

Continuing in the Word

DISCIPLESHIP: PART 2 • JOHN 8:31-32

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If you were here with us last week, you might remember that we started with a scripture reading from Matthew 28, a passage we commonly refer to as the “Great Commission,” some of the last words spoken by Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection and before his ascension back into heaven. We learned how the emphasis is on **“making disciples,”** and that we do not necessarily need to go from one place to another place to do what Jesus is telling us to do here, but the Lord’s command is that as we live our lives, we are to **“make disciples.”** This is what our King has commanded. Our mission is to make disciples. It is important, then, that we know what a **“disciple”** actually is!

We learned that various forms of the word **“disciple”** are found well over 200 times in the New Testament, and the most basic definition goes back to the idea of “instruction” or “learning.” In the Great Commission, then, Jesus is telling us to make people students. We are to make people learners of Jesus. This is our mission, and as Jesus goes on to explain, we make people learners of Jesus or followers of Jesus by 1.) Baptizing them, and by 2.) Continuing to teach them. And this is a lifelong process. This is our mission. This is why we exist as a congregation. We want to be disciples, and we also want to make disciples.

Last week, then, we started a series of five lessons where we are looking at discipleship. What do we need to know about being disciples, and what do we need to know about making disciples? We come here to learn about Jesus. We are disciples of Christ. And so, in this series of lessons, we are looking at several passages in the gospel accounts, passages where Jesus himself explains what it means to be disciples.

We are working through these five passages in chronological order, and last week we started in Matthew 10. As Jesus sent his disciples out on a mission, he not only told them what he wanted them to do, but he also warned them that the mission would be difficult, that there would be consequences. I am thankful for those of you who caught the typo last week! It has now been corrected, and I’m hoping all of us can now concentrate going forward! But by way of very brief review, being a disciple means that we SUBMIT to the Lord’s will in our lives, it means that we do the best we can to IMITATE Jesus in the way that we live. But the result is: We will be PERSECUTED. As the Lord’s disciples, when we submit and imitate, we have no right to expect any better treatment than He received. And these are some of the first lessons we learn from the Lord himself concerning what it means to be a disciple.

This morning, we continue with a second major passage on discipleship, as we move ahead to several verses in John 8 (p. 1671). In John 8, Jesus is in the temple, and he is interacting with the crowds who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Booths (or the Feast of Tents, as we might describe it today). Several weeks ago, we looked at the three main festivals where everybody was required to come to Jerusalem, and this is one of them. So, large crowds have gathered in the temple, and Jesus is using this time to teach and preach, and he's getting a mixed reaction. Going back to John 7:12, we find that ***"there was much grumbling among the multitudes concerning Him; some were saying, 'He is a good man'; others were saying, 'No, on the contrary, He leads the multitude astray.'"*** And yet the text goes on to explain that nobody spoke out publicly in favor of Jesus, because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Some believed, but others wanted to kill him. This is where the leaders sent some officers to arrest him, but they just couldn't do it and came back with that famous statement in John 7:46, ***"Never did a man speak the way this man speaks."*** We have some back and forth in John chapters 7-8. Some were curious, some believed, some were skeptical, and others were more openly hostile. And this is where we come to John 8:31-32. As those in the crowd are trying to decide whether they should perhaps become disciples themselves, Jesus gives something of a challenge, a test: If you want to be a true disciple, this is what you must do. With this in mind, let's notice what the Lord says about discipleship in John 8:31-32,

³¹ So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

This morning, I want us to focus in on three big ideas in this passage.

I. And we start with the basic truth that TRUE DISCIPLES WILL CONTINUE IN JESUS' WORD.

Hopefully this is familiar to most of us, but we might need to define some terms here, at the beginning, just to be sure. When Jesus refers to his ***"word,"*** he is referring (as I understand it), not only to the words he personally spoke while he was here on this earth, but he is also referring to the entirety of the New Testament. This book we have open in front of us came from God. It is the word of God, the word of Christ. And we believe this, because of what Jesus said a few chapters later. In John 14:26, in the upper room, on the night before he was murdered, Jesus spoke to his disciples, and he said, ***"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."*** Then, two chapters after that, Jesus also said (in John 16:12-13), ***"I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come."*** And this is exactly what happened. After Jesus ascended back into heaven, the Spirit came and inspired the disciples to speak and to write the words of Jesus. The word of Christ, then, is the New Testament.

