

Main Idea: According to what Jesus said in John 8:31-41, people who say they believe in Jesus need to see three things.

- I. We need to understand the nature of true faith (31-32).
  - A. If you're really Jesus' disciple, you hold on to His teaching.
  - B. If you're really Jesus' disciple, His teaching gets a hold on your life.
- II. We need to understand the truth about ourselves (33-38).
  - A. The sinner's problem is that he can't stop sinning (34).
  - B. The sinner's need is to become a son (35).
  - C. The sinner's hope is to experience the power of the Son (36).
  - D. The sinner's deception is that he trusts in something other than Jesus' word (37).
  - E. The sinner's root problem is that he belongs to another family (38).
- III. We need to understand the inadequacy of religion (39-41).
  - A. Religion blinds a person (39).
  - B. Religion turns a person against Jesus (40-41).

The Bottom Line: If we want to be free, we need Jesus!

Picture this scene. It's a church service and the preacher is coming to the end of his sermon. He has just told the listening audience about Jesus and what He alone can do for people. And then he asks the question, “Do you believe what I am saying? Do you believe in Jesus?” At which point he begins to see hands start going up. And so he asks, “By raising your hands, are you saying that you believe in Jesus?” And the people respond in confident unison, “Yes, we believe!”

Here's the question. What do those people need? You say, “They need follow-up. They are baby Christians and need help if they're going to grow.” Without question, baby Christians need follow-up, but we're assuming something, aren't we? We are assuming that just because a person raises a hand and says he believes in Jesus that he indeed is a Christian.

So how do you help people who tell you they believe in Jesus? That's a critical question in an area like ours when there are many people who, when asked, say they believe in Jesus. It's also the very situation that Jesus Himself faced in John 8.

In John 8 Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. It was about six months before He would be crucified and the opposition was already gearing up to eliminate Him, as He well knew. At the Feast He made a messianic announcement to the crowd (8:12), “I am the light of the world.”

The Pharisees challenged His claim in verse 13. But some in the crowd believed. That's what verse 30 says, “Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him.”

That's cause for celebration, right? These people are now saved and heading for heaven. After all, they *believed in Jesus*. They *put their faith in Jesus*.

But wait. Notice the beginning of verse 31, “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said.” Jesus had a message for these people who believed in Him, and as we'll see, His message wasn't a follow-up course for new Christians. In fact, by the time He's done with His message, these “believers” will be picking up stones to stone Him, says verse 59.

That's strange behavior for a saved believer, wouldn't you say? Indeed, but that's the point. These are not saved believers. These are *unsaved* believers.

Huh? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? Actually, it's not. You see, Jesus faced two insufficient responses in John 8. First He faced the response of *no faith*—that's the Pharisees and other religious leaders. But secondly, He faced the response of *faulty faith*, or we might call it *false faith*, or as I mentioned in an earlier message, *the non-believing believer*. That's the people mentioned in verse 30 who *put their faith in him*.

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

Ever met anybody like that? In twenty-four years of pastoring, I've met dozens and dozens, if not hundreds of people, who at one point gave indication that they *put their faith in Jesus*, but then gave no evidence of really following Him thereafter.

Here's what John MacArthur has to say about these "believers" in John 8. "Their belief, as will soon become evident, was not saving faith, but was merely the first step toward it. Thus the Lord's goal in this section was to point them to saving faith in Him—the type of faith that would truly set them free from sin, death, Satan, and hell."<sup>1</sup>

Leon Morris comments, "This section of discourse is addressed to those who believe, and yet do not believe. Clearly they were inclined to think what Jesus said was true. But they were not prepared to yield Him the far-reaching allegiance that real trust in Him implies. This is a most dangerous spiritual state. To recognize that truth is in Jesus and to do nothing about it means that in effect one ranges oneself with the enemies of the Lord. It means also that there is some powerful spiritual force holding back the would-be believer from what is recognized as the right course of action. The man in that position is not free but a slave."<sup>2</sup>

So back to the question. What do people who say they believe in Jesus need? Let's take a look at Jesus' answer to that question. According to what Jesus said in John 8:31-41, people who say they believe in Jesus need to see three things.

