

A Matter of Identity

Rich Nathan

May 24-26, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 8:12-59

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An event of huge significance for criminal prosecutions in America happened on September 19, 1910 at the Hiller Home in Chicago. Clarence Hiller, the father of the home, woke up to discover that a gaslight near his daughter's bedroom had gone out. Clarence went to investigate. His wife, who was still in bed, heard a succession of sounds, fighting, two men tumbling down the stairs, gunshots, and then the slamming of the front door. When she got out of her bed to check out what was going on, she found her husband, Clarence, dead at the foot of the stairs.

The police arrested Thomas Jennings, who was a convicted burglar, less than a mile away. There was blood on his clothes. His arm had been injured. He said both things had happened as a result of falling out of a streetcar. In his pocket they found a gun similar to the gun that shot Clarence Hiller, but they couldn't determine whether or not it was the murder weapon.

Detectives poured over the house. One thing was clear; the killer had entered through a rear kitchen window. Detectives found imprinted in the white paint that the murder victim, Clarence Hiller, had applied to a railing four clear fingerprints from someone's left hand. No one in American history had ever been convicted before on

the strength of fingerprint evidence. It was a new concept having been recently introduced at an international police exhibition in St. Louis.

Thomas Jennings' defense attorneys argued strenuously that fingerprint evidence was unscientific and inadmissible. Four police officers said that the fingerprints perfectly matched those of Thomas Jennings.

The jury found Jennings guilty. The Illinois Supreme Court upheld his conviction in a historic ruling. And Jennings was executed by hanging.

Today we take fingerprint evidence for granted. In fact, we have lots of ways in the 21st century to identify people. We have social security numbers, voice analyzers, signature recognition programs, and optical scanners that can identify you by the pigmentation of the color of your eye.

I saw the other day that some scientist at Carnegie Mellon have designed a program that can identify people by the way they walk by using a radar gun on them. The gun can be pointed at you five hundred feet away. Apparently every person has a recognizable gait - the way we swing our arms and move our shoulders and hips. There are slight differences that are affected by our weight and body type.

A significant effort was made during the Iraqi War by American analysts to figure out whether the person making speeches in Iraq was Saddam Hussein or some look alike.

A wonderful book was written a few years ago by Lee Strobel called "The Case for Christ," from which I got the story about the history of fingerprint evidence. But this book uses this identification approach in trying to find out whether the Bible is accurate regarding its statements concerning Jesus. Does the evidence line up? Is he the promised Messiah?

You know, a large part of the Bible is devoted to the issue of identity. Who is Jesus? How shall we think about this person, Jesus of Nazareth? Is he the Messiah? Is he the one sent by God, or should we look for another? And who are we? How shall we think about ourselves? What is our identity? I've called today's talk, "A Matter of Identity." Let's pray.

John 8:12 – When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The context for Jesus' statement in chapter 8 is the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, which is also called in Hebrew Sukkot. This Jewish holiday, which takes place in the fall, is a harvest festival celebrating the ingathering of the fruit of the tree and the vine. But it has religious significance for Jews as a celebration of the desert wanderings of the Jewish people during the exodus. As you know, during the exodus people for 40 years lived in temporary shelters as they went through the Sinai Desert. And during this Holiday of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, Jews build temporary booths that many orthodox Jews today will live in for a week.

As I mentioned in previous sermons, the apostle John arranges the material in John 5-10 around the Jewish holidays. John is a very Jewish book. Jesus' statements and controversies in John 5 are built around the Jewish Sabbath. In chapter 6 the themes emerged come from the Jewish Passover. Chapters 7-8 are built around the Feast of Tabernacles. Chapter 10 takes place at Hanukkah.

This particular holiday, the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot, was actually my favorite holiday as a Jewish boy growing up in New York. I loved going into the booths, the sukkot that was built at the synagogue. It was this huge temporary booth, which was set up with huge massive tables of food. There were all kinds of cakes, cookies, and fruit. As a little boy I would go in and stuff my pockets with pound cake and cookies. Then me and my friends would go and lean against a fence, turn our pockets inside out, and eat the pound cake and cookies. It's a great holiday!