What, then, does it mean to ***"continue"*** in Jesus' word? The word Jesus uses here can be translated as "stay, abide, or remain." Just doing a brief overview of the other places this word is used in the New Testament, we find it was often used to refer to staying at somebody's house. A true disciple, then, will live in the word of God. We will make ourselves at home there. So, this isn't just hearing the word of God, this isn't just thinking, "Yes, this is an interesting message," but the Lord is telling these people in John 8 that true disciples will be fully committed to continuing in his word. His disciples will make themselves at home in his word. There are certain homes where I feel at home - my own, obviously! I also feel at home at my parents' house. I feel at

home at the Muellers' home - Taco Tuesday, the Soup Slurp, or whatever. I feel that I can get up and get something out of the fridge. I am comfortable there. In a similar way, we should also be at home in the word of God. His word is where we stay. His word shapes the way we live. His word controls us. His word is our manual. Many times when we get together as elders to discuss a difficult situation, we have to pause to consult the manual; because, as a congregation (and as an eldership) we have a book that guides us. And we are familiar with that book, but we need to be sure. And often, we are independently turning to the same passages, but the point is: We have a book that guides us; the message of Jesus has been written down, and we need to continue in it.

Several decades later, the apostle John (as an old man at this point) would need to remind a good Christian sister (in 2 John 9) that, ***"Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son."*** And I find it interesting that John uses the same word in 2 John 9 that Jesus used so many years earlier in John 8:31. John got the message, and he passed it on, that true disciples will ***"continue in"*** or ***"abide in"*** the word of Christ. We are not to ***"go too far,"*** but we are to ***"abide"*** in it.

True disciples will continue in the word of Christ. And in a sense, this should make us think back to the Great Commission. Remember: Jesus told us to make disciples 1.) by baptizing them, and 2.) by ***"teaching them to observe all that I commanded you."*** Discipleship, then, is an ongoing process. Yes, there is an initial act of obedience, but the obedience is just getting started at that point. The obedience must continue. We continue in his word by reading it, by digging into it, by applying it to our lives, and by obeying it - over and over again, continually. If we claim to be disciples, we need to be living in his word. We need to be at home in the word, and we must continue in it.

II. And this leads us to a second big idea - in a sense, it is more of a logical conclusion based on what Jesus says here - but I want us to at least briefly consider another truth taught in this passage, that NOT ALL BELIEVERS ARE TRUE DISCIPLES.

And again, in a sense, this is basically just the opposite of the first big idea this morning, but it is important to realize that not all believers are true disciples. I don't want us to miss this. In fact, please look with me at verse 30. I know we started today in verse 31, as it is the beginning of a new paragraph, but let's not miss the context. Notice, please, the conclusion of the previous paragraph (in John 8:30), where John says that, ***"As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him."*** And so, there were some ***"believers"*** in this crowd. In fact, let us not miss the audience here. Let us not miss the original hearers. A year or two ago we had a series of lessons on how to study the Bible, and if you remember: One of the most important factors in studying a passage is to realize who is being spoken to or who is being written to. And in verse 31, John straight-up tells us, doesn't he! In verse 30, ***"many came to believe in Him,"*** and then in verse 31, ***"So Jesus was saying to those who had believed Him..."***, and then we have our passage. These words were first spoken, then, to people who (according to John) were believers. And to believers, Jesus makes the point that to be considered a true disciple, you must continue in his word.

On this point, we might emphasize the ***"if."*** ***"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine."*** Like so many of the other awesome promises in scripture, this also is a conditional statement. And so, if our first point was that true disciples will continue in the word, our second point today is simply the realization that not everybody who claims to be a disciple is actually a disciple. Or we might say: If there are

“true disciples,” then there are also disciples who are NOT true; there are “false disciples.” The false disciples are those who claim to be disciples and yet they do not continue in the word of Christ.

And most of us understand this. We know that claiming to be a Christian and actually living the Christian life can be two very different things. We know from the book of James, in fact, that even the demons believe in God. So, there is more to being a disciple than just claiming that we believe in Jesus. After all, these people Jesus is talking to in John 8:31 are **“believers,”** but even they need the reminder: To be counted as true disciples, they must continue in his word. And if we were to keep reading in John, we would come to an example of believers who refused to continue. I’m thinking of what John observed in John 12:42-43, where he said, **“Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.”** Does that ever happen today? Absolutely! Fear may hold us back. Loving the approval of the world may hold us back. But the Lord’s reminder for us this morning is that true disciples will make the commitment to continue in his word.

III. **As we go back to our text for this morning, I want us to notice one more big idea, and that is: CONTINUING IN THE WORD OF CHRIST SETS US FREE.**

