

The Festival of the Reformation (transferred)
St. John 8:31-36

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.”

Jesus used a very weighty word to describe the state of man’s corruption, not just for his time, but even today: “slave.” When Jesus used that word as He spoke to the Jews who had believed in Him, it did more than just catch their attention; alarm bells were likely going off in His hearer’s heads, putting them on the defensive. Hence their reaction in the text!

Given this country’s history with slavery, you are most familiar with the concept of chattel slavery. These kinds of slaves were considered less-than-human property. People, though they were considered anything but, were owned by other people, documented and registered and taxed under certain property tax codes. Unfortunately, even though the concept and practice of chattel slavery have been around since the 16th century, for most Americans, it influences the understanding of more historic practices of slavery, even other forms of slavery in use to this day! It should come as no shock that the words “slave” and “slavery” still carry as much weight and bad baggage today as they do; the history may not be the most recent, but it’s recent enough to cause consternation in people.

As I mentioned, there are still people today who are not justly compensated for the work they do in one form of slavery or another. There are those who call child labor in less developed and less sensitive parts of the world a form of slavery, even as it was used in the past. The kind of slavery you *most* often read about in the Bible, which is in practice in some places today, is not the same as the chattel slavery of this country’s past; in this case, to have called someone “my slave” would not have indicated ownership of another person, but that another person was indentured to serve them—in many cases, these slaves gave themselves over willingly to this service as a means of being cared for themselves, because slaves had to be respected and cared for. From conquered peoples to self-indentured fellow countrymen, a slave in the ancient world was not less-than-human and in many cases, could work out or buy back their freedom.

As much as “slave” and “slavery” are weighty words, they are also economic words, dealing with possessions, income, and services in one form or another.

Jesus, as He so often did with these kinds of ideas, came along and turned that idea upside down. He said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” The Jews who had believed in Him responded, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” Into the concept of slavery as economics, Jesus thrusts a spiritual concept into the mix. Hear His words again and learn about slavery and freedom:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.
The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

It has been said before—I know I have said it many, many times: If you can’t say, “No,” to something, then you are a slave to that thing. Something comes along that tempts you, and tempts you again, and tempts you again. As you are continually tempted, the pressure builds and the temptation becomes all the more attractive. You know what you are being tempted to do is a sin, so says the voice of conscience, but the more attractive and desirable the thing is, the easier it is to justify doing it, and to make excuses for doing it.

The thing is, no one is tempted toward sin only once. You know how it is. You’ve succumbed to a temptation, committed the crime, and before you know it, you’re being tempted again and again and

again and again... And you sin again and again and again and again. One time has become two, two becomes three, and in short order that thing you were tempted to do only once has become a habit. You can't say, "No," to it; you have become a slave to it.

And here's the thing with sin. No one sins only once who continues to live and breathe after committing the sin. So, since you sin—and sin repeatedly—the difficulty in saying, "No," to sin should be apparent.

Jesus says, anyone who sins is a slave to sin. By holy inspiration, St. Paul wrote, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) One more time: "All...have...sinned..." That "all" means everyone—all of you sitting here, the man standing up here in the pulpit, everyone—there is no difference, all are sinners alike.

There's an old saying in political circles: "If you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth." Sometimes the thought is that if the truth is ignored, it will go away. It all sounds ludicrous, but that's exactly what was going on with Jesus' hearers. "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?" It begs the question: how often had they repeated that lie? Were they ignoring their history with Egypt? Were they blind to the occupation of the Romans right in front of them?

It may be enough to make you wonder: Can I be that blind, ignorant, or ludicrous? Do you believe a lie to avoid the truth? I'm sorry to tell you, you certainly can, and you absolutely do.

It might be as simple as avoiding those who have wronged you, even if only slightly. It could be as complex as avoiding confrontation because you know—you just know—that confronting this person is going to get you nowhere and accomplish nothing, so you don't even try. Or maybe it's something in between, such as not coming to church because you grow weary of hearing about being a sinner (and if that's your concern, what you're fixated on, all that you're hearing, then I would encourage you to keep listening for the absolution, which is always there).

As for believing lies to avoid the truth, well, that happens every time you try to justify yourself for committing what you know to be sin. Instead of the serpent asking you, "Did God really say?" (cf. Genesis 3:1) you tell yourself that God didn't say or didn't mean it like that. You tell yourself the lie that God's law really doesn't condemn you for doing the thing you did, for saying the thing you said, for thinking the thought you thought, etc. And you repeat it, over and over again, to try to convince yourself that the lie is true and the truth is a lie.

These are all temptations, to be sure, and even if the intention may be good in some cases, the result never is, and you sin. If you can't say, "No," to something, then you are a slave to that thing.

