

I know a boy, thirteen years old, raised by Christian parents, who was given these words of Jesus for his confirmation verse. “If you continue in My word...” The pastor read from the King James Version of the Bible as the boy kneeled before God’s altar. As with every confirmand, this boy was planning on doing exactly that. He had no desire to forsake Jesus’ word. He had not been raised in that way. He had every intention of abiding in Christ, of continuing in Jesus’ word.

He had watched his father, a Lutheran pastor, his pastor, continuing in the word of Jesus, spending hours each day reading his Bible in his chair, as cancer was taking over his body. He lost his battle with cancer two months before his son was confirmed. He had not been given the privilege of confirming his son. But the greater gift was in giving his son a picture that is forever etched in his memory – of his father, in his chair, “continuing in Jesus’ word.”

But then came high school, and other priorities took over. “If you continue in My word” did not remain in the forefront of his mind. College came next, and working alongside of his studies, and he became too busy to continue in Jesus’ word. He went to church, but Jesus’ word became a Sunday morning thing, and not a seven-day a week habit. Where is that boy now? Standing here before you preaching Jesus’ word.

It's not because that boy was so strong in his faith, so dedicated to being Jesus’ disciple, that he continues in Jesus’ word today. We do not sing, “Thy Strong Christians,” but rather: “Thy Strong Word.” The power is not in me, nor in you. It’s in Jesus. It’s in His word. Not one of us, and I speak from experience, not one of us would continue to abide in Jesus’ word if it was up to us.

What I’m saying is that we would all become false disciples of Jesus. We would pay Him lip service. We may show up in church. We wouldn’t forget Him. How can anyone forget Jesus? But we would not be “truly My disciples,” as He puts it here, because we would not continue in His word. And we would deceive ourselves into believing that we were still His true disciples even though His word would not have a place to abide in our hearts.

But my friends, it’s not left up to us. “If you abide...” says Jesus, “If you continue in My word...” Sounds like it is left up to us. “If I do this.” But since when does God leave His dear children on their own to do something, to do anything?

I admit, I confess actually, that the day I was confirmed I thought to myself: “I can do it. ‘If I continue in Jesus?’ Sure! I always have before. I can, and I will continue in His word.” But I was stupid. Spiritually stupid. I did not anticipate the power of my sin, the world’s temptations that I would face, and the devil.

No one does. Every confirmand is overconfident. And by the grace of God, hopefully, every confirmand, sooner rather than later, is knocked flat. We learn only by experience that we are not able to continue in Jesus on our own, that we are not stronger than sin, temptation, and the devil. Jesus did not say, “If you continue in My word,” as a challenge to us to see if we can do it. But rather as a hurdle that we are unable to clear.

It took a long time for that boy to learn this. And hopefully he will never think he has learned it well enough, that when Jesus says, “If you continue in My word,” it is time for us to get down on our knees and pray: “Lord, help me. On my own I will fail to abide in Your word. And so, Lord, abide with me, and let Your word abide in me. Help me, Lord.” How do you think Jesus will answer such a prayer? And especially when it becomes our daily prayer?

The word of the Lord is always working. And here is real comfort for us. Your baptism is Jesus, His powerful word at work in you, and in your loved ones. I’m not saying, “Once baptized, always saved.” But I am saying, “Once baptized, the word of Jesus is always working.”

Now consider this, that Jesus says here, “If you abide in **My** word.” He says this to Jews who know well the words written down by Moses. But He does not say to abide in Moses’ word, but in “My” word.

Is there a difference? Indeed, there is. St. John 1:17: “*The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*” Jesus is the embodiment of the Gospel. He is not the Ten Commandments walking around in the flesh. He is Grace and Truth; the One who sets sinners free from the curse of the Law.

The word of Jesus is the word of the cross. The word of forgiveness. And that forgiveness is very real. That forgiveness is for sinners like me and you who, too often, fail to continue in Jesus’ word; for sinners like us who are too often easily enslaved by temptation and the power of sin.

God’s people were slaves in Egypt, weren’t they? Slaves to Pharaoh. But the word of the Lord is always working. When that word, “*Tell the people to go forward,*” was applied to the Red Sea, the waters parted for them, and they were slaves of Pharaoh no longer.

Friend, Jesus set you free in the waters of your baptism. And your baptism is always working. You are no longer slaves to sin. Your sin is forgiven. Your baptism assures you of this. And if you lack this assurance, you need to abide more in Jesus’ word – His word of promise that, yes, you are forgiven, all your sins are forgiven; yes, He is Grace and Truth, and in Him you are set free from all the powers of evil.

“If you continue in My word.” You know something? Let’s help each other in this. I need help, and so do you. We need God’s help to abide in His word. Let’s also help each other. Amen.