

## "Conditional Freedom" John 8:31-36 Reformation Sunday 2021

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus rest upon each and every one of you this day.

One of the foundational doctrines of the faith is the fact that God's love for us is unconditional. We don't have to do anything first in order to merit the love, mercy, peace, and forgiveness of God. He doesn't work like we do in our relationships with one another. There is no conditionality. There is no, "you do this for me, and then I'll do this for you." Nope. As St. Paul tells us, while we were still dead in our sins, Christ died for us; while we were still dead in our sins, God so loved us that He sent His Son to be born under the Law in order to fulfill the Law—all of it—and lay down His life as an all-redeeming, unconditional sacrifice of love for the life and forgiveness of the entire world.

And yet...you can't help but hear the big conditional "IF" spoken by Jesus Himself in our Gospel lesson for today. And this should really raise some eyebrows given the fact that this is the appointed Gospel lesson for Reformation Sunday; the day in which we celebrate the joy of the unconditional reality of our salvation—salvation through faith alone in God's grace alone, which is ours because of Christ alone. "If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples."

"IF"...this small, two-letter conditional term is responsible for more heartache and trouble in life. "If you really love me, you'll do this for me." That's not spoken out of love. That's nothing more than sinful manipulation, and we're all guilty of pushing the buttons and pulling the strings in an attempt to get people to do what we want them to do. So...does this mean that Jesus really does have a few skeletons in the closet? Maybe He's not so perfect. Maybe He's no better than any of us.

Here's the reality, and this may surprise some of you: Jesus really is speaking a conditionality here. I know you're probably used to be me

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telling you that “this isn’t what the word in the original language means or this isn’t how this word was originally used or understood.” This isn’t the case here. The word that Jesus uses in the original Greek is a conditional term. It’s translated properly. But...does this mean that Jesus is setting up conditions in order to merit salvation, mercy, and forgiveness?

Look at what the text says. It’s right there in plain English. Jesus was speaking to a group of Jews who had believed in Him. That doesn’t mean that they still did. There was a time that they had believed. In fact, if you asked them, they would probably tell you that they still did believe. But Jesus knows the truth. He drops the conditional bombshell on them by telling them that if, only if, they abide in His Word will they truly be His disciples. Basically, Jesus gives them a reality check. “You say you believe, but if you really did believe, you would abide in My Word. This is what My disciples do. You can put on a really good show that fools everyone. But you can’t fool Me. If you don’t abide in My Word, then you’re not My disciples.”

And this brings up an excellent point to ponder, because I know that every one of us can look down our noses at those faithless fools. What does it mean to abide? So often, especially in our day and age, we understand this word in terms of obedience to the law; to the rules. We’re good, law-abiding citizens. We abide by the law. We abide by the rules. We try and follow all the COVID restrictions. We try and obey the traffic regulations. We pay our taxes when asked.

But Jesus never said to abide by His Word. To “abide by” means to stand beside or be alongside of; in close proximity. Jesus never tells us to walk alongside His Word. He says quite clearly to abide IN His Word. The difference is as simple as abiding by the pool or abiding in the pool. Abiding by the pool is nice, but I’m not in the pool. I’m not

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swimming. To abide IN the Word is to be immersed in it; to be completely covered over and enveloped in it; to dwell in it; to remain it; to live in it. To use catechism language, to abide IN the Word is nothing more than to trust in God above all things; to let Him have the final Word; to let Him lead.

This is why I love the image of a no-name little monk by the name of Martin Luther, standing before the most powerful people in the world at that time, and they're not happy with him. He hasn't been abiding by their rules. "Martin, this is what we've always done!" Standing before men who very much wanted to snuff out this little rebellious spark, Luther abided IN the Word and promise of his Lord and Savior. He trusted in God above all things, even if it meant death. "Here I stand. Unless I am proven wrong by Scripture and the clear Word of God, I can do no other."

Now, it's easy to say that the rest is history and call it a day. But there's so much more to it; so much that we often forget or conveniently fail to mention. Luther lived the rest of his life as a wanted man. He was marked for death, and there were powerful people who held long grudges. Luther was hated and hunted until the day he died. And yet he never wavered in his trust. He never recanted in an attempt to get the hounds of hell off his trail. He remained firm in his faith; he abided IN the unconditional love, mercy, and grace of His heavenly Father all his days, as rough and scary and unsure as they were. It's easy to stand here and ask, "how many of us can say that?" None of us. If we're honest, we've all failed to abide in and trust in God above all things.

My fellow redeemed: I can't make you believe. I can't make you abide IN the Word and Peace and Joy of Christ Jesus. Only the Holy Spirit can do that, which He does through the Word of God. Faith

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comes through hearing; hearing the Word of Christ. It is for this reason that I direct your attention and your faith to your Lord and Savior at work right now, in your hearing and in your midst. Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! Here is the unconditional love of God, made flesh for you and hung on a criminal's cross to die for you, for your sin, and for the sins of the entire world. Here is the full wrath of God against sin, and at the same time, here is God's incomprehensible love for you, in the flesh.

I direct you to the baptismal font. Here is where your Lord and Savior brings you His Good Friday victory over sin, death, and the grave. You can't go back and be at the foot of that cross as water and blood poured forth from His riven side, which is why He brings that victory to you. Here in the waters of baptism our Lord cleanses us and declares us innocent, not because of what we do or what we can bring to the table, but solely out of His divine grace and mercy; solely because of what Christ Jesus did for us in His all-redeeming life, death, and resurrection. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into His death and resurrection?"

My fellow baptized and redeemed children of God: You are free. The Son has set you free, and He continues to make you free in His Word and Sacraments. My prayer for you is that you simply and daily live in this freedom. May you ever and always live in and abide in the freedom that Christ purchased for you with His life, death, and resurrection. May this joy and peace that surpasses all understanding abide in your hearts and minds all your remaining days, and may it be on your tongue and witnessed in all that you say, think, and do for as long as God gives you this mission opportunity we call "life." May there never be any doubt that you are a disciple of Christ; a disciple who has been set free to ever abide in Him and His Word of Life and Peace, and

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to make that same Word of Life and Peace known to all those whom He brings you into contact with.

To Him alone be all glory, all praise, and all honor, now and all our remaining days. Amen.