

Steward the Truth as Freedom from Deception

John 8:31-36

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, *“If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples.* ³² *You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* ³³ *“We are Abraham’s descendants,” they answered, “and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be set free’?”* ³⁴ Jesus answered, *“Amen, Amen, I tell you: Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin.* ³⁵ *But a slave does not remain in the family forever. A son does remain forever.* ³⁶ *So if the Son sets you free, you really will be free.*

On Saturday, July 24, 1920, the front page of the Boston Post ran an ad for Cosmopolitan Trust Company, a local bank in Boston. The ad was promoting their 5% savings account interest rate. That seems like a great rate even today. But it stood out as particularly low compared to what was promised in an article appearing just above it. That article’s headline ran: “Doubles the Money within Three Months—50 Per Cent Interest Paid in 45 Days.” A full one hundred percent return on investment over three months? That sounds too good any day. It was, as you’d expect, creating waves. The article goes on to describe how such returns were being achieved—essentially by purchasing postage at a low price and selling it at a high price. It mentions how the founder of this company went from penniless to worth \$8.5 million in a matter of months.

Unfortunately for everyone who invested, it was a sham. The company’s founder was getting rich. But he was doing it by making money from new investors to pay the promised returns to current investors. If you’re thinking this sounds like a Ponzi scheme, you’re right. In fact, the founder of this company was none other than Charles Ponzi himself. He wasn’t the first who robbed Peter to pay Paul. He’s certainly among the most well-known. His scheme was massive in scale, both in the thousands of people it hurt and in the depth of its deception. Ponzi had no legitimate way to generate the profits he promised. What he was offering evaporated like mist in the growing light of day.

We hear a story like that, and we’re glad it wasn’t us getting duped. We might even think we’d be able to snuff out the deception. We’re too careful to be taken in like that. And maybe that’s true. But the reality is, there’s a far more sinister deception out there that has affected us. It’s gripped us and fooled us like it has all people. It’s the deception that Jesus speaks of in John chapter 8.

These verses are part of a larger discussion Jesus is having with a specific group of Jews. These Jews had heard Jesus teach. They listened. They learned a bit about him. But there was still a problem. They weren’t yet disciples of Jesus. They didn’t believe that Jesus was the Messiah, their Savior. Why not? Because they’d been deceived. The nature of the deception comes out in these verses in two important ways.

First, notice how Jesus says that by holding to his teaching, *“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Jesus is certainly stating something about his word and its power. Before we get to that, notice that he’s also revealing something here about the situation these Jews are in. They lack true freedom. But they don’t see it. And it’s obvious from their response: *“We are Abraham’s descendants, and we have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be set free’?”* These people are looking to their bloodlines. They’re stating that they descended from Abraham. They claim to be genetically part of God’s chosen people. They most certainly are not slaves. Whatever sort of freedom that Jesus is talking about, it can’t possibly apply to them. Abraham is their father. Jesus is clearly mistaken.

But of course, Jesus was not mistaken. Instead, these Jews were blind to their true situation. They were bound but couldn't see it. They were enslaved but didn't know it. This slavery wasn't like when their ancestors were in Egypt. And Jesus wasn't talking about the control of the dreaded Romans. This was a much more serious. It was a far more sinister slavery. Who or what was their master? Jesus tells us, *"Everyone who keeps committing sin is a slave to sin."* This was slavery to sin. These people were bound to sin as their master.

There are the two characteristics of sin's deception that we really want to focus on today: that sin blinds and sin binds. Since our first parents lost their innocence in the garden, human beings, in this world, have wrongly believed they're free. In their minds and hearts they feel they are free to pursue whatever they want. They strive to find joy and satisfaction where they want. And in this way what the Bible calls sin, humans have long called a sort of good. It's a prohibited pleasure, a hidden happiness, something desirable even if only in the dark places of the heart. But in these short verses, Jesus declares something completely different. This supposed freedom is only an illusion. That's because sin blinds us. And worse yet it hides the reality of a truly terrible slavery. How sin binds us. People are held captive by their own fallen desires. They can't escape the impulse of evil within. They can't avoid the consequences of evil in their own lives. Fallen humans are slaves and don't even know it. Yes, sin blinds and sin binds.

As stewards of the truth, we need to understand the situation. We need to see things as they are. And see it not primarily in everyone else's lives. But in ours first. One of the points that has been made in this series is that being a steward of the truth means embracing the truth first for ourselves. We can't pass on to others what we don't possess. We can't help others live out what we've not embraced.