#### I. We need to understand the nature of true faith (31-32).

Let's think about the word "faith" for a moment. What is faith? In reality, everyone is a person of faith, for everyone believes something, even the atheist who believes there is no God. Verse 30 says that many Jews *put their faith in Him*. So what they had was faith, but as we'll see, it wasn't *saving faith*.

I find MacArthur's explanation helpful at this point. "Saving faith consists of three elements, commonly referred to by theologians with the Latin terms *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. *Notitia* (knowledge) is the intellectual component of faith. It involves an understanding of the basic facts regarding salvation. *Assensus* (assent) goes one step beyond *notitia* and confidently affirms those facts to be true. *Fiducia* (trust) acts on them by personally appropriating Jesus Christ as the only hope for salvation."<sup>3</sup>

Now listen to what Jesus had to say to these people who "believed in Him" in verses 31-32, "Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"

Did you catch that? Jesus made a distinction between merely believing in Him and really being His disciple. He said two things are true of you if you are the real thing.

**A. If you're really Jesus' disciple, you hold on to His teaching.** "If ye *continue* in my word," says the AV. "If you *abide* in my word," says the ESV. The NIV uses the word "teaching," but the Greek is *logoi* (from *logos*). He's talking about His word. What a person does with His word reveals whether the person's faith is saving faith or something less. True disciples hear His word and then hold on to it, continue in it, and abide in it.

Don't read works into this. It's not believing plus abiding that saves them. It's believing in Jesus plus nothing. But when a person believes in Jesus with a Spirit-produced saving faith, you'll know it because that person will keep holding on to Jesus' word.

He will read it. He will come to church to hear it. He will defend it when others deny it. He will share with you what he's learning from it. He will hide it in his heart. He will thank the Lord for it. And when he fails to do these things, he will be convicted, for he will know that something precious is missing from his life.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, p. 354.

<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, p. 454.

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, p. 355-6.

Jesus gives a second evidence of saving faith. First, you will hold on to His teaching, then...

**B. If you're really Jesus' disciple, His teaching gets a hold on your life.** "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." What's that mean? Free from what? Free from problems in life? Free from political oppression? Free from economic hardship? Free from physical problems? Is that what Jesus is promising?

No. Look at verse 34. He's talking about sin. "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin." That's what Jesus sets us free from. He liberates the true believer from continuing to live in the bondage of his sin.

And what specifically does Jesus use to set the sinner free from his sin? The truth. You will know *the truth*, and *the truth* will set you free.

So where do you get *the truth*? Don't miss the connection between *word* in verse 31 and *the truth* in verse 32. If you hold to my word, says Jesus in verse 31, then you will know the truth. And once you know the truth, you will experience the power of the truth in breaking the chains of sin that previously held you in bondage.

Don't miss the connection between learning and living. If a person is a true believer, he will hold on to Jesus' teaching and then Jesus' teaching will get a hold on his life.

Please don't water this down. Jesus says that a key evidence of true faith is a changed life. It's not the changed life that saves him, for Jesus alone does the saving. But it is the evidence that he indeed has been saved.

Friends, most of you are here today and would say that you believe in Jesus. What's more, many of you have children and grandchildren and neighbors and classmates and friends at work who would say the same. That's great. But that's also what the people in John 8 were saying. So we need to listen carefully to what Jesus told them, for He is speaking to us. If you hold on to my word and you are seeing the liberating power of my word in your life, then you are really my disciples. Learning and life-change. Those are the evidences of saving faith.

You say, "What does that mean in practical terms?" Here's the very tangible illustration Jesus gave in John 10:27, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." When faith is real, you'll know it because the person will listen and follow.

