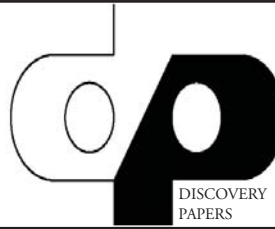




## INSIDE THE WORD



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John 8:31-59  
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Many of us, it seems, are attempting to compensate for some perceived deficiency, real or imagined. We think we lack something: something we've never received, something we've lost, something we fear we'll never get. Therefore, we grasp for it, perhaps irrespective of the will of God. The first woman perceived that she lacked wisdom, so she ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Brennan Manning writes of his "insatiable appetite for affirmation," rooted in his fear of human disapproval, which produced in him, generally, a performance-based mentality and, specifically, a craving for "ministerial success."<sup>1</sup> He perceived that he wasn't getting the approval he needed, so he compensated for it, as many of us do, by pursuing some version of success. What do you think you lack? Do you think you're trying to compensate for it in any way? If so, what might you do about it? We turn, in John 8:31-59, to some of Jesus' best-known words.

In John 8:30, John reported that many people who overheard Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees believed in him. Now Jesus turns his attention to those people. Suffice it to say that Jesus doesn't teach what we would teach in a class for new believers.

John 8:31-59:

**So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

**<sup>33</sup>They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"**

**<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. <sup>37</sup>I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. <sup>38</sup>I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and**

**you do what you have heard from your father."**

**<sup>39</sup>They answered him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, <sup>40</sup>but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. <sup>41</sup>You are doing the works your father did." They said to him, "We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God." <sup>42</sup>Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. <sup>43</sup>Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. <sup>44</sup>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 does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. <sup>45</sup>But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. <sup>46</sup>Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? <sup>47</sup>Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."**

**<sup>48</sup>The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" <sup>49</sup>Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. <sup>50</sup>Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. <sup>51</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." <sup>52</sup>The Jews said to him, "Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' <sup>53</sup>Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?" <sup>54</sup>Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' <sup>55</sup>But you have**

**not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word.** <sup>56</sup>Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” <sup>57</sup>So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” <sup>58</sup>Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” <sup>59</sup>So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

## Chain reaction

Jesus says that meeting a certain condition (abiding in his word) demonstrates a certain status (being a true disciple). Not only does abiding in the word of Jesus demonstrate one’s status as a true disciple, it also sets off a chain reaction in one’s life. First, if you abide in the word, you will know the truth. Second, knowing the truth will set you free.

All of this needs unpacking. What does it mean to be set free? What does it mean to know the truth? What does it mean to be a true disciple of Jesus? Finally, and most importantly, what does it mean to abide in the word of Jesus? Jesus is only asking us do to one thing here: he’s asking us to abide in his word. Abiding in his word sets off the chain reaction. If we abide in his word (demonstrating that we are true disciples), we will, inevitably and without question, know the truth. If we abide in his word, the truth we know that comes from abiding in his word will, inevitably and without question, set us free. It all comes back, then, to abiding in the word.

It may help, first of all, to unpack what comes from abiding in the word to see whether in fact we want to be true disciples, whether we want to know the truth, whether we want to be set free. If I’m going to promise my children a reward for a certain behavior, I have to make sure the reward is compelling enough to motivate the behavior. Is what Jesus promises for abiding in his word compelling enough? If it is, then we’ll be motivated to abide in it. If it isn’t, then why would we want to abide in it?

## What does it mean to be a true disciple?

Jesus wants to make sure those who have believed him know what they’re signing up for. He doesn’t want false disciples; he wants true disciples. The noun translated “disciple” (*mathētēs*) come from the verb translated “learn” (*manthanō*). The twelve disciples are depicted in the gospels

as following Jesus. A disciple of Jesus is a learner who follows him. A disciple learns from the word of Jesus and therefore knows the truth. Jesus is addressing those who have believed him, but are they truly his disciples?

A true disciple of Jesus, who abides in his word and knows the truth, will be set free by the truth. These people don’t abide in the word of Jesus; they don’t know the truth; and the truth will not set them free. When Jesus told them what they were signing up for, they wanted no part of him. No, they are not true disciples. They are not learners following Jesus. By the end of John 8, they aren’t even false disciples.

Do you want to be a true disciple? Put another way, do you want learn from Jesus, not as you learn in a classroom but as you learn from being with someone? Not everyone wants to learn, and even less want to learn from Jesus. One of the tests of being a true disciple is whether you believe what Jesus says—all of what Jesus says. I have to admit, much of what Jesus says is either confusing to me or off-putting. The words of Jesus in John 8:31-59, for example, are both confusing *and* off-putting. I will sometimes say, when we’re considering the thrust of Jesus’ words in our staff Bible studies, “I don’t like it.” I don’t like it—but I believe it. I believe what Jesus says even if it’s confusing or off-putting. True disciples don’t simply dismiss what’s confusing or off-putting; they wonder if they’re missing anything, they ask questions, and they probe deeper.

