

Though all may be gone, our victory is won; the kingdom's ours forever! Amen.

For Martin Luther, the conversation began on October 31st, 1517, when he nailed the *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

He wanted to debate about the nature of repentance and forgiveness, but over the next four years the conversation shifted to something even more fundamental than that: Who is in charge? That is, who gets to say what is right about repentance or forgiveness or any Christian teaching?

And at that time practically everyone answered, "That's a dumb question. The church is in charge! The pope is in charge!" But when Luther answered, he said, "Scripture alone is in charge."

That's why, in 1521, at a city called Worms, Luther stood trial before the most powerful men in Europe. In front of him was a table covered with his writings. They pointed to it and asked him a simple question: "Will you recant?" That is, "Will you admit that you are wrong? Will you take back everything you have written and submit to the authority of the church?"

They wanted him to say, "Yes, I recant." But that meant losing the freedom of Christ and denying the Word of Christ. And he could not do that. You see, fifteen hundred years before Luther, the conversation in today's Gospel happened, a conversation where Jesus clearly articulates the principle guiding Luther: *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone.

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples" (8:31). Literally Jesus says, "If you remain in my Word." That is, where you stand determines whether or not you follow Jesus, and following Jesus means standing in one place – in his Word.

Notice too he says, "my Word" – singular. Not, "my words" – plural. Jesus' teaching is not a salad bar. You know, "Red onions, ham, cheddar cubes, yum! But spinach, not so much. Ranch is good, but that balsamic vinaigrette is nasty." You don't get to pick and choose which of Jesus' teachings to believe. Jesus' teaching is all one, big, unified Word (Romans 16:17).

Remain in it. Hold to it. Why? Because **"then you will know the truth" (8:32).** Again, notice what Jesus says: THE truth. That "the" is significant. The one, absolute truth is what Jesus teaches. Jesus even calls himself the way, the truth, the life (John 14:6). Want to know the way to heaven? Want to have eternal life? Remain in Jesus' Word. Stand in Jesus' truth. But understand that Jesus' idea of the truth is very different from what passes for truth today.

Popular opinion is all about many truths. "You have a truth that you stand in. I have a truth that I stand in. Maybe you will change your truth and maybe I will change mine and maybe we will all change our truth if popular opinion changes and maybe there is no truth at all so just respect everyone's view of truth and the only thing you can't do is tell someone that their truth is wrong because for them it's true."

Confused? Me too. But that's kinda the point. Popular opinion says that life is too confusing for there to be one truth. To that Jesus says, **"If you remain in my Word, you are really my disciples, ³² then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (8:31-32).** In an age that doubts the very existence of truth, Jesus gives you timeless truth that is true for all people. Whether you believe or not, whether you like it or not, his Word is truth.

And true freedom comes only from knowing Jesus' Word. However, like *truth*, *freedom* is easily misunderstood. Americans think that freedom means no boundaries. "It's a free county. I can do whatever I want. Don't tell me what to do."

But Jesus is talking about real freedom – freedom from the control of sin (Galatians 5:1). Once you are free from sin, you are really free, because what you want to do is in line with what God wants (Psalm 119:35). That's true freedom – the freedom to follow Jesus instead of the make-believe freedom to follow your sinful nature (Ephesians 4:22-24).

The freedom to do whatever you want is really just freedom to choose which sin you are going to sin. Is that freedom? Sure, you can do whatever you want, as long as all you want to do is sin. That's not freedom, but we humans think it is. And isn't that the worst kind of slavery, when the slave prefers the chains and doesn't want to be free?

"But wait, but wait!" We object, just like they object to Jesus. **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?" (8:33).** "Jesus, we can't be slaves! We're children of Abraham. We've got the right blood flowing through our veins, the right genes in our pool!" They want to stand in their own word about themselves, and they think that they're fine.

So do we. "Jesus, we can't be slaves! We're Christians. We are sons and daughters of the Reformation!" Well, if God can raise up children of Abraham from the stones of the Jordan River (Luke 3:8), then God can raise up Wisconsin Synod Lutherans from the stones of Echo Lake. The objection shows that we don't understand what slaves to sin we naturally are.

Jesus replied, **"Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (8:34)**. Standing in your own word about yourself makes you a slave – because everyone sins and everyone is a slave of sin, and if your word about yourself does not agree with that, you are wrong (1 John 1:8).

Pick a Commandment and your slavery to sin becomes quickly and painfully obvious. It's easy to stop yourself from cutting off someone's head. It is not so easy to stop yourself from hating him in your heart (1 John 3:15). It's easy to stay out of your neighbor's bed. It's not so easy to keep your eyes to yourself (Matthew 5:28). It's easy to never hold up a convenience store. It's not so easy to stop coveting what isn't yours (Romans 7:8).

You think that you can stop sinning any time you want, until you try. This is the sad reality of the human condition (Genesis 6:5). You need to be freed. Sin will not emancipate you. But can you free yourself? Can you work your way out?

Sixteen years before his trial at Worms, Martin Luther tried to work his way out of this slavery. He gave up a promising legal career to become a monk. He gave away all his stuff. He slept on a stone floor in an unheated cell. He became a priest, confessed his sins every day, and attended church services seven times a day. He did all this to free his conscience from the guilt of sin. But the way of works just became another form of slavery.

"Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever" (8:35). Slaves cannot free themselves – they don't belong to the family. But a son always belongs. And *the* Son can free the slaves.

Sisters and brothers, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys: If you claim freedom because of your religious pedigree or because of what you do, you end up losing the One Person with the pedigree and the deeds who truly matters: **"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36)**.

The Son. There's that significant little word again. Who is THE Son? He is the Word become flesh, the eternal Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

Stand in Jesus' Word about himself and see what it reveals. The Son is everything that you are not. Jesus was not a slave to sin. Jesus did not sin. Not once. Not ever. So he has everything that you need. Jesus gives you the credit for his sinless life (Romans 5:19).

And, he pays the price for your freedom. The thing about slavery is that you cannot free yourself. Someone else has to redeem you – pay the price, and buy you back (Psalm 49:7-8).

Our freedom was not free. It wasn't cheap even. In fact, our freedom cost Christ everything (2 Corinthians 8:9). Jesus is walking, talking truth, and his truth was rejected often, still is. Jesus is the Light of the world, but millions prefer sin's darkness to him. Jesus has all power, yet he allowed himself to be bound and beaten. The Lord of life paid your redemption price, and it killed him. The One who fills the heavens lay wrapped in grave cloths. And the One who was dead, now lives again forever, and that resurrection is God's promise to you: "You are free!" (Romans 4:25)

All this is by *grace alone*. Not that you save yourself, and not that you even help, but that the Son does it all for you by his life, death, and resurrection. By yourself alone, you are enslaved to sin and will die in sin (John 8:21). In *Christ alone*, you are free from sin – freedom you receive as a gift by *faith alone*.

Jesus ties this freedom, not to the genes in your body, but to *Scripture alone*. Jesus connects true knowledge, not to a doctorate from Harvard, but to his Holy Word. Jesus binds true freedom to each and every syllable of Scripture, because **"the truth will set you free" (8:32)**.

That is what the Reformation was all about. Once the truth set him free, Luther refused to compromise it. So at his trial, when those powerful men asked him a simple question: "Will you recant?" He gave them a simple answer. God grant us the strength to say the same thing.

"Unless I am convinced by Holy Scriptures and plain reason my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me! Amen."