Recently Sherry and I spent a day visiting Boston and we saw the red line. Ever seen it? Interestingly, commentator Kent Hughes talks about it in his commentary on this very passage. He writes: "When our family visited Boston a number of years ago, we took the historical walk from the Boston Common. We started under the great steeple of Park Street Church, walked down past Tremont Temple, came to King's Chapel, took a right to the Old South Meeting House, spent some time listening to a lecture, and then wandered over to Quincy Market and Faneuil Hall, where we had lunch. We had a marvelous time. And in all our sight-seeing, there was only one thing required of us – to follow a red line on the sidewalk. If you follow that red line, you will see nearly all the nearby historical sights of Boston. All we had to do was follow the line, pay attention to the signs it brought us to, and obey them."

Then Hughes adds, "Similarly, only by abiding in the Word of God, 'hold[ing] to my teaching,' can we enjoy the liberation Christ offers us."<sup>4</sup>

He's right. It's a matter of learning the word and living it. That's the key to freedom.

But here's where we get in trouble. It's been well said that one of the great problems that plagues the American church is biblical ignorance. People are not spending time in their Bibles.

Friends, that's how freedom comes and there's no substitute for it. We must be learners and then lovers of God's Word. Then, and only then, do we experience true freedom. And then, and only then, are we giving evidence that our faith is the real thing.

That brings us to the second thing we need to understand if we say we believe in Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Kent Hughes, p. 246.

## II. We need to understand the truth about ourselves (33-38).

Notice the effect Jesus' words had on these "believers." Listen to them speak in verse 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?'"

That's interesting. Jesus talked about freedom and their response is to say they've never been slaves. What about Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, and the Romans, for that matter? Those weren't exactly vacation destinations. They were cruel masters that enslaved the Jewish people.

But the people aren't talking about national slavery. They know their history. They're talking about personal slavery. They don't view themselves as individuals who are enslaved to sin, cut off from God, and in need of a Savior. *We're okay with God. After all, we belong to an important family, a chosen family. Our forefather is Abraham.*

It's interesting to ponder the powerful effect of a family heritage. You probably know the name of Jonathan Edwards, the tremendous preacher in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. What you may not know is the incredible blessing that his descendants have been to our country. Kent Hughes presents the following information about a study done in 1900 by A E. Winship:

"Winship concluded that from the single union of Jonathan Edwards and Sarah Pierrepont came thirteen college presidents, sixty-five professors, 100 lawyers and a dean of an outstanding law school, thirty judges, sixty-six physicians and a dean of a medical school, and eighty holders of public office, among them three United States senators, mayors of three large cities, governors of three states, a vice-president of the United States, and a controller of the United States Treasury."<sup>5</sup>

Impressive, huh? And it points to an obvious conclusion. It's a great blessing to have a godly ancestry, and for many in this room that's cause for great thanksgiving.

And yet, as Hughes points out, there's another statistic about Edwards' family that is rarely mentioned. "In 1756 Esther, daughter of Jonathan Edwards, gave birth to a boy. This is how she described her son shortly after his birth: ...very sly and mischievous...has more sprightliness than Sally...handsomer, but not so good tempered...very resolute and requires a good governor to bring him to terms."

Hughes adds, "Such words could be written about many children, but these were written about Aaron Burr, the man who took the life of Alexander Hamilton and then plotted to crown himself as emperor of Mexico. Aaron Burr was the grandson of Jonathan Edwards!"<sup>6</sup>

Friends, it is a great privilege to have godly parents and grandparents, but know this. As Hughes puts it, "While a godly heritage is of inestimable value, it does not guarantee spiritual health...Our heritage can be either a curse or a blessing."<sup>7</sup>

You say, "But how can a godly heritage be a curse?" It happens when we view it wrongly, and thus, view ourselves wrongly, like the Jews did in John 8.

How did they view themselves? As sinners in need of a Savior? No. They are good people from good stock. You say, "But they believed in Jesus." Yes, but why? Because they believed He could save their sin-chained souls? No. They don't even think they are in bondage.

