

Spiritual Bondage to Liberty

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 8:31-36
Preached on: Monday, September 1, 2014

Please take your Bibles and turn with me this morning to John's Gospel, chapter 8. We find ourselves in verses 31-36 as we continue to examine these wonderful truths that reveal to us who Jesus really is and who we need to worship and praise with all of our hearts. Follow along as I read our text this morning, beginning in verse 31,

31 So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." 33 They answered Him, "We are Abraham's offspring and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, 'You shall become free'?" 34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. 36 So if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

Slavery is a terrible thing that takes on many forms. When we think of slavery, many times our minds immediately go to the scourge of slavery that we've seen down through the course of history in various political systems, an intolerable evil that enslaves helpless people to do the bidding of some evil despot. Refusal results in imprisonment, sometimes torture and death. There are countries today like North Korea and virtually all of the Muslim countries where the majority of the population are slaves to the ruling class. The tyrannical oppression of Muslims, for example, especially women who live under the rule of sharia law is absolutely inconceivable. They rape, torture and murder in the name of a God that doesn't even exist.

Slavery can also take other forms than political forms. There are countless millions of people today who may enjoy political liberty but they are enslaved by various addictions that threaten their health. Addictions really speaks of that which causes a person's mind and body to become utterly obsessed with something that is destructive. I read an article this last week from the Masters in Public Health entitled, "The Ten Most Common Addictions Plaguing America." The number one addiction is media which they defined as a complete dependence on the Internet, text messaging and television. By the way, the Internet includes pornography, Facebook, twitter, all that stuff. Second was tobacco or nicotine. Third: alcohol. Fourth: marijuana. Five: food. Six: gambling. Seven: prescription drugs. Eight: bulimia, that is the act of bingeing and purging or vomiting which actually releases endorphins that alleviate emotional pain like anxiety. We see this mainly in women. That's why it's so hard for them to kick. And then number nine:

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cocaine. Ten: hallucinogens, like LSD, PCP, peyote, ecstasy, mescaline. Which by the way, barely beat out inhalants and heroin in terms of popularity.

Folks, people are desperately trying to escape a life that really has no meaning to them, a life that is often filled with misery. Peter says in 2 Peter 2:19, "By what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved." Millions of other folks are slaves to superstition. Think of all of the people, the Islamic jihadist that believe that if you go and kill yourself for Allah you're going to go into heaven and have 72 virgins. Think of those even in Roman Catholicism who believe that you can go to a priest and confess your sins, secret sins, to a person who is probably a slave to private debauchery himself. Millions are convinced that priests have the power to impart grace through eating something or drinking something, through the sacraments. The charismatic movement is built on superstition. People that actually believe that nonsensical ecstatic gibberish is a sign of spiritual superiority. And a prayer language, people who actually believe that there are certain men and women who have the ability to heal them. There are also countless others that are enslaved to Satan and his domain of darkness which appeals to man's lusts which also enslaves every man, woman and child. Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 9:3, "The hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives." The Apostle Paul tells us that unregenerate man, in other words, a man that has never been born again, that has never placed his faith in Christ and been transformed, that man is helpless, Romans 5:6. In chapter 6 he says that they are a slave to sin, a slave to impurity and lawlessness resulting in further lawlessness. In Romans 7. he describes how man is under the dominion of the law of sin. And yet, isn't it interesting how many people think that what I just said is utter foolishness which betrays the fact that they are under the slavery of sin that blinds them.

Where is the freedom for the man who is a slave to his own evil heart? A heart that is so evil that it convinces him that he is free to do whatever he wills? Where is the freedom for the woman controlled by sensuality and greed? Where is the freedom for the college students on spring break that are utterly controlled by their passions? Utterly helpless to restrain their own flesh? In the bondage of their own corruption. Where is the freedom for those enslaved by anger and fear and hopelessness and poverty and despair? Where is the freedom for those trapped in some snare of addiction? Or those imprisoned in the misery of disease or disability? I ask you, where is the freedom for those who dragged behind them the ball and chain of guilt? Where is the freedom for those seized by the talons of fear as they are forced to look into the dark dungeon of the grave that awaits them? Oh, dear friend, apart from the glorious Emancipator, the Lord Jesus Christ, every man, woman and child lives their life in captivity. Every unsaved man is a slave to this inner beast called sin, a creature so powerful as to make him think that he is perfectly free and not a slave at all to sin or to Satan or to death. To make him think that he possesses

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inherent goodness that will make him pleasing to God. A beast so powerful as to make him think that the truth that will set him free is folly. If that isn't bad enough, every man apart from Christ is dominated by Satan, the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience, the Bible tells us. The one who takes people captive to do his will, that causes them to fulfill the lusts of their father the devil. Apart from saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, apart from that regenerating work that causes a man to be born again and to become a new creature in Christ, man lives his life dominated by the fear of death and judgment and the solitary confinement of an eternal hell.