So let's do that. Let's consider, for a moment, sin's deception very personally. Sin has deceived all of us. It certainly has blinded us. That's why it's so easy to criticize the life choices of others. It's easy to sit on the judge's bench and bang a gavel and pronounce how others fail to recognize the deception of sin. But the truth is, we're in the same situation. We don't see ourselves objectively. We're not able to see, on our own, the shackles that bind us. No, these need to be shown to us. They need to be revealed to us. Because our fallen hearts are just like every other human heart in the world. It's a heart that the Bible describes as "deceitful above all things and beyond cure." We know sin's deception well. We've been blinded by it too.

And we know what slavery is like as well. That sin has bound us to its terrible will becomes clear anytime we reflect on the promises sin makes and its failure to deliver. The promise of pleasure ends with self-loathing. The promise of power and success is never enough. The promise of freedom sin seems to offer only becomes a dark and deadly prison. One author and pastor put it well: *"Man craves the very things that destroy him. He is like a dehydrated man thirsty for poison"* (Christopher Esget in *Disordered Desires*). That's what it's like to be bound in slavery to sin. We know it in our own way from our own experience with our own sinful self.

But despite this, despite the deception of sin, even though we've been duped, we have also now come to know the truth. The truth is what Christ powerfully proclaims in these verses. The truth is that while sin blinds and it binds, Jesus Christ reveals and releases. Jesus said to the Jews, *"If you remain in my word, you are really my disciples. You will also know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* This truth Jesus has revealed to us. This truth he proclaims to us every time we hear his gospel. The Son of God has come. He has come for you and for me. He has come not to judge or condemn, but in mercy to save. Jesus has revealed to us the beautiful truth of God's heart. It's a heart that desires to release the sinner from the terrible

mastery of sin. And that's what he's done for you and for me! Each one of us can testify to the One who is the truth as well as the way and the life. He has set us free when we was bound by an angry mob. He remained captive until he died the death that every sinner deserved. His death was completely innocent. But it was absolutely necessary. It was the only way God could maintain his justice and free every one of us from sin. After friends took down his lifeless body and laid it in a tomb, mankind only had to wait a short weekend for God to show how pleased he was with his Son's payment for all sin. He raised him to life on Easter. Now we stand righteous before God. Each one of us has come to know the freedom only the Son of God gives. Each of us is renewed in it again and again every time God's mercy and grace in Jesus is proclaimed to us. It's freedom from your guilt, freedom from my shame, freedom from the control and power of sin over us. Freedom from the fear of the future. Freedom from the fear of death.

Within a few months of that article in the Boston Post, Ponzi's deception became public. The truth came out—and it was devastating. People's investments were wiped out. Several banks failed. The truth was known, but there was no help in sight. It's different with the truth of Christ. Jesus Christ has come to reveal the truth of sin's deception in our lives. But it's not as a hopeless and helpless headline. He comes to release us from it. This is the beautiful truth that Christ speaks of here. Embrace it for yourselves. Recognize it deeply in your own lives. As you do, you'll also then be ready to steward it for others.

This is really important. There's a whole world out there that is deceived by sin. They're in our communities, in our social circles, in our families. And it's much more harmful than Ponzi's scheme. It's far more sinister than identity theft. This is deadly deception. It's blinded people. It's bound them. In our culture today there's an exaggerated emphasis on freedom of expression and the pursuit of happiness. It has left people believing they are free to exercise pursuing what they want. But it's an illusion. People are given a false sense of security. They're indulging in modern life, alternate lifestyles, and a humanism that believes we are fit to judge what is good or evil. It may all seem to bring genuine happiness. But it's an illusion. There's so much deception out there, in our communities, our social circles, our families. The power of sin blinds and it binds.

So what do we do? What is our response? Our Lord tells us, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The answer is here. It's the teachings of Christ. It's the truth of Christ. Christ's truth has and continues to set us free. This truth has the power to set others free. So we must teach it. We must bring it. We must reveal it.

It can be very easy as longtime Christians or people raised at another time and place to throw our hands up in the air in frustration at the world. We grumble at how we've gotten to where we are. But we cannot do that. It's not enough for us to simply assert our moral truth as if it should be obvious. Because it's not. This is the deception of sin in our day. To face it and deal with it as Christians means patiently and carefully and faithfully bringing the truth of Christ to it. As stewards of the truth, our task is to help others see the genuine beauty of Christ's truth amidst all the ugly of sin.

So don't dismiss their questions. Don't disregard their perspectives. Rather, engage them. Recognize how sin has deceived them, just as it has you. Only when you see how sin enslaves you, can you appreciate the rescue your Savior made for you and for all people. Then patiently, carefully, faithfully apply the truth of Christ that has set you free. In this way we will steward the truth as freedom from the terrible deception of sin—wherever it may be.