

Reformation Sunday  
Glimpses of Freedom

October 29, 2023  
John 8:31-36

“The truth will make you free!” Jesus says. You might argue that we are Americans. We have always been free. We live in the home of the brave and land of the free. But are we really free? There are many things that can hold us in bondage.

Simply stated, bondage happens when you **have to** do something. It happens when you can't say “yes” or “no” to a request. For example: You **have to** pay your mortgage. You can't say, “No,” to the mortgage company. Well ... you can, but there are not-so-nice consequences for non-payments. However, when the mortgage is paid off, suddenly you are free to spend that money however you like. You no longer **have to** pay the mortgage. You are free to do with that money whatever you want – spend it, save it, donate it. That's a glimpse of freedom.

It's a bit harder to live with such freedom. You have so many choices rather than someone telling you what you **have to** do. Some people prefer bondage to the rules. It makes life easier – until it doesn't.

Even Christianity can become bondage when people say things like: “You **have to** keep the Ten Commandments.” “You **have to** read the Bible.” “You **have to** attend church.” Those are phrases of bondage – not the freedom that Jesus gives us.

Jesus says at the end of our text: “The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever.” He makes a contrast between slaves and children.

It seems a bit absurd to ask, “What do you **have to** do to be your parent's child?” There's nothing you **have to** do to be your parents' child. There's nothing you **can** do to be your parents' child. Being their child was something that happened to you – you were born; or you were adopted. In either case, good parents declare, probably not quite with these words: “We are your parents. You are our child.” There's almost nothing a child can do to change that relationship.

That's a lot like what God declares in our First Reading: “I will be your God. You will be my people.” The people didn't **have to** do anything to make that relationship. God did it all. God said it. It happens, like, “Let there be light,” and there was light. “You are my people.” They are God's people.

A similar promise was made to each one of you at your baptisms. God said, “I am your God. You are my child.” That happened. You are God's children. God declared it. Believe it.

When the **have tos** are removed, like when the mortgage is paid off, you are free to do whatever you **want to** do with that extra money. As children of God, you are free to do whatever you want to. You should **want to** do good things with your freedom. You should **want to** love God and your neighbors and yourself. You should **want to** study God's Word. You should **want to** gather together, like you've done today, to receive what God gives to you.

We don't always **want to** do what we should do. The problem is sin. Sin is not only doing the wrong things. Sin is not only disobeying God. Our deepest sin lies in the fact that in our hearts we don't always desire to do the good we know we should do. We do not always use our freedom to do the most loving things for self and others.

One way to deal with this sin is to fall back onto the slavery of the law. To live by the “**have tos**” of the law. So much preaching that I hear today deals with, “You **have to** do this or that.” That is slavery of the law. Jesus did not come to make us slaves to some new set of rules. Jesus said, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” You are free. We don't dare give up

this freedom that Christ suffered and died to give us. You are God's children. God said so at your baptisms. That's the truth. That's the truth that makes you free.

We will sin. We are sinners. That's also the truth. That truth also brings us freedom. We don't need to try and hide our sins or rationalize them. We recognize them. We admit our mistakes. We repent of them. We trust the truth that all our sins are forgiven through Christ.

We can't cure our sinfulness by trying harder to keep the law. That is the slavery of the **have to**s that Jesus died to free us from.

We deal with our sins by continuing in the Word Christ has given us. One of the many gifts that Martin Luther gave us was the Bible in the language of the people. He wanted everyone to read and understand it, not just the scholars who read it in Latin. He also talked about how God uses the Word.

God's Word is used by God, whether it comes from reading and hearing scriptures, from sermons, devotions, hymns, or even from a friend, God uses those words to convict us of sins so that we might confess them, repent of them, and seek help in overcoming them. As God's Word works in our hearts and lives, we will find ourselves recognizing more and more of our sinfulness, so that it might be confessed, forgiven, and rooted out.

As God's Word works in our hearts and lives, we will find ourselves recognizing more and more of God's gracefulness that forgives those sins; that continually accepts and welcomes us back as God's own children. We will find ourselves being more willing to freely do the good that God desires – without God demanding that we **have to** do it. When it is a **have to** it is not really an act of love; but acts of selfishness.

Jesus has to set you free. Jesus has to set you free, so that you can **fulfil** the law, rather than just **obey** it. Jesus said that the greatest law is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Love cannot be commanded. You cannot give the order, "You **have to** love me" – well, you can command it. If you do, you can't know if they really love you or not. They may just say they love you, because they feel that they **have to** say those words – but they may not really mean them. They may say those words and do nice things simply because they feel that they **have to** do such things to avoid being punished if they don't obey. They may say those words and do nice things simply because they feel that they **have to** to get some reward. Acting out of fear of punishment or hope of rewards is not love. Such acts come from selfish motives – how the words and deeds might affect me: escape punishment or receive rewards.

True love – honestly caring for others and God and self – can only happen when there is freedom not to love. You don't **have to** love God back. You don't **have to** love other people. You don't **have to** love yourself. You should **want to** love God and others and yourself. When you don't have that deep desire in your heart – and that's likely to happen often – then you need to, as I said before, continue in the Word. God's Word will reveal your sins and call you to confession and repentance. God's Word will assure you that you are forgiven. You are still God's children. You are accepted. You are truly Jesus' disciples. Learn again this truth. It sets you free.

You are free. Jesus has said it. Believe it. You are free – free to truly love God and each other and yourself. Not because you **have to**, but because you are free to want to without threats of punishment or promises of greater rewards. This is a glimpse of the freedom Christ has given you.

Sometimes the question is asked: "What do I **have to** do to be free?" That's the wrong question. That's another **have to**. The gospel of Jesus Christ comes as a declaration, not a

question. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has set you free. That's the truth. Now that we believe that, we can ask: What are you going to do?