

Bible Study Guide: Week of 10-19-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 8:31-36

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." ³³ They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free?" ³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

³¹ Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

This part of the Gospel of John takes place during the festival of booths or tabernacles. This feast lasts 8 days and is a commemoration of the Exodus and wilderness wandering of the people of Israel. Each family erects a dwelling or "tent" in which meals are eaten and in which the people sometimes sleep. This is a remembrance of the flimsy structures the people lived in during the 40 years in the Sinai wilderness. It is interesting that in this context the people are gathered to commemorate their first 40 years as a freed people. That makes their response in v. 33 all the more ironic, as we will see. First, however, we must deal with the first two verses. There are quite a few difficult and complex concepts at play here.

First, who are "the Jews who had believed in him?" These were the people who had witnessed Jesus' signs and who had begun following him.

Second, what does it mean to continue in Jesus' word? Two key words here—first, the word "continue" is actually better translated as "remain" or "abide." This word, *meno* in Greek, occurs in various forms 34 times in the Gospel of John. First, when Jesus was baptized, John the Baptist describes the Spirit as having remained on him. Jesus' first disciples in John 1 ask where Jesus is staying/remaining/abiding. He tells them, "come and see." They don't (yet) realize the depth of truth conveyed by their question about where Jesus abides. Also, the vine and the branches in John 15—Jesus talks about branches remaining/abiding in the vine.

On the other hand, this word is also used to indicate that some still remain or abide in sin. In John 3, we are told, "the one who believes in the Son has eternal life, but the one who doesn't believe in the Son does not have life, but the wrath of God remains on that one." See also, in John 9 where the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus answers, "If you were blind you would not have sin, but now that you say 'we can see,' your sin remains."

What does Jesus mean by truth?

John 1: The Word became flesh...full of grace and truth.

The Law came through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

John 4: God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth.

John 8 (just after this passage we are looking at today): a painful and lengthy discussion about the nature of truth. Jesus calls the people who turn away from him children of the devil. He says their father is the father of all lies. He says, "Because I tell the truth, you do not believe me." Let's just say you probably never read this passage in Sunday school as a child.

John 14: the way, the truth, and the life.

John 15-17—the Spirit of Truth—the advocate.

John 18: Jesus and Pilate—everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. Pilate: "What is truth?"

What does Jesus mean by being made free?

This is language of manumission—freedom from slavery. This describes a change in social status of going from an enslaved person to a free person.

³³They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, "You will be made free'?"

Again, there is great irony here—the people are gathered to celebrate the festival commemorating their freedom from slavery! They do not know themselves and their history, much less Jesus. Even though they seem to have selective memory about their own past, they are thinking on a human level—literal ancestry and literal slavery and literal freedom. Jesus is speaking of freedom from slavery to sin.

³⁴Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.

How do we define sin?

Often we think of individual acts of wrongdoing or individual moral failings.

How does John define sin?

Within the Gospel of John, sin is equated with failure or refusal to recognize and trust in Jesus.

What does it mean to sin in this context?

Literally, this verse reads: "Everyone who does the sin is a slave to the sin." To "do the sin" is to fail to recognize and acknowledge and trust in the power and presence of God in Jesus Christ. The alternative is to "remain/abide/continue in Jesus' word" and, therefore, to trust him as a disciple. The choice Jesus is attempting to force people into is to either follow him or to follow their own way.

³⁵ The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶ So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

A better translation of v. 35 might be something like "The slave does not remain/abide in the household forever. The son dwells/abides in the house forever." Notice the connection back to v. 31—the verb here, once again, is *meno*—to dwell or remain. Jesus' argument here is that what matters isn't the status of the person as slave or free, but rather one's being known and freed by the son of the household. The impermanent status of the slave is overridden by the grace and power of the Son. The Son has authority to act on behalf of the entire estate, to extend the metaphor.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. What does it mean to you to continue in Jesus' word? How do you do this? How can you do this more faithfully?**
- 2. Jesus' audience here seemed to trust in their status as Abraham's descendants rather than trusting in the presence of God in their midst. What do we trust in instead of God in our own day and age?**
- 3. What might it mean for the Son to set one free? What does true freedom look like?**