

# STRAIGHT TALK FROM JESUS

by Ray C. Stedman

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I grew up on the great words of American freedom. As a boy in school I was required to learn Patrick Henry's wonderful address, delivered at the House of Burgesses in Williamsburg before the Revolution. I still get chills up and down my spine when I remember his words,

Is life so dear and peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I care not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

But I find that many people today do not really understand freedom. Most people define it as being able to do whatever you feel like doing. Yet you cannot read the parable of the prodigal son without realizing that that is exactly the way he defined freedom. He thought that getting an early inheritance, leaving home and going off and indulging in instant gratification was freedom. But he soon found that it was but another form of slavery.

The true definition of freedom is, "being able to be all that you were meant to be." Don't you long for that? To feel fulfilled, to be able to do all that is possible for you to do and be -- that is freedom.

That is what we will explore in this part of the Gospel of John. It is one of the best known words of Jesus, uttered in the temple courts in Jerusalem at the close of the Feast of Tabernacles:

**Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him [that is a striking phrase: "Jews who had believed in him", Jews for Jesus, if you like], "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. {John 8:31-32 RSV}**

What a wonderful word! It constitutes a short course in discipleship. But it is more than that. It is a declaration that discipleship is the only true path to freedom, to being all that you were meant to be. If you want that -- and I'm sure everybody listening to me wants it -- then Jesus says the way is to become his disciple. This is the path to freedom. It is the only way to be all that you want to be.

Here Jesus tells us in precise detail -- in four steps -- how to be free.

It begins with belief: "Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him." There is a slight difference between the words in Verse 31 and those of Verse 30. Verse 30 says, "As he was speaking, many believed in him," or, "on him." Literally in the Greek it is "into him." They stood on Jesus, they clambered onto him and stood on him. They trusted him. That phrase indicates a deep commitment of heart to Jesus.

But Verse 31 is a different phrase: "Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed him." They had not yet trusted him, but they had believed him. They had been intellectually grasped by his arguments and his words, but they had not yet committed themselves to him. It is to these people that Jesus says, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Discipleship begins with belief; even intellectual belief; they were there at the door, at the first step.

It is important to understand that belief can only come from evidence. You will never find freedom until you examine the evidence that Jesus is who he claims to be. You must believe him first, and that means examining the evidence. Hundreds of thousands of people reject Jesus without ever really examining the evidence for who he is. That is why this book was written. At the end of his gospel John writes, "Many other things Jesus did that are not written in this book," {cf, John 20:30}. (John did not write an exhaustive but rather a very selective account of the life of Jesus.) "But," he continues, "these things are written [these signs are recorded] in order that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and believing, you might have life in his name," {cf, John 20:31}. Obviously, then, if you want to be free, to be all you want to be, you

must begin by examining the evidence about Jesus. Read the gospels. Read his words. Search them out. Do not reject them because some atheistic professor sneers at Jesus in a classroom. Do not reject them because some cult distorts him and presents a supposedly historic figure that has no basis in fact. Examine the evidence. Make up your own mind. Look for yourself. That is the place to begin.

Then, second, "continue in his word." Read these words and think about them. Ponder them. Listen to Jesus. Compare what he says with your own experience. Does what he says agree with what you have found to be true in living life? That is the test. The test of any religion is not whether it is pleasing, or whether you enjoy it. The test is: "Is it true? Does it accord with life? Does it fit what is happening? Does it explain what is going on?" That is the test, and that you can only establish as you continue in his word, as you think long and deeply, read fully and frequently. This is a process.

Jesus suggests here that when you do that something will happen to you: "If you continue in my word, you will truly be my disciple." That immediately indicates there are two kinds of disciples. There are those who are not yet real disciples. Outwardly they are -- they follow for awhile, they are interested, they outwardly conform, they may join the organization -- but they have not yet inwardly committed themselves. But if you read his word and you continue in it, if you think about it and you see how true it really is, how practical and pragmatic and relevant it is to life, something will happen to you. Somewhere along the line a crisis will occur. You will find that his words have grabbed you, and you will commit yourself to him (like the people mentioned in Verse 30), and then you are really a disciple.