Now there are two ceremonies that accompany the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. The first was one I identified a few weeks ago. We read about it in ch. 7. It was a water ceremony where the high priest of the temple would pour water down the altar that would spill out into the court. And it was while the water was being poured that I believe Jesus stood up on the temple steps and said, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."

But there wasn't just a water ceremony. There was also a light ceremony.

And, by the way, I believe the text, John 7:53-8:11, this wonderful story of a woman caught in adultery and Jesus' mercy to her was almost certainly not originally placed by John in chapter 8. The best scholarship suggests that it made its way into John's gospel very late. It may be, in fact I believe it is an authentic story and it may have dropped out of one of the other gospels for reasons too numerous for me to list right now. In any case, I believe that as originally written the text ran from 7:52 to what is now 8:12. It is a seamless story about the Feast of Tabernacles.

So we had this water ceremony and then there was a light ceremony. Four large stands held four golden bowls of oil and were placed in the temple courts. These 16 bowls that could only be reached by tall ladders were lit on fire. And they provided so much light that all of Jerusalem, it was said, would be lit up. At a time when there was no street lighting at night, having these huge fires burning in the temple, glowing against the limestone of Jerusalem's walls would have made an impressive sight.

This lighting in the temple was accompanied by the lighting of thousands of torches held by Jewish men who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. And these Jewish men with these thousands of torches would dance the streets of Jerusalem. And I believe that just as the moment the lights were lit in the temple, and the torches were lit in the streets, Jesus stood on the temple steps and with a loud cry yelled, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

This is the second of the seven “I Am” statements in the gospel of John. We read earlier in John 6 the first “I Am” statement in which Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” Now Jesus says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

What is Jesus claiming about his identity when he says, “I am the light of the world?” In the context of the Feast of Tabernacles and the wilderness wanderings, we understand something about the meaning of the light. When the Jewish people, after their exodus from Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, they were led by a pillar of fire at night. That pillar of fire offered the Israelites protection. It suggested the presence of God. And it offered the Israelites guidance in the wilderness.

Jesus is saying, “I am the presence of God. I am the protection of God. And most of all, I am the guiding light of the world. Follow me. Listen to me. Stay close to me and you will not wander in darkness down blind allies, cul-de-sacs, and dead-end pursuits. Follow me and I will help you navigate life.”

You know, we live at a time in history in which every person in America faces a blinding array of choices. Go back just 40 years ago and options were much more limited, as for women in their expected roles in families and society, but also for everyone. There was a track laid out. You were expected to be married and have a few children, live near your family of origin.

Now, everything is an option. You can marry, or if you like, live with your boyfriend or girlfriend outside of marriage, or with a roommate or you can opt to live alone. You can have sex with someone of the opposite sex, or sex with someone of the same sex, or change your own sex. You can have children. You can choose not to have children. You can have children through artificial insemination. You can have children through surrogate parenting. You can abort your children. You can carry them to term. You can change your facial features. You can change your body. You can live in a country far from the place you were born.

How do we figure out what's right in a world that presents us with so many options? Is there such a thing as right and wrong, or is right and wrong entirely a matter of individual preference? That if you believe something is OK, then it is OK for you. And how far do we push this idea of individual preference when we say, "Well, you know, suicide bombers sincerely believe that their cause is just and the means that they're employing to carry out their cause is correct." Nazis believed that their cause was just. So does the KKK.

Is there a right and wrong? Are there any boundaries on behavior at all? Or do we all have to just figure out everything on our own?

You know this issue of figuring out what's right and wrong becomes especially important and pressing when you have children. For those of you who believe that everything is just a matter of individual choice and preference, that no one has a right to tell you or anyone else what is right and what is wrong, that it's up to you to

figure it all out – wait until you have children. Are you willing to raise your children by that standardless approach? Are you willing to say, for example, to your 11-year old daughter, “Go ahead, honey. It’s OK if you sleep with your 17-year old boyfriend, if that’s what you want to do. Just make sure you use protection.”

