

My wife and I were out for a walk. (This happened some time ago.) As we walked on the sidewalk, a car slowed down, a woman rolled down the window, and said, "I am looking for St. So-and-So Church. Someone told me to go this way. Am I close to the church?" I answered, "Yes, you are. Just a block away." Then she asked, "Am I going in the right direction?" I answered, "No, you are not. You are going this way; but the church is that way."

In a way that sentence describes a lot of people in this world. People are looking for something - looking for God; looking for answers; perhaps looking for the right church. Some might be very close to it. But, like this woman, many are headed the wrong way.

That picture describes a man named Martin Luther, a man who lived in Germany 500 years ago. He was close to the church; in fact he was in the church. But he was headed the wrong way.

That picture also describes the Jewish leaders we meet in our sermon text. These men also were close to the church; in fact at this moment they were right at the temple. But they were headed the wrong way.

This morning, however, we focus our attention on another man – Jesus Himself. Jesus was there in the temple. The words of Jesus point all of us in the right direction. He says to us,

CONTINUE IN MY WORD!

When you "continue in my word," 3 things will follow:

1. You will be my disciples indeed.
2. You will know the truth.
3. You will be free.

I. You will be my disciples indeed

A. The situation in the temple

1. Two groups of people

The crowd here in John 8 was a diverse group. Some of them were Jewish leaders, teachers of the law. Unfortunately, these men did not believe in Jesus. They did not want to learn anything from Him. They were in the temple; but they were going the wrong way.

There was also a smaller group of people. These individuals had been listening carefully to Jesus. They believed His words. Now Jesus said "to the Jews who had believed him," "Your faith makes me happy. You believe My words. You believe in Me. Now continue in my word. Remain in my word. Then 'you are really my disciples.'"

2. Two different teachings

What does that mean, "Continue in my word?" What is His "word"? Jesus' word, God's word, is the entire Bible. But for right now let's focus only on the words which Jesus spoke right here in John 8:

- In v.23 Jesus identified Himself as the Son of God who came down from heaven. He said, "You are from below, from this world. I am not of this world. I am from above." (I.e., I am the Son of God who came down from heaven.)
- In v.12 Jesus talked about His work. He said, "I am the light of this dark world." This whole world is living in spiritual darkness. But I am the light. I show you the way to God. I am the way to God.

- Then in v.27 Jesus said, “I will be lifted up,” lifted up on a cross where I will pay for the sins of all people with my blood.

Those words of Jesus were divisive. He was saying to the Jews who believed in Him, “Don’t listen to those teachers of the law over there. They are going in the wrong direction. They are saying, ‘If you obey the laws, if you are good people (like us!), then God will accept you on Judgment Day.’ I am telling you something very different. I am saying, ‘All of you are sinful human beings. It is not possible for you to obey God’s laws perfectly. But I am your Savior from sin. Now continue in *my word*, then you are truly my disciples.”

B. The situation at Luther’s time

There was a similar situation back in Germany some 500 years ago. The German people did not continue in the words of Jesus. How could they? The great majority of them did not have access to a Bible. How could they continue in God’s word if they had no idea what God says in His word?

The Church took advantage of that situation. The church leaders were saying, “Martin Luther, you do not have a Bible. But that’s okay. You do not need one. People like you are not going to understand it anyway. Martin, just listen to us. We know a lot more than you do. Just believe and do what we tell you to believe and do.” Luther, like many other people at that time, had been near the church, even in the church, for a long time. But he, like the rest of the people, was headed the wrong way.

Then the situation changed. When Luther attended the university, he found a printed copy of the Bible in the library. Now he could read the words of our sermon text for himself, “Continue in *my word*, then you are truly my disciples.” “Martin, if you want to follow Jesus, if you want to have eternal life, then continue in *my word*.”

This became Luther’s motto: “God’s word! Scripture! Scripture alone!” In fact later on Luther translated the entire Bible into German so that ordinary people could continue in the words of Jesus and be His disciples.

II. You will know the truth.

Back there in the temple Jesus added a second promise: “Continue in my word, then *you will know the truth*.”

A. God’s word is the truth

When Jesus spoke the word “truth,” the Jewish leaders had a quick response: “How do we know that You are telling us the truth?” Good question. The basic answer is simple:

- God always speaks the truth. It is impossible for God the Father to lie.
- Jesus, the Son of God, always speaks the truth. He once said, “I am the truth.” (John 14:6) It is impossible for Jesus to lie because He speaks words that He received from God the Father.

