

Bible Study Guide: Week of 10-25-2021

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

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” 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?’” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

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Jesus’ discussion here is with the crowds who have been following Jesus for the last few chapters. Presumably, the crowd includes those who saw Jesus’ sign of the feeding of the 5,000 and who continued to follow him despite the difficulty of his teaching that those who follow him must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Jesus urges them to continue (the Greek verb here is *meno* and is better translated as “remain” or “abide”). It comes up 40 times in John’s gospel, compared to just 13 times in the other three gospels combined. This word is crucial to John’s narrative—Jesus urges the disciples to “remain” in him as a branch remains in a vine later in the gospel, for instance. This abiding or remaining in Jesus, the Word made flesh, is John’s definition of discipleship and true life.

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Those who believed in Jesus up to this point have endured the discussion from chapter 6 about Moses and the bread from heaven. Here, another patriarch comes up, this time Abraham. Evidently, the Jews in this passage have either forgotten or are distorting their own history. The story of the Old Testament is, in many ways, the story of God’s people being set free. Obviously, Moses (who came up in chapter 6) was chosen by God to lead the people who were descended from Abraham to freedom from slavery in Egypt. The prophets wrote about God’s liberation from captivity in Babylon. Even at the time Jesus was having this discussion, the people were living under Roman occupation. So to suggest that they were never under the power of anyone else is either ignorant or disingenuous. Notice the active construction of Jesus’ statement: “The truth will set you free” versus the passive voice of the Jews’ question: “What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” The people distort not only their own history, but also the words of Jesus—words about truth and freedom. They leave out the bit about truth entirely, then misquote the bit about freedom. As we saw in chapter 3 with Nicodemus, the people here have trouble conversing on the same level that Jesus is speaking on.

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Rather than pointing out the history of slavery in Egypt or even the current Roman occupation, Jesus shifts the focus to a different kind of slavery—slavery to sin. He also plays on images from the Abraham stories (think, for example of Abraham and his sons Ishmael, born through his wife’s servant Hagar, and Isaac, born through his wife Sarah. Ishmael and Hagar were banished from Abraham’s presence. They did not have a permanent place. Meanwhile, Isaac, the son of promise, did have a place with his father. Jesus subtly portrays the people here as more like Ishmael than Isaac, instead painting himself as the true Isaac—the one with a permanent place who has the power to liberate any who trust in him.

Think about the imagery in John 1 when John told us in the prologue: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

Here the issue is: Who is the “Father” of the people? Is it Abraham, or is it God? Who is a true child of God? How does one become a child of God? Jesus points the people to himself and asks them to continue in his word in order that they may know the truth and be set free by the truth.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. This lesson comes up each year on Reformation Sunday. Why do you think this is the assigned text for that day?**
- 2. What do you think Jesus means when he tells the people to “continue in my Word”? How do we do this?**
- 3. The people in this story put their trust in their lineage back to Abraham rather than in Jesus. Who or what do we put our trust in besides Jesus?**