“Honey, it’s OK if you cheat on a test, so long as you get away with it. Don’t study, if you don’t feel like it. Don’t read, if the book is hard or uninteresting. Cut corners. Only do things that are easy. Just watch TV. After all, you have a right to do with it what you wish. It’s your body. Use it, abuse it, and let others abuse it. It’s OK.”

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

In a world that presents you and me with a blinding array of moral choices, in a world in which we face too many options, where our children are being bombarded with so many moral choices, and so many options – the media, popular music, popular culture – that they are just overwhelmed, in a world in which whole nations seem to be wandering in darkness, Jesus says, “Follow me. Listen to me. I’ll help you navigate life. I’ll help your family navigate life. If you are married, I will help you, as a couple, navigate through. If you are trying to raise a child on your own, or with your mate, I will help you with that. I’ll give you guidance. I’ll show you where the rails are that keep life healthy, whole, and sane.”

One of the things I love most about having a relationship with Jesus is that he has given me a game plan for life. Because of him, I know how to have a healthy, mutually satisfying, life-giving marriage. Without Jesus, I might be divorced. I certainly don't believe, even if I stayed married, that Marlene and I would have in and of ourselves the capacity to enjoy the rich, rewarding marriage that we have because I probably would not ever be able to admit that I was wrong about anything. I would almost certainly never ask for forgiveness. She or I would hold grudges. I don't believe I would truly serve her or put her interests above my own. But because of Jesus, who is the light of the world, I understand how to do marriage.

Because of Jesus, who is the light of the world, I had a game plan for parenting. I had something to say to my children regarding their choices. I've guidance to offer. Wisdom that doesn't come from me but comes from Him.

The same thing is true regarding how I conduct myself at work. Jesus has given me guidance about personal relationships and issues of public and political concern. And how I should relate to someone of a different race, religion, or ethnicity. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Let me ask you a personal question. Do any of you feel that in your life you are just walking in the dark? That you are tripping over things in your relationships, or things in your own person? Over and over again you keep stubbing your toe on the same issues, cutting your shins on problems that you don't have the ability to navigate

around? Is there anyone here who is tired of living without light regarding your sexuality or your relationships, or your child raising, your job situation, your finances?

Can I make this personal? Is there anyone of you who feels desperate for wisdom to do life that you just don't have? That you are willing to admit today that you don't know what to think about major issues in life or how to feel, or what to say? You need guidance. You need to turn to Christ.

Who is Jesus? It is a matter of identity. He is the light of the world.

VV. 23-29 – *But he continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.” “Who are you,” they asked. “Just what I have been claiming all along,” Jesus replied. “I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.” They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him.*

Now, we've seen in other texts from the book of John that Jesus is identified as the great “I am.” Three times in this chapter Jesus says, “If you want to know who I am, if you want to know my identity, here is what I go by, I Am.” v. 24, “I told you that you

would die in your sins, if you did not believe that I AM.” The NIV adds “the one I claim to be,” but that’s not actually in the original. It’s simply, “If you do not believe that I Am.” The Greek is “ego eimi.”

Likewise in v. 28, we read, “So Jesus said, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I Am.’” The words “that I claim to be” are not in the original.

And finally, in v. 58, “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “Before Abraham was born, I Am.”

Do you want to know me? I Am. That’s my title. I Am. That’s my name. Jesus is identifying himself with the name that God used of himself when God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. When Moses asked God for God’s name, God said, “My name is I Am.” The Hebrew for I Am is Yahweh. The King James Version translated it Jehovah.

