

# John 8:31-59: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 17 January 2020

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     John chapter 8 verses 31 to 59. So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. 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? Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever. The son remains forever. So if the son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

I know that you are the offspring of Abraham, yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my father, and you do what you have heard from your father.

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. 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.

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. 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. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. 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. But because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me.

Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.

[ 2 : 01 ] The Jews answered him, Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon? Jesus answered, I do not have a demon, but I honor my father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory. There is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death. 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. Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died. Who do you make yourself out to be? 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. 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. 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. As in the Gospel of Luke and the Pauline epistles, the question of the identity of the true sons of Abraham is prominent within the Gospel of John, and nowhere more so than in the second half of chapter 8. Jesus' argument about slaves and sons in the house of Abraham anticipates Paul's allegory of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians chapter 4, for instance. Jesus addresses the Pharisees as those who were akin to slaves in the house of Abraham. One day they would be removed. He also describes them as the children of the devil here. They are seed of the serpent, or a brood of vipers.

The question of who a person's true father is, the question that dominates this passage, is answered in the one that they take after. The closely related question of whether one is a slave or a son is also revealed by people's actions. By their fruits you will know them. The person who makes a practice of sin is a slave to sin. We might again observe similarities between Jesus' arguments in this passage and various arguments in John's first epistle, in places such as 1 John chapter 5 verse 1. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. Or in chapter 3 verses 6 to 10.

No one who abides in him keeps on sinning. No one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil. Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. Likewise we find common themes of abiding in Jesus and his word. Looking through the Johannine literature, the Gospel of John, the Epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation, we can see numerous points of contact and close resemblance. The description of Jesus' interlocutors in verse 31 as the Jews who had believed him is surprising if they are the same persons as are trying to kill him in verse 40.

The reference to the Jews who believed in him connects this discourse with verse 30's reference to many who believed in him. However, perhaps the they of verse 33 refers to a different or a broader group, one that includes the religious officials who oppose him. Alternatively, other commentators have suggested that factions among Jesus' own followers, or within the later church, might be in view here.

As elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus speaks in ways that are misunderstood by the people to whom he is speaking. When he speaks of freedom, they think of freedom from slavery as a people. Their insistence that they, as the offspring of Abraham, have never been enslaved to anyone seems to be at odds with the experience of Israel in Egypt and Babylon, if not also the Jews' current situation under Roman rule.

[ 6 : 23 ]      However, they seem to have in view their pride in being sons of Abraham and believe that the nation, even when under foreign rule, was internally free and destined for freedom. Jesus clearly has in view a different sort of freedom than the Jews to whom he is speaking. The real slavery that should concern them is not bondage to a foreign nation, but bondage to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household, while the son does. Jesus, as the son, is able to bring people into the freedom characteristic of sonship. When the Jews insist that their father is Abraham, Jesus underlines the contrast between them and Abraham, the man that they wrongly claim to be their father. They are trying to kill Jesus, even though he told them the truth, completely out of keeping with the behaviour of Abraham, who had welcomed the messengers who came to him. Their violent hatred and murderous intent towards Jesus is characteristic of their father, the devil, who was a murderer from the beginning.

The intent of the devil is to kill and destroy, to take and to diminish life wherever it is. Being only a creature himself, he can never create, only destroy. In particular, humanity created in the image of God is something he will always seek to attack. The devil, in addition to being a murderer from the beginning, is also a liar and the father of lies, who speaks lies out of his own character.

We might, of course, recall the temptation of Eve in the garden and the deceptions of the serpent on that occasion. Jesus is tracing a line back from actions through character to origins. Those who practice sin are in bondage to sin and are the children of the devil himself. While the Jews may insist that they are the children of Abraham, their behaviour belies their claims. Jesus presents a powerful indictment against the Jews here. If they truly were of God, they would receive the words of the man that God sent. They haven't made any demonstrable charge against Jesus. Instead, they reject him, not merely despite his telling the truth, but because he does so. Somewhat surprisingly, the Jews answer him by saying that he is a Samaritan and he has a demon. Presumably, these two charges go together. Earlier, in chapter 7 verse 20, people were speculating that Christ had a demon. The connection between his being a Samaritan and having a demon perhaps suggests that they believe that the worship of the Samaritans is a worship of demons. It's possible that they're insinuating here that Jesus is the bastard son of a Samaritan. When it came to the question of being heirs and descendants of the patriarchs, the Samaritans were in competition and opposition to the Jews. The Samaritans challenged the Jews' claim to be exclusive descendants of Abraham.

However, the Samaritans had earlier received Jesus and so their charge against Christ sets up an unfavorable contrast between them and the Samaritans who received him. Christ had earlier spoken about the fact that those who received his word definitively passed from death to life. When he makes a similar claim here, the Jews regard this as proof positive that he is possessed by a demon.

Abraham and the prophets have already died. Is Christ suggesting that he is greater than them? Of course, Jesus is the greatest son of Abraham. He's the true heir. He goes on to declare that Abraham, their supposed father, rejoiced to see his day, and he saw it and was glad. Perhaps he here has in mind the encounter that Abraham had with the angel of the Lord in Genesis chapters 18 and 22.

[ 9 : 42 ] In John's Gospel, there are several occasions where appearances of God to his people in the Old Testament are regarded as anticipations of the coming of Christ. Christ is the glorious vision of the Lord that Isaiah saw in the temple in chapter 6. Christ is the great I am. He is the one who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai. He is connected with the vision of the ladder given to Jacob at Bethel. The one who had been active throughout Israel's history is now unveiled and made flesh, walking among us, revealing his true identity as Jesus. The crowd wonder why he is making these claims. He's not yet 50 years of age and yet he's claiming to have seen Abraham. It seems strange that they would choose the figure 50, given that Jesus is only around 30 years of age. Perhaps this should be seen as one of John's Gospel's allusions to Jubilee themes. Jesus' remarkable claim in response, truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am, is one in which he identifies himself with God, applying the name for God, I am, to himself. He is not just claiming some sort of angelic status or some sort of pre-existence or the power of some lower deity. He is identifying himself with God himself. God has come and visited his people. In its current form, beginning with the Nun-Johanne text of the woman caught in adultery, John chapter 8 begins and ends with failed stoning attempts.

Once again they are unsuccessful in taking Jesus' life because his hour has not yet come. A question to consider, reading this chapter alongside Romans chapter 4, how does the Apostle Paul expand upon the logic of Jesus' argument here in addressing the question of believing Gentiles within the family of Abraham?