

*“If you continue in My word...”* This Scripture verse was given to a young man on the day of his confirmation. “No problem,” he thought, “I have been continuing in Jesus’ word since I was little, so of course I will continue to do so as I become older.” Little did he realize at that time how difficult this would prove to be. High School and College presented many and various obstacles to his continuing in the words of Jesus. Getting married and raising children presented even more obstacles. What he thought would be a simple thing turned into a real struggle for him.

Is he unique in this? You tell me. How goes it for you? Are you finding it easy to continue in Jesus’ word? Or like this young man learned over time, are you also discovering that it might be the most difficult thing of all to do?

Maybe it has to do with how we interpret the word “continue.” What do you think it means? But of course, that may not prove very helpful, because we tend to justify our own actions. Some will say that to *“continue in My word”* means reading it daily and hearing it weekly. Others will say it means showing up in church for Jesus’ birth and for His resurrection.

The King James Version has the word continue. Years ago a confirmand would have learned it that way. Today we hear the word abide. *“If you abide in My word...”* We hear that word a lot. A few chapters down from our text we hear Jesus say, *“I am the Vine, you are the branches...Abide in Me and I in you.”*

Ask a branch connected to a vine what it means to continue to abide in that vine, and it could easily give you an answer. Abiding is everything to the branch. It could not even imagine what life would be like if it was not abiding in the vine. Does the branch need to be ordered to abide in the vine? Of course not. To be joined to the vine is where it belongs. It’s where it dwells. Threats are not needed to keep the branch in the vine. Everything it is comes from the vine. Everything it produces it receives from the vine. In fact, the branch would not even remember what life was like before it was joined to the vine. There was no life. It’s life came from the vine.

Most of you also do not remember what life was like before you were joined to the Vine. To Jesus, that is. This happened when you were baptized into Him. Before this there was no life. You and I receive our life from Christ. Abiding in Him is everything to us. Could you even imagine what life would be like if you were not connected to Jesus? To be joined to Him is where you belong. He is your dwelling place. Everything that you are comes from Jesus. Everything you have is because you abide in Him.

So let me ask you...do you need to be ordered to abide in Christ? Are threats needed to keep you connected to Jesus? I would hope not. But there is this...we have somehow come up with the idea that abiding in Jesus has very little to do with abiding in His word.

That young man began to think this way not long after he was confirmed. He was not taught this from his pastor. He learned to separate Jesus from His word because living his life got in the way. He would never say he was too busy for Jesus. But he did become too busy for Jesus’ word. And so he fell into the habit of believing that he could continue to abide in Christ without continuing all that much in the reading, studying, and hearing of Jesus’ words.

So what do you think, was this a weird kid? The way he thought and acted is so far away from where you were at that time in your life? Or perhaps you can relate. And not just to how it was after you were confirmed, but also to where you are in life right now.

If you can, it's because you are tempted by the world around you, by the devil, and by your own fleshly desires. We are tempted to separate Jesus from His word. But He is the living Word of God. To know His words is to know Him. He says this in our text. *"If you abide in My word...you will know the truth."* The truth is not a thing; it's a Person. Jesus is the Truth. To abide in Jesus is to abide in His word; to abide in His word is to abide in Jesus. But how many truly grasp this?

The Jews Jesus speaks to in our text had only a superficial belief in Him. They were not true disciples. He says this. It's because His words did not have a place within them. This is not you though, is it? Jesus' words do have a place within you. This is why you are here, isn't it? Not out of a sense of duty, to obey the Third Commandment, but because being joined to Jesus, you believe His word is the on-going nourishment you need as a branch on the Vine.

If you ever have doubts about Jesus, however, whether you truly are abiding in Him, do not look at your behavior – how much time you spend in His word. For none of us spends enough time. We would all feel guilt and have serious doubts if we measured our connection to Jesus on our end only. Rather, look at your baptism. Here is the assurance that, yes, you are in Christ and He is in you. And the promises He made to you on the day of your baptism stand forever. He will never reject you. He will never sever Himself from you.

When you walk around in your yard and see branches on the ground, perhaps after a windstorm, you are reminded that this also happens to disciples of Jesus; disciples who sever themselves from Him. Not abiding in Jesus' words, they become weak in their connection to Him and are easily broken off from Him. But God is gracious and forgiving. As He seeks lost sheep, so He seeks to restore broken branches.

He restored me to where I was before. I am that young confirmand of whom I speak, who received this text as my confirmation verse. God forgave me, and He forgives you too. For Jesus is not a harsh and unmerciful Vine. He came for the purpose of dying on the cross for every broken branch. For every sinner. Even for those who are just superficial disciples. Even for those who have no place in their heart for His words of life. He died for all. God forgives you. And not because you are doing your best to continue in His word. He forgives you, and this is why you want to continue in His word.

And God gives us helpers in this very thing. My dad was my helper and teacher. My pastor for thirteen years, he died of cancer before I was confirmed. In the months before he died, he spent hours each day in his easy chair pouring over his Bible. What a confirmation gift this was for me! I did not see it at the time, but years later I did. He was teaching me how to continue in Jesus' word. He was showing me what it means to abide in Jesus.

As you continue in Jesus' word, He will strengthen your connection to Him so that no windstorm can break you off from Him. You are so precious to Him. And so, with love, He looks at you and says, *"If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciple, and you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free."* Amen.