Do you want to know me? Yahweh, Jehovah. Do you want to understand what’s going on in John 8, Jesus is saying that there is such a unity between my being and the Father’s being that we go by the same name. Jesus is making an unmistakable direct claim to deity here. That’s why the religious leaders in v. 59 picked up stones to throw him. They didn’t miss what Jesus was saying.

Over and over in the book of John Jesus makes the most outrageous claims. For example, in this chapter in v. 23, Jesus says, “You are from below; I am from above.

You are from this world; I am not from this world.” He is making a claim to his origins and Jesus, the man, is saying, “I didn’t come from this earth. I came down from above.”

In chapter 5 Jesus claims that he has the authority to judge every man and every woman who has ever lived in history. He says everybody is going to stand before him and he’ll render a judgment on your life. He says the judgment is going to be based on where we stand with him. Have we put our faith in him or have we turned our backs on him? Jesus makes the claim in John 5 that on the last day he is going to give the word and that every single human being who has ever lived in history will rise from the dead. Incredible claims!

And then Jesus gives this stern warning in v. 24, “I told you that you would die in your sins if you do not believe that I Am.” You must, in other words, make this identification between me, the man Jesus, and the eternal uncreated, Old Testament God of Israel, Yahweh, to be saved. You must see in my person, Yahweh. Jehovah God at work on behalf of Israel and on behalf of the world.

Have you made that identification? Do you see in Jesus of Nazareth the eternal being of Almighty God? Do you believe that Jesus and God the Father are one in essence?

People say, “I’m not sure I believe in Christ.” Or they say, “I’m not sure I even believe in God.” You know, rather than argue someone into belief in Christ and God, an

appropriate response for the Christian is to ask, “Really? Well, which Christ don’t you believe in? Which God don’t you believe in? Do you not believe in the Christ that Muhammed Ali rejected when he became a Muslim? Ali rejected Christianity because he said, ‘I can’t believe in a white, blue-eyed, blond-haired God.’ Is that the Christ you don’t believe in? A white, blond-haired, blue-eyed Christ? Well, that’s great, because I don’t believe in that Christ either.”

“Do you not believe in the Christ of Deism, the Christ who is far away, who doesn’t care about children suffering from child abuse and people dying of AIDS? The Christ who might as well live on Mars? Good! I don’t believe in a far-off Christ either.”

“Do you not believe in the Christ of statues in some dark church or the Christ of medieval portraits with the halo around his head? That’s great! I don’t believe in that Christ either.”

“Do you not believe in the God that they taught you about in Catholic elementary school, the punitive God, the God who is just waiting for you to mess up so that he can smack you? The angry, easily provoked God who just loves to judge people and send them to hell? The God who delights in catching you doing something wrong so that he can discipline you? Do you not believe in the irritable, short-tempered, constantly upset God? Good! I don’t believe in that God either.”

Friends, rather than argue with someone about why God exists or why Jesus exists, why not ask the person which Christ or God don’t you believe in. Will you describe for

me the Christ that you have problems with. Will you describe for me the God that you don't think exists. And after they describe that Christ or God you can say, "That's amazing. We have so much in common religiously. I didn't think we shared such a spiritual bond. I don't believe in that God or that Christ either. Let me share with you the Christ that I do believe in."

V. 28, So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know who I am and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, that is when you have hung me, Jesus, on the cross, then you will realize I Am. The God we believe in is the suffering God. He is the God who just doesn't glance down at us from the distance of the moon, but who cares enough about us to be affected by our situation. We believe in a God who is pained by our pains, grieves with our grief; a God who hates cancer and premature deaths and victimization and sin so much that he had nails pounded into his hands and nails pounded into his feet and a spear driven through his side to set in motion the ultimate eradication of abuse and victimization and injustice and premature deaths and sin.

We believe in a God whose love is most clearly revealed at the cross. Do you believe in that Christ? The Christ who most clearly reveals God to us and the nature of God at the cross?

Who is Jesus? He is the light of the world. He is the great I Am. He is the Suffering God.