And this is where we get to verse 32, where Jesus says, **“...and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”** This verse has been taken out of context so many times! I believe it is etched on the wall of the original CIA headquarters. It’s the motto for countless universities. And there have been many variations, “Tell your boss what you think of him, and the truth shall set you free,” and so on. But the original statement as spoken by Jesus in the temple was highly offensive. And I say that because of their defensive response in the next few verses. When Jesus said this, they answer Him and say, **“We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’”** We might compare it to an outsider coming to visit us here in the United States, and we might imagine this visitor coming from a foreign nation and saying this to us, “You know what you people here in the United States need? You need some freedom!” Our natural reaction might be to say, “But we are free! This is the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave! It’s in our national anthem! We have the freedom of speech, and the freedom of religion, and the right to bear arms, and the freedom of the press, and the freedom to peaceably assemble, and the freedom to disagree with our own government, and so on!” And so if somebody tells us that we need to be free, we might object. And that is what they did. They got mad. And this is what slavery does. A lack of freedom can be deceiving. And we see it in their response, **“We have never been enslaved to anyone.”** Really? Had they forgotten what we’ve been studying in our Sunday morning adult Bible class? Had they forgotten 400 years in Egypt and how God had to send Moses to help bring them out of that particular captivity? Had they forgotten how the northern tribes had been carried off into captivity by the Assyrians? Had they forgotten how the southern tribes had been taken away to Babylon? Had they forgotten the oppression they suffered under the Greeks? Had they forgotten their circumstances at that very moment under the Romans? They had been deceived into thinking they were free, when really they were not free at all.

Of course, Jesus wasn’t talking about political freedom. He wasn’t talking about literal slavery. Because he responds by saying (in verse 34), **“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.”** And this applies to everybody. This applies to all of us. All of us who are old enough to be accountable to God for what we’ve done are capable of being enslaved to sin. The scripture teaches that, **“...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:23). We are all guilty.

But the good news comes here in verse 32: If we continue in Jesus' word, if we are truly his disciples, we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. As Christians, we have Jesus as our Advocate (1 John 2:1). We have been set free from the slavery of sin. Isn't that what we studied a few weeks ago when we looked at the gospel in Romans 6? Those who have obeyed the **"form"** or **"pattern"** of teaching have been set free from sin, and that happens when we are buried with Christ in baptism (as we read in Romans 6, in our scripture reading earlier this morning). Knowing this truth has a way of setting us free.

Of course, many of the people who heard this for the first time were offended. They didn't see themselves as being enslaved at all. But again, sin is like that. Sin is deceiving. Even while standing next to a recycling bin full of empty bottles, the drunkard will deny that any of this is a problem. Even when confronted with the tears of a broken spouse, an abusive husband will deny that he has failed to love her just as Christ loves the church. The woman involved in an ongoing affair with another man, may stubbornly refuse to admit that what she is doing is sin, justifying her behavior. And on and on. Sin is deceptive. Even when confronted with the evidence, many will often refuse to acknowledge the truth that we are enslaved to sin. And again, Jesus isn't talking about complete atheists and total heathens here; he is talking to believers.

What I find interesting is that this discussion comes right after Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in the very act of adultery. At the beginning of this chapter, the authorities (some very religious men) had somehow caught a woman **"in the act"** (which is really weird right there - How did that happen? Where is the man in that scenario? And on and on), but they drag this woman to Jesus and they want an answer. Jesus wrote in the dirt, but in the end, he defends the woman with those powerful words, **"He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."** And, of course, the men start leaving, from the oldest to the youngest. I believe the old guys figured it out first. They knew that they personally were guilty; probably just as guilty as that woman was. Ultimately, Jesus' message to the woman is, **"Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?"** She said, **"No one, Lord."** And Jesus said, **"I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."** My point in bringing this up is, 1.) All of us have been enslaved to sin, and 2.) Jesus offers freedom. Just as he offered forgiveness and freedom to the woman, Jesus continues to offer this freedom to all who are willing to continue in his word. His word is, **"From now on sin no more."** He offers forgiveness and a better way. He offers freedom. What he told that woman to do was not impossible. But, just as Carl read for us earlier from Romans 6, God has freed us from the slavery of sin at the moment we obeyed the gospel. As disciples, we have come to know the truth, and the truth has set us free.

Conclusion:

What does this passage mean for us? I don't know about all of you, but I want to be a true disciple, and to make sure, I need to be constantly rededicating my life to continuing in the word. We need to read it. We need to study it. We need to come together with our Christian family to help others understand it and to understand it and apply it more effectively in our own lives. We want the freedom Jesus offers. And to get there, we need to continue in the word.

This morning, then, we really need to be asking ourselves where we are in this. Are we like those who heard this for the first time? Do we believe in Jesus, but have we failed to truly continue in his word? Are we enslaved to sin, but too distracted by the pleasure of sin to admit it? That's the danger, and we need to be aware of it.

But, there is another aspect of this passage that applies to us. Yes, we want to be true disciples. However, as we learned in the Great Commission last week, we also need to be making disciples. This is why we exist as a congregation. This is our mission personally as well. We need to continue getting the word out and talking to our friends and neighbors about the freedom we've been given.

If you are not yet a disciple, we would invite you to take that step, to obey the gospel, to make a commitment to turn away from sin, and then to call out to God for salvation in the act of baptism, a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins. I hope we can continue looking at three more of the discipleship passages over the next few weeks. If you have any questions about becoming a disciple of Jesus, get in touch, but if you are ready to obey the gospel through repentance and baptism, we hope you will let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com