

“Becoming Free”

John 8:31-36

Jesus: the promised Messiah

Listeners, fans, disciples

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- John 8:31-32

“The truth will set you free”

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*** Love God and love people**

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West Valley Church
May 10, 2026
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Becoming: Free¹

If you asked most people the question, “Are you a Christian?” surveys show that about two-thirds of them would say yes. But what do you think they mean by that? Do you think that everyone who says they are a Christian is actually a Christ follower?

We all know too many people who claim to be Christians, but then their actions, character, and words don't line up with the ways of Jesus.

Now, it's not ever our job to judge whether or not they are Christians – God is the only judge of people's hearts. He knows; we don't. Our job is not to judge *others* but to examine *ourselves*, to see if *we* are living as Christlike disciples. *Then* we become examples for others of what a true Christian is like. That's our goal, right? Not to prove that other people *are not* Christians, but to prove that *we are!*

Last week we had an amazing time together as 21 people got baptized, plus one person the week before. That's 22 people who publicly proclaimed that they believe Jesus died for their sins, that he rose again from the dead, and that they are going to follow him the rest of their lives. Twenty-two people who want the world to know that they are Christians, first and foremost.

So what does that mean to be a Christian? What did Jesus teach about what it means to be a true disciple of his? I think that's an excellent question for all of us to answer, including those of you who were baptized.

Jesus taught a lot about the requirements of discipleship, and there were a lot of people following him and listening to his teachings.

In those crowds, there were many who were beginning to believe that Jesus was God's Son, the promised Messiah. Others weren't sure but were still listening. Jesus saw that those who believed were wanting to learn how to become his followers.

Today in our series called “Becoming,” we are looking at “Becoming Free.” We are going to look at the instructions that Jesus gave on what it means to be a Christian. By the way, Jesus never used the term “Christian” to describe his followers. Some of the terms that Jesus used were “disciples,” and “followers.” Other people called these disciples followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2). But it wasn't until *after* Jesus's death and resurrection that his followers were called “Christians;” someone in the city of Antioch first came up with the term to describe the thousands of followers of Jesus who were coming out of Jerusalem and spreading the good news about Jesus throughout the region (Acts 11:26).

Even though Jesus didn't use that term, Jesus *did* talk about the requirements of being his

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disciple, and we're going to look at some of that from the Gospel of John.

John was one of Jesus' disciples, and he wrote his eyewitness account – the Gospel of John. In chapter 8 we see Jesus preaching and teaching about how to become a Christian, and I'd like to look at just one section of that today. Would you honor God's Word by standing with me as I read for us?

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, 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. (John 8:31-36, niv)

This is the Word of God for the people of God: Thanks be to God. Thank you for standing; you can be seated.

So in that, we see many Jewish people crowding around Jesus and listening to him, and in those crowds some people were beginning to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the one promised centuries before by the ancient prophets. The crowds had heard about this promised Messiah from the writings of their ancient Hebrew prophets recorded in their Hebrew scrolls, which was their Bible. Every local synagogue had copies of those scrolls, and their Rabbis or teachers would publicly read from them and teach about them on every Sabbath day, which was Saturdays.

So, the Jewish crowds that were listening to Jesus knew that a Messiah was coming and wondered if Jesus might actually be that Messiah—the Savior prophesied to come and begin a new covenant that God had promised to bring.

Jesus: the promised Messiah

Let me set what the spiritual stage was like by the time Jesus arrived. You see, the people of Israel had broken God's original covenant given to them through Moses – at its heart it was what we call the Ten Commandments – they had broken them time and time and time again, individually and as a people. It was clear that they were never going to be able to obey them. So God had promised to make a *new* covenant with them and send a Savior—the Messiah—to begin this new covenant.

The Hebrew Bible, known to us as the Old Testament, forms the first half of our Bibles and it details God's relationship with Israel *before* Jesus came and established the new covenant, which is recorded in our New Testament. In fact, we catch glimpses of the Messiah all throughout the Old Testament in the stories of people like Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Isaiah, Jonah—they all give us foreshadowings of the coming Messiah.

What the Old Testament promises, Jesus in the New Testament fulfills.

What the Old Testament proposes, Jesus in the New Testament fulfills.

What the Old Testament pins its hopes on, Jesus in the New Testament fulfills.

What the Old Testament prophesies, Jesus in the New Testament fulfills.

What the Old Testament purposes, Jesus in the New Testament fulfills.