That is what Jesus said to Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, who came to him by night {cf, John 3:1-15}. To that man, who knew all the Old Testament and was an expert in the Torah, Jesus said, "Unless you are born again you cannot enter the kingdom of God." When Nicodemus inquired how that would happen, Jesus said it would be "by the Spirit and the word," using the two symbols, water and wind. The Spirit and the word would accomplish it. Then, as the word takes root in the heart, a transformation occurs, a life is imparted by the Spirit, and one becomes a real disciple.

Step three is, "You will know the truth." "If you continue in my word, you will know the truth." What an objective! Everybody wants to know the truth. Nobody likes to be flim-flammed and cheated. Nobody likes to be taken in by a con artist. What, then, is the truth? Again I come back to what underlies all of life: Truth is the nature of things as they really are. Truth is seeing through all the illusions, the dreams, the phantasmata and the wishful thinking, all the facades and the unreal images, and getting down to the heart, the core, the reality -- that which really is. That is the truth.

There is no more attractive promise in the Scripture than this: To be rendered able to recognize the lies that you hear spread on all sides by the media today. When you flip on the television and listen, even to the commercials let alone the programs (sometimes the commercials are far more interesting and revealing) you will recognize the lies that are being spread. The implications of the media are that you deserve much more than you are getting, that you have it coming to you, that you can do anything you want, that your hands are on the control stick of life -- those are all lies. Life will teach you that. You are given certain choices, but you are not given every choice. You can control a limited area, but certainly not all areas of life. To think you can is part of the lie that is being spread abroad today.

But when you can see things as they really are you can affirm what is good and true and permanent. When you come to see the truth -- and it is a process, it does not happen all at once in one magic moment -- as you obey the word of Jesus, as you continue seeing life through his eyes, you will begin to look at yourself differently; you will not see yourself any longer the way you once did. You will see other people differently. You will read your newspapers differently. You will change your whole value system. You will begin to understand what is happening.

The first letter of John declares that: "Jesus Christ has come and given us an understanding," {cf, 1 Jn 5:20 RSV}. That is a most valuable thing. Have you ever read the wonderful words of the second chapter of Proverbs? They declare the same truth:

**... if you receive my words**

**and treasure up my commandments with you,  
making your ear attentive to wisdom  
and inclining your heart to understanding;  
yes, if you cry out for insight  
and raise your voice for understanding,  
if you seek it like silver  
and search for it as for hidden treasures;  
then you will understand the fear of the Lord  
and find the knowledge of God! {Prov 2:1-5 RSV}**

What a promise! It ought to set us all searching, listening, thinking and reading, that we might find and understand the knowledge of God.

Now the fourth thing: Jesus promises that when you launch into this program, when you follow him, hear his word, and continue in it, a wonderful thing will happen -- "the truth will set you free." That is a marvelous claim. The truth will deliver you, permit you to be all that you were meant to be. That says a lot about your present condition. doesn't it?

What does it free us from? When we put it into practical terms, it frees us from all our hang-ups! Hang-ups are what keep us from being all that we were meant to be. Hang-ups. What a marvelous modern expression! To be hung up means you cannot move, you are bound and limited by something, unable to free yourself.

Hang-ups are the same for everybody, everywhere. We all suffer from them. Fear is probably the biggest one. Being afraid, worried, anxious, insecure, timid, constantly threatened by anxiety. I know people who are so gripped and bound by fear they cannot even go outside their homes. They do not dare go to the store; they cannot walk on a public street because they are afraid. That is an extreme example, I agree. Most of us, though, have fears that limit us and keep us from doing what we long to do.

Then there is anger. Have you ever felt angry and mad at life in general? Have you ever got up in the morning feeling surly? You didn't feel like saying anything. You felt a quiet rage in your heart and you didn't know why. That is the hang-up of anger, of hostility, hatred, aggressiveness and rage that keeps you striking out at everybody -- prickly, like a porcupine on a cold winter's night.

Then there is guilt. Millions of people -- perhaps many of you right here -- suffer inwardly from a terrible sense of failure, of shame about things in your past. Between the services this morning a man said to me, "I would like to talk to you sometime about some of the things that have happened to me." I could read a sense of guilt in his eyes as he said that, a hurt, a look of despair, even depression, over the past or present.

