



Advent 2016

Sermon Transcript
December 18, 2016

The Amen of Christmas
Jesus: The Truth of God
John 8:31-59

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 18, 2016 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
John 8:31-59

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ³³ 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’?”

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

³⁹ 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, ⁴⁰ 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. ⁴¹ 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.” ⁴² 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. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, “Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?” ⁴⁹ Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” ⁵² 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.’ ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?” ⁵⁴ 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.’ ⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Introduction

Our passage this morning is a back and forth conversation had between Jesus and a group of people who seemed to be somewhat favorable in their view of Jesus. At the beginning of our passage, verse 31, this crowd is described as *“the Jews who had believed him.”* Now by this time, there was already an opposition party formed against Jesus, primarily made up of the religious leaders. In the previous chapter, John 7:32, the Pharisees and the chief priests had already dispatched some officers to arrest Jesus. But when it came to the people, the crowd, they were somewhat divided over Jesus. In John 7:40-44 it says, *“When they heard these words, some of the people said, ‘This really is the Prophet.’ Others said, ‘This is the Christ.’ But some said, ‘Is the Christ to come from Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?’ So there was a division among the people over him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.”* However, in our passage this morning, we find a crowd that is somewhat favorably disposed towards Jesus. Here we read, *“So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him.”*

If you follow this back and forth conversation between Jesus and this crowd to its conclusion, it may surprise you how this conversation ends. It starts in verse 31 with Jesus addressing a group of fellow Jews *“who had believed him.”* So this passage starts with *“Jesus said.”* Like most conversations, it was a two way conversation. In verse 33, it says that the crowd *“answered him.”* And back and forth it went. In verse 34, *“Jesus answered them”* and in verse 39, *“they answered him.”* In verse 39, *“Jesus said to them”* and in verse 41, *“They said to him.”* In verse 42, *“Jesus said to them”* and in verse 48, *“The Jews answered him.”* In the next verse, verse 49, *“Jesus answered”* and then in verse 52, *“The Jews said to him.”* Again, in verse 54, *“Jesus answered”* and in verse 56, *“So the Jews said to him.”* And then in verse 58, we see one last time, *“Jesus said to them.”* Only this time, the crowd that was once described as those who *had believed him*, now responds by picking up stones to throw at him. What did Jesus say that turned a crowd of supposed “believers” into a crowd that wanted to kill him?

It definitely is a curious question to ponder. But I wonder if the more important question to ponder for us this morning isn't, "what does it mean to believe?" This passage makes me wonder about the possibility of being favorably disposed towards Jesus; that is one who professes to believe and all the while is yet to become a true disciple of Jesus. In fact, Leon Morris suggests that this is exactly what we ought to be thinking about when we come to this passage. He writes, "It is best to think that John is speaking of people who had made an outward profession, but a profession that did not go very deep. Jesus' words, then, are meant to drive home to formal and casual adherents the meaning of true discipleship."¹ When it comes to Jesus, what kind of belief do you have? What does it mean to be a true believer of Christ? What does it look like to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus?

Seeming to know from the outset of their conversation where the crowd truly stood, Jesus begins this two-way conversation by clarifying what it means to be a follower of Jesus. So he starts in verse 31 by saying, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.*" This word "*abide*" is a favorite word of John. You see it often in the Gospel of John as well as the letters of John found at the end of the New Testament. It is a word that means to "remain" or to "continue." For example, in John 15 we have that famous teaching of Jesus where he likens himself to a vine and we are the branches. The difference between the branch that bears fruit and the branch that is thrown away is found in abiding. Here Jesus says, "*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.*" This same distinction is made in that short letter at the end of the New Testament, 2 John. In verse 9, John writes, "*Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching, has both the Father and the Son.*" Leon Morris concludes, "It is easy enough to be superficially attracted to Jesus, but the test is "*abiding.*" It is only those who continue who are genuine disciples."²

In this passage, abiding in Christ is closely connected to the teachings of Jesus. When Jesus says, "*If you abide in my word,*" he is referring to the totality of his teachings. In other words, you can't have Jesus apart from what Jesus says or teaches. He says in verse 47, "*Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not of God.*" In verse 51 he adds, "*Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.*"

So what kind of crowd are we this morning? Are we simply attracted to Jesus? Or, are

we abiding in Jesus? The answer to that question can be found in how we respond to what Jesus says and to what Jesus teaches and to who Jesus is. Jesus says it this way in John 15:7, *“If you abide in me and my words abide in you . . .”* In other words, you can’t have a Jesus of your own making. To follow Jesus is to follow his teachings. So, as we listen in on this unfolding conversation between Jesus and this crowd, I want us to pay attention to what we learn about the teachings of Jesus and what it is we need to embrace to be followers of Christ.

