

“The Son Sets You Free”

Isaiah 6:8-10; JOHN 8:31-59; I CORINTHIANS 2:14 (TEXTS)

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • January 10, 2016 (Big Springs URC)

Dear Congregation of Christ: Did you know that the great hymnwriter John Newton was a former slave trader? In 1744, when he was 19 years old, John served on a British warship. But he could not stand the harsh conditions on the ship, so he deserted. He was soon recaptured, publicly flogged, and demoted. Later, he requested to serve on a slave trading ship, which took him to the coast of Sierra Leone. His master, who was a slave trader, was cruel and brutally abused him. He was soon begging for food. In 1748 he was rescued by a sea captain who was a friend of his father.

His mother, who had died when he was only seven, taught him the Bible. But in his younger days, he became arrogant, rebellious and morally corrupt. However, on a homeward voyage in 1748, his ship was overtaken by a violent storm. It was during this dangerous storm that he pleaded to God, “Lord, have mercy upon us.” In that moment, he experienced what he later called his “great deliverance.” He then believed that God’s grace had worked on him.

In our text today, Jesus discussed slavery with the Jews. But he was not referring to the slavery of Africans during the days of John Newton. He explained to the Jews that they were slaves to sin as long as they did not believe the word of truth spoken by him. The only way they would be freed from this spiritual slavery is by believing in him, the Son of God. And after being redeemed from slavery to sin, what kind of life does a person live?

This morning, our meditation will be on “**The Son Sets You Free**,” focusing on three things: first, **Enslaved by Sin**; second, **Set Free by the Truth**; and third, **To Do the Fathers’ Works**.

Enslaved to Sin

Last Sunday, we studied Chapter 5, where Jesus started his dispute with the Jews. They accused him of breaking the Sabbath and of blasphemy because of his claim to be equal with God. Our text today in Chapter 8 begins with Jesus saying to the Jews who had “believed” him, “*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*” (verse 31-32). In the course of this conversation, the “belief” shown by these Jews is proven to be false. Right after Jesus said this, they answered that they are children of Abraham, and have never been a slave of anyone. As in almost all his conversations with the Jews, and even with his disciples, Jesus was again misinterpreted. So Jesus clarified that the slavery he was speaking of is not physical slavery, but spiritual slavery, “*Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin*” (verse 34).

But what is a slave? The English words used for the original Greek word are “slave,” “servant,” and “bondservant.” In the Old Testament, a slave is part of the household, and the Law commands, “*You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God*” (Lev 25:43). Even

in the Graeco-Roman world, a slave can even be responsible over his master's household, including teaching the children. Paul alludes to the Old Testament law when he commands, *"Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven"* (Col 4:1; Eph 6:9). Even so, a slave works for his master without pay or thanks.

This is the sense in which Jesus says that a sinner is a slave to sin. A sinner is not free to do as he pleases. He is under the control of his master. Where he lives, where he goes, when he eats, when he rests, are all under his master's will. Paul even quotes Jesus in Romans 6:16 and 20, saying that an obedient slave is a slave of the one whom he obeys. He is either a slave of sin leading to death, or a slave of obedience leading to righteousness. He tells us that we *"were once slaves of sin."*

Does an unsaved sinner do only bad things? Surely, even the most heinous, cruel, evil people in the world such as Pharaoh, Herod, Nero and Hitler have some good in them. They can choose to love their wives and children. They can do good things for their nations. But the Bible says that in spiritual things, sinners without the indwelling Holy Spirit will always reject God's grace in Christ for his own salvation. They are blind to the truths revealed by God in Scripture. They are unwilling and unable to have understanding of God's Word. In fact, Paul says, they are dead in sin, and are by nature children of God's wrath. Jesus says in verse 43, *"Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot hear my word."* Paul echoes this when he says, *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned"* (1 Cor 2:14). Jesus and Paul both allude back to the prophet Isaiah who says that unsaved people have hearts that are dull, ears that are heavy, and eyes that are blind to God's Word (Isa 6:10; Jer 6:10). Only a person regenerated by the Spirit can truly discern spiritual things.

Article 3 of the III/IV Heads of Doctrine of the Canons of Dort summarizes all these: *"Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform."*

Therefore, sinners who have not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit are unable and unwilling to come to faith in God and Christ for salvation. So how then can anyone be saved?

Set Free by the Truth

In verses 31-32, Jesus tells the Jews, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* This is the only way that a sinner can be freed from his slavery to sin. But he says later that an unbeliever cannot hear his Word. Is he not contradicting himself? Paul also says that an unsaved person is blind, deaf, and hardhearted, even dead, to spiritual things. How then can he know the truth? We have to go back to Jesus' words to Nicodemus, *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born*

of the Spirit is spirit... So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:6-8). Jesus fulfills what the prophet Ezekiel says God will do to set unbelievers free from sin,

"And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezk 36:26-27).