Jesus was that promised Messiah who fulfilled the prophecies of the ancient prophets and established, instituted, and irreversibly began the New Covenant.

The New Covenant calls for belief in Jesus as the Messiah – the perfect, once-and-for-all sacrifice for the sins of those who accept him.

This eliminated the old way of animal sacrifices. And for those who would be Christians – Jesus’ disciples – this Messiah would then send the Holy Spirit of God Himself to live within each one, and the indwelling Holy Spirit would put the law of God within the hearts of each believer and give them the power to follow the ways of God.

This is the work of the Trinity: God the Father created us, but we sinned, so God has spent our entire human history working to rescue and restore us. God the Son is the fulfillment of all God’s work to reach us and be in relationship with us. God the Spirit cleanses us, frees us, and empowers us to know the truth and live the Christian life.

So in John chapter 8, we see the crowds gathering and listening to Jesus teach. Some who were listening began to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

To use a sports analogy, you might say they were not just passively sitting in the stands anymore – they were becoming active fans.

Then, among those fans, some wanted to move to the next level and become true disciples of Jesus.

Listeners, Fans, and Disciples

So, you could say that in that audience there were three groups of people: The first group was just hanging out, listening, and not yet believers.

The second group was those who were beginning to believe that Jesus was God’s Messiah. They were becoming fans—not just listeners in the crowd anymore.

Then, among those fans was the third group of those who wanted to move to the next level. They were becoming disciples of Jesus. They were more than just fans; they were becoming true followers.

Jesus started addressing *those* fans, and he challenged them to move from being a fan to becoming a true follower, a disciple.

Those same three groups of people are here in this room today. See if you can figure out which group you identify with.

First, there are **listeners**. If this is you, thank you for being here! Just being here takes a tremendous amount of courage to come to a big room full of people you don’t know well. It takes courage to overcome the negative things you might’ve heard or even experienced from some churches and Christians. But you are here and you are listening and learning. You’re not sure about becoming a believer yet – and that’s okay – but you are interested.

You might not really understand what is happening inside of you right now, but let me help shed some light on this for you: I can tell you that what's happening and what you are feeling is *God's grace* – his love for you – drawing you like a giant, unseen magnet of the soul, like a magnet from himself to you.

He wants you to experience his saving grace. He has worked through all of human history up to this point and time so that you could know him and experience his grace.

He wants you to experience his truth about salvation and be set free from your sins and live the abundant life that he has provided.

Others of you have stepped over the line of faith and become **fans**. You believe that Jesus is God's Son, and you have accepted his saving grace. You've experienced some of the freedom that Jesus promises, you've been baptized and you are hungry for more and want your character to be more and more Christlike. One of the things you are realizing is that, as you experience God's grace, it has led you to hunger for more grace!

You are in the group that Jesus was talking to in John chapter 8. He is calling you into that third group who are becoming full blown followers, **disciples** of Jesus; people who prioritize Jesus above everything else in their life. People who are filled with the Holy Spirit and are not only free from sin but free to think and act just like Jesus.

The question Jesus answers in John 8 is...

How do we move from being a fan to a disciple?

Today, I want us to look at that question and how Jesus answered it in his teaching about how to be a real disciple.

Here again are the first two verses of the Scripture we read earlier:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'
(John 8:31-32, niv)

There's that familiar phrase that we hear people use in popular culture...

"The truth will set you free."

Imagine picking your car up from the shop after a routine tune-up, and the technician says, "This car is in great shape. Clearly you have an automotive genius to take great care of your car." Later that day, your brakes don't work. You find out you were out of brake fluid. You could have died.

You go back to the shop, and you say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The technician replies, "Well, I didn't want you to feel bad. Plus, to be honest, I was afraid you might get upset with me. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say, "I didn't come here for a little fantasy-based ego boost! When it comes to my car, I want the truth."

Or imagine going to the doctor's office for a check-up. The doctor says to you, "You are a magnificent physical specimen. You have the body of an Olympian. You are to be congratulated." Later that day while climbing the stairs, your heart gives out. You find out later your arteries were so clogged that you were, like, one jelly doughnut away from the grim reaper.

You go back to the doctor and say, "Why didn't you tell me?" The doctor says, "Well, I knew your body is in worse shape than the Pillsbury doughboy, but if I tell people stuff like that, they get offended. It's bad for business. They don't come back. I want this to be a safe place where you feel loved and accepted." You'd be furious! You'd say to the doctor, "When it comes to my body, I want the truth!"

