

UNEDITED DRAFT

ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON 2015

Today is Ash Wednesday. “Ash” because historically, ashes have been a symbol of repentance. In Old Testament times, people would signify their repentance by putting on sack cloth and sitting in ashes. In some churches today, the “ash” is applied to the forehead as a symbol of repentance. But of course the true repentance God is looking for is not an external sign or symbol, but a repentance of the heart. It is my prayer that today we will recognize the seriousness of sin, and the enormous offense that it is to God. That we will turn from it, and turn to Jesus for his forgiveness. It is my prayer that this repentance will not be just for today, or even just for this season of Lent, but for every day of our lives.

For this Lenten season, our sermons will have a common theme. So Jesus had this phrase. If you grew up with the King James Version you’ll recognize this: “Verily, verily I say unto you...” The Greek word is “Amen.” “Of a truth. So be it.” HCSB=“I assure you.” ESV: “Truly, truly, I say to you” But we’ll just stick with what the NIV says here, and it is the title of the sermon series for this season: “I tell you the truth.”

Jesus said this phrase quite frequently. I counted 79 times Jesus said it in the four Gospels. Obviously, many of those are parallel accounts of the same incident, but it’s still a lot of times that Jesus used this phrase.

Why did he use it? Well, obviously not because sometime he told lies or half-truths. Rather it was an attention getter. When you write something, you get to a central point, or an especially important point, you can put it in bold print. Or you make them a section heading. Or you put them in a call-out box. But how do you do that when you’re speaking? You need a way to heighten people’s attention when you’re getting to the main point, or an especially important point. In English, we might say, “Okay, now listen.” OR “listen up!” Or , “Okay, now pay special attention to what I’m about to say, this is important.” Jesus said, “**I tell you the truth.**”

So, if we want to get some of the biggest points Jesus made, all we have to do is look for that phrase. So that’s exactly what we’ll do in our midweek services over the next 6 weeks, and then also for our special services on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. If you’re keeping track, that’s 9 teachings of Jesus that followed the phrase, “I tell you the truth.”

Jesus is going to say to us, “Come on, listen up! Pay special attention to what I’m about to say here.” And I assure you we will be richly blessed if we will give the attention his words deserve.

Today as we launch this Lenten season, Jesus has some especially challenging words for us. Today what follows “I tell you the truth” gives us pause. When you hear them, your first reaction might be, “What?” Your second reaction will probably be, “I’m not so sure about that.” But unless you get this, you will not understand the meaning of the Lenten season first of all. But far more important, you won’t understand the fundamental truth of how you get right with God.

So, Jesus says “Listen up!” **Anyone who sins is a slave to sin.** Let’s look at the whole context to see what’s going on.

John 8:31-36 **31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”**

Jesus once told a parable that described the kinds of reactions people have to the good news of Jesus Christ. Some immediately outright reject it. Some believe then persecution and hardship kill their faith. Some believe but then the cares of this world choke out faith. Finally, some believe, their faith grows and they bare much fruit. In other words, the kind of faith God is looking for is the faith that endures... the faith that perseveres... the faith that remains and continues to grow no matter what

Well, Jesus was in a situation here where many were following him. Many professed to believe in him. *But would they have an enduring faith?* Were these self-professed believers truly believers? Jesus gives a benchmark. He says, **“If you hold to [literally, remain in or keep on in] my teaching, you are really my disciples.”** To be exposed to his teaching is not enough. To *have heard* his teaching is not what makes you his disciples. But to keep on in it does make you Jesus disciple. At the end of the *sermon on the mount*, Jesus said something similar. He said a person is wise and builds on solid ground if they hear his words AND put them into practice. One time when Jesus was teaching he declared: **“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”** (*Luke 11:28*)

Why is his teaching so important? Because then **you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.** Jesus called himself the way, the truth and the life. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit and calls him the Spirit of Truth. God’s Word is called the truth when Jesus prayed to the heavenly Father, **“Sanctify them by the truth, your Word is truth!”** And in Psalm 31:5 it says **“Redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth.”** Unless you know the truth, the God of truth, his son who is the truth, the Holy Spirit who teaches and confirms his truth in you, then you are not free. You are a *slave*. The truth will set you free.

Now pay attention to how the Jews responded. Jesus essentially just said this: One who is truly his disciple, remains in his teaching. His teaching is truth. They had no problem with any of this. But then Jesus said, “The truth will set you free.”

NOW they had a problem! Jesus was clearly saying that without his teaching and truth, they were slaves and would be slaves. And that suggestion that they were spiritually enslaved without his truth offended them.

33 They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

First, how could they say they had never been slaves to anyone? They had been slaves to the Egyptians. Later they were slaves to the Babylonians. After that they were slaves to Medo-Persians. You could say there was a degree of enslavement to the Greeks. And now they were subjugated to the Romans. So what were they talking about? They knew that Jesus was talking spiritually. So they also were talking spiritually. Spiritually speaking, they did not believe they needed to be freed. They did not believe themselves to be enslaved. To be spiritually enslaved means you are subject to the will of another. It means you are powerless and helpless. It means you need rescue.

And they were not willing to admit that or believe that. They, the Jews, knew that they were a chosen people... the people of Abraham. Essentially, they were saying to Jesus: We are not spiritually powerless and in need of rescue. We have Abraham as our father! We have the Moses’ laws to live by! And we know those laws! And we usually keep those laws! We have the temple here in Jerusalem! We know and perform all the correct rites and rituals. Jesus, we of all the people on the planet are most empowered and least in need of rescue! If your truth sets us free, then we don’t see much need of it!

