple, go through the sacrificial motions, and then plod back home without focusing on the whole message of what goes on there? What would father Abraham say about your attitude towards me, that even though ‘you are Abraham's descendants, yet you are ready to kill me,’ (v. 37), the very Son Abraham hoped for? What would Father Abraham think about the way you block out everything I say and only ‘do what you have heard from your father’ (v. 38)? Look, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin’ (v. 34). Truth is, Abraham has a ‘permanent place’ (v. 35) right now in heaven in my Father's presence. He is free for eternity. But you are slaves because you want to hold onto your earthly status, your cultural heritage that comes from a sinful man. Sooner or later, death is going to come and it's going to kick you out of that family and into the grave. And then what?”**

We face the same temptation, don't we? You and I may not have as strong of a connection to an ethnic heritage as the Israelites did, but American culture is all about freedom. This is “the land of the free.” You're free to follow whatever political party you want. I'm free to shop where I want. You're free to say or post or tweet or upload whatever you want. I'm free to drive the car I want. And here's the biggest one: we're free to believe what we want. Free even to believe that sin doesn't exist. It's not sin, just a “lifestyle choice.” It's not sin, just “poor judgment.” That's not sin, just an accident or miscommunication. Even if people don't want to talk about sin anymore, it doesn't change the facts. Jesus spoke the truth when he said, **“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin”** (v. 34). We may have been born politically free, but not spiritually. By nature we were born as slaves to sin. You can't go a whole week without messing up at least a little bit at school or work. I can't get rid of that ball of guilt I drag around from a relationship I messed up. I know the right thing to do. I want to do it, but I just can't shake sin's shackles, and they pull me right back into prison. You try to do everything you've heard will make you fit in, but no matter what you try, you still feel shut out. Aren't those our struggles? Weren't those Martin Luther's struggles too?

If Luther were here today and he saw how much you were struggling with slavery to sin, he would saddle up right beside you, put his arm around your shoulder, point you the cross, and say, **“Through the Son, you are free indeed! I know how you feel. For about half my life I felt enslaved to my sins and my guilt. I tried everything to get rid of it. I worked hard. I went to church regularly. I tried praying to saints. I even quit school to become a monk and do a whole bunch of things I thought would make up for the wrongs I did, but I still felt like ‘a slave to sin.’ Then I learned what Jesus really meant when he said, ‘If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed’ (v. 36). Right there, on the cross, through the Son, God broke the chains sin held you with. Jesus gave up his freedom as true God and came to earth to obey all the commandments. Jesus knew sin owned you. So he paid for your soul's freedom with his own blood. Through the Son God bought you back from the devil. Forgiveness is free! That's the truth, and THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE.”**

Martin Luther knew as well as anyone how much sinners like you, like me, like him need the Son to set us free from sin, from our damning habits, and from our nagging guilt. Not through the American constitution, but only through the Son are you spiritually free. Not through good ole hard work, but only through the Son's obedience. Not by sweeping sin under the rug, but only through the Son who wipes your sin away. Jesus was punished for your sins and mine. And then Jesus rose from the dead. Because of that, he has the key to set you free. You don't need to spend your whole life trying to hatch the perfect escape plan from sin. Through the Son, God simply unlocks your chains, the same chains Satan was hoping to drag you into hell with. So now you're not a spiritual slave. You're free. **THE TRUTH HAS SET YOU FREE.** You're free to walk with your Savior right into heaven.

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Just as true as it is that through the Son you and I are set free, it's equally true that a real child of God holds onto that freedom through the word. That's the part Jesus' fellow Jews forgot. They neglected the word of God, the **"teaching"** (v. 31) that Moses and the prophets passed along. It was an easy trap to fall into. Put yourself in their shoes and listen to what their culture was telling them. "You're special! You're a descendant of Abraham, the forefather of our great nation! We Israelites are tough. Empire after empire has tried to get rid of us, but we're still standing. We're enlightened. We got educated religious leaders who can tell us what the Old Testament *really* means." For these Israelites, instead of **"holding to [Jesus'] teaching,"** (v. 31), instead of listening to what Jesus saw at God the Father's side, they only would do what they heard from their earthly, sinful fathers. They had no room left for the word of God, and so they were enslaved by lies and by false knowledge.

Martin Luther got duped into the same thing. For the first thirty years of his life his religious leaders kept pointing him to tradition and to humans. As a member of the Roman Catholic Church, Luther's priests kept asking him, "Do you pledge allegiance to the pope? Then – and only then – do you belong!" The Catholic fathers sold indulgences, silly pieces of paper, and tried to tell Martin, "Through this, you can buy insurance for relatives so that they won't go to hell. It just may take them a while to get to heaven from purgatory, though." For decades, Luther was enslaved by the church's culture and manmade tradition that told him, "If you repeat enough prayers, starve yourself enough, shut yourself off from the world, promise never to marry, then you can earn your freedom from sin's punishment." For over half his life, Martin Luther was enslaved. He was a slave to human tradition and false teaching that couldn't free him from his guilt.

Do you and I put ourselves through the same torture? Do we **"have room for [the Son's] word"** (v. 38)? Do we **"hold to his teaching"** (v. 31)? The world says you are enslaved through the word. "You've been brainwashed. Your parents lock you up and don't let you have a good time. Lighten up a bit and let loose. Then you'll feel really free!" The world says we enslave others through the word. "You're a bigot! How can you deny people their most basic human rights and freedoms?! How can you teach that junk at your school? You're holding back the progress and development of innocent minds!" Under all this cultural weight it would be so easy to cave in, let go of **"[Jesus'] teaching"** (v. 31), and try to find freedom through something else.

But a life without God's word is really just a life of slavery to sin, guilt, and lies. Martin Luther discovered that over and over again. Only through the word did he discover God's pure, underserved love. Only through the word did he realize God forgives sins because he loves you, not because you've done enough good works. That's why one of Luther's mottos throughout the Reformation was, "By scripture alone." Through the word you know sin exists in the world and inside your own heart and all the nasty things it does. But through the word, sinners like you and me come to **"know the truth, and the TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE"** (v. 32). Through the word Jesus tells you can beat temptation and sin because he already has. Jesus' teaching doesn't keep you locked up in chains. It sets you free from an empty life that has no meaning or joy. Through the word your life is changed, not chained. Instead of relying only on ourselves, through the Word the Holy Spirit leads you and me to rely on Jesus. The Holy Spirit works through the word and gives you the power to tell Satan and sin, "No!" You're not a slave to sin anymore. You're free to leave your bad habits and live in God's family.

Today we celebrate the Reformation, and to a lesser extent Martin Luther, the man who started it way back in the 1500s. In many ways he was a greater person than you or I could ever hope to be. He was smart. He was a great writer. He could think. Man, could he preach. He was courageous. But Luther was also the first to admit that in a lot of ways he was just like you and me. He sinned. He couldn't save himself. He couldn't do anything to free himself from his guilt. And just like you and me, he came to know God's word. He knew the truth, and **THE TRUTH SET HIM FREE** from sin, from human tradition, and from culture. We thank God that he used a man like Martin Luther to teach that salvation only comes through the Son as taught through God's word. May God use you and me to help set others free! Amen!