My friend, if you admit that I am describing you, I have good news for you this morning, that is, the truth about Jesus can set you free. Amen? "If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed," Jesus says. This is a promise from the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Deliver, our Redeemer King.

Now, as we look at this passage, we've got to remember the context so I want you to come with me again to first century Jerusalem. We want to go to the outer court of the temple. It's the close of this magnificent seven day, actually eight day celebration, the Feast of Tabernacles, commemorating God's provision and protection for the ancient Israelites as he brought them through the wilderness after freeing them from the bondage of the Egyptians. Also a time of celebrating the blessings of the future millennial kingdom when the Messiah will return and dwell with his people. So they are in the temple here, the outermost court of the temple. There are four massive, golden lampstands symbolizing the presence of God in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led the ancient Israelites through the wilderness. These have now been ceremonially extinguished and probably with the smoke of the extinguished wicks still lingering in the air, Jesus has declared himself to the people to be the light of the world, a claim they all knew was a claim to deity. A claim that immediately caused them to be filled with rage and meet him with stiff resistance.

Now in this narrative, John records what he saw and heard as the light of the world exposed the religious pretensions of his Jewish kinsman. We will quickly see, dear friends, how the opponents of Christ in that day are really no different than they are today. They use the same kind of arguments as those of the first century. Because of a man's depraved nature and because he is in complete bondage to sin, the same flawed reasoning, the same flawed arguments, the same arrogant self-assessment is as prevalent today as it was back then. A wild thistle can no more bring forth good fruit today than it could back then.

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Now in order to better understand this section of Scripture and apply Jesus' words to our lives, I wish to examine this text under three categories. Number 1: the distinguishing characteristics of genuine discipleship. Number 2: the multiple blessings of genuine discipleship. Finally, the deceptive bondage of false discipleship. Bear in mind that in this section Jesus, once again, deals with the problem of fickle faith. That is, faith that is capricious, that vacillates, that is indecisive, that is not a genuine saving faith. Those who believe in Jesus up to a point but are unwilling to really yield their life to him. This is a theme that John has already introduced in chapter 2 concerning those who believed in his name when they saw all of his miracles but who later, you will recall, in chapter 6, abandoned Jesus permanently after hearing a sermon they disliked, an experience in which I am all too familiar. They believed he could save them from their unhappiness and deliver them from their Roman oppressors but they saw no need for a Savior to save them from their sin. So we've got to bear this in mind. For example, in verse 30, we read, "As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him." These are people who are not genuinely born again. That this is so is seen like in verse 34, he describes them as slaves to sin. In verses 37, 40 and 59, we read how they are seeking to kill him because they hated his assessment of them. In verse 44, he just describes them as children of their father the devil. Verse 45, they don't believe what he says. Verses 48 and 52, they blaspheme him and in verse 55, he calls them liars.

So John records Jesus' words here concerning number 1: the distinguishing characteristics of genuine discipleship. Now this is a very timely topic because there are many people today that claim to be Christian because they have some belief and even faith in Jesus Christ but Scripture is clear that not all faith is saving faith. How can we know for sure if a person is a true disciple or a mere professor? We have the answer here in verse 31, "Jesus was there saying to those Jews who had believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of mine.'" The term "abide" is more important. John uses it frequently in his Gospel. It means "to continue, to remain, to persevere." You see, a true test of genuine discipleship is not how a man begins but how a man ends. Jesus is not as interested here in attracting a crowd, in getting a big following, in building a big church, if they are not genuine believers so he's given them a test here. He's wanting them to count the cost, to examine their heart. "Do you abide in my word?"

Later in John 15:4, Jesus says, "Abide in Me and I in you as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me." You see, the evidence of genuine saving faith is an intimate union with the Lord Jesus Christ which manifests itself in the continuance of service to Christ, a love for Christ, joyful obedience to his teaching. In John 14:23, Jesus says, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word and My Father will love him and We," referring to the Triune Godhead, "will come to him and make Our abode with him." So said differently: true discipleship has

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nothing to do with being validated by some profession. That may have been when you came to Christ, that may not have been. Genuine discipleship is not validated by church attendance or visible morality or active ministry in a church. What validates genuine Christianity are matters of the heart, matters that manifest themselves in a variety of ways. For example, you will see a true disciple of Christ hating and mourning over their personal sin. They will have a hatred of the world. They will be desiring constantly to be separated from that world. They will have a hungering and thirsting for righteousness. They will have an appetite for the word of God. They will love the Lord their God with all of their heart, mind, soul and strength. They will love their neighbor as themselves. They will have a passion to commune with God, to fellowship with God in prayer. They will have a selfless love for others. A burden for the lost. A desire to live for the glory of God and on and on and on. Said simply: a true disciple of Christ worships him as Savior and obeys him as Lord. Now, does this describe you?