First question: Do you want to be with Jesus to learn from him? Second question: Do you want to know the truth?

## What does it mean to know the truth?

The truth is defined in two ways in the gospel of John. First, the truth is defined in much the way that we would define it: truth as opposed to falsehood. More specifically, Jesus tells the truth—the truth that he has heard from God (verse 40). Jesus tells his disciples “the truth” that it is to their advantage that he goes away (John 16:7). To tell them otherwise would be to speak falsely. Second, Jesus is so identified with the truth that he not only tells the truth but also embodies the truth: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). To know the truth, then, is not only to believe what’s true as opposed to what’s false but also to know Jesus. Knowing Jesus, who speaks the truth, helps you separate truth from falsehood.

Jesus tells those who have believed him “the truth” he heard from God, but they want to kill him for it (verse

40). Moreover, they unwittingly sided with their father the devil, who “does not stand in the truth” and is “the father of lies” (verse 44). Jesus, in fact, accuses them of being liars (verse 55). They did not know the truth. They did not even want to know the truth.

Do you want to know the truth—both the truth that Jesus speaks the truth who is Jesus? Not everyone wants to know the truth. Some contend that there is no such thing as truth. Of course, the obvious retort to such a contention is to ask whether that contention is true or not. Some prefer denial. Some don’t want Jesus, or anyone else, for that matter, speaking the truth to them. Some don’t want to know Jesus as the truth because they understand that to do so means they must listen to what he says. Some don’t want to be bothered by the truth. James A. Garfield, the twentieth president of the United States, is first credited with saying, “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.” Isn’t that *the truth*?

First question: Do you want to be with Jesus to learn from him? Second question: Do you want to know the truth who is Jesus and the truth that Jesus speaks? Third question: Do you want to be set free?

## What does it mean to be set free?

The truth—that is, both Jesus and the truth he speaks—will set you free. When Jesus says “the Son sets you free,” it’s the same as saying the truth sets you free, because Jesus embodies the truth (verse 36). But what does the truth set you free from? If you’re not free, you’re a slave. If you’re a slave, what are you a slave to? Jesus tells us: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (verse 34). The truth sets you free from slavery to sin.

Sin is an attempt to compensate for some perceived deficiency irrespective of the will of God: to make up for what we’ve never received, to recover what we’ve lost, to grasp for something we fear we won’t be given. “All sins are attempts to fill voids,” wrote Simone Weil. Sin is taking the place of God and saying, “I will define what I need and get what I need on my terms.” Sin is putting yourself in charge of your own needs irrespective of the will of God. Lack of control makes us angry, and some of us realize our lack of control and explode in anger once we have children. Lack of success makes us envious. Lack of intimacy and lack of excitement make us lust. In Brennan Manning’s case, lack of approval made him perform. As James says, “You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” (James 4:2).

Once you start, it’s hard to stop, especially if you manage

to get at least something of what you want. That’s what sin does: it gives you at least something of what you want so that you keep returning to it for more. Of course, in many cases, it would not even occur to you to stop, at least until you realize that what you’re doing isn’t good for you or for those around you. By then, it’s not so easy to stop, because a pattern has been established. To not be able to stop doing something even when you realize that what you’re doing is harmful—that sounds like slavery, doesn’t it? When I was in college, a friend told me that I was being a jerk to someone. I said, “I know I’m being a jerk, but I can’t stop being a jerk because I’m a jerk.” I was enslaved.

Those who believed in Jesus in John 8 deemed themselves free already based on their descent from Abraham (verse 33). How can the truth set them free when they don’t want to be set free, when they don’t even know they’re enslaved? Likewise, many people today aren’t aware that they’re slaves to sin. They think they’re free. When they think of freedom, they think of being free to do as they please. They do as they please regardless of what pleases the Creator, who knows what it means to be human (having created humans!). But that’s not freedom; that’s slavery. It’s dehumanizing. In fact, it’s the worst kind of slavery. To think you’re free when in fact you’re a slave is to be a slave indeed.

## Morally corrupt, supremely forgiven

How, then, does the truth—that is, both Jesus and the truth he speaks—set us free?