Pride is another hang-up; a proud, aggressive, arrogant spirit that indulges in rank prejudice and bigotry; an aloofness and withdrawing from others, with its accompanying loneliness. Do you see how practical all these things are? This is what Jesus is talking about.

His wonderful promise is that there is a way out. "Bring them to me," he tells us. "Bring them to me. Listen to my words. Look at life as I see it and a wonderful thing will happen: there will be a change in you. You will be given a life that you never had before, and you will begin to be freed from your hang-ups." It will happen! In fact, it is happening to hundreds of people right here this morning. I know some of your lives. I know there are probably five hundred people here who could stand up and say, "That is what is happening to me. I find myself able to live at last. I find myself freed from my hang-ups, and it is getting better all the time. It is a glorious, wonderful thing." That is the promise of Jesus.

The account goes on immediately to introduce us to the major hindrance to finding this freedom. We often find there is a block, an obstacle in the way. These people to whom Jesus is speaking verbalize that hindrance in the words of Verse 33:

**They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to any one. How is it that you say, 'You will be made free'?" {John 8:33 RSV}**

That is their problem: self-sufficiency, "We are Jews. We belong to the chosen race. We are descendants of Abraham and we have never been in bondage to any one." That is their reply to the words of Jesus. Many commentators are appalled by that claim. They ask, "How could these Jews say that when they were already under the heel of Rome? Their history is rife with captivities, in Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Rome, almost any nation around for awhile. How can they claim they never were in bondage to anyone?"

But if we read that verse that way we are missing the whole thrust of it. Obviously these men are not stupid. They know their nation is in bondage. But they are not talking about that kind of bondage. They are talking about freedom before God. They know that this is what Jesus means, and that is what they claim. What they are saying is, "Nobody tells us how to worship. Even though we have been in bondage to other nations we have never allowed anyone to tell us how to worship God. We have always been free to worship as we like. We will fight to the death for that. We have never let anyone take that away from us." That is true of this remarkable nation to this day. They will allow no one to change their way of worship. But they extended that to mean that they, as individuals, were acceptable to God because they were descended from Abraham. They had not forgotten their bondage to the Romans, rather, they were boasting in the fact that they were part of a chosen race, thus they were confident of God's approval.

I was in Dallas, Texas, last week, and driving in from DFW airport we went right past Texas Stadium, where the Dallas Cowboys play. That is a unique stadium. It is not like the Kingdome, the Superdome and other great stadia where football is played, because it is not completely roofed over. It has a big hole in the roof right over the football field. Spectators are protected but the players are exposed to the elements. When I asked why I was told, "So God can watch his favorite team!" That is the way the Cowboys feel about themselves: "God's Favorite Team!" That is what these Jews felt, too: "We are God's favorite people; God's chosen race."

There is the real problem. This is what most often keeps people from becoming disciples of Jesus and thus finding the path to freedom: They think they are OK the way they are. They may need a few minor adjustments here and there but no big changes are required; they feel they are already free. They look at themselves the same way travel folders describe San Francisco. Have you ever read through a travel folder of San Francisco? I will tell you what you will not find in it. You will never find in it a paragraph that says, "Although it is one of the most beautiful cities in the country, San Francisco has huge ghetto areas where you can drive for blocks and see people living in squalor, misery, hunger and heartache. This city is noted as one of the most immoral cities in the nation. You can stroll down Castro Street on a beautiful summer's evening and find yourself surrounded by lesbians, faggots and transvestites. You will never forget that experience." No, you will never find a travel folder that says that. They talk instead about the Golden Gate Bridge, the beauty of the Bay, the wonder of the redwood trees, and the glories of the history of San Francisco, while they ignore the hurt and the heartache. That is what these people who were listening to Jesus were doing, and that is what we do, too.

But Jesus cuts right through all of that. Listen how he handles this. He takes these men at their word and begins to examine what they say.

**Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." {John 8:34 RSV}**

That is one of the most profound statements ever uttered by Jesus. When you let yourself follow wrong and do wrong, whether in attitude or in action, you become a slave of that wrong. Gradually you slip under its control. Later, when you want to break it, you will find you cannot. You are a "slave to sin."

