

“Hold to My Teaching”

I. To know the truth

II. To be set free

³¹To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” ³⁴Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

It was one of history's most dramatic moments. The date was April 18th, 1521. A lone monk stood before the Imperial Council in the city of Worms, Germany. On a table in front of him sat a stack of books and pamphlets in which he had called into question the authority of the papacy; he objected to the practice of selling indulgences and insisted that sinners are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus and not by their good works. But because those writings stood in opposition to the official teachings of the Roman Catholic church, the church officials demanded that this monk take back what he had written, admit that he was wrong, or else be excommunicated from the church and immediately be labeled an outlaw, someone who could be legally shot on sight.

What would he do? Would he buckle under the pressure of the church hierarchy? Would he admit that he was wrong? After giving the matter prayerful consideration, Dr. Martin Luther responded to his accusers with these words, *“Unless you can prove from the Bible that I have made wrong statements, I cannot and will not take back anything. My conscience is bound by the word of God. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.*

That, my friends, marked a turning point in the history of the Christian church. Although we commemorate October 31st, 1517, the day that Luther posted the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church, as the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation, the fact is, at that point in Luther's life, he was still a Roman monk simply asking questions. But 4 ½ years later, at the Diet of Worms, Martin Luther openly took a stand for the truth—at the risk of being burned at the stake.

The question is, how could Luther do something like that? Why did he do it? The answer: because that’s what Jesus told him to do. In fact, it’s what Jesus tells you and me to do, as well, right here in our text, where Jesus says, in effect, “Christian...

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II. In order to be set free.

The account that we have recorded for us here in John chapter 8 is something that we see happening throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, namely, Jesus is interacting with the Jews of his day. And, as so often happened when Jesus spoke, some of the Jews believed in Jesus and some of them didn’t.

In fact, it seems that John is referring to that group when he writes in the opening verse of our text, *To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said....* Now whether John is referring to

the Jews who had come to believe in Jesus, or he was referring to the Jews who at one time had believed in Jesus but now no longer did, doesn't really matter, because Jesus words applied to both groups. Jesus tells them, *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples."* With those words Jesus is drawing a distinction between those who claim to be believers and those who truly are believers. In Jesus' day, and still today, there are those who think they are followers of Jesus, people who say that they have a good relationship with God, people who say take pride in the fact that they've been members of a particular church their whole lives, but who still refuse to hold to Jesus' teaching. They refuse to listen to what God says in his word—whether it's what God says about the importance of gathering together for worship, or what God says about the sanctity of the marriage covenant. Sometimes, people are simply unaware of what the Bible teaches. Other times, they know what it says, and they out right ignore it or deny it all together.

But the result is the same. Jesus says that they really aren't his disciples. These are the ones about whom Jesus once said, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."* (Matthew seven verse 21). You see, true discipleship is marked by and maintained by a connection to God's word. That's what Jesus means when he says, "If you hold to my teaching, (literally, the Greek there says, "if you remain in my word"), then you are truly my disciples."

Boy, isn't that a warning to each one of us about the danger of not remaining in the Word, not holding to Jesus' teaching? I mean, if we think that the Bible knowledge that we gained in 8th grade confirmation class should be enough to carry us to the end of our life, if we think that we can kind of pick and choose God's truth (you know, "I'll buy that, but that one's not for me"), if we can remain biblically illiterate and still be a true disciple of Christ, we're fooling ourselves and will be exposed in the last day.

Isn't that why the Bible commands us, for example, to *Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Or 2 Peter 2:2, Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. Or Colossians 3:16, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another.*

Isn't that also why Mount Olive continues to offer so many ways for adults to study the Word together, whether it's through Bible classes on Sunday or Wednesday or Friday mornings, or through Life Groups and SISTERS groups meeting throughout the week, or even through Bible studies posted on our website? As a Family Growing in Christ, Mount Olive not only worships together, it also studies the Word together. We're here to be disciples of Christ, men, women and children who hold to his teaching.

And why do we want to do that? Why do we want to hold to Jesus' teaching? Because then, as Jesus says, I. You will know the truth. Do you realize what that statement, "You will know the truth," implies? It implies first of all that there is such a thing as absolute moral truth. And it implies secondly that someone can actually know what that truth is. You realize, those are two things that the majority of people in the United States now reject. According to a recent survey by George Barna, 58% of Americans believe that there is no such thing as absolute moral truth. In other words, the majority of Americans, including a lot of church-going Americans, no longer believe that there is an objective definition of what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. Instead, say the majority of Americans, "When it comes to truth...well, it all depends. It's all relative. What's true for you may not be true for me." Of course, the reason that more and more Americans are rejecting the idea of absolute truth is that it allows people to define their own truth. For example, "You can't tell me it's wrong to

abort my child, because I have a right to do what I want with my body.” “And you can't tell me that I need to pay more taxes, because I have a right to do what I want with my money.” In each case, rejecting the idea that there is a higher standard that God is holding us to in turn gives us the freedom to do what we want to do. Or to put it another way, when there is no unchanging standard of truth, then “anything goes.”

