

Jesus the Liberator—February 15, 2015

By Amanda A. Nevin

When you hear the word “lens” what comes to mind? For someone who wears glasses it may be the prescription lens that helps them see; a photographer the various lenses one uses to capture images closer/further away; the camera lens itself that mirrors an image and is caught on still or moving film. The official definition of a lens is “a piece of glass or other transparent substance with curved sides for concentrating or dispersing light ways (so you can see something). In our passage Jesus is addressing those who once saw in him as the possible savior and who are now wavering in their faith and belief. Dale Brunner, a theologian, renders vs. 31 as saying “those who had previously believed in Jesus.” Why is this important? Jesus is addressing many who previously believed in Him, previously put their faith and trust in Him and who are now questioning and are actually becoming hostile towards Jesus. Jesus cautions these believers to learn what true discipleship looks like for those who are true disciples will look at Jesus and know the truth and the truth will set them free.

True discipleship is tested with “do you hold to Jesus’ teaching” and make a home in Jesus’ word. Do you run the filter, the lens of your Christian faith through the litany test of Jesus and his word or is the lens in which you look through and experience life, something other than Jesus, maybe a clouded perspective or a limited view of Jesus? Jesus is cautioning this crowd to look at him, the one who is the true word of God, the one who has completely fulfilled the law of God in the Old Testament and has made something new.

True discipleship means trusting Jesus and making the choice to get my life’s decisions from him by living from now on in the Home of his word. In this passage it is implied that there are many who profess themselves to be Christ’s disciples who are disciples only in show and name and not in deed or in truth. So what does this mean? It means that we are to live under the faithful obedience of Jesus’ teachings: to look at Jesus who is Lord, the great I am and the one who teaches us that we are to love the Lord God with all of our heart, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves and to read the scriptures through the lens of Jesus’ love, grace and mercy. It is one thing to follow a Jesus whom we have engineered in our own consciousness, a Jesus we think we know through “hearing” God’s word occasionally preached or taught, or listening to others pontificate about Jesus, or thinking we know Jesus simply because we know a few good Bible stories. It is another thing to actively seek Jesus in his word and run our thoughts, our life, our words, our actions through the lens of what we have read and experienced in God’s Holy Word. Jesus want us to know the truth- which is him, to learn to make Jesus the central factor in our week, life, home, work, family, play, in other words the central part of our reality. When we dwell in Jesus’ word, his life, his ministry we receive the benefits of truth and freedom because we know the lens by which we are looking at the world. When we look at others in comparison, judgment, disdain, jealousy, condemnation, criticism, we are taking our eyes off of Jesus. When we look to others to be our example we take our eyes off of Jesus. When we hold on to grudges, fear, unwillingness to forgive, our own ideologies, justification for why we live the way we do, we take our eyes off of Jesus, we aren’t seeking truth and we become enslaved in sin. When we look at Jesus he sets us free to imagine the impossible, to think outside the box, to be creative, to be who we are called to be and to live without fear and judgment from him, and who cares about what others things. Jesus

liberates us to be his people, but we have to personally endeavor to seek after Jesus. I think that Jesus is trying to tell those once believers to not go on what you have heard in the past or believed in the past, you personally have to continually seek after Christ every day. As disciples those who have believed in Jesus, that is accepted his word must continue in it if they are to be his true disciples. In this passage Christ wants us to be set free to follow him to have a revival of consciousness in our faith, to undertake seeking Jesus once again and to be looking through the lens of Christ to gain our wisdom, our hope, our freedom so that we might be liberated to be the people that Jesus wants us to be.

The flip side to all of this is that anything that is not God's Son will enslave us in sin. For example: sometimes we get steeped in the tradition or rituals of things (we have always done things this way); our spiritual habits and we take our eyes off of the real Jesus. The tradition, habit, rituals, become our truth and while we think it is Jesus, we have long since lost the real Jesus in all of those other things. Like those in the passage who say 'oh we are Abraham's seeds, meaning we are Abraham's heirs, we are the chosen ones so we are okay.' Christ is telling them, no you are not! Just because you were part of the chosen family at one time, you have lost your place you and are now enslaved in your sin and as a slave have no part of the family. Only those who truly believe in the Son (meaning me, Jesus) are set free and are heirs to the family. Jesus challenges a widely held assumption that blessing from God for the people of Israel was for them only and it became for the people of Israel a feeling of privilege and protection and one could argue a self-righteous sense of privilege at the exclusion of others. Jesus opens the door in this dialogue claiming that it is not religious heritage that brings true freedom and discipleship but truth and truth is following the one who is Truth—Jesus himself. Karl Barth describes it like this "It is the life of people who are headed on a long journey and along the way find a sign pointing them westward. The signpost is there to convey to them to their destination, but instead they stop and create a life for themselves under the painted words. They build a civilization there, celebrating the signpost and telling stories of how they arrived at the marker. Rituals evolve and songs are written. Books are published and liturgies follow. A few travel on and return, confirming that the sign does indeed lead to the place promised. But the second and third generations have built a life around the signpost and have forgotten the meaning of the journey. Their lore is built on stories of past travel, not on stories of arriving or on the prophetic call to get on with the journey themselves."ⁱ We often live under the signpost, thinking we know the real Jesus, but we are afraid to journey on and have a personal encounter with the living Christ ourselves. If Jesus stepped into our century today, if he walked into our church this morning, if he picked up a religious symbol or something that we "hold dear to our hearts in this congregation as tradition" and challenged that symbol's meaning, would we cheer or would we fight? Suddenly we might find ourselves defending Christendom instead of the Christian faith.