John will say later in one of his epistles 1 John 2, beginning in verse 4, "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." Unfortunately, like so many people today, many of these Jews professed faith in Jesus as a political Messiah but they had no desire to hold tight to him, to be intimately united to him and to live out what Jesus taught like the institutional Christianity of our day that will, for example view Jesus as an example of selfless love and of supreme morality but they will wholly reject him as the Judge of heaven and earth at whose name every knee will bow and every tongue will one day confess that Jesus is Lord. Or the equally phony cultural Christianity that is absolutely ubiquitous in our culture today that use Jesus as kind of a Santa Claus that hands out the goodies rather than the Savior of our sin, or the infantile country-western "Jesus was a country boy" mentality. But you see, none of these people will see Jesus as the one to whom they must bow, as the self-existent, uncreated Creator of the universe, the Son of God, the only name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

So Jesus begins by giving number 1: the distinguishing characteristics of genuine discipleship and then from there he moves to secondly: the multiple blessings of genuine discipleship. Again, he says, "If you abide in My word and you are truly disciples of Mine and you shall know the truth." Not only that, "and the truth shall make you free." Now my friends, to know the truth is far different than knowing what is true. You see, to know the truth refers to an understanding, an embracing of the truth of the person and the work of Jesus Christ, what Paul called in Colossians 1:5, "the word of truth, the Gospel." Knowing the Gospel, embracing the Gospel, living the Gospel. Throughout history, every

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political and religious leader has had his or her own version of the truth concerning morality or concerning spirituality and in every era of human history we witness more and more moral decay and spiritual chaos. You would think that somebody would finally get it right, wouldn't you? Today the postmodern worldview insists, therefore, that there is no such thing as universal, comprehensive truth, absolute truth. There is no such thing as absolute truth and of that they are absolutely certain. Truth must be, therefore, determined by the societal norms of a culture. Therefore, what may be true for you isn't necessarily true for me and so the supreme virtue is tolerance. To claim you know absolute truth about morality and spirituality is therefore unacceptable. Therefore dear friends, it is becoming increasingly unacceptable in our world to be a Christian and to claim that the Bible is the infallible word of the living God. Eventually, it will be outlawed altogether.

But there is a fundamental flaw in the postmodern worldview that they fail to take into account and, of course, this goes back to the truth of what God tells us. You see, they do not believe that man at his core is ruled by a heart that is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick, Jeremiah 17:9. They do not believe that man is born spiritually dead, morally perverted. That he is in the bondage of sin. They do not believe that unregenerate man, unsaved man, has absolutely no capacity to even understand the truth, much less live it. He is ruled by his lusts and serves an unimaginably powerful and fiendish supernatural tyrant named Satan. They think all of this is foolish. They do not understand that Satan is violently opposed to universal, comprehensive, absolute truth, that truth that is revealed in the word of God. We are told in Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction."

So given all of this, every society, every culture will establish for itself its own set of truths regarding morality, regarding spirituality and those things that they establish will always be determined by the criteria of satisfying their own evil desires, the pleasures of their heart. James 3:15 describes the wisdom of the world as quote "earthly, natural, demonic." You see, apart from divine intervention, man will eventually destroy himself. We see this happening before our very eyes. It is almost laughable if it were not so sad. We actually live in a culture that believes that man is still evolving from apes. We live in a world where it is acceptable to kill unborn infants if they are not wanted. In fact, we live in a society where you're considered intolerant if you think it's wrong for men to copulate with men and women to do the same. You are considered somehow mean if you do not think that it's okay to unite homosexuals in marriage and allow them to raise children. You even think that this is pleasing to God. I mean, this is stunning deception. You see, apart from believing in the absolute truth of Christ who is the essence of truth, the way the truth and the life, man will continue to be deceived. And unless he repents and submits to the Lordship of Christ, unless the Lord radically saves him and changes

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him, he will be judged one day for his high treason against the most high God and will be sentenced to an eternal hell. My friends, this is the truth.