Notice who does all these things. Four times, God says, "I will." Does the sinner have any part in his own regeneration by the Spirit. Does the sinner create a new heart and a new spirit within him? The sinner has no part in being born, just as a baby has no part in his own birth.

In verse 32, Jesus says, *"the truth will set you free"* from slavery to sin. Then in verse 36, he says, *"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."* The Truth and the Son are inseparable. Only Jesus has God's perfect Truth and Knowledge, because he is of the same substance with God the Father. He is the only Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Since an unbeliever is a slave to sin, the only way to freedom from sin is to be redeemed by Christ. How does Christ redeem a sinner from slavery to sin? In the Bible, salvation is often called redemption. Redemption is the term used when a slave is freed from his master by someone else who pays a price, a ransom, for the slave. Paul says that Christ *"obtained [or bought][the church] with his own blood"* (Acts 20:28). Paul often talks about Christians as being *"bought with a price"* (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). He uses the same word in Galatians 3:13, *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us"* on the cross. He *"came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Matt 20:28).

Therefore, a sinner is saved in this way, as Paul summarize in Romans 8:28, *"those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."* The whole salvation event is the work of God. He elects, he calls, he justifies, and he glorifies a sinner. The part where a sinner is set free from slavery to sin is the "calling." He calls the sinner with his Word, and through the work of the Spirit, his ears are unplugged, his eyes are opened, and his heart is renewed.

What happens then to the sinner after he is freed from slavery to sin?

To Do the Father's Works

First Jesus says in verse 31 to those who had believed, *"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples."* This means a true disciple, freed from slavery to sin, will continue believing and obeying his word. Faith resulting in obedience is one test of true discipleship, because he has been set free from the power of sin in his life.

But Jesus rebukes the Jews because of their unbelief. They tell Jesus that they are children of their father Abraham, and they had never enslaved to anyone. They have always been free! This of course is not the truth. For in Egypt, they were slaves for 400 years. During the time of the judges they were enslaved by the Philistines, Moabites, and other enemies. During the their exile in Babylon, they were slaves for 70 years.

Not only were they false claiming freedom from other nations' slavery. Jesus also tells them that their claim to be children of Abraham was also false, *"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."* Abraham had faith in God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. The Jews did not believe in Jesus. They did not believe his Word of truth. Instead, they have been blinded by the devil's lies. And these unbelievers and their followers are all dead. They are all like Adam, whom the ancient serpent Satan sent to spiritual death by his lies. They are like Cain, who was deceived by the devil's lies to murder Abel.

In addition to this extremely offensive rebuke, Jesus again claimed to have a special relationship with God the Father, who glories him, who sent him into the world, and who gives eternal life to all who would believe in him. The last straw was when Jesus claimed to have lived before Abraham lived. The Jews were dumbfounded, saying Abraham died 2,000 years before them, and all the prophets died. And this man, not even 50 years old, is claiming that he lived before Abraham! So Jesus answered them that Abraham looked forward and rejoiced to see the coming of the Messiah. And then Jesus said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM"* (verses 56-58). When he said, "I AM," the Greek word for YHWH, the Jews knew that he was claiming to be God. So they picked up stones to kill him because he was committing blasphemy.

But those who are freed from slavery to sin believe and abide in his Word. How does a slave freed from sin abide in and obey God's Word? Paul tells us in Galatians 5:13, *"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."* And Peter also tells us, *"Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God"* (1 Pet 2:16). We are not to do whatever we feel like doing, since if we did, we will still be enslaved by our desires and passions. We are not to give any opportunity for the devil to enslave us again through our sinful desires.

Instead, we are to love and serve one another in the church. We are called slaves of righteousness and servants of Christ. In our church, there are many opportunities for service. Every believer has been given spiritual gifts by Christ to be used for the building up of the church and of one another. Special spiritual gifts are given to pastors, elders and deacons. But this does not mean that they do all the work. Paul exhorts the church in Rome,

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Rom 12:4-8).

These gifts are only some of the many gifts that Christ has given to you as members of Big Springs Community. Our church has many needs which you can fill. For the building up of the church, Christ is faithful in providing for these needs through everyone in the church.

Dear Friends in Christ: On that day when John Newton pleaded to God to have mercy on his soul, he was freed from his slavery to sin. And this salvation was not empty. It was real, for he continued serving as captain of a number of slave ships, so he could alleviate the sufferings of the slaves and preach the gospel to both his crew and the slaves.

Because of the influence of George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, he finally quit his role in the slave trade. He was ordained in the Anglican church, and was assigned to a parish in Olney, England. The poet William Cowper joined his church, and together, they wrote many hymns that we still sing today, including “Amazing Grace,” “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds,” “O for a Closer Walk with God,” and “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” Our last hymn reflects his thankful heart to God for his amazing grace that “saved a wretch like me,” a slave to sin who once lost but now found, once blind but now can see.