First, Jesus diagnoses our morally corrupt condition. Consider the truth he spoke to the false disciples in John 8: he called them slaves, children of the devil, and liars. Such words are not easy to hear. Because looking at the truth of our morally corrupt condition is too painful, many of us look away in self-deceit. Looking away, but still vaguely aware of our condition, we then attack others, if only in our minds, in order to imagine ourselves as better than we actually are. It was too difficult for the false disciples to look at themselves; instead, they picked up stones to throw at Jesus (verse 59).

Second, Jesus not only diagnoses our morally corrupt condition, he also does something about it. He dies for it! He dies for us! Therefore, if we’re truly Jesus’ disciples, we’re not only morally corrupt, we’re also supremely forgiven. If we’re forgiven for our corrupt condition, then we can look at the truth of it instead of looking away in self-deceit.

Furthermore, after the crucifixion and resurrection, a new dynamic is at work in which we appropriate Christ’s



victory over sin as the Holy Spirit moves us toward Christ. You will know the truth—you will know Jesus—and as you know Jesus, the Son will set you free from sin, not all at once, of course, so that you, in your need, can draw close to him along the way in your battle against evil. But he will set you free, surely and eventually and completely. “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

The apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 8:11: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” The Spirit is imparting to us the life of God even now and bringing about renewal for the inner person (Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 4:16). Although our bodies will die, death is not their final state. The presence of the Spirit, who unites us with Christ, is the guarantee that God will raise us from the dead, just as he raised Christ, at which point we will be completely free from sin. By the end of John 8, however, those who initially believed in Jesus are still in bondage.

Do you want to be set free from slavery to sin, from always compensating for some perceived deficiency? Not everyone wants this kind of freedom. Do you want to take a look at your morally corrupt condition, or would you rather look away and, looking away, distract yourself by casting stones at others?

Russ Douthat, a columnist for *The New York Times*, observes that plenty of spiritual teachers and writers in our world are more or less encouraging us to define and meet our own needs on our own terms:

*From the sermons of Joel Osteen to the epiphanies of “Eat, Pray, Love,” our spiritual oracles still urge us to seek the supernatural, the numinous, the divine. They just dismiss the idea that the divine could possibly want anything for us except what we already want for ourselves.<sup>2</sup>*

In other words, they don’t know they’re enslaved; they don’t know that Jesus wants so much more for them than they could possibly want for themselves.

First question: Do you want to be with Jesus to learn from him? Second question: Do you want to know the truth who is Jesus and the truth that Jesus speaks? Third question: Do you want to be set free from compensating for some perceived deficiency? If you answer yes to these questions, then abide in the word of Jesus.

## What does it mean to abide in the word?

The “word,” like the “truth,” is defined in two ways in the gospel of John. First, the word of Jesus, the sum of what he teaches, represents the “words of God” (verse 47), and God’s word is “truth” (John 17:17). Therefore, the word of Jesus is the vehicle through which the truth is conveyed. Second, like the truth, the word is defined in a more personal way in the gospel of John. Jesus is the truth; he is also the word—the word who is God (John 1:1, 14).

In English, the verb “abide” is related to the noun “abode.” Likewise, the verb translated “abide” (*menō*) is related to the noun that means “home” (*monē*, John 14:23). Therefore, abiding in the word of Jesus means to make your home in the word of Jesus and, because Jesus is the word, to make your home in Jesus himself. Jesus not only tells us to abide in his word, he also tells to “abide in me” and to “abide in my love” (John 15:4, 15:9).

The word of Jesus found no place in those who initially believed in Jesus in John 8; in fact, they couldn’t even bear to hear his word (verses 37 and 43). Based on a few of Jesus’ words, they believed him in verses 30. Based on a few more of his words, they didn’t believe him by verse 45. Although they believed for a few minutes, they never made their home in the word of Jesus and the word who is Jesus, not even for a few minutes.

What does it look for us today to abide in the word? If you make your home in a particular dwelling, you don’t simply look at it from the outside; you enter it, you get inside it. Any time we use words, we are saying something about ourselves. Jesus observed, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). The words of Jesus, which together constitute the word of Jesus, tell us about him; they tell us about his heart. When he invites us to abide in his word, he’s inviting us to enter his heart, to get inside his heart. If in fact he is the word, this makes all the sense in the world. What he’s inviting you to do is make your home in his heart, and if you make your home in his heart, you make your home in his love. What an invitation!