Paul tells us in Romans 1:18 and following that because of reason and because of conscience, every man knows that what I've just been saying is true but he can't stand it. Therefore, Paul says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them," referring to reason and conscience. "Professing to be wise, they became fools." My friends, this is why Jesus' words here are so exceedingly wonderful. "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine." And then he says, "and you shall know the truth," speaking of the Gospel, the revealed word of God. Not only that, but "the truth shall make you free." He's telling us that when we are more morally and spiritually committed to the truth and therefore united to Christ who is full of grace and truth, we enjoy this amazing freedom of being able to live lives that give glory to him and result in enormous blessing being poured out upon us. Unsaved people know nothing of that kind of freedom. Moreover, he's telling us that the indwelling Holy Spirit teaches us these all-sufficient truths of Scripture which is, according to 2 Timothy 3:16, "inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

So you'll not only know the truth but this truth is going to set you free. These are just a small sample of the many blessings of genuine discipleship and this is why Satan and his minions are so committed to eviscerating biblical truth from every culture and distorting and dumbing down the truth in Christian churches. You see my friends, truth is to a Christian what mommy's milk is to a newborn infant. It's a matter of life and death. Nourishment begins with that simple milk but then as we mature, we have to have more nutritious, solid food to bring us into spiritual maturity and Christians who are deprived of the in-depth, systematic, expositional preaching and teaching of the word of God will never grow up. It will never happen. They will remain spiritual infants, if you will, and I say this in kindness: they will remain spiritually retarded. Happy but dimwitted and immature. Too ignorant to even know they're ignorant. I see this all the time. Paul described this in 1 Corinthians 3. You will recall he talked of men of flesh, he said, babes in Christ. "I gave you milk to drink not solid food for you were not able to receive it. Indeed even now you are not able for you are still fleshly," meaning you're willfully weak. You're willfully worldly. You're willfully undeveloped.

This is true of most Christian churches, Christian bookstores and Christian radio stations. They dispense milk for baby Christians and myth Kool-Aid for phony Christians and people drink it all the time. Just listen to the lyrics of most contemporary Christian music

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on the radio. Imagine if every preacher, every Sunday school teacher, every college and seminary professor, every youth minister, every artist, writing and singing their songs, got serious about unleashing the truth of the word of God, truth that would set people free from the bondage of Satanic falsehood, from the pit and the power of sin. As Paul said in Romans 6:18, "having been freed from sin, you become slaves of righteousness." My friends, if that were to happen, churches would be filled with people starving for the glory and the greatness of God. They would be hungering and thirsting for righteousness. They would be craving the meat of the word. Christian bookstores would suddenly have an entirely new inventory. Most of their books would be what are currently called the antiquated books; they'd be filled with books of Puritans and other great theologians of days gone by, books that are considered today too doctrinal, too divisive. And Christian music would become truly Christ-exalting. You wouldn't hear this "snuggle up to Jesus" silliness. Genuine self-sacrificing humility would put an end to the Dove Awards. They would seek their reward from God not from men.

Dear Christian, grab hold of this, grab hold of the blessings of genuine discipleship that only grow on the vine of truth. You must abide in his word. By implication, those who do not abide in his word not only do not belong to him, they don't know the truth and they remain, therefore, in moral and spiritual bondage. We all have friends and family members in that condition. Such was the case with Jesus' opponents. They could not and would not admit it. This leads us to number 3: the deceptive bondage of false discipleship beginning in verse 33. "They answered Him, 'We are Abraham's offspring and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, "You will become free"?' " You see, the Jews resented the implication that somehow they were in spiritual bondage simply because they were not abiding in the words of truth concerning Jesus of Nazareth. Every man without Christ finds this highly offensive but the truth is, before a man knows the truth about the Gospel and embraces it, he simply cannot recognize his moral and spiritual bondage. That was the case with the Jews.

Notice verse 34, "Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.'" The word "commit" and the grammar that is used here in this text denotes not just a one-time type of thing but a disposition of a person's life. It denotes a life-dominating principle of rebellion against God, the manifestation of a fallen, depraved nature that is so thoroughly evil it causes a man to actually love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. That's what he's referring to. Those who commit sin, just a slave of sin. And sin as we look at it biblically, is basically man's innate inability to conform to the moral character and desires of God. But he can't see that because he's a slave to sin. Furthermore, people will become apoplectic with rage if you tell them the truth and the truth is this: if you have never placed your faith in Christ and been born again, then everything that you do and everything that you are is fundamentally offensive

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to a holy God. You tell that to people and find out what happens. Go to the divinity students at Vanderbilt University and tell them what I just said which is all through Scripture and watch the reaction. Talk about throwing the cat in amongst the pigeons. Why can't they see this? Because they are imprisoned by self-righteous pride and self-deception. Beloved, were it not for the grace of God, we would still be in that same prison. That's why we need to love those who remain under that incarceration and give them the Gospel and pray that the Spirit of God will use it to penetrate that heart and cause them to see the truth that they might repent.