And who are we and what is our identity? Let's look at v. 31. *To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciple."*

You know, v. 31 might be one of the most important verses in the Bible regarding the meaning of being a follower of Jesus, especially for American churchgoers and Americans who believe that they are Christians. *To the Jews who believed him, he said, "If you hold to my teachings, you are really my disciples."*

You know, we in American churches, we who consider ourselves to be Christians in America, we would never say this. We would say, "So long as you make a start toward Jesus, everything is OK. So long as you raised your hand during an invitation to receive Christ when you were 16, or you prayed a prayer along with a pastor as an adult, or you went forward at a Billy Graham Crusade, or at a church camp, you will be eternally with Christ."

Listen to me now, listen carefully. True faith does result in the gift of eternal life now and forever. But the question that most of us never ask is "what is true faith?" How do we know if the faith that we are putting in Christ is a real faith, the genuine article? How can you know if the faith that you have is not some psychological wish fulfillment, some emotionalism – you just got caught at a weak moment and you said you believed; or whether the faith that you have has really laid hold of the real Christ

so as to save you. Is making a good start the mark of true faith? Is raising your hand, coming forward, or praying the prayer, is that the real mark of true faith?

Jesus tells us in John 8:31 what marks true faith. And I think you ought to underline this verse in your Bible. He said, "If you hold to my teaching." Literally, if you remain in, if you abide in, if you continue in, if you persevere in obeying my teaching, then you are one of my followers."

See, the issue is not have you begun the faith journey. The issue is do you continue the faith journey and make it to the finish line despite all the obstacles thrown in your way by life and by other people and by Satan. Do you make it to the finish line? This, by the way, is the teaching of the entire New Testament. You must persevere in faith to be saved. The mark of true saving faith is that you continue, that you hold on, that you fight through the obstacles. There are literally dozens of verses like this. I'm just going to read to you a few.

Jesus said in Mark 13:13, *You will be hated by all for my name's sake, but he who endures to the end will be saved.*

In Luke 9:62, *Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

1 Cor. 15:1-2, the apostle Paul says, *Now I would remind you brethren in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received and in which you stand, by which you are saved if you hold it fast, unless you believed in vain.*

Colossians 1:21-23, *And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his own death in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you have heard.*

2 Timothy 2:11-12, *The saying is sure if we have died with him, we shall also live with him, if we endure we shall also reign with him. If we deny him, he will also deny us.*

Hebrews 3:6, *Christ was faithful over God's house as a son and we are his house, if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.*

Let me read you one last verse. Hebrews 3:12-14, *Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God. Exhort one another every day as long as it is called today that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have shared in Christ if we hold our first confidence to the end.*

We Americans must have room in our theology for the real possibility that many people who have prayed some salvation prayer, but who are greedy, perpetually

bitter, angry and sexually promiscuous and do not move forward with Jesus, no real change in life, will not be saved. It's holding onto Jesus' teaching, it's continuing on in love and obedience that marks the genuineness of faith.

Friends, the reality of your faith is always going to be tested by the Lord. Sometimes immediately following the joy of praying to receive Christ, a person is just body slammed. They come forward and pray to receive Christ and then immediately following that everything blows up. They get laid off from their job. Their car breaks down. Their health or their marriage takes a major nosedive. Has any of that ever happened to any of you? You just got body slammed?

The issue for the new believer, the issue for the old believer is will you continue to hold onto Christ even when your life feels like it is falling apart? Even when it feels like Jesus is disappointing you? Will you love Christ more than you love money? Will you love Christ more than you love your boyfriend or girlfriend or as Jesus said, "More than you love your father or mother or wife or husband, or child."? Has the Lord tested your love for him?

Here is a promise you can take to the bank. The Lord will repeatedly test your friendship, and mine, with him. All through the book of John, Jesus makes the incline steeper and steeper. And so it is in our lives, its Jesus or our jobs; Jesus or your pursuit of money; Jesus or your popularity; Jesus or your addiction to pornography; Jesus or your non-Christian boyfriend; Jesus or your non-Christian girlfriend; Jesus or your secret lover. It's not those who start the race who will be saved; rather it's those

who finish the race. “He who perseveres to the end will be saved.” “If you hold to my teaching, you are truly my disciple.”