## Enter the heart of Jesus

What, then, do we do with the word of Jesus? Read it, by all means. Study it, yes. Memorize it, sure. Especially, use your imagination as you are exposed to it. Do all of this and more not simply to know it but to know Jesus, to know his heart, to know his love. The word of Jesus—indeed, all of Scripture—is a doorway. Jesus’ opponents searched the Scriptures, and they knew the Scriptures far

better than most of us, but they stopped at the doorway (John 5:39-40). At our church, we emphasize the teaching of the Scriptures—rightly, in my opinion. It’s a strength of ours, I believe. Every strength, though, can conceal a weakness, and the potential weakness of emphasizing the Scriptures is to treat knowledge of the Scriptures as an end in itself and leave it at that. To do so is akin to knowing the nooks and crannies in the door and perhaps admiring its beauty but never walking through it. Don’t stop at the door. Enter through the word of Jesus to make your home in the heart of Jesus. The heart of Jesus: that’s your home. That’s where you belong. What’s behind the word? Behind the word is the heart. Open the door and walk through it.

Enter the heart of Jesus through the word of Jesus. Then, of course, you will learn from him as a disciple—really learn. Then, of course, you will not simply know *about* the truth, abstractly from a distance; you will also, more importantly, *know* the truth, personally and intimately. You will know Jesus himself and the truth he speaks. You will know his heart.

Enter the heart of Jesus through the word of Jesus, and you will be set free from compensating for some perceived deficiency. How so? Jesus is Lord of the world. You’re not. Listen to him, “Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” Jesus here, as elsewhere in John, equates himself with the one true God, who identified himself to Moses as “I AM” (Exodus 3:13-14). He accurately defines your needs. He perfectly meets your needs—in his perfect time and his perfect way, of course. He has proved that he is Lord of the world by rising from the dead. He has proved that he meets your needs by meeting your biggest need: dying on the cross for your sins.

When you enter the heart of Jesus through the word of Jesus, you get what you want most, even if you wouldn’t have defined it this way: you get love, pure and holy. Getting love from Jesus, you also get the sense that you can trust him to define your needs and meet your needs. He sets you free from slavery to sin: compensating for some perceived deficiency. When you enter the heart of Jesus and make your home there, you realize, bit by bit, that you lack nothing. Isn’t that the truth of Psalm 23:1? “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”—or, with the Lord as my shepherd, and in John 10 we find that Jesus is our shepherd, I shall not lack whatever I need. Moses told the Israelites who had spent forty years in the wilderness, “You have lacked nothing.” How can he say such a thing? Because, “These forty years the Lord your God has been with you” (Deuteronomy 2:7). If it can be said that those who wandered in a desert lacked nothing, how much more can it be said of those of us who dwell in the heart

of Jesus? In the end, this is the truth that sets you free, as you appreciate it: you lack nothing. For if you realize that you lack nothing, you will not sin by compensating for some perceived deficiency. Listen to the apostle Paul: “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19).

What do we learn in the heart of Christ? We learn that he is in control; therefore, we need not get angry. We learn that he has a unique part for us to play in the drama of redemption; therefore, we don’t need to be envious. We learn that there’s no better intimacy than intimacy with him, that there’s nothing more exciting than knowing him and following him into the world; therefore, we need not lust. Inside the word, in the heart of Jesus: that’s where we find freedom.

### Note to self

Do you want to be with Jesus to learn from him? Do you want to know the truth who is Jesus and the truth that Jesus speaks? Do you want to be set free from compensating for some perceived deficiency? If so, enter the heart of Jesus through the word of Jesus, and he will set you free—in his time and his way.

Here’s how Brennan Manning, enslaved to performance because of his fear of disapproval, entered the heart of Jesus. At the end of a retreat, he wrote what he called his “false self” a letter:

*The bottom line, my pampered playmate, is that you are both needy and selfish. You need care, love, and a safe dwelling place. On this last day in the Rockies my gift is to take you where, unknowingly, you have longed to be—into the presence of Jesus. Your days of running riot are history. From now on, you slow down, slow very down.*

*In His presence, I notice that you have already begun to shrink. Wanna know somethin’, little guy? You’re much more attractive that way. I am nicknaming you “Pee-Wee.” Naturally, you are not going to roll over suddenly and die. I know you will get disgruntled at times and start to act out, but the longer you spend time in the presence of Jesus, the more accustomed you grow to His face, the less adulation you will need because you will have discovered for yourself that He is Enough. And in the Presence, you will delight in the discovery of what it means to live by grace and not by performance.<sup>3</sup>*

Manning walked through the door and entered the

heart of Jesus. Maybe, when you enter the heart of Jesus through the word of Jesus, you'll feel that you've come home. Maybe you'll settle down. Maybe you'll never want to leave. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, / and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Psalm 23:6). Home is where his heart is.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 1994), 30-45.

<sup>2</sup>Russ Douthat, "What the Church Needs Now" (*The New York Times*, March 19, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Manning, 44-45.