Friends, until the sinner admits his bondage, he will never put his faith in Jesus the Savior. Maybe Jesus the Miracle-worker, or Jesus the Example, or Jesus the Teacher, but not Jesus the Savior. Only a sinner needs a Savior.

And of course, that's why Jesus came into the world. Not just to do miracles, and live an exemplary life, and teach with authority. He came with the cross in mind. He came to die as a substitute for sinners, so that by believing in His work as their substitute, they might be saved.

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<sup>5</sup> Kent Hughes, p. 249.

<sup>6</sup> Kent Hughes, p. 250.

<sup>7</sup> Kent Hughes, p. 250.

So how is the so-called believer with faulty faith ever going to exhibit saving faith? He must come to grips with the painful truth about himself.

That's what Jesus helps us to see in verses 34-38. He reveals five things about the sinner.

**A. The sinner's problem is that he can't stop sinning (34).** In verse 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin."

People do not like it when they are told that they are enslaved. Tell a drunkard that he is in bondage and you'll often hear, "Oh no, I can quit whenever I want." The same goes for the drug addict. And the person who looks at internet porn. And the person who loses his temper, or gossips, or struggles with contentment. "It's just a little problem I have. Sure, I struggle, but don't we all? I'm basically a good person, a good dad, a good worker, a good church-goer."

He's blinded by his goodness, isn't he? Just like the Jews in John 8 were. And what he needs, says Jesus, is to stop kidding himself. What is true of the sinner? Jesus says, "Everyone who sins is *a slave to sin*."

Who is a slave to sin? Just the big sinner (and that's always the person who's sins are bigger and worse than ours, isn't it)? No. *Everyone who sins* is a slave to sin. Everyone. Everyone is under sin's control. The sinner cannot stop what he's doing. Oh, he can refine his sin, and he can move to another sin, but he can't stop sinning.

William Hendriksen describes his predicament, "He is as truly (nay, *more* truly) chained as is the prisoner with the iron band around his leg, the band that is fastened to a chain which is cemented into the wall of a dungeon. He cannot break the chain. On the contrary, every sin he commits draws it tighter, until at last it crushes him completely."<sup>8</sup>

Friends, that's the picture Jesus gives us of what we are as we enter this world. We are *slaves* to sin and we can't stop sinning.

**B. The sinner's need is to become a son (35).** In verse 35 Jesus says, "Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever."

Notice the contrast Jesus makes between a slave and a son. A slave may experience certain benefits of living in the master's house, but only for a while, and certainly not forever. That's because at any moment he could be sold by his master, and he has no say in the matter. He is a slave in the household.<sup>9</sup>

But a son? He doesn't just live with the family. He *belongs* to it. He belongs to the family forever. How did he gain that favored status? Did he earn it? No. He had nothing to do with it. He was born into it by the choice of another.

That's what the sinner needs, to stop being a slave and become a son. How does that happen? There's only one way...

**C. The sinner's hope is to experience the power of the Son (36).** Jesus continues in verse 36, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Who is free? Who is no longer a slave to sin? It's the person who experiences the liberating power of the Son of God Himself. *If the Son sets you free*—in other words, if the Son takes action in your behalf and transfers you from being a slave to being a son in the family—then you will be free indeed.

I love those words...*free indeed*. Not free sort of. Not free possibly. Not free if you do the right things. When a sinner experiences the power of the Son through simple faith, that sinner stops being a slave and immediately becomes a son, and as such is *free indeed*.

A lot of the hymns we sing celebrate this, none more vividly than Charles Wesley's "And Can It Be."

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,*

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<sup>8</sup> Hendriksen, p. 53.

<sup>9</sup> Observation by Hendriksen, p. 53.