It is this spiritual slavery that Christ had in mind when He said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." "Abide" here means to continue in or hold fast to, much as the word "keep" does with regard to the commandments.

Speaking of those Ten Commandments, one can look to when they were given to address these descendants of Abraham. Having been slaves to the Egyptians, YHWH led them out of Egypt, and in the wilderness gave them the Ten Commandments. This slavery in Egypt was given to them as an object lesson, pointing to the greater slavery to sin. Therefore, when God gave the Ten Commandments, chiefly purposed to point out sin, He prefaced them thus: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This is a theme that runs throughout the Pentateuch, and it is repeated often: YHWH is their God; He brought them out of slavery.

There is one time that really stands out, though. In Deuteronomy, it is written:
Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his

commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." (Deuteronomy 8:11-17)

A lie repeated often enough becomes the truth, right? "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." "We have never been enslaved to anyone." Those were easy lies to tell themselves. While they were under the rule and occupation of the Romans, life was relatively peaceful. There were some Jewish slaves in Roman households, but many Jews also enjoyed Roman citizenship. It was easy for them to have denied the periods of slavery in their history at a time like that. "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone." They denied their past, and in so doing, they had forgotten their God—they had sinned.

To this, Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."

As you live your lives in these latter days, there are lies that you can easily be led to believe are truth. Among them is the meaning of "God is love." The world would have you believe that means that anything goes, that the Law is of no effect. You want to take things in ways that only seem right? God is love. You want to lie in bed with anyone who might please you, opposite sex or same? God is love. You want to rip babies from wombs? God is love. Those are the "big ones," not to put too fine a term on it. In the church you might see these kinds of things blessed when, "Repent," should be proclaimed. Some issues might be ignored when they should be dealt with. "God is love," is taken to mean that you can bend without breaking, but if you can't say, "No," to something, you are a slave to that thing.

To you, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."

Is there a way to break away from this slavery to sin? How? How does one say no to the sin which so easily entangles? On your own, there is no way. Left to your own devices, you will not.

But there is a Way! Return to the Word of God. In the Gospel this morning, Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth..." The Word of God declares to you your fallen nature, proclaims to you what it is that you have forsaken. This is the Law of God and the truth it proclaims to you, even as you heard from the pen of St. Paul, "All have sinned..." No matter how much you may want to ignore or deny it, you are a sinner, and you have sinned. And sin deserves the wrath of God. This is the Law.

But, like I said, there is a Way! Left with only the Law, you would be left in utter despair. It was in this utter despair that the church on earth found itself in the days of Martin Luther. In very few places, the Gospel was hardly ever proclaimed to lost and hurting souls, and where it was, it was preached as some sort of unattainable goal, turning into another Law. So the people were left to work their hardest and give their last penny in order to appease the wrath of God for their sin, hoping against hope for a reduced stay in Purgatory.

Again, like I said, there is a Way! Out of this time of despair, God called Martin Luther who, being in despair himself, became a monk (a friar) against his father's wishes, and started down a path that led him to discover the sweetness of the Gospel, the true Gospel—that Jesus is not a wrathful

Law-bringer, but the fulfillment of the Law and the propitiation that brought peace with God over and against his sins and the sins of the whole world. His eyes were opened with verses such as these:

- “[B]ut God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” (Romans 5:8-9)
- “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” (Galatians 2:20-21)
- If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)
- “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:21-26)
- “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...” (1 Timothy 1:15)

That, dear hearers, is the truth. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the way free from slavery to sin, as He paid the redemption price with His shed blood. He is the truth, the truth of God’s grace over and against the sins committed by way of this fallen flesh. He is the life, the life eternal of all of those who believe in Him by way of His resurrection from the dead and ascension to the right hand of majesty.

You heard me use the word “redemption.” That is also an economic term, consistent in use with the word “slavery.” A slave, in and of himself, has no means to free himself, especially a slave under the practice of chattel slavery. Those bound in service to another in other forms of slavery were indentured until such time that they had served enough time or acquired enough money to purchase their freedom—that is redemption. In relation to slavery, redemption is buying freedom, and it always involves a price. Jesus is your redemption in that His blood pays the price to buy you back from the slavery to sin—a propitiation, in the case of Jesus’ blood.

This is the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins that you hear expressed in these passages:

- “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight...” (Ephesians 1:7-8)
- “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14)
- “[Y]ou were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” (1 Peter 1:18-19)

“The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” The Son has set you free, redeemed you from sin and death into His most marvelous life. Though you still struggle with your fallen flesh on this side of eternity, His love and blood covers your multitude of sins. You are free, free indeed, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.