

An Exposition of the
GOSPEL OF JOHN



“The Emancipation Proclamation”

John 8:31-36

Theme: True freedom is not the right to do as we please, but the power to do as we should.

Introduction: [Read text] Few words stir the human heart more deeply than the word *freedom*. Nations have fought wars for it. Revolutions have been launched in its name. Individuals have sacrificed everything to obtain it. In American history, the Emancipation Proclamation marked a decisive moment when millions were declared free from physical bondage. Yet history also teaches us a sobering truth: a person can be legally free and still live as a slave.

Jesus Christ confronts that reality in our text. Speaking to religious people who believed themselves to be spiritually secure and morally superior, He exposes a deeper bondage than chains or oppression—the bondage of sin. Sin is not merely something sinners do; it is a power that rules them. The unregenerate person is not simply flawed but enslaved—his mind darkened, his desires corrupted, his will bent toward self rather than God. Though he may claim freedom, he is captive to impulses he cannot master and desires he cannot change. He is free only to follow his fallen nature and powerless to rise above it. His bondage is comprehensive, touching every faculty of his soul and placing him under the righteous judgment of God. Until Christ intervenes, he is not a seeker in need of guidance but a slave in need of deliverance. Only the Son can make him free.

These men claimed freedom because they were descendants of Abraham, heirs of covenant privilege, and guardians of religious tradition. But Jesus declares that true freedom is not inherited by lineage, achieved by religion, or claimed by self-confidence. It is granted only by the Son.

In this passage, Jesus issues His own *Emancipation Proclamation*. He announces that ***real freedom is not the right to do as we please, but the power to live as we should***. He reveals the path to freedom, exposes the illusion of freedom, and proclaims the promise of freedom that only He can give.

As we walk through this text, we will see:

1. **The Passage to Freedom** (vv. 31–32) — abiding in the truth that liberates.
2. **The Pretense of Freedom** (vv. 33–34) — the dangerous illusion of self-righteous independence.
3. **The Prospect of Freedom** (vv. 35–36) — the glorious liberation granted by the Son.

And in the end, we will be forced to confront a question far more searching than whether we claim to be free: *Have we been made free by the Son?*

I. **The Passage to Freedom – 8:31-32**

A. **The Priority of God’s Word – v. 31**

1. Those who had heard the astounding teaching of Jesus began to believe that there was legitimate messianic credibility in His teaching – v. 30.

2. However, their response was stimulated more by their amazement at his boldness and clarity than it was anchored in regeneration
3. It was a faith that fell short of true saving faith – they were simply beginning to think He might indeed be the Messiah.
4. Instead of cuddling these ones who are teetering on the brink of fully believing in Him, Jesus anticipates that they will vacillate between His teaching and the lure of their old self-righteous system and immediately tests the authenticity of their faith.
5. He “*was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, ‘If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine’.*”
 - a) *It was not enough to grant some intellectual agreement with the teaching of Jesus; it is necessary to “**continue**” – that is, they must make it the rule of their lives.*
 - b) *True faith is not measured by initial, or even intermittent, enthusiasm but by a persevering allegiance to Jesus.*
 - c) *As they yield their lives to the teachings of Christ and obey those teachings, the reality of their faith will be demonstrated.*
 - d) **“*continue*”** [**μένω**] – “*remaining, staying, persisting*” - conveys the evidential conviction distinguishing genuine disciples from superficial followers – not as a means of earning forgiveness, but in evidence of grace.
 - e) *Hence, the single most important sign of devotion to the Lord – according to the Lord – is living in a persistent state of obedience to His Word.*
6. Through this, Jesus redefines discipleship away from a religious identity to a relational obedience and allegiance to Him – cp. 1 John 2:3-6.

B. The Power of God’s Word – *v. 32*

1. As a person yields himself to the priorities of God’s Word, there is a powerful effect in his life – “*and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*”
2. “**know[ing] the truth**” is the product of abiding in the word of Christ, and such knowledge “**will make you free.**”
3. “**know**” [**γινώσκω**] – refers to experiential knowledge, not some abstract acknowledgement or theological awareness.
4. It describes a life transformed by the power of the Word of God – both the written and Living Word.
5. This freedom is not an independent experience but an inevitable consequence of sustained submission to Jesus and His Word.

