

JOHN — WEEK 11

TO BELIEVE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

Jesus talks to people who believe Him. What do they believe and what don't they believe?

Who has true Faith?

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1 John 8:31–32

Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

This passage would make perfect sense, except that it begins with, “*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him.*” This isn’t addressed to unbelievers.

Jesus goes on to say, “... *the truth shall make you free,*” but only for those of them who *abide in My word.* They already believe. What’s up with adding another requirement? Is this works-based salvation?

No. *Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him,* but believed what? Do they believe in His death and resurrection? Do they believe in His deity? Do they have the Holy Spirit?

No, no, and no. Of course not. This isn’t about works versus faith because their belief isn’t that kind of faith. You can believe a lot of things Jesus said, such as the golden rule, without anything remotely approaching saving faith.

But at the same time, this is an important lesson about the journey of faith. No one goes from zero to a hundred in an instant.

Closed minds become open and then things start to change. When you’re on the right path, where or when you crossed the line into saving faith isn’t the issue.

The path is the issue.

Christians nowadays get this wrong in two ways. They think crossing the line is the issue or they think the endpoint is the issue.

No, the path is the issue because Christ is the issue. If the gospel is just about saving me, then crossing the line and getting to heaven are the only things that matter.

But that’s a self-centered view of the gospel, not to mention a boring one.

Still, it’s understandable, especially for new Christians. They’re not expected to have a mature, advanced view. Later, as they grow in Christ, they’ll grow in humility. They’ll get past a child’s understanding of the gospel and discover the full truth.

But notice that this is the path making itself the issue. As we walk the path, we learn that the walk is more than just to get from point A to point B; it’s to grow us in the walk.

This is taught beautifully in the Christian classic, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places* by Hannah Hurnard.

If you’ve never read it, you’re missing out.

2 John 8:32–36

“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’?”

Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”

As always, Jesus is so focused on His mission that He resists their distractingly ridiculous comment and keeps on making His point. Saint Augustine has a thorough takedown.

They puffed themselves up as Abraham’s seed and said, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can You say, ‘You will be made free’?”

O inflated skin! This is not magnanimity; it is hot air! For even if you want to talk about freedom in this life, how were you truthful when you said, “We were never in bondage to anyone”? Wasn’t Joseph sold? Weren’t the holy prophets led into captivity? And again, didn’t that very nation, when making bricks in Egypt, also serve hard rulers, not only in gold and silver but also in clay?

If you were never in bondage to anyone, ungrateful people, why is it that God is continually reminding you that he delivered you from the house of bondage? Or do you perhaps mean that your ancestors were in bondage, but you who speak were never in bondage to anyone? How then were you now paying tribute to the Romans, out of which you formed a trap for the truth himself, as if to ensnare him?—Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John (as translated in The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture)

But this kind of slavery isn’t what Jesus is talking about, so He just keeps going. Maybe they’ll catch on eventually.

“I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.”

Jesus isn’t just describing a feature of sin; He’s presenting a whole new concept of what sin is.

Think sin isn’t slavery? Try to stop sinning. So, who’s in control? That’s slavery.

And look at the extreme case of someone who has destroyed his or her life through sin. What was the driving force behind everything going wrong? Was it not the self-centered pursuit of happiness? How is it that the pursuit of happiness can lead directly to its opposite?

It’s the result of not being in control. Something else is overriding.

When you’re not in control, you’re a slave.

3 John 8:37–43

“I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father.”

They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.”

Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father.”

Then they said to Him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God.”

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word.”

Abraham is the father of many nations—that’s what his name means—but he’s also the father of faith. That’s what Jesus is driving at when He says, *“If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham.”*

Their problem is lack of faith. This gets back to the distinction that we discussed earlier. Their belief in Jesus isn’t faith. Most importantly, faith is a gift from God. That’s why Jesus says, *“Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word.”*

It’s not a choice; it’s an inability.

This jumps right to the root of reformed doctrine—total inability. We aren’t able to accept the gospel on our own. We can’t even listen to it.