When we make a check list of all the things "others have done" we forget to pull the log out of our own eyes. When we judge others for their lifestyle choices we are enslaved in fear and judgment. When we cast judgment on others because they are homeless or foreigners we are enslaved to self-righteousness. When we point our fingers at others sins and mistakes we are enslaved in our pride and power. When "the cop in your head tells you, you can't", you can't change your addictive behavior, you can't change your circumstances because the world around you puts up barriers; you can't be a stronger Christian because you don't know the Bible, you can't be kinder because you are "just a mean" kinda person; you

can't learn a new way of living because you are set in your ways; when a young adult says "I can't make a difference in the world because there are just too many things that need to change, when the mom/dad who says they "can't be a good parent because their child is already lost," the person who says I can't be free from drugs/alcohol/food because they have a hold of me, our lens is not focused on Jesus, it focused on ourselves, our interpretations, our own opinions and fears. When we tell ourselves that we can't then we are not living into the hope of the one who sets us free, we are living in a lie and not focusing on Christ, we are living at the signpost. Christ as the liberator is telling us that if we follow him, his word we are set free from the wages of sin and death, set free from the bondage of this world set free to truly learn how to forgive those who have hurt us, how to give thanks for all of our blessings, how to apply God's word for ourselves, how to see Christ in the other, how to be the hands and feet of Christ to others, offering blessings instead of curses, offering hope instead of condemnation, offering love and forgiveness even when we are afraid.

The old bracelets and symbols WWJD: What would Jesus Do? Seems a bit corny in some respects and yet I think that is what he is asking his disciples to do, to discover once again what he would do and go and do; go perform miracles in Christ's name, go and the love neighbor who drives us crazy; go and challenge the status quo; go and learn where your food comes from and buy food that doesn't enslave others, seek out what fair trade means; look for the real Jesus away from politicians views of Christianity; go and instead of having judgment on those who are homeless, look at what fair housing in this area really means, fight for a higher minimum wage so that those in our service industry can survive and have great employment, go and seek what Jesus asks of us, have a personal experience with Jesus and then apply that to our daily living.

There is a contemporary artist by the name of Todd Agnew who wrote a song called "My Jesus" he captures the essence of this passage in my opinion. "Which Jesus do you follow, which Jesus do you serve? If Ephesians says to imitate Christ why do you look so much like the world? Cause my Jesus bled and died, he spent his time with the thieves and liars, he loved the poor and accosted the arrogant, so which one do you want to be? Blessed the poor spirit Or do we pray to be blessed with the wealth of this land? Blessed are the they that hunger and thirst for righteousness or do we ache for another taste of this world of shifting sand? And whois this that you follow this picture of the American dream, if Jesus was here would you walk right by on the other side, or fall down and worship at His holy feet? Cause my Jesus would never be accepted in my church, the blood and dirt on his feet might stain the carpet, but he reaches for the hurting and despises the proud, and I think He'd prefer Beale St. to the stained glass crowd, and I know that He can hear me if I cry out loud. I wanna be like Jesus, not a poster child for American posterity, but like my Jesus, you see I'm tired of living for success, and popularity I wanna be like Jesus, but I'm not sure what that means." Jesus says, to follow him, to be like him and in order to do that we have follow Jesus, the real Jesus, not the Jesus we have created in our minds, in our hearts and in our own opinions, too look through the lens of scripture at Jesus himself and discover once again the heart of Jesus and to go and do likewise. Where do you need to change in order to be more like Jesus? What Would JESUS do to show his love for his father, heart mind and soul? What would that look like for us?

ⁱ Burge, Gary, The NIV Application Commentary: John, Zondervan Press, Grand Rapids Michigan. Pg 267-68.