*I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free;  
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.*

I was an eleven year old boy when the Son came into my prison cell and took the chains of sin off my wrists, set my heart free, and called me to follow Him. I ask you. Can you say, “My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed thee”? Have your chains fallen off? Is your heart free? One of the strongest chains that held me captive was the deceptive thought that I was a good boy that belonged to a good family and therefore, I was okay. Perhaps the same goes for you. The sinner’s only hope is to admit that he indeed is a sinner and then to put his trust in the One who alone can make sinners free indeed.

It’s so simple, isn’t it? Why then aren’t churches filled this morning in a community where thousands of people say they believe in Jesus? Jesus addressed that next.

**D. The sinner’s deception is that he trusts in something other than Jesus’ word (37).**

For this particular group of sinners, it was their heritage, as Jesus told them in verse 37, “I know you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word.”

The Jews refer to Abraham twice in this conversation (33, 39). Abraham, of course, was the man to whom God gave an incredible promise two thousand years prior to this. He said in Genesis 17:7, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.”

That’s who we are. We are Abraham’s descendants. So Abraham’s God is our God. That’s what God said.

But, of course, they forgot something, didn’t they? Abraham wasn’t declared righteous on the basis of his merit, nor were they. “He believed God,” says Galatians 3:6, “and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

This is the sinner’s deception. Oh, he may say he believes, but the truth is, he’s really trusting in something else. It’s not in God and in His grace alone that he trusts, like Abraham did, but in his heritage, or his accomplishments, or his baptism, or his church, or his parents’ faith, or in a dozen other rivals that take the place that Christ alone serves in his heart.

In this case, these “believers” in John 8 indicated that they put their faith in Jesus, but in reality they were still putting their ultimate faith in their connection with Abraham. In fact, they were ready to kill Jesus because, as He put it, “you have no room for my word.”

There’s a key identifying mark of a person who says he believes in Jesus but lacks genuine saving faith. He has *no room for Jesus’ word*. He doesn’t love the Word of God. He doesn’t think he needs it. He’s got something else in which he’s trusting. And so when he makes a significant job decision, or a parenting decision, or a financial decision, he doesn’t search the Word. That’s not where his trust lies. There’s no room for Jesus’ word in this person’s heart.

And so, in reality, while he’s probably not even aware of it, such a person is still in bondage. Please don’t miss what Jesus is teaching us here about freedom. Hendriksen sums it up, “One is free when sin no longer rules over him, and when the word of Christ dominates his heart and life. One is free, therefore, not when he can do what he wishes to do but when he wishes to do and can do what he should do.”<sup>10</sup>

So the sinner’s problem is that he can’t stop sinning. The sinner’s need is to become a son. The sinner’s hope is to experience the power of the Son. The sinner’s deception is that he trusts in something other than the Son’s word. There’s one more thing Jesus wants the sinner to know.

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<sup>10</sup> William Hendriksen, p. 52.

**E. The sinner's root problem is that he belongs to another family (38).** That's verse 38, "I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father."

When I was growing up every once in a while I'd hear something like, "You can sure tell who he belongs to. He is his father's son." And of course, they were talking about the family resemblance. As Warren Wiersbe explained, "Nature is determined by birth, and birth is determined by paternity."<sup>11</sup>

Why does the sinner instinctively resist Jesus? Jesus says, bottom line, it's because he already belongs to another family. *You do what you have heard from your father.* Who's their father? Jesus will tell them momentarily (verse 44), but at this point He's helping them see their root problem. The reason they are refusing to make room in their hearts for His word is because they're already listening to another voice. Or, to put it another way, the reason they won't accept His invitation to enter God's family is because they already belong to another family.

And how did they respond to this news? Let's listen to the dialogue in verses 39-41, "'Abraham is our father,' they answered. 'If you were Abraham's children,' said Jesus, 'then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does.' 'We are not illegitimate children,' they protested. The only Father we have is God himself.'"

That brings us to our third point. People who say they believe in Jesus need to grasp, first, the nature of true faith, second, the truth about themselves, and third...

