

Title: “Christ Keeps Us; We Abide in His Word”

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John 8:31

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Service Readings: Rev. 14:6-7; Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

A disciple of Jesus is someone whom Christ has freed and who remains in Christ's Word.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

What is a *real* disciple? Over the past two weeks we have focused on this very question, and today we end the series where we began: what is a disciple and are you one? Today we remember the Reformation, and so it is fitting to hear from Luther. In one of his sermons on this very passage, he wrote that there are true and false disciples. False disciples, “hear the Word with its promises: ‘If you believe in Me, I will not forsake you. You shall be a lord, free from death, devil, and sin, and I will give you eternal life.’ [But false disciples] never reach the point where they taste and experience that God is a Man who can deliver from both physical and spiritual need. They do not stand fast and survive the danger. They fear for their goods, their peace of mind, and their comfort. They are too impatient and they do not want to suffer. Therefore they never experience spiritual consolation, nor do they ever find out what God really is, or what a great comfort is available to them, or how it tastes. Those are the false Christians.” He doesn’t stop there; he continues, “They do learn to speak the words, as a parrot or parakeet repeats words spoken by people. But their heart does not feel them; they remain unchanged and do not taste and perceive how faithfully and true God is.”

What Luther is warning his hearers about is that it is possible for someone to know the right words to say about Jesus but look for security somewhere else in times of struggle. Picture a person who is facing a serious illness. He knows that God loves him, but he won’t trust God because this illness threatens to upheave his entire life: time off work, enormous medical bills, and the possibility that this illness leads to death. Luther would call this person a saved Christian, but a false disciple. Contrast that with another person facing the same serious illness and worldly challenges. This person says, “I don’t understand why God has permitted this. I am afraid and I don’t know what will happen. But I do know that Christ has died and risen for me, and so I will cling to his promise.” You see the difference? What Luther is describing is the difference between a faith that simply acknowledges God’s promises with a faith that actually relies on them.

Sure, our faith may occasionally be weak, especially in times of stress and turmoil. The fruits of our faith may be imperfect. We may struggle to cling to Christ, but even in these times, we trust that he is holding on to us. This is what true discipleship is about. It is about not just saying, “I know that God is faithful.” It’s saying, “I know God is faithful, even though I may not understand what he is doing in my life right now.”

True discipleship is about looking to Christ in all our situations. And when we do, we find true comfort. In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus says:

³¹ ... “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Being free means that we find rest in Christ. It means that we turn to his Word, that we abide in it. We allow it to affect our lives, our decisions, our outlook. We cling to it in every situation. Even when we are afraid, even in those times where our faith is weak, we turn to Christ.

But notice what Jesus says next. He doesn't just say that his Word will help us live better lives. He doesn't promise a better outlook. He says that the truth will set us free. And then he explains what binds us: sin. Some who were listening to him object and push back. They insist that they have never been enslaved. But Jesus makes it clear that he is talking about slavery to sin, not political authorities. And this is the problem we cannot solve ourselves. We cannot free ourselves from sin by trying harder, doing better, or becoming more devoted disciples. We can't even free ourselves by having stronger faith. Sin has us in its grip, and it demands death.

This is where the Reformation comes into focus. Martin Luther knew what it was like to try and find peace with God through his own efforts. But the harder he tried, the more clearly he saw that he could never free himself. He could never make himself righteous before God. The answer, he found, was not to try harder but to hear the Gospel in a way he had never heard it. We are justified before God by grace, through faith, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Our righteousness does not come from what we do for God. It comes from what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the freedom Jesus is talking about. And this is the freedom that is accomplished for us, by Jesus: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Our freedom doesn't depend on us; it doesn't even depend on how well we hold on to Jesus. It depends entirely on Jesus, who has come to set us free.

That doesn't mean that our faith is unimportant. Our faith receives Christ's gifts. But faith is not a work. It is not something we must perform well enough to earn God's favor. Even our faith is a gift – created and sustained by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. We are not saved because we have become strong disciples. We are saved because Jesus Christ gave himself for us.

And this brings us back to Luther's warning. The danger is not that we sometimes feel afraid or that our faith sometimes grows weak. The danger is that we look somewhere other than Christ for the freedom, security, and peace that only he can give.

So what does it mean to be a disciple? It means abiding in his Word. It means returning again and again to the promises that he has made. It means hearing his Word of forgiveness, receiving his gifts of the Sacraments. It means trusting that his promises remain true even when our situations are difficult or our faith is weak.

Listen to Jesus. Hear his promise. Return to his Word. There you will find the one who has set you free. That is what the Reformation was about. It was not about discovering how to become better Christians through our own efforts. It was about recovering the good news that our salvation rests entirely on Jesus and his saving work. And that is what makes us his disciples. It is not that we have mastered the Christian life but that Christ has claimed us as his own, set us free from sin and death, and continues to sustain us through his Word.

So remain in his Word. Trust his promises. And when you are afraid, when you struggle, when you wonder whether your faith is strong enough, remember this: Christ's grip on you is not measured by the strength of your grip on him.

The son has set you free. And whom the son sets free is free indeed. Amen.

Please pray with me.

Lord Jesus, keep us steadfast in Your Word. When our faith is weak and our hearts are troubled, remind us that our salvation rests not in our strength, but in Your saving work for us. Thank You for setting us free. Amen.