There’s a distinction in Hebrew that makes this a bit clearer. Remember, even though this was recorded in Greek, Jesus was saying this in Aramaic, which is close to Hebrew.

Hebrew distinguishes between listening to someone’s voice and listening in someone’s voice. This might translate to English as the distinction between hearing and listening, but the distinction in Hebrew is stronger. Listening in someone’s voice implies acceptance.

Of course, we can’t be certain how Jesus actually phrased this, but he had to say it one way or the other and “listening in” fits best.

When Jesus said, *“Because you are not able to listen to My word,”* He’s saying that they need a miracle.

Nothing less will do.

4 John 8:44–47

“You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God.”

Time out. Isn’t Jesus talking to the same people who were identified in verse 31 as “*those Jews who believed Him*”? Now He says, “*But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me.*” The timbre of this conversation doesn’t make sense—at least not as it sounds in English. If I had been there, I would have walked out long before this point. Yet they’re not leaving. What am I missing?

Remember, Jesus said, in verse 37, “*You seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you.*”

If I had been standing there hearing this, I would think the word “you” means that He’s talking to me, as if He said, “Each and every one of you wants to kill Me.” If that’s how the crowd took it, they would have already walked. Once again, we can learn a lot about what something means from the crowd’s reaction.

In English, there are many different flavors of the word you: you all, y’all, all y’all, you people, some of you, etc. In the Greek here, it’s plural. It might best be translated as “you people,” but in modern English, that has an unfortunate, nasty connotation. So, translators just leave it as “you.”

But the desire to kill Jesus can’t be the exact sentiment of every individual in the crowd. Thus, the word “you” doesn’t mean each person individually; it’s a group reference. The “Jews” are trying to kill Him, even if only a tiny percentage actually are.

So, forget the seemingly harsh tone; that’s just a distraction. What’s Jesus’s point here?

It’s the connection with the devil. Jesus already pointed out how sin is slavery. Now He adds an element to who is the puppet-master.

The slavery is directly to sin itself—we are slaves to sin—but sin doesn’t have an agenda. The devil does.

And that agenda is deception and murder. *He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.* Remember, in the garden of Eden his goal was death.

So, yet again, Jesus is raising the volume. Not believing Jesus means being a stooge of the devil.

Christians almost never talk about spiritual warfare anymore. Thus, we play into the hands of the enemy.

The result is that we are constantly surprised by how things go wrong. We choose to be oblivious to what’s going on behind the scenes.

All warfare is based on deception. — Sun Tzu

5 John 8:48–59

Then the Jews answered and said to Him, “Do we not say rightly 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. And I do not seek My own glory; there is One who seeks and judges. Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.”

Then the Jews said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon! Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death.’ Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do You make Yourself out to be?”

Jesus answered, “If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, ‘I do not know Him,’ I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw and was glad.”

Then the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?”

Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.

So, which is worse? Saying someone is a Samaritan or saying he has a demon? In first century Jerusalem, that’s not an easy call.

Jesus just ignores the Samaritan crack (which doesn’t make sense anyway) and replies straight-up to the accusation that He has a demon. He’s getting close to the climax of this dialogue and He wants to get to it.

“Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

There’s no question about it; He’s claiming to be the eternal creator of the world. And not just because He’s thousands of years old. He says “I AM” in a way that implies deity. That’s why it’s in all caps.

And if there’s any doubt about what He means, the crowd’s reaction settles it.

Then they took up stones to throw at Him.

Jesus’s claim to deity is the central claim of all of scripture. Understanding this (and believing it) are the keys to life. Many Christians think that the key is accepting Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross as payment for our sins.

That’s nice, and an accurate view of the doctrine of justification, but the key is knowing who Jesus is.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Does it seem that your path was custom designed for you?
2. Does sin feel like slavery?
3. Did your conversion feel miraculous?
4. Are you often surprised by how things go wrong?
5. What is your mental image of the trinity?

Items for prayer: