

“If You Abide in My Word...”

(John 8:31-36 – Reformation – November 3, 2024)

John 8:31-36 – ³¹*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³²And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” ³³They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, ‘You will be made free’?” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. ³⁵And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. ³⁶Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”*

Dear Redeemed in Christ Jesus:

On this Reformation Festival, we thank God for preserving to us His pure Gospel. By Martin Luther’s day, many false teachings had replaced God’s Word in the visible church. These teachings enslaved sinners in a system of works-righteousness, of trying to become good enough before God to earn salvation and eternal life.

But by God’s grace, Luther and other reformers restored the true Gospel. They restored the three core principles that have guided Lutheran theology to this day – “Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, and Faith Alone.” Scripture Alone reveals what we could never discover by our human reason. Contrary to our natural way of thinking, God’s Law teaches that as sinners we cannot earn His favor or a place in heaven. But His Gospel reveals that we are saved by His gift of Grace Alone, freely given to us through Faith Alone in Christ. We do not add our own good works; we trust only Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross that has taken away all our sins; and we trust only Jesus’ perfect life which God counts to us for our righteousness.

Foundational to knowing and receiving God’s gifts of grace in Christ, we begin with the principle of “Scripture Alone.” Jesus says: **“If You Abide in My Word...”**
1) You are My disciples indeed, 2) And you shall know the truth, 3) And the truth shall make you free.

1) You are My disciples indeed

Always, our relationship to Jesus as His disciples is connected to abiding in His Word. By His Word alone He called us to faith, revealing His saving truth to our heart, setting us free. Ephesians 1:13 says: *“In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.”* Jesus brings His Gospel of salvation to us in His Word and Sacraments. In Baptism, He comes to us with His Word of

promise connected to the water, washing away our sins, pouring out the Holy Spirit and saving faith in our heart. By that same Word of truth, the Holy Spirit continues to keep us in the true faith, so we abide in Jesus.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:19-20: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”* It is in the faithful teaching of His Word and use of His Sacraments that Jesus promises to be with His Church. This is how He makes disciples and keeps us in the true faith.

Therefore this remains a core principle in Jesus’ Church – “Scripture Alone.” His Word is the only authority in His Church. It is the only way He speaks to us and reveals His saving truth. So we teach all things as He commanded, neither adding to nor subtracting from His Word. The Good Shepherd says: *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”* On the other hand, when false shepherds speak by a different voice than His Word alone, we will flee from them as from a stranger (John 10:4-5, 27-28). With Jesus’ disciples in every age we say: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”* (John 6:68).

2) And you shall know the truth

Thus as we abide in Jesus’ Word, we are His disciples indeed. He goes on to say: *“And you shall know the truth.”* A popular idea is that there is no objective truth for all time and people. Many say, “What was true back then is not true now,” or “What is true for you may not be true for me.” But Jesus says we will know *“the truth”* – the eternal truth of God, as opposed to the lies of Satan and false teachings of men.

Among those listening to Jesus were the Pharisees. They considered themselves the rightful heirs of Abraham, and the only rightful interpreters God’s truth. Yet they were under Satan’s deception. They replaced Scripture alone with the teachings and traditions of men. They replaced grace alone with a religion of works-righteousness.

There will always be such false teachers. It was so in the time of the Lutheran Reformation. The Pope was considered the rightful heir of the apostle Peter and only rightful interpreter of God’s truth. Instead of Scripture alone, the tradition of the church and teachings of men held authority. The Bible was kept out of the hands of the people, for it was thought they could not rightly understand it. Church services were in Latin, not the language of the people. But what came through clearly was the false teaching that salvation was not a free gift, received by faith in Christ alone. But you had to do your part to earn God’s favor by good works and a holy life.