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6. “**free**” [ἐλευθερόω] – refers to being delivered from bondage of domination and refers to the liberty from some oppression.
7. In the broadest sense, a person is free **not** when he can do whatever he wants, but when he wants to do and can do what he should do – cp. ***Romans 6:12-14***.
8. Contemporary culture defines freedom as self-expression and self-determination. Jesus defines freedom as deliverance from self-rule and submission to divine truth.
9. Hence, continual knowledge of God’s Word produces in a believer’s heart and mind the desire to be conformed to the righteousness of Jesus Christ and gives them the power to do so – cp. ***Titus 1:1***.
10. When speaking of being “made free,” Jesus tells them that anyone resisting Him is in bondage and needs to be liberated.

II. The Pretense of Freedom – 8:33-34

A. The Denial of Bondage – v. 33

1. Having just begun to think that Jesus’ teachings were credible, their spiritual pride now bristles at His assessment of their spiritual condition.
2. They react with anger to the implication Jesus makes that somehow, they are to be classified as those who were in bondage – a condition that would demean their pride in their national status.
3. Instead of being part of the specially privileged children of Abraham, they are being equated to the Gentile pagans – “***The answered Him, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, “You will become free”?’***”
4. They have been raised religiously proud and morally superior, enjoying a unique religious standing as the “seed of Abraham,” heirs to the covenants of promise.
5. When confronted with spiritual reality, sinners often respond with defensiveness rather than repentance – ***Proverbs 16:2***.
6. Those who give credibility to their own religious position often bristle when confronted with their need to be delivered from:
 - a) *The lack of genuine righteousness* – ***Romans 10:3***.
 - b) *The lack of true wisdom* – ***1 Corinthians 2:14***.
 - c) *The lack of effective power over sin* – ***Romans 6:20***.
 - d) *The lack of freedom* ...

B. The Definition of Bondage – *v. 34*

1. Jesus responds by stating that their physical lineage means nothing – that “*everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.*”
2. “This is one of the most remarkable sayings ever uttered by our Lord – He immediately wipes out the distinctions between Jew and Gentile with respect to their standing before God and his holy law.”¹
3. Jesus shifts the focus from ancestral identity to personal accountability.
4. Whoever “*commits sin*” – whether Jew or Gentile – has been overcome and taken captive by his master, sin, and is unable to deliver himself from this bondage.
5. If sin enslaves, then self-effort cannot liberate.
6. Moral reform, religious ritual, and good works cannot break sin’s chains – only divine intervention can.
7. This condition describes the person who has not been set free through God’s Son and is habitually, continually defeated by sin – *Romans 6:16-18; 2 Peter 2:19*.
8. Sin is not some “trivial flaw,” but a tyrant that rules the unredeemed heart and pushes a person into the jaws of judgment.

III. The Prospect of Freedom – *8:35-36*

A. The Unique Privilege of the Son – *v. 35*

1. Jesus goes so far as to deny the relevance of their asserted heritage because they cannot claim the position of a son, since they are only slaves.
2. He states: “*The slave does not remain in the house forever*” – they were presupposing themselves as part of the family when they were not.
3. Sin is not merely moral bondage but relational exclusion, moving the focus from slavery to status, from sin to sonship.
4. “*slave*” [δοῦλος] – possessing no choices or individual will, no status or relationship, able at any moment to be dismissed or sold – no guarantees or promises.
5. In contrast to the slave’s position is the position of a true son who possesses rights, authority, and relationship – “*the son does remain forever.*”

¹ Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary: John, Volume 2*, p. 53.

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6. A “*son*” exists in the home not because of performance but by nature and relationship.
7. How foolish it is for a slave to act as secure as a son, which is essentially what these Jews were doing, assuming that their spiritual condition was secure when they were merely slaves of sin.
8. Abraham’s true children – those who are his seed by their own personal faith in God, patterned after his own – enjoy the permanent privileges, but not the slaves who will be driven out.

B. The Unconditional Promise by the Son – *v. 35*

1. The true Son of God – the One who enjoys all the privileges – is the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. He was incarnate for the express purpose of freeing those enslaved to sin and death.
3. Those who come to Him by faith and believe in Him know the glorious freedom He offers – “*So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.*”
4. He does not state: the law will free you, or religion will free you, but “*the Son makes you free.*”
5. Thus, we can be free through the work of the Son of God, using the Word of God as we abide in Him – cp. *Romans 8:2-3*.
6. “*free indeed*” [ὄντως ἐλεύθεροι] – underscores authenticity and permanence of the real freedom from sin and its consequences instead of the imagined freedom that religion produces.

So What?

1. **What are some indications in my life that I am living as a son in Christ Jesus rather than functioning as though I am still a slave to sin?**
2. **How has Christ’s promise of true freedom practically demonstrated itself in my desires, priorities, and responses to temptation in the last week?**
3. **To what do you point to show that your confidence rests in the Son’s work rather than in your religious background, moral disciplines, or spiritual achievements?**

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