Now, back in Luther's day, you didn't have this widespread rejection of the Bible as the source of moral truth. No, in the 1500s, the majority of people believed in God and the Bible. In fact, the Lutheran confessions didn't have to include an article about the Bible being the inspired and inerrant Word of God, because the church still believed that. The trouble is, in Luther's day, the church taught that the Bible was just one source of divine truth. In addition to “sacred scripture,” there was also something called “sacred tradition.” What is sacred tradition? It's what the Roman church claimed that God had passed down through the teachings of the priests and the councils and the pope himself. The Church taught that when the pope spoke “ex cathedra”, that is, when he made an official statement as the head of the church, it was regarded as divine truth, equal to scripture itself. And when there was a conflict between sacred tradition and sacred scriptures, then typically, tradition was given the upper hand.

My friends, that's what Martin Luther objected to. Luther knew that there is only one source for all true doctrine and practice—and it's God's holy word. That's why Luther not only preached about Sola Gratia (that we are saved by Grace alone), and Sola Fide (through faith alone), but also Sola Scriptura, (that our faith is founded on Scripture alone). In fact, in his commentary on the book of Galatians, Luther went so far as to pen these words, “*I am not to be believed, nor is the church to be believed or the fathers or the apostles, or an angel from heaven, if they teach anything contrary to the word of God.*” You might say that what Luther taught about the word of God is exactly what Jesus once said to his heavenly Father, namely, Father, “*Your word is truth. (John 17:17)*”

That's the first reason that Jesus tells us to hold to his teaching, namely, I. So that we'll know the truth. The second reason is II. So that the truth can set us free. Isn't that what Jesus says here in our text? “*If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*” Now someone might say, “What do you mean that Jesus will set me free? I already live in America, the home of the brave and the land of the free. I'm not a black man living in the Deep South in the 1800's. And it's not like God hasn't already given me the freedom to choose how I live my life. I have a free will. I can make my own decisions in life. Basically, I already have the freedom to do what I want in life.”

Jesus, however, would beg to differ. What does Jesus say? “*Very truly I tell you, whoever sins is a slave to sin.*” In other words, if you or I use our freedom to do whatever our sinful nature wants us to do, or what the sinful world wants us to do or what Satan himself wants us to do, then we are no longer free. Then we are slaves. We're being controlled by someone or something else. In reality, sin has become our master.

And if we're honest, we've all experienced that in life. We can all say with Saint Paul, “The good that I want to do, I don't do. And the evil I don't want to do, this I keep on doing. Who will rescue me from this body of death? The answer? Jesus will. Only Jesus can set a person free from the slavery of sin. And how does he do that? He does it by telling us the truth. First, by telling us the truth about ourselves. Namely, that by nature, we can't do anything pleasing to God. What does Scripture say? *All our righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6)* Even the good things we think we do, are still tainted by sin. That's the ugly truth about ourselves.

But even more important than the truth about ourselves is the truth about our God: the

unconditional love that God has shown to us in Christ. The sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross of Calvary to free us from the guilt of our sins, to free us from the punishment that our sins deserve, yes, to free us from the power of sin itself. What does scripture say? *(Christ) died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Cor. 5:15)* That's the definition of true freedom. The freedom to not do the evil that our Old Man wants to do, but rather the freedom to do the good that God has recreated us to do in Christ. Isn't that what Saint Paul means when he says in Galatians 5:1, *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free*”? And again in verse 13, *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.* That's the freedom that Jesus gives, to serve God and one another, not because we have to, but because we want to. Because God has empowered us to, by his love and mercy in Christ.

Five hundred years ago a German monk stood before the most powerful court in the land. But he was not afraid. He was not afraid of ridicule. He was not afraid of imprisonment. He was not afraid of death. And why not? Because in God's Word, Martin Luther knew that he had the truth. And that truth had set him free, just as Jesus promised that it would. My friends, the same thing is still true for you and me today. As a church body that still wears Luther's name, Jesus' words still apply to each one of us. Jesus says, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”—for time and for eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.