

John 8:31-36 *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."³³ They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"³⁴ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Sola Scriptura

1. Enslaved to sin
2. Freed by Christ
3. And remaining in the truth

Five hundred and five years ago a Catholic monk ventured out on the last day of October, went to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, and nailed ninety-five statements to that door. These statements contained an idea that bothered him very much. These statements challenged what was being taught about the forgiveness of sins and questioned the prevailing practices of the day. When Dr. Martin Luther nailed those 95 Theses to the church door, he was not at all sure of himself. What he was sure was that he had a lot of questions and he wanted a thorough, public discussion of those questions. Nailing the 95 Theses to the Castle church door was an open invitation to discuss the questions he was struggling with.

The 95 Theses would never be debated, but the questions raised in them would be discussed throughout Germany and Europe. And as Luther sought answers to his questions, he became more and more convinced that the only place for answers was God's Word. Not tradition, not councils, not Popes – God's Word alone was the only answer to questions of faith and life. The Lutheran Reformation motto of *Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura*, began with *Sola Scriptura*.

Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. God's Word alone gives the answer to our greatest problem. *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.* The devil understands that better than anyone, but that doesn't stop him from trying to convince people otherwise. He wants us to believe that sin is liberating. He wants us to dismiss God's guidelines about sex and marriage as being too restrictive. He wants us to use "freedom of expression" as an excuse to say hurtful and harmful things.

Sin is not freedom; it's slavery. *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.* Slaves to sin. That's who we are. Born with sin we are born to sin. Sin emerges in our day-to-day behavior with little difficulty. Angry words, jealousy, greed, gossip and the desire for revenge pop up frequently. Often, they trap us and make life miserable. But, it's worse than that. Jesus reminds us that by nature we can do nothing but sin. We can't escape the cycle of sin, cover-up, excuse and denial.

One of the worst things about being a slave in the old South was the constant threat of being sold. Sometimes slaves were sold as a way of punishment. Even a well-behaved slave could be sold, if the master needed money. Imagine the anxiety of having a home that you couldn't be sure of. They lived in constant fear of upsetting the master, of trying to win his favor, but never able to be sure about the future.

Many people think that their relationship with God is the same way. Their relationship with God is shaky at best and they live in fear that they don't measure up. Not only are they slaves to sin, they are slaves to fear.

That's how strongly sin has grasped us. And we need to understand that. Martin Luther said, "These facts, I say, should be stressed. If we do not know the magnitude of the disease, we shall neither know nor desire the remedy; for the more you extenuate sin, the less value you attach to grace." (What Luther Says, #4190)

Billy Lawrence learned the hard way what a precious thing freedom was. He learned by losing his freedom. From his jail cell, he could look out on the world. He saw the prison guards and other workers coming and going freely while he was imprisoned – for four years.

On the outside, Billy had taken freedom for granted. He had been too free with his time, getting mixed up with the wrong crowd. He started with petty theft, then graduated to grand theft auto. Now his time was not his own. It would be two more years before he was eligible for parole. He would be 30 years old before he got out. What a waste!

Billy missed his family, especially his mother. He would give anything to be with her now in their home by the beach. When he thought about it, he could almost feel the sun and the warm ocean breezes on his face. Instead, all he saw was the cold, dark, colorless cement walls of his cell. He yearned for liberation.

We live in the prison of a fallen world, given over to sin and death. Imagine the irony: We think we are free but we are imprisoned in sin. We are rulers, free to roam – in a concentration camp. Our freedom is only a delusion. (Adapted from Jacob Preus, *Just Words*, pp. 195ff.)

The Jews were under that same delusion. *"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"* They claimed freedom, but they were slaves as we all are.

Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Jesus provides freedom. He became our sin. The Bible tells us, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." (2 Corinthians 5:21) He lost his freedom and died our death so that we could be free. Christ provides us freedom from sin, death and the power of the devil. He has also freed us from the need to earn our salvation. Paul said in the lesson earlier, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." (Galatians 5:1) We have been liberated from the obligation to justify ourselves. Christ has already done that for us. Christ has done it all for us. He was subjected to the sentence of our sin, and he suffered capital punishment in our place. As Paul said in another place, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

It's like a child in foster care. One child who had bounced from one foster home to another for years was finally adopted by a family. When asked what being adopted meant to him, he said, "It means they can't get rid of me when I do something wrong." Did you hear that? He was no longer someone outside the family who could be discarded at any time. He was now part of the family and that meant belonging no matter what.

That's freedom. Not freedom to sin. We're not saying that. But free to go to our heavenly Father with our fears, our doubts, our sins, our failures and know that he loves us. Because we are sinners, you and I. Sin still enslaves our sinful nature. We don't like it, but it's still there. But even as I carry around all this sin, I don't have to wonder if I've done enough to make up for it. It's already gone, nailed to the cross. I can live in the love and security of my heavenly Father no matter what comes into my life. That's freedom. *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Where do we find that freedom? *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* Teaching here in the original is *Word*. If you hold to Jesus' word, you will be free. It's interesting that Jesus uses the singular: *Word*, not *words*, but *Word*. All of Jesus' teachings are one Word, one truth, one emancipating message.

Remaining in that Word we have freedom, because in that Word we have Christ. Notice that in verse 36 he said that the Son sets you free, but in verse 32 he said the Word sets you free. He is saying the same thing in both verses. When you have the Word, you have Jesus, you have freedom from sin, death and hell.

Being a disciple, then, means being in the Word. A disciple is like a miner who drills deeper and deeper into the same piece of ground. A disciple is not a tourist who wanders in search of something new and different. Tourists bring back souvenirs and snapshots. A miner digs down deep and brings up precious gems of truth. Don't be a tourist, be a miner.

Today, we celebrate the Lutheran Reformation. What does Lutheran mean in our congregation's name? We are St. Paul Lutheran Church. Should we leave out the name Lutheran? Just be St. Paul Church? Or maybe St. Paul Community Church? Maybe something even more generic: Faith Center of Appleton? Why do we retain Lutheran in our name?

What's it mean to be Lutheran? Do you have pictures of Martin Luther in your home? Or do you carry an idea card that says you are Lutheran? What's it mean to be Lutheran? May it be that to be Lutheran means that we hold to the truth of God's Word. We confess all of the Word as the truth. We confess every doctrine of God's Word as the one truth from Jesus.

Those doctrines – that truth – is the back bone that gives us strength. Imagine a jelly fish. It has no backbone. Just a blob floating in the water that is easily broken up with a stick. Imagine a human body without a backbone. It would be just a pile of skin, veins, organs and body parts on the floor. You need a backbone.

Lutherans are people with backbone if we hold to Jesus' Word. Dig deep into God's Word. Cling to Jesus' Word as if you are clinging to Jesus himself. That's what it means to be Lutheran. That's what it means to believe in *Sola Scriptura*.