Truth Starts with Jesus

The first thing I want you to see is how Jesus finishes the sentence that was started in verse 31. *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* This is a bold claim and a powerful statement. It is an assertion that there is such a thing as “truth” with a capital “T” to be believed and embraced. Truth is not relative, rather, it is absolute. It reminds me of the interchange Jesus had with Pilate when he was standing on trial before he unjustly was condemned to die on the cross. Jesus said to Pilate in John 18:37, *“For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.”* Pilate then mutters under his breath, *“What is truth?”* It as if Pilate is saying, “Who is to say what is truth and what is not truth?” It is an assertion that questions whether or not there is ultimate and absolute truth. It is an assertion that claims the autonomy of the self to declare for yourself what is true and what is not true and that can change from person to person. But here Jesus holds out the prospect that in him we can *“know the truth.”*

The word “epistemology” is a fancy word, but it is an important word. It basically asks the question, “how do we know what we know?” Or, “how can we know what is truth?” Obviously, the ability to “reason” is an important part of coming to know truth. But human reason is not the starting point when it comes to knowing truth and knowing God. We can’t know ultimate truth unless it is revealed to us. Stephen Wellum puts it this way, “Revelation from God is the only way we can know anything about God.”³

The real question when it comes to knowing “the truth” about God and about yourself is to ask, “Where is the starting point?” In my quest to know truth, do I start with God as the foundation of knowledge, or do I start with myself and my ability to reason? You can see the contrast between these two starting points in the quest for truth when you read the Reformers pitted against the philosophers of the Enlightenment. John Calvin, one of the Reformers, put it this way, “Without the knowledge of God, there is no

knowledge of the self.” In other words, in order to know “the truth” it starts with God and the revelation of himself. In contrast, the philosophers of the Enlightenment, Descartes and Kant flipped it around and said, “there is no knowledge of God except through the knowledge of the self.” So in other words, according to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, man is the starting point for knowing truth. Depending on where you start, will determine how you view God and how your view yourself.

Isn't it interesting how Jesus is introduced to us in the Gospel of John? *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”* This is the same thing the writer to the Hebrews says in the opening of Hebrews, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . He is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature.”* In other words, Jesus is the starting point to knowing God and knowing yourself, to knowing truth.

When we talk about the kind of truth that sets us free we are not just talking about a philosophical understanding that enlightens us in some way. Rather, truth, here is found in a person. Jesus is the truth. Jesus is the revelation of God to us. Jesus is the starting point to knowing God and ourselves. When Jesus says, *“you will know the truth and the truth will set you free”* he is speaking of a truth that saves us because it is a truth wrapped up in a person. In fact, he ties the truth to his person in verse 36 when he says, *“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* Wellum writes, “In light of Scripture, the church has confessed consistently that to identify Jesus correctly, we must affirm that he is the divine Son who has become incarnate, that to know him is life eternal, and that to know him not is judgment unto death.” And then he adds, “Biblically speaking, getting Christ right is a matter of life and death.”⁴ Why? It is because Jesus is “the truth” and “the truth” - that is Jesus - sets us free.

Know Yourself

The immediate response of the crowd to these initial words of Jesus is telling. They answered Jesus in verse 33, *“We are the offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’”* This response from the crowd indicated that they did not have a clear knowledge of themselves and their need. It was a statement that indicated that they felt they were in good with God

because of their connection to Abraham. To the Jew, this was more than just going on “ancestry.com” to learn about their heritage. Abraham and his descendants were chosen by God all the way back in Genesis 12 to be the people of God in this world and to bring the blessing of God to this world. And so, to be a child of Abraham was equivalent to being a child of God. In fact, the crowd says at the end of verse 41, “*We have one Father—even God.*” So what does Jesus mean when he says he comes to set them free? In their mind, they are asking, “Free from what?” “We are the children of God.”