We witness this even in Christian circles. Think of those who proudly and loudly assert that even the natural man is not enslaved by his sin, that he has a free will to choose. But what they fail to understand is that the desire to exercise that will rightly is in bondage to a nature that is utterly hostile to God so that free will will always choose wrongly. A poisoned fountain cannot produce pure water. A thistle cannot produce grapes. A sinner has no spiritual nature within him to produce anything pleasing to God, that's why he must be born again. The great Puritan theologian John Owen poignantly described this dreadful state of sin's deception and its power to make men in its unwitting slaves. He said this, "Many there are in the world who find not this law in them who whatever they have been taught in the word, have not a spiritual sense and experience of the power of indwelling sin and that because they are wholly under the dominion of it." He goes on to say, "They find not that there is darkness and folly in their minds because they are darkness itself and darkness will discover nothing. They find not deadness and an indisposition in their hearts and wills to God because they are dead wholly in trespasses and sins. They are at peace with their lusts by being in bondage unto them. This of the state of most men in the world which makes them woefully despise all their eternal concerns."

Such my friends, was the case of Jesus' adversaries. They could not recognize their slavery to sin because they were convinced that they were the inheritors of privilege because they were Abraham's descendents. They were self-assured that they were spiritually free from the power of sin and divine condemnation. "We are Abraham's offspring and have never yet been enslaved to anyone." Therefore, they could not see that the only possible means of being freed from the bondage of iniquity was to be reconciled to God, through faith, in his Son that stood before them. You see, only by being united to his death and his burial and his resurrection can a man die to sin, be freed from sin's mastery over them and become free to walk in righteousness. You know, often I hear unbelievers say, "I don't want to become a Christian because then I will have to give up all the so-called sins that I really enjoy." You know my friend, the truth is you won't have to give them up but for the first time, you will be free to give them up. In fact, you will want to give them up.

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Well, like so many today, the Jews simply could not see their bondage to sin and to Satan and so in light of this Jesus says in verse 34, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin." Then he gives this amazing analogy, verse 35, "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever." In other words, slaves have no permanent standing in a family; their place is only temporary. The application is simply this: just because you were the natural descendents of Abraham does not make you his spiritual children, true sons. And because you're still enslaved by your sin, you are slaves. You are not sons in Abraham's family. Therefore, you have no title to the covenant blessings. You see, only those who embrace the truth of Christ, those who have placed their faith in him, can be set free and become sons of God.

Verse 36, "If therefore the son shall make you free," the son there referring to Christ, "you shall be free indeed." Unlike a slave, a true son had a permanent place in the family and ultimately the Son is the Lord Jesus Christ who alone has the power to make a person free and be adopted into the family. He alone is the one who can liberate those who suffer under the taskmaster of sin and the tyranny of Satan. What an awesome mystery this is. Think about it my friends: to be delivered from the bent of our old nature, of lawlessness and self-will. To be rescued from the wolf within us that hungers after sin. To be emancipated from the dominion of darkness ruled by the arch enemy of God, the enemy of our souls. To be free to live to the praise of God's glory. To be able to experience the blessings of his righteousness. To be free to be call ourselves sons of God. To be free to plead his promises. To come boldly before his throne of grace in time of need. To claim the Father's protection and enjoy his bounty. To be free from the prison of the grave knowing that when we die, we simply are transformed into glory where we will stand in the presence of his glory blameless with great joy.

Charles Wesley captured this perfectly in his hymn, "And Can It be?" when he said this,

"Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee."

My friend, if you know nothing of this kind of freedom, today you can be delivered from the bondage of your sin and from Satan and experience the liberty of his grace so I invite you to come to Jesus. Believers, I want to leave you with this: examine your heart. Where have you foolishly submitted yourself to that defeated tyrant of sin? Think about the

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things that occupy your thoughts and your time. Look at your checkbook. Look at your credit card statement. Where are you spending your money? What excites your soul and animates your will? As the sparrow hates every scale of the snake, the godly man will hate every form of sin that seeks to destroy him. So my friends, dear Christians, don't exchange your liberty for bondage. Examine your heart. Confess those things and run from them.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these eternal truths. Press them upon our spirit. Plant them within our hearts that they might yield the good fruit of righteousness and blessing. And for those, again, that know nothing of what I speak, nothing of the truth of your word, Lord, we cry out to you to do to them what you have done to us, to bring conviction and repentance and cause them to be born again by the power of your Spirit. This is our plea for your glory. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.

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