Continuing, Jesus declares,

**"The slave does not continue in the house forever; the son continues forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." {John 8:35-36 RSV}**

In these marvelous words Jesus points out that slavery is the opposite of freedom: "You men say you are free, but you do not know how great a slave you are." If freedom is being able to be all that you are meant to be, then slavery is to lose all possibility of that. When you give in to little ways of what Jesus calls "sin" -- wrong deeds and wrong thinking -- gradually an invisible net is being woven that you finally cannot break.

Such things never seem dangerous at first. They look very innocent because everybody does them, and we justify them in many ways. They are popular, and furthermore, they are a lot of fun. I do not have to argue that with you. We know from our own experience the pleasure that wrongdoing brings. Not only the obvious things such as drink and sex, but the pleasure of inward sins. Did you ever feel the exquisite pleasure of telling somebody off when he was wrong? Did you ever feel the delight of showing yourself to be better than someone else, or of indulging in a juicy bit of gossip that wrecked somebody's reputation? Those too are "the pleasures of sin" {Heb 11:25}. They form habits within us that finally become unbreakable, no matter how hard we try.

The chief mark that this is happening is that, when you finally decide to quit, you cannot. You have heard that well-known saying about smoking, "It's easy to quit smoking. I've done it hundreds of times!" That is true also of a hot temper, an inward lust, an indulgence in pornography, whatever it may be. It seems easy to do until you try, and then you find it is impossible. So pride and hate and loveless indifference and prejudice and jealousy and anger and malice and revenge, all gradually take deep root in us and bind us, and we become slaves. That is what had happened to these men. How quickly Jesus strips away all their facades and exposes them for what they really are.

He also declares that kind of slavery has a very serious problem connected with it: "The slave does not continue in the house forever, the son continues forever." These men had said, "We are descendants of Abraham." They meant, "We are sons of the house of Abraham." To that Jesus says, "No. It is true you are in Abraham's house, but you are not there as sons, you are there as slaves, slaves will eventually be cast out. They do not live in a house forever. Only the son has permanent residence in a house."

A "house," as Jesus uses the word here, is a symbol: it is a place of pleasure and privilege; to live in a house is to have certain enjoyments of pleasure and privileges. Sin has its pleasures and it offers its privileges to us. The problem, however, is, as you see manifest on all sides, it cannot last. I do not have to illustrate this. You can see it everywhere. You all know people who are trying desperately to hang on to the pleasures of sin, to get the same kick out of drugs or gambling or lust or adultery or fornication that they did at first, but it is slipping away; it cannot last. Eventually they are turned out into the streets, pathetic wanderers trying to find their way home. You know that is true, don't you? But listen to Jesus, "The Son can make you free." The Scriptures declare that when you believe in Jesus, and when you follow him, he makes you into what he is. You become a son, and a son remains in the house forever. Nothing can take away the pleasures and privileges that sonship brings.

Jesus now takes this a little deeper,

**"I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father." {John 8:37-38 RSV}**

This is a step further into reality, to the explanation of the cause of evil. It is a question of fatherhood. Who is your father? It is all a matter of relationship. Yesterday my wife and I joined with my brother-in-law and his wife in looking at some old family portraits of our ancestors, men and women we have never met, but we are descended from them, and our children are descended from them. We had a great time noticing where certain features in our children come from. Looking at a picture of a great-grandmother we said, "Oh, that is where our daughter gets her broad face and her blue eyes." Another picture brought the comment, "That is where one of my daughters gets her high cheekbones." It is clear that our ancestry greatly affects us.

That is true spiritually, too. That is what Jesus declares here: "I have a Father. I talk with him all the time and he with me, therefore, I talk like him; what I say is what he says. But you want to kill me," he declares. "That reveals what kind of a father you have: You have a murderer for a father."

These men, understandably, did not like that very much. Being Jews, they were a bit hard to change, so we read,

**They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did." {John 8:39-41a RSV}**

In the book of Genesis we are told that when God sent a heavenly visitor to Abraham, the patriarch welcomed him. He killed the fatted calf, made a splendid feast, listened to the visitor's words and obeyed the truth. Thus Jesus is saying here, "You cannot be Abraham's children, really. Outwardly you are, but inwardly you are not because you do not do what Abraham did. Rather you are doing what your father does."