Are you saying, “Rich, if I stumble, or a family member of mine or a friend of mine stumbles along the way that we’re not saved? That we lose everything? That we lose our salvation?”

Not at all. What Jesus teaches us is NOT that a person who stumbles loses their salvation. The issue is when we stumble, do we remain down, stuck in sin, continuing to walk away from Christ and away from his will, and away from his teaching, or do we get up, turn around and come back fully into the light. Turn back to Christ and choose to obey him again?

Are we Judas, who began with Christ but walked away? Or are we Peter, who stumbled and fell; but who got up, turned around, and followed Christ to the end?

Who are you? Where are you at right now? What direction is your life headed in right now? Don’t tell the Lord what you did 15 years ago or a year ago. You make a start at Christianity. If you’ve stumbled along the way, are you willing to get up and turn around and follow Jesus again? It’s not the good starters who make it in, but those who finish the race.

Well, this discussion of discipleship leads to further discussion of slavery and freedom, vv. 32-36. *Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendents and we have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

You know if verse 31 is one of the most neglected verses in the Bible by contemporary American churchgoers regarding salvation, v. 32 may be the most misapplied verse in the whole New Testament. “Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

This verse is engraved on the walls of the Ohio State University’s Law School. I remember seeing it when I entered Law School there 25 years ago. It forms the motto of many universities. But Jesus is not saying that any truth will set you free. That the truth of Supreme Court decisions will set you free. Or the truth of particle physics, or the truth learned in a cosmetology program, although a good cosmetologist may free you from the problem of split ends or a cheap dye job on your hair.

V. 32 is linked to v. 31 with an “and” or a “then.” The freedom we enjoy is linked to holding on to Jesus’ teaching. If you hold to my teaching, you are truly my disciples. Then [and only then] you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. The truth that sets us free is found in Jesus’ teaching. And not just in his teaching, but in us holding onto his teaching, in you obeying, persevering in, submitting to his teaching.

If you hold to my teaching. Jesus' words alone don't free people. Again, there's a misunderstanding here. It's not just reading Jesus' words in the Bible or studying the Bible or hearing the Bible that frees us.

How does Jesus liberate us? Its Jesus' words believed, applied, obeyed, submitted to that frees us.

Well, how does obeying Jesus' teaching free a human being? We need to understand the nature of slavery and the nature of freedom. See, we think of freedom primarily from external restraints. We are freed from political oppression. Freed from our parents' supervision. Thank God, I'm 19. I'm free. I live in a dormitory now. I don't have my parents breathing down my neck. Thank God, I quit that job and I'm on my own running my own business. I'm freed from having a boss tell me what to do. Thank God, I'm divorced. I don't have to live with that witch anymore or that emotionally unavailable man. I'm freed from an unhappy marriage.

We Americans basically think of freedom as the freedom to do what we please without having anyone tell us what we ought to do. For us freedom means that we get to call the shots. The problem is that Jesus speaks to us here of a slavery that goes deeper than having to listen to other people. These Jewish leaders say to Jesus in v. 33, *"How can you say that we shall be set free?"* Jesus replied, *"For I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."* Everyone who continues in sin and a sin pattern is a slave. Jesus discerns a slavery that is far worse than slavery to some foreign occupying power, or slavery to some master on a plantation. Jesus speaks

about the slavery to sin, the slavery to yourself, slavery to your own lusts, to your own unstoppable habits, slavery to your own addictions.

I want you to think with me about this for a moment. Who is more free? Michael Jackson, who has hundreds of millions of dollars. He has enough money to do what he pleases. He can retain dozens and dozens of people who will do whatever he says whenever he says it. He has enough money to call the shots, to be boss, to buy dozens of cosmetic surgeries, to own an animal menagerie and all kinds of fairground rides on his private property. Who is more free? Michael Jackson with all of his money, or before she died, Mother Theresa, who worked with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, but who radiated joy.