Obviously, when something matters to us, we do not want to be told what they think we want to hear; we want the truth.² And yet, the entire algorithmic social media system is built around telling you what you want to hear, not often the truth. AI is looking so much like reality anymore that it is convincing us of an illusory truth.

"The truth shall set you free." While these are the words of Jesus, popular culture has distorted the original meaning because it takes the phrase out of context.

But when Jesus said "truth," he was not talking about the difference between opinions or between facts that are correct and incorrect.

The truth that Jesus was talking about is the truth about salvation. *That's* the truth that Jesus meant. He also used this meaning of "truth" when he later said:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, niv)

That truth is experiencing the salvation that Jesus offers. He is the truth.

Jesus is the Truth about Salvation

When you believe in Jesus as your Savior, you experience the truth of his salvation, that salvation sets you free from the guilt of sin and bondage to the power of sin. *That* is the truth that Jesus is talking about.

Now, with this proper understanding of the word "truth," let's reread this passage:

"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" (John 8:31-32, niv)

Believing in Jesus opens the door to the truth about his salvation, and then holding on to his teaching will set you free! If you believe and hold on to his teaching, then you will experience the promise of freedom. If you accept Christ and follow him, then more and more and more you will know the truth and be set free in your life.

So, what is the condition that we need to fulfill in verse 31, "If you hold to [Jesus's] teaching"? What does "hold to" mean?

² John Ortberg, "Loving Enough to Speak the Truth," PreachingToday.com

“Hold to, remain with, continue in, and not depart from” the teaching of Jesus.

“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

But too many people want the *if* without the *then*. They want the salvation without the sacrifice; they want the crown without the cross. They want the pardon without the price. They want the offer without the obedience.

You and I need to learn how to hold on to the teaching of Jesus.

The original language of the Greek phrase “hold on to” can also be translated into English as “if you remain in, or abide in,” or it can be translated, “if you do not depart, but continue to be present.”

The full meaning of “hold on” means to “hold tightly to them and remain obedient to them and continue to stay in them and not to depart from them.” What is the “them”?

What Is “the Teaching of Jesus”?

That phrase includes all of the various principles and commands of Jesus that were taught over his ministry and recorded by his followers.

There is much to learn about the teaching of Jesus.

That’s one reason why we gather together each week to hear the preaching of God’s Word, and that’s why we get into Life Group Bible studies so that we can ask questions and understand. That’s why we exhort you to make the time to read the Bible every day.

The grace of God helps us to hold on to the teaching of Jesus as we learn what that teaching is. John records Jesus saying this about what the Holy Spirit will do for disciples:

But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. (John 14:26, nlt)

As we learn more and more from his Word each week, God’s sanctifying grace helps us grow in the understanding of how to become better disciples of Jesus. Sanctifying grace is a way to describe what the Holy Spirit does in disciples, helping us to know and live God’s Word every day.

Remember that salvation and becoming a disciple of Jesus can only happen in our lives by the grace of God. We can’t save ourselves. We aren’t strong enough or good enough.

Here’s the big picture about God’s grace: God’s grace first draws us to himself. It’s called prevenient grace—“prevenient” means that before we even know God he starts working in our lives.

That grace begins to draw us to Jesus like a giant spiritual magnet. That prevenient grace is God drawing us to Jesus so that we might experience his saving grace.

Then his saving grace leads us to his sanctifying grace, which gives us the power to become more Christlike disciples.

So then the question becomes...

What does that sanctifying grace look like in us?

Trying to briefly explain what the entire teaching of Jesus looks like is not easy at all; but Jesus did give us a summary in Matthew chapter 22. In that scene, Jesus was asked by a religious leader in the crowd which of the commandments was the greatest. Jesus's answer shows his summation of the entire Mosaic Law and the writings of the Prophets (basically the entire Old Testament).

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:36–40, niv)

These are two great commandments that Jesus affirmed from the Old Testament...

Love God and love people.

Then, during the last week of his earthly ministry, as he gathered together his disciples for the Last Supper, he taught another important command to his closest followers:

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” (John 15:12, niv)

Love is a very big part of *everything* Jesus taught.

Love God with everything in you. Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. Love your fellow Christians the way Jesus loves you.