### III. We need to understand the inadequacy of religion (39-41).

"Abraham is our father," they insist. They know their Bible. They know that in Isaiah 41:8 Abraham is called "the friend of God." So by once again asserting their connection with Abraham, these people are trying to prove that they too are God's friends. We're not slaves to sin. We are sons of the friend of God, which means we're on good terms with God too.

Here we see how religion works. Religion does two things.

**A. Religion blinds a person (39).** Jesus just told these people the truth about faith and themselves, but they don't get it. They don't see their true condition. Their lives are filled with religious activities, even good, God-commanded activities, that blind them into a false sense of security. They come to the Temple Feasts three times a year. They memorize the Torah. They teach their kids to keep God's commands. They don't behave like the pagan nations around them. They are good people, religious people, and they're convinced they are God's people.

Even for those of us who know Christ, religion is blinding. We can convince ourselves that we are okay with God because of what we are doing. We teach a Sunday School class, we work with kids, we give our offerings. But that's not the basis of our standing with God, is it? We've lost sight of His grace and our desperate need for Him, which is why we've stopped giving His Word the priority place in our hearts we once gave it.

But there's something else that religion does. Not only does it blind a person, but...

**B. Religion turns a person against Jesus (40-41).** As unthinkable as it sounds, it's true. "You are determined to kill me," said Jesus to these religious Jews. Kill Him? Why would people who say they believe in Him want to kill Him? Because they don't really believe in Him.

Oh, they're willing to take His free lunches, and they'll take His miracles, and they'll even listen to His inspiring teaching and nod in agreement. But when He starts meddling with them, and tells them they are slaves to sin and that they need for Him to set them free, they not only reject His message but conclude He must go. And even worse, they determine to kill Him.

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<sup>11</sup> Wierbe, p. 322.

I see two things here that stun me. First, I'm stunned by the depth of the sinner's problem. He's not only a sinner who is enslaved and powerless to change, but he's using every ounce of his energy to defend his sense of goodness even if it means choosing to personally eliminate the Son of God from His life. And this is the "good" sinner, the man with the reputable life.

I can relate. Even as a saved man, I find myself defending my own goodness when my feelings get hurt, and don't give my Savior's word the place it deserves in my heart and life. Oh, wretched man that I am, to borrow a line from Paul.

But I see something else in this story. I see the incredible love of the Savior. He loved these sinners enough to tell them the truth even though He knew the truth He told them would cost Him His life. *You are determined to kill me.* When I know that my words will cause another person to lash out at me, I want to hold back to protect myself. But not Jesus. He didn't come to protect Himself from the abuse of sinners. He came to die for them. Oh, what mercy and love!

You say, "I've done that to Jesus. I've said terrible things to Him in my heart. I've treated Him like I wanted Him out of my world." I have, too. And though I deserve eternal punishment for what I've done, His promise remains, for He says to the sinner, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

The Bottom Line: If we want to be free, we need Jesus!

Friends, here's the appropriate response. To borrow the words of an English pastor named John Bode, penned in 1868...

*O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;  
Be Thou forever near me, my Master and my Friend;  
I shall not fear the battle if Thou art by my side,  
Nor wander from the pathway if Thou wilt be my Guide.*

*O let me feel Thee near me! The world is ever near;  
I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear;  
My foes are ever near me, around me and within;  
But Jesus, draw Thou nearer, and shield my soul from sin.*

*O let me hear Thee speaking in accents clear and still,  
Above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self will.  
O speak to reassure me, to hasten or control;  
O speak, and make me listen, Thou Guardian of my soul.*

*O Jesus, Thou hast promised to all who follow Thee  
That where Thou art in glory there shall Thy servant be.  
And Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end;  
O give me grace to follow, my Master and my Friend.*

*O let me see Thy footprints, and in them plant mine own;  
My hope to follow duly is in Thy strength alone.  
O guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end;  
And then in Heaven receive me, my Savior and my Friend.*