When it came to the words of Romans 1:17, *“The righteous shall live by faith,”* Luther was taught that he must earn eternal life by becoming righteous before God. Like many a poor sinner, he constantly asked himself if he had done enough. He became a monk, for it was considered the holiest life and best way to become saved. In the monastery, he tried to work out his salvation by his own efforts, endlessly confessing his sins and doing works of penance to make up for them. In a desperate effort to drive every impulse of sin from his heart and become righteous before God, he fasted and beat himself. Yet no matter how hard he tried to become free, he found himself imprisoned in sin and unrighteousness, despairing before the righteous God.

Haven't we all felt that bondage? Jesus points out: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.”* Due to our inborn sinful nature, we all sin. Even though we know the truth of God's Law and want to live holy lives according to His Commandments, we still fall into temptation and sin. We try to conquer those impure desires we feel, those unloving thoughts we think; but they keep coming back. We try to change wrong behaviors and become more Christ-like; but we keep returning to our old sinful habits and self-centered lives. Sometimes like Luther, we can get down and depressed, and even despairing, about our sinful condition.

The truth of God's Word is that salvation is a free gift of His grace, through faith in Christ. We do not have to beat ourselves up trying to become righteous enough. At the cross of Christ, God has forgiven us. In the perfect life of Christ, He counts us righteous. But today as ever, Satan's lies are enslaving. They turn us away from the objective truth of God's Word and the salvation Christ has won for us. They turn us to our own subjective experiences and feelings to find truth and peace with God.

Even many who hold up Scripture as God's inspired Word, can still deceive. After preaching that you are first saved by the grace of God, they end up pointing you to your holy living and spiritual progress as proof of God's grace in your life. Instead of pointing to Jesus' sacrifice for your sins, they emphasize your sacrifices for Him – your tithing, your service, your charity, your fasting, your prayers... So they leave you asking: *“Have I done enough? Have I denied myself enough? Have I given God my whole heart? Do I feel strongly enough that I'm saved? When I come before God in judgment, will I have lived the life of a true child of God?”*

3) And the truth shall make you free

Such an inward focus on our own hearts and lives cannot free us. Like Luther, we only find ourselves enslaved by sin. But Jesus says: *“If you abide in My word... you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*

It was only after Luther became a priest that he began to read the Scriptures for himself. A copy of the Bible was available at the monastery. In times of temptation and despair, he turned to it seeking comfort in Christ's blood atonement for his sins. When he became a professor of religion at Wittenberg, he began to interpret God's Word by God's Word alone, instead of by the interpretations and traditions of men. The more he did, the more comfort he found in the truth of Christ that set him free.

Already, he had experienced the painful truth of God's Law: *"Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever."* No sinner can earn a place in God's house; no one can merit eternal life.

But then comes the Gospel, as Jesus says: *"Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."* As the Son of God in our flesh, Jesus came to win for us a place in God's house forever. On the cross, He made the one sacrifice that took away all our sins; He suffered the full punishment and death for them instead of us. Not only that, Jesus lived the only perfect life ever lived under the Law, and He did it for us. So in Christ, our crucified and risen Savior, God justifies us. He is no longer counting any sin against us, but He is counting only the perfect life of His Son to us!

As Luther studied the Scriptures, he found that the righteousness of God is not something we earn by obeying His Law. Rather, the righteousness of God is His gift of grace, freely given to us through faith in His Son. As he read in Romans 3:19-28: *"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed... even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."*

When Luther discovered the Gospel, he truly was set free. Sinner though he was, he knew God justified him in Christ. As a child of God by faith, he knew heaven's gates were opened to him, and he would abide in God's house forever!

Today, we rejoice in the same truth of Christ's Gospel. The Son has made us free, and we are free indeed! No more do we look to our own lives or anything we do for God to earn His favor. By God's grace alone, through faith in Christ alone, we stand justified, forgiven and righteous in His sight. Through faith in His Son, we are His children and heirs of His heavenly Kingdom. Therefore as Jesus' disciples indeed, we want to abide in His Word; for we know the truth, and the truth makes us free!

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.