The command to love is big. Learning to love and learning all the other teachings of Jesus takes a lifetime of learning and growing, empowered by the grace of God in the Holy Spirit.

If we hold on to this teaching of Jesus and cooperate with the sanctifying grace of God, we will receive the promise of being set free!

Set free from what?

Being “set free” sounds like a great thing, but the religious leaders in the crowd took it as an insult. They did not see themselves as needing freedom from anything. Instead, they saw themselves as powerful leaders among the people of God with a privileged heritage from Abraham (Genesis 12:2–3).

Remember the reaction of the leaders in John 8:33:

“They answered Jesus, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’” (John 8:33)

But the freedom Jesus was talking about was a spiritual freedom from a spiritual slavery to

sin, not a physical slavery. We humans naturally focus on the physical/temporary while God focuses on the spiritual/eternal.

Jesus saw them as inwardly slaves to sin and in desperate need of freedom from the guilt of sin and the power of sin.

Listen to how Jesus identified their slavery:

“Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, 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.’” (John 8:34-36, niv)

Free from Slavery to Sin, Free to Love

Jesus saw them as slaves to sin and in need of freedom.

That is the same way that Jesus sees us today. He knows that sin has made slaves of us all. That sin brings guilt, and no matter how much good we do, we can never be free of the guilt of sin on our own.

We need a Savior who can forgive our sins. That’s the power of God’s saving grace to forgive our sins and remove our guilt.

Then we need his sanctifying grace by the Spirit to break the power of sin in our lives so we are no longer slaves to sin.

The apostle Paul later explained this slavery to sin issue to the believers at Rome:

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.”
(Romans 6:12–14, niv)

So, the question for us today is, “Have you been set free from your slavery to sin?”

1. It begins by believing in Jesus as your Savior and receiving the saving grace of God. That is the line of faith that you must step over to move out of the crowd of listeners and officially become a believer in Jesus.

Have you taken that first step and become a fan – a believer? Today is a great day to make that first step!

2. Then the next step is to daily grow in that faith and allow the sanctifying grace of God to do the work of the transformation of your character and your life into Christlikeness.

That transformation is a lifelong journey that begins with our salvation experience. But it’s not just a one-time event; it is a series of spiritual events in a lifelong journey of transformation.

There are many milestones along this journey of grace. But one of the big milestones is entire sanctification.

3. This is the step of presenting your entire self to the sanctifying grace of God so that the power of God can break the power of sin in your life. This is a step of entire surrender to the sanctifying power of God.

This is a huge step because it means that you give over the control of your whole being to God. You invite God to be your master and lord. God the Holy Spirit moves in and breaks the slavery to sin in your life.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote the words we read earlier: Romans 6:13:

“Offer yourselves to God . . .; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.” (Romans 6:13)

In the next weeks we will dive deeper into what this third step means and what it does not mean.

But for those of you who have already been believers, the question for you is, “Have you offered yourself to be entirely dedicated to God? Is Jesus the master over every area of your life?”

What is your answer to Jesus and his offer of freedom?

Which is more powerful in your life right now: the power of sin or the power of the Spirit of God?

Ask God for that kind of power today and be set free!

(Open the altar for seekers of salvation or sanctification.)

Prayer

Benediction:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Life Group Questions
Becoming: Free
Week of May 10, 2026

1. Read John 8:31-36. The sermon described three groups of people: listeners, fans, and disciples. How do you see those three in this passage? Which group do you most identify with right now, and why?
2. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” What do you think it practically looks like to “hold to” or “abide in” the teaching of Jesus in everyday life?
3. What are some ways people today try to claim Christianity without actually following the ways of Jesus? How can we focus more on examining ourselves instead of judging others?
4. The sermon emphasized that the truth that Jesus talked about is not just facts or opinions, but the truth of salvation through Jesus. How have you experienced God’s truth bringing freedom in your own life?
5. The message talked about being “free from slavery to sin, free to love.” What sins, habits, fears, or struggles can keep people spiritually stuck or enslaved? How does Jesus help us overcome them?
6. Jesus summarized his teaching with commands to love God and love people. Which of those comes more easily for you, and which is more challenging right now?
7. The message described sanctification as both an initial “full surrender” and then a lifelong journey of surrender and transformation through the Holy Spirit. Have you made that “full surrender”? What does that mean? What is one area of your life you feel God may be asking you to surrender more fully to Him?
8. Close in prayer for one another to be fully surrendered disciples, especially in the areas mentioned.