You know, the greatest slavery is slavery to self. That's what sin is. Sin in its essence is the self-centered life. Sin is living self-indulgently, self-consumed, self-oriented.

Let me make this personal. Are you a slave? I'm not asking if you are being pushed around, being told what to do by someone else, if you work under a tyrannical boss, or you work for yourself, if you are in an oppressive marriage or single. I'm just asking what Jesus asks of us. Are you a slave? Are you a slave, friend, to some uncontrollable addiction? A slave to substance abuse? A slave to cigarettes? Alcohol or drugs or food? Are you a slave? A slave to other people's opinions of you? A slave to your anger? A slave to your job? Or making money? Are you a slave to your sexually appetites or brokenness? Are you a slave to yourself? To your own habit of self-indulgence or self-promotion?

Are you a slave or are you free? Has the Son of God, who owns the plantation granted you liberty?

You know, one of the greatest areas of bondage anyone can experience according to the Bible is the bondage of unforgiveness, to live perpetually trapped by resentment. To be imprisoned by past sins against you. To be tied up by someone's injustice.

Nelson Mandella, who is one of my heroes and ranks in my opinion as one of the greatest men of the last century, wrote an extraordinary autobiography titled, "The Long Walk to Freedom." He wrote that after 27 years in prison, 18 of them on Robben Island in South Africa, "When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that it is not the case. The truth is we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "Had Nelson Mandella and all these others not been willing to forgive, we would not have even reached first base." Mandella reintroduced into politics, into political life and government, the virtue of forgiveness. You are a

slave when you live in prison to what people have done to you in the past. Mandella understood this.

Let me close with this story. Mother Theresa once said, "Forgiveness is the greatest thing in the world." She illustrated it by a story. She and several of her nuns were working in an alleyway of Calcutta finding those who needed care and putting them in an ambulance to transport them to the House of the Dying. She was about to close the door of an ambulance when she heard the cry of an old woman. She looked out at the street, but could see no one. But the cry persisted.

Then she spotted a trashcan along the wall. Looking in the trashcan she found an old woman bleeding and in a terrible state. "Please, please help me," said the old woman, "My son put me here to die."

So we got her out and took her with the rest back to the house. We washed her and prepared her and cared for her. That night was one of the most arduous I've ever had in my life, the prayer, the perseverance, the persistence of the sisters to get that old woman to the point where she could forgive her son. It went on all night. In the wee hours of the morning the woman said, "Just a minute, I want to say something to you. I can remember well the day when my son was a young boy and something happened. I shut him out of my home and closed my heart to him. It has never opened since. From that point, the boy took the wrong path. I am to blame because he had no one to turn to."

Mother Theresa said to her, “If we got him here now, would you ask him to forgive you?”

She replied, “Yes. Yes. Find him. Find him.” She told the sisters where to go.

They moved out fast and found the son, a man in very great need and trouble. They persuaded him to come with them. The mother and son confronted each other. It was a moment of anguish. We didn’t know what would happen.

The mother said to the son, “Son, I shut you out of my life when you were a boy. You had nobody to turn to. I am to blame for the life of misery you’ve had to lead. Will you please forgive me?”

The man, a tough man, broke down and wept. He cried on his mother’s shoulder, “Of course, of course. But will you forgive me?”

She held him and they wept together. She said, “Son, I forgive you.” Shortly after, the woman died. But she was serene and at peace. She had found reconciliation not only with her son, but with God.

Friend, what is your identity? Are you a slave or are you free? It is in obeying Jesus, not calling our own shots, but letting him call the shots. Not being our own boss, but allowing him to be boss. Not asserting our own wills, but submitting to his will that

finally we get set free. To be free to have your life oriented around Christ who is the light of the world, the great I Am. Let's pray.