But Jesus says to them in verse 39, “*If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did.*” Instead, Jesus speaks of their bondage to sin in the first “double amen” statement in this passage in verse 34, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.*” They thought that because they could trace their lineage all the way back to Abraham that they lived under the constant smile of God, that they were children of God. And yet, if you lined them up next to the Gentile and stacked their lives up against the lives of the pagan Gentile, there was no difference in how they lived. Both were in bondage to sin.

That is the point of Romans 1-3. Romans 1 makes the case that the irreligious pagan is as sinful as they come, for they are governed by their sinful desires and so there is no restraint on what they do or don’t do. But then, in Romans 2, Paul turns his sights on the religious Jew, who happens to have the very Law of God in his possession, but his life is no different than the pagan Gentile. Out of one side of their mouths they may speak against stealing, adultery and idolatry; but then out of the other side of their mouths they break these commandments time and time again. Sure, your heritage as one coming from Abraham is of value. You have in your possession the law of God revealed to you. But Paul says in Romans 2:25 that it is only of value if you keep the law. He says, “*but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.*” In other words, their sin betrays them. Jesus said to them in John 8:39, “*If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works that Abraham did.*” Instead, they are slaves to their sin.

“*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.*” To truly “believe” means to accept God’s assessment of where we stand before God. My problem in life is not just that I have a “darkness in my thinking” and I need Jesus to shed light on my mind so that I might know truth. Rather, I have a darkness of the heart and I am enslaved to my sin. Left to myself, I do not love God or others as I should and I need Jesus, the truth, to set me free from my sin. That starts with the humble confession, “God have mercy on me a sinner.” But then as one who abides in Christ in his word, there is a progressive change in our hearts and we turn from sin to loving God and loving others. John says in 1 John

2:3, “*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.*” A true disciple is one who recognizes that life is lived under the authority of God and in dependence upon God and his word. It starts showing up in the way we live.

Know The Way

The tone of the conversation between Jesus and the crowd heats up over what it really means to be a child of Abraham. In verse 39, the crowd said “*Abraham is our father*” and the implication at the end of verse 41 was that God was their father because of their connection to Abraham. But Jesus countered that if Abraham was truly their father they would be acting like Abraham by believing in Jesus. He says in verse 42, “*If God were your father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here.*” When Abraham received the word of God, the Bible tells us that he believed God. That is the common characteristic of a true disciple of Jesus. He says in verse 47, “*Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is because you are not of God.*”

The true children of Abraham are the children of faith. We sing that children’s song, “*Father Abraham, had many sons, many sons sir, had father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you. So let’s just praise the Lord!*” A child of Abraham is not a child of national descent, but a child of faith. Like Abraham, he receives the Word of God and believes the Word of God. Abraham was told to leave his country and his family and to go to a land that God would eventually show him and give to his descendants. He spent most of his life without a descendent and with no land to call his own. But he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Paul says in Galatians 3:7-9, “*Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*”

This leads us to the second “double amen statement” of this passage. In verse 51 Jesus says, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.*” To “keep” the word of God is to abide in God’s word by faith. It is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God from heaven and that he the very truth of God. He tells the crowd in verse 43 that he came from God. This is where they begin to move from a crowd who embraced Christ to a crowd ready to stone Jesus. Rather indignant, they ask Jesus in verse 53, “*Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died! And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?*” He is the truth of God and the Bread of Life. *If*

you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples. Ultimately, that means through faith, you recognize that Jesus is the Son of God. John writes in 1 John 4:1-2, *“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.”*

In our “Way of Life” it is our practice to “let the Word of God dwell in us richly.” Why? It is because *faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.* One who abides in Christ is one who abides in God’s Word and is being formed by God’s Word. At the end of the Gospel of Luke, Luke 24:44, Jesus says that the Scriptures are all about him. They point us to Jesus. *“Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations.”* The characteristic of a true follower of Christ is that he or she continually confesses faith in Jesus Christ, the one from heaven and the one who makes us children of God through faith.