The Jews object to his words and move the argument to a different ground.

**They said to him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God." {John 8:41b RSV}**

Some of the commentators think this is a sly dig at Jesus' own birth. Rumors of the virgin birth of Jesus were circulating, and they are taking a cut at that. "You want us to believe that you were born of a woman without a man?" they imply. You want us to believe that your mother, Mary, had a baby without the involvement of a father? We find that hard to believe. We certainly were not born that way. We were born legitimately. Furthermore, if you are going to put things on a spiritual basis, what do you make of what Isaiah and Moses said, that 'the father of Israel is God'? God is our father."

To this Jesus continues the same line of argument,

**Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me." {John 8:42 RSV}**

What he is saying is. "What you do reveals to whom you belong. All your proud claims are worthless if your hearts are filled with murder and lust and envy and jealousy and hate. You are not God's children. You come from another source."

Jesus brings the discussion to a dramatic climax in the three remarkable questions that follow. Let us remember the setting. Jesus is dialoguing with these Jewish leaders in the courts of the temple. The people of Israel, many of them supporters of, and believers in, Jesus are hanging on every word. The leaders particularly are very upset; they feel threatened. Now Jesus asks three questions of them, and pauses for an answer after each question. Here is the first question:

**"Why do you not understand what I say?" {John 8:43a RSV}**

He awaits their response. There is none, so he answers his own question:

**"It is because you cannot bear to hear my word." {John 8:43b RSV}**

He could read the anger, the resistance on their faces. They were threatened, they did not want to hear this, and he tells them why:

**"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me." {John 8:44-45 RSV}**

Now he strips away all the veils. He opens the door to the invisible kingdom under which all of us live. You will never understand life until you accept the fact that there are invisible realities, both good and bad, governing and controlling human life. Jesus lived continually in the realization that the invisible control center of earth was where the great issues of life were settled. He points out that there is a malevolent being, a hater of men, working behind the scenes; a murderer who wants to destroy human beings, and his process is to

deceive them, to lie to them, to make them think and believe a lie. That is what had happened to these men. They had been tricked; they had so long believed all the little lies that appealed to their pride and their ego that they were no longer capable of understanding and recognizing truth when Jesus spoke it.

Then Jesus asks the second question,

**"Which of you convicts me of sin?" {John 8:46a RSV}**

That is surely one of the most remarkable challenges in all of human history. Here is a Man who could stand up in public before his enemies and openly ask them, "Which one of you convicts me of sin? Speak up!" He pauses for an answer, but no one says anything. This is the unshakable rock upon which our Lord's testimony stands. What he means is, "If you can find anything that I have done wrong, anything in all my thirty-three years on earth; if there is one of you who can stand up and say, 'You cheated me, you stole from me, you lied to me, you deceived me, you lived for your own self, you took away what belonged to another,' that would utterly demolish my claim to have come from God." This is why Christians have always said that you must either think Jesus Christ is a madman, is absolutely out of his head to make such claims, or you have to believe what he says -- one or the other. He leaves us no other choice.

Then he asks the third question:

**"If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?" {John 8:46b RSV}**

No one had answered when he asked, "Which of you convicts me of sin?" Their silence implied that no one could do so. So he asks, "If I tell you the truth, why do you not believe me?" There is a remorseless logic in his words. He has stripped away the veil that has hidden their hearts from themselves. He has revealed them, not as good and decent men who were free before God, but as slaves, bound with habits they could not break, slaves to sin, desperately needing the work of a Redeemer. So he states the case plainly.

**"He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God." {John 8:47 RSV}**

This brings us back to Verses 31-32, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." That is the only way out. To all victims of Satan's lies he offers the priceless gift of freedom.

He breaks the power of cancelled sin  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean;  
His blood availed for me.

Is that what you are saying? May God grant it to be so.

Let us think about these words of Jesus. Think about yourself, living on God's earth, living in his universe, under the control of this magnificent Lord who understands life so intimately.

Who are you in relationship to him? That is the question.

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