

Sept 12 – Small Group Leaders’ Guide - John 8:31-36; 51-59 “His Service is Perfect Freedom”

Read John 8:31-36; 51-59

1. (31) Jesus turns to those who already believe in him to say that if they abide in his word they will know the truth and the truth will set them free. What would it look like practically to have his word abide, dwell, live in us?

We reflected on this earlier in the series and were helped along with a particular illustration.

Let’s say you were to get a new piece of furniture for your home or apartment. Which many of us did this past year as we were spending more time at home. As you brought that new piece of furniture in you had to move things around to accommodate it right? Or maybe you even had to get rid of some things so that that new piece of furniture could find its rightful place.

Abide in my word. Let it live in you, dwell with you, find a home with you. Let it move things around in your life, let it rid your life of things, let it order you, shape you, direct you.

Certainly abiding in his word is obedience to his word – it is not less than that but it is indeed more than that. It is to allow his word to be the lens through which we see ourselves and our world. It is his word that should define us, direct us above all else...

2. (34-35) His listeners are angry and offended by his offer of freedom, for to offer someone freedom is to imply that they are enslaved to someone or something. What is the nature of their slavery that Jesus wants them to see? Is this a slavery we can relate to? if so, how?

Jesus invites them to open their eyes and see the nature of their slavery. In vs. 34 he says everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin, meaning that under every pattern of sin in your life, and all of us have patterns of sin, there is an enslavement to something, something we’ve given control over to.

For example: Why do we lie? Well we might lie to have other people think well of us. We are enslaved, we’ve given control over to our reputation.

Why do we not respond in love and generosity to the needs around us? Well we might not do so because it will inconvenience us, cost us something. We are enslaved, given control over to our comfort.

Why can’t we admit our wrong and move to forgiveness? Well we might not do so because we would appear to be weak. We are enslaved, given control over to power.

Behind every pattern of sin in our lives there is something we’ve given ourselves over to that controls us. It could be anything money – sex – success – achievement...

There is another side to their lack of freedom Jesus wants them to see. In vs. 35 he says the slave does not remain in the house forever, but the child remains forever.

In the ancient world the servant's relationship with the head of the house was always insecure. why? It was based on performance. Good performance would increase status within the household. Poor performance and there would be demotion, sale or worse. The child's relationship with the head of the house was always secure. Neither good nor bad performance could change that status.

What is Jesus trying to reveal to them? I think he's saying your relationship with the living God is not as a child to a loving parent, but as an employee to a boss. You are seeing your relationship with God based on your performance. As a result when you don't perform there will be fear – is God going to get me? When you do perform there will be pride and a sense of entitlement – God owes me, I've done the right thing!

I would think that these are as contemporary to us as to the original listeners. It will be tough for people in the group to admit this reality readily so there would be wisdom in thinking ahead of time how you personally as a leader experience these kinds of "slavery" so that you can support people in reflecting upon it themselves.

3. How does the modern western person envision freedom? Does what Jesus offers sound like freedom?

Isaiah Berlin, an oxford professor of political philosophy from the 20th c, said that here in the west we conceive of freedom as absolute negative freedom. Meaning that for us freedom is the absence of every constraint on our choices. If anything or anyone constrains our personal choices than we aren't free.

As a result Jesus' offer of freedom doesn't sound like freedom, for he says if you accept the constraints of my word you will be free.

We often envision freedom as the absence of any constraints on our personal choices. To pursue such a freedom however is pure fantasy as we will never achieve such freedom, for something will always constrain us. To flourish in relationships we must to varying degrees and in varying ways constrain our personal freedom for the sake of the relationship. When we make choices we are often constraining our freedom in one area to experience greater freedom in another. So the question must be which constraints are in our best interest, which constraints will undergird our flourishing?

4. Jesus says that if we accept the constraints of his word we will be free, we will have life. The constraints of his word are the constraints of love for he summarizes his word as loving God and loving others (Mark 12:28-31). How will being constrained by love undergird our full flourishing as human beings?

There is no right or wrong answer to this question, it is more of a conversation about what life is meant to look like when we are constrained by love.

As a leader I would encourage you to think through a few examples of where being constrained by love leads to full flourishing of individuals, relationships, society to help spark the conversation. Give this question time it is the heart of the small group time, every other question is simply intended to allow us to enter into Jesus' teaching to get us here...

One of the sticking points in this conversation may be a definition of love. In the modern western mindset to love is to give others the freedom to live how they would want to live without any judgement on their choices – love then is seen as tolerance.

When Jesus says love is the summary of the law, a subsequent question must be and what does love look like? That question would drive you back to the law for the details of the law are the working out of what love looks like...

5. The first listeners are deeply offended by his suggestion that his word is perfectly suited for our flourishing as humanity and rightly ask 'who do you think you are'? What are their suggestions? What is his answer?

They believe he is either a lunatic (how can you know Abraham you aren't even 50), or he is a demon from hell.

He invokes the divine name, the core affirmation of who God is that sits at the heart of the feast of shelters. "I am he" – Ane Who – I am the God who dwells in the midst of his people.

6. It was John Stott who said that those who truly met Jesus either ran in terror, assaulted with fury, or prostrated themselves in utter surrender. How will we respond to Jesus, the I AM? And what would that look like in light of this teaching?

Most of us sit on the fence when it comes to Jesus. This question is to push us, as Jesus does in this conversation, to lovingly encounter Jesus as he truly is so that we might respond in keeping with who he is.