Know The Son

This conversation comes to a boiling point starting in verse 56. *“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”* Some critics question whether or not Jesus ever claimed to be divine, the Son of God. Certain cults will deny that Jesus is fully God. You can’t get a more clear declaration of deity than this verse. The fact that the crowd picked up stones to stone Jesus for blasphemy gives evidence that they knew exactly what Jesus was claiming to be true of himself.

When Jesus said, *“before Abraham was, I am,”* he wasn’t just claiming to be in existence prior to Abraham, who lived some 2000 years before the birth of Christ. But by using the phrase *“I am”* he was actually using the sacred name for God found back in Exodus 3 when God met Moses at the burning bush. When Moses asks God for his name, God says, *“I Am Who I Am.”* It is the sacred name for God which means that God has no beginning or no end. It is a name that indicates that there is nothing that caused God to be. Rather, God is the self existing God. This name was so sacred to the observant Jew that they would not even pronounce it. It was synonymous with the holiness, the wholly-*otherness* of God. And now Jesus is claiming to be *I Am.* It was a declaration of absolute deity. Jesus was claiming to be one with the Father. Jesus is fully God and fully man.

When we read the story of this season we hear of a virgin who gives birth to a child. Can it be? Mary even asks of the angel upon being told that she would give birth to a baby, “*How will this be, since I am a virgin?*” To which the angel said, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and therefore, the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.*” The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is essential to our faith. It is not a doctrine that is optional to our faith. Without the virgin birth we do not have a God who is human and divine and therefore, we do not have one who can atone for our sin. The theologian Gresham Machen said that “there can be no doubt that at the close of the second century the virgin birth of Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of the Christian belief by the Christian church in all parts of the world. To which Kevin DeYoung concludes, “we should not be so hasty in dismissing the doctrine as a take-it-or-leave-it element of the Christian faith.”⁵ In other words, apart from the virgin birth of Christ, the deity of Christ, we have no hope and we have no faith.

This is part of what it means to *abide in my word*. It is to embrace by faith what Jesus says of himself, that “*before Abraham was, I am.*” In 2 John 7, John identifies the deceivers as the ones “*who do not confess the coming of Christ in the flesh.*” We live in a pluralistic culture that does not see the Scriptures as the authority on the nature of Jesus and so for some they distinguish between the Jesus of Scripture and the Jesus of history. But the one thing that cannot be fully explained away is the empty tomb and the birth of the church on the message of the resurrected Jesus from the dead. This was the culminating evidence of the nature of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. It is the confession of the church, derived from the testimony of the Scriptures and given evidence by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and he is the truth of God from heaven.

Conclusion

So what does it mean to believe? What do we learn from this passage about what it means to be a true disciple? Jesus said, “*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.*”

A true disciple of Jesus recognizes that Jesus is the embodiment of truth and he is the final revelation of God to us. Do you want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus, the Son of God. Truth is not just a compilation of ideas. It is wrapped up in a person, Jesus.

A true disciple is one who knows of his need for Jesus because we all born in sin. And so

a disciple cries out for the mercy of God through faith in Jesus. And then, through the power of Jesus turns away from sin and lives unto God. In other words, your life is changed and God's love shines through you. You are different!

A true disciple is one who turns in faith to Jesus. Like our father Abraham, we take the word of God and receive by faith. It is truth. We seek to live by it. It points us to Jesus and the cross and we turn in faith to Jesus.

Finally, a true disciple who abides in the word of God embraces the truth of Jesus Christ. We confess with the church down through the ages that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God, incarnate, that is God in the flesh. And therefore, through Jesus Christ and Christ alone, we have the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

This is the baby we come to see this week. He is God, who humbled himself so that we might have life in his name! May this week be filled with wonder and worship for the who deserves our praise. To Jesus be praise!

¹Leon Morris *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 404

²Ibid., 404

³Stephen J. Wellum *God The Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016)

⁴Ibid.

⁵Kevin DeYoung “Is the Virgin Birth Essential?” December 8, 2016 www.thegospelcoalition.org

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