That's the gist of what's happening here.

Now I tell you the truth, we are a lot like them. You and I – we're not much different. We are equally offended at the suggestion that we are, without Jesus and his truth, slaves. We are powerless to please God. We are in need of rescue. A part of us wants to hear nothing of it! Not that we couldn't use a little help. Maybe few tips on right living. Maybe a top 10 list of things to do to please God. Maybe some relationship tips. Time management tips would help me improve myself. If we just had a few suggestions to follow... ways to improve our lives a little bit... that would be some helpful truth, wouldn't it?

Such thinking reveals our inner, core belief that we're not powerless... we're not truly in need of truth that brings freedom... we're not truly in need of the rescue Jesus offers. We don't really need the freedom that Jesus offers, because we're already feeling pretty free.

And to all of this Jesus has some very important words. **34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, [verily, verily I say unto you; listen very carefully to what I'm about to say because this is of utmost importance for you to truly get...] everyone who sins is a slave to sin. 35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family...**

Jesus shoots our objections out of the water. Do you really think you are free? Do you really think you still have spiritual power? Do you really think you are not enslaved? Do you think you can please God with what you do? Do you think you can improve your life in and of yourself to the point that God is duly impressed? Jesus answers: Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Super easy benchmark to check if you're enslaved. Do you sin? Yes? Then you're a slave to sin. Enough of this talk about your spiritual freedom. If you sin, you are a slave to sin. And if you are a slave to sin, then you have no permanent place in God's family.

And this is very easily demonstrable. Apart from Jesus and his truth, show me a life that is free from sin. If we are spiritually free, then anyone should be free to choose to be perfect. "I'm free to choose sin and I'm free to choose not to sin." Fine, then I challenge you not to sin. Let's make it just one week. You choose not to sin for one week, then we'll come back and discuss how it went.

With this *truth* Jesus is teaching us something important and extraordinarily uncomfortable. By nature, apart from Christ, we are enslaved to sin, and therefore we have no permanent place in God's family. Eventually, ultimately, the slave to sin must be removed from the holy and perfect family of God, never to be a part of it again.

Friends, this isn't pleasant to think about, but it's the first part of the reason we're here on Ash Wednesday. The wages of sin is death. "Dust you are and to dust you will return." Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. As slaves to sin, we deserve to die. We deserve to be separated from God's family forever. And that is hell.

What we desperately need is an escape plan. How can we escape these chains? How can we be set free? What can save us? Jesus reveals that the question is not "what," but "who." Who can save us? The answer in our text is this: **"35 Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** The key to rescue and release is knowing the one who holds the key to rescue and release. The key is Jesus. And the teaching of Jesus reveals the truth that sets us free.

Jesus did not give a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” so that we could free ourselves. Jesus loved us so much, he took part in an incredible rescue mission to free us himself. Sin enslaves us, so Jesus came and lived a perfect life. He did that on our behalf... as our perfect substitute. We are powerless against sin, Jesus was powerful and perfect. We are tempted and sin. Jesus was tempted and always resisted. We know the good God wants us to do and often fail to do it. Jesus wasn’t afraid to approach the messy situations in people’s lives and clean them up. He always showed love, always helped, always obeyed.

Jesus saw us getting beaten and whipped by our slave master, sin. He didn’t just feel sorry for us, he stepped in and took that beating for us. This Lenten season we will follow Jesus all the way to the cross and see the pain and suffering inflicted on him because of our sins. The betrayal, mocking, false accusations, spitting, beating, flogging. He was falsely condemned and placed on the cross. He suffered in isolation from his heavenly Father, and there he died. He declared his work finished. He guaranteed it through his resurrection.

Now the son has set you free. And you are free indeed! God declares you not guilty of sin. The shackles have been cut off. You are free.

So here is what is amazing. Not only are you set free for eternal life. You are set free in this life too. We still live in a world of sin. You still have a sinful nature inside of you. But by God’s grace, you now have a new and holy person inside of you too. This new person is empowered by Jesus Christ. God’s Spirit lives within you. God empowers you to live a new and holy life. You *are* now able to say *no* to sin, and to live for God.

So let’s really bring this down to earth. What sinful habits and behaviors have enslaved you? What is your slave master, or has been in the past? Alcohol? Drugs? Excessive use of television, movie or internet? A bad relationship? Pornography? Hoarding of earthly goods? Materialism which perhaps shows itself in frequent shopping and purchases?

I want you to leave with the good news today, that Jesus has set you free from all of these things which try to enslave you. With Christ living in you by faith, you can say no to sin and live for God. He strengthens you with the Word and Sacraments. You have a Christian community here that will walk with you in your struggle to live a free life instead of one that is enslaved.

Friends, sin has no power over you anymore. Sin is not your master. I tell you the truth. Listen, listen, listen! The Son has set you free, and you are free indeed! Amen.

2 Samuel 12:1-13

Nathan Rebukes David

12 The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, 3 but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

4 “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

5 David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! 6 He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

7 Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. 8 I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. 9 Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. 10 Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.’

11 “This is what the Lord says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. 12 You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.’ ”

13 Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Nathan replied, “The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.

Luke 18:9-14

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”