

The Gospel of John

Lesson 13: The Truth Will Set You Free; Before Abraham Was, I Am -- John

8:31-59

It begins gently enough, with a promise so beautiful that people have carved it into library walls. "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." But the moment Jesus mentions freedom, His hearers bristle. "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone." It is a strange thing to say for a people who had been slaves in Egypt and were, at that very moment, under Roman occupation. But they are not thinking of political slavery. And Jesus tells them about a deeper bondage they cannot see: "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." There is the chain none of us put on ourselves and none of us can take off.

From there the conversation grows tense, then heated, then explosive. They boast that Abraham is their father. Jesus says that if Abraham were really their father, they would act like him, but instead they are trying to kill the One who told them the truth. They claim God as their Father. Jesus says their true father is the devil, the father of lies, and that the reason they cannot hear His words is that they do not belong to God. The polite religious veneer is being stripped away to reveal what is underneath, and what is underneath is hostility to the truth and to the One who speaks it.

Then Jesus says something that lifts the whole exchange into eternity. He tells them that if anyone keeps His word, he will never see death. They are scandalized: Abraham died, the prophets died, who do you make yourself out to be? And Jesus answers that Abraham himself "rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." Abraham, who lived two thousand years before? "You are not yet fifty years old," they sneer, "and have you seen Abraham?" And Jesus speaks the sentence that ends all debate about who He is: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

Before Abraham was, I am. Not "I was," but "I am," the very name God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. In one short sentence Jesus claims to be eternal, to have existed before Abraham was born, and to bear the divine name. His hearers understood Him perfectly. There is no misunderstanding, no metaphor to soften. They pick up stones to kill Him for blasphemy, because they know exactly what He has claimed: to be God. This is one of the clearest declarations of Christ's deity in all of Scripture. Read it carefully, because everything hangs on whether He told the truth.

Group Discussion: Jesus said, "everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (v. 34), describing a bondage His hearers could not even see. Why is sin so often invisible to us as slavery, and how does Jesus' promise that "the truth will set you free" (v. 32) speak to that bondage?

Personal Reflection: Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (v. 31), tying real discipleship to continuing in His word. How consistently are you abiding in His word, and what would it look like to abide there more deeply this season?

Read John 8:31–59

Study Questions

1. Jesus 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” (vv. 31–32). What is the connection between abiding in Jesus’ word, knowing the truth, and being set free?
2. Jesus exposed a slavery His hearers could not see: “everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (v. 34). Where in your own life have you experienced sin as a bondage rather than mere freedom, and how have you found, or longed for, the freedom Christ gives?
3. Jesus said, “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (v. 36). What kind of freedom does the Son give, and how is it different from the freedom the world chases?
4. Jesus told them, “the truth will set you free,” but real freedom requires continuing in His word (vv. 31–32). Is there an area where you have been seeking freedom apart from God’s truth, and what would it look like to seek it in His word instead?
5. Jesus told His opponents that their works revealed their true father, and that they were of “your father the devil... a liar and the father of lies” (vv. 39–44). What does this teach about how our actions reveal who, or what, truly fathers our lives?
6. Jesus said, “Whoever is of God hears the words of God” (v. 47). When you examine your own responsiveness to God’s word, where do you find yourself resisting or tuning out what He says, and why?
7. Jesus said that Abraham “rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (v. 56). What does it mean that Abraham, who lived long before, looked ahead to Christ, and how does this show that the whole Old Testament points to Jesus?
8. Jesus promised, “If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (v. 51). How does this promise change the way you face your own mortality and the death of those you love?
9. This is the clearest claim to deity in the chapter: Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (v. 58), and His hearers immediately picked up stones to kill Him for blasphemy (v. 59). What is Jesus claiming by the words “I am,” why did His hearers understand it as a claim to be God, and how does this passage refute any view that Jesus was merely a created being or a good teacher?
10. Look back over this passage, from “the truth will set you free” to “before Abraham was, I am.” What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to abide in His word, walk in His freedom, and bow before Him as the eternal “I am”?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Exodus 3:13–15, God revealing His name “I AM WHO I AM”; Isaiah 43:10–13, “I am he,” the eternal God before whom no other was formed; Romans 6:16–22, slaves of sin set free to become slaves of righteousness; Hebrews 11:13, the patriarchs greeting the promises from afar; Colossians 1:16–17, Christ existing before all things and holding all things together.