B. Luther rediscovered the truth

As he continued to study the Bible, Luther discovered the truth. Or, we should say, he *rediscovered* the truth. The teachers of the law back there in the temple were not telling the truth. The church’s leaders in Luther’s day were not telling the truth. The truth is this: “I cannot make myself good and righteous before God.” Rather, “the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s son, cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7) I am righteous before God because Jesus has paid for my sins. I have eternal life because of God’s undeserved love, that is, because of His grace.

This also became Luther's motto: Grace alone! We are saved because of God's undeserved love and mercy.

C. Many today reject the truth

Our world today is also filled with lies. Today many publicly reject the word of God's truth. We hear people saying,

I do not accept the Bible. My heart and my feelings tell me the truth.

I do not accept the Bible. I follow the teachings of the Koran and of Islam.

I do not accept the Bible. I find comfort and peace in the teachings of Buddhism.

Loud voices in our world are telling us, "Don't believe the Bible. It is full of hate speech."

Once again Jesus' words are clear, blunt: "If you continue in *my word*, then you will know the truth – THE truth, the one and only truth. We have eternal life only because of God's grace, His undeserved love and mercy.

III. You will be free.

A. Impossible to free ourselves from sin

Finally we get to promise #3. Jesus says, "Continue in my word – you will know the truth and the truth will *make you free*."

Once again the Jewish leaders objected. "Jesus, you are wrong! We Jews are the children of Abraham, and we have never been in bondage to anyone! How can you say that the truth will make you free?"

Jesus was not talking about political freedom. He was talking about something much bigger. He was talking about slavery to sin. Jesus added, "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin." "Whoever commits sin is the slave of sin." (v.34) The person who sins even once will not be able to stop sinning. We know that from our own experience. Which of us is able to live even 24 hours without having a sinful thought, or saying an unkind word? Which of us is able to live 24 hours with nothing but pure perfect love in our hearts, perfect love for God, perfect love for one another?

More than that, how are we going to become "debt free," free from the debt we owe to God because of our sins from the past?

B. Luther's struggle - and freedom in the gospel

That is what bothered Luther most of all. Outwardly Luther was no worse than anyone else. But Luther had a conscience. His conscience kept reminding him, "Martin, your life has not been perfect and you know it."

Luther struggled to free himself from bondage to sin. He tried his best to avoid sin and do only good things. But he could not do it. He went to confession regularly and confessed every sin he could think of. Finally, according to one story, the priest told him, "Luther please don't come back here until you have something worthwhile to confess, something big, something sensational."

When Luther found it impossible to stop sinning, he tried something else. "Perhaps I can somehow make up for my sins, pay for them." Again Luther followed the rules of the church. He prayed, prayed especially to the saints. He went to mass. Finally he did the best thing any Christian could do – he gave away all his possessions, took a vow of poverty and entered the monastery. In the monastery he could spend the entire day and some of the night in prayer, at church, doing things that would make God happy.

But even that did not help. His conscience continued to accuse him: Martin, you are a sinful human being. You deserve death, eternal punishment. For Luther death and judgment were not a Halloween joke. He expressed his concern especially in one of his hymns:

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay, Death brooded darkly o'er me.
Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my mother bore me.
Yet, deep and deeper still I fell; Life had become a living hell,
So firmly sin possessed me." (CW 377:2).

Until finally, finally Luther began to understand the gospel, the good news that Jesus has paid for our sin with his blood. There at the cross Jesus set us free from sin, from death and from the power of the devil. Now we are free – free to serve our dear Lord Jesus.

I gain eternal life by faith – not faith in myself, but faith in Jesus and in what Jesus has done for me. This became Luther's 3rd motto of the reformation: "Faith alone!"

By the working of the Holy Spirit we also have become believers in Jesus. Now continue in, remain in, the words of Jesus.

Those words are not a command. They are a gracious promise. Jesus is saying, "All those who continue in my word, are my dear people. And I promise to give you eternal life."

We conclude then with a prayer of thanksgiving:

- Thank You, Father in heaven, for giving us the Bible, the word of truth.
- Thank You, Lord Jesus, for paying for my sins on the cross.
- Thank You, Holy Spirit, for opening my heart and leading me to believe in Jesus.
- Thank You, Lord, for the blessings of the Reformation, for Luther's 3 mottos: Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone.
- Thank You, Lord, for our pastors here at St. Paul's, pastors who faithfully bring us Your word week after week, and who regularly encourage us to continue in Your word.

Dear fellow Christians, don't give up; don't listen to the lies; don't turn away. Continue in Jesus' words. Then we are His disciples indeed. Here we have the truth; and that truth makes us free. Amen.

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