

Loyalty To Christ's Word As A Test Of Discipleship.

Text: John 8:31-32

1) Loyalty to Christ, Loyalty to His Word

Suggested Hymns:

2) Disloyalty Of Some Of His Followers

604, 391, 266, 840, 300

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is John 8:31-32, ³¹ *Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you continue in My word, you are My disciples indeed.* ³² *And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The word *discipleship* is not used much in Church today. It deserves to be used more and to be better understood. The term discipleship is not found in the New Testament Scriptures; but the word disciple occurs repeatedly in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Our Lord Jesus Himself introduced the use of this term with respect to those who heeded His call to follow Him.

The term *disciple*, like the word used in the Greek of the New Testament, means first of all a learner, one who sits at the feet of a teacher and learns facts from him and absorbs his ideas.

Now, Jesus, as was then the custom, moved about among the people, going from village to village, from one part of the land to the other, in order to spread the good news which He had come to teach. Those, then, who accepted His message would follow Him in order to learn more of His truth, to absorb His spirit, and also to be of some service to Him. Thus the learner became a follower. And such following and serving became an important element in all discipleship.

As there is in our day much confusion in the meaning associated with the term *Christian*, so there is also much unclearness as to what constitutes discipleship. As there are many who consider themselves Christians when they

accept the ethic of Christ, but not His claim of Deity and Saviorhood, so there are those who believe that all they need to become disciples of Jesus is to join some Christian church or unite themselves with a group of professing Christians.

What is our understanding of discipleship? We dare not be wrong on this question, and we need not be in doubt. The Master Himself did not allow the men and women of His own day and nation to be in doubt.

He touched on the question of discipleship a number of times and submitted definite tests whereby people could know whether they were real disciples; and in speaking of such tests He always also emphasised the cost of discipleship. He would not mislead anyone into believing that discipleship was a simple and easy matter.

Today we look at the first test of discipleship¹ which is loyalty to His Word. We may well call it the fundamental test of discipleship. In the light of His words and under the gracious guidance of the Holy Spirit we desire to make certain that we ourselves are real disciples of Jesus. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Loyalty to Christ, Loyalty to His Word

Loyalty is a term that is heard often these days. It comes from the Latin *legalis*, legal, and denotes adherence and faithful support of the lawfully constituted government. Those seeking citizenship in our country and those assuming public office must all take oaths of loyalty. Sad experiences have taught us how essential for national safety is the loyalty of every government employee and of all other citizens.

Is Christ asking too much when He requires of us who are His subjects in the Kingdom of Grace that we be loyal, absolutely loyal, to Him? But when are we loyal to Him, and how can we know?

We are loyal to Him when we are loyal to His Word: when we in sincerity hold to the truth which He taught and when we let His Word, His teaching, be our guide for our faith and our life. ***“If you continue in My word, you are My disciples indeed.”*** The important question now is: What did Jesus mean when He said, ***“My Word”***? Here again we need not speculate nor be in doubt.

In His discussions with the religious teachers in Israel, Jesus repeatedly asserted that the Father sent Him, that He was speaking the Father's Word and doing the Father's work. At the close of His earthly ministry, in that great high-priestly prayer, Jesus said to His Father, "*I have given them Your Word.*"² Thus Christ identified His teaching with the Father's teaching, His will with the Father's will, and His Word with the Father's Word.

Christ's Word, Law and Gospel

The Father's Word, as revealed in the Old Testament, contains the two elements which are designated Law and Gospel. The Law, or the holy will of the Father, Jesus never set aside. He constantly referred to it and quoted the Law from the Old Testament Scriptures.

He did so particularly in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. Over against the misinterpretations and misapplications of the Law on the part of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus emphasised the true meaning of the Law and exalted its spiritual requirements.

The pity is that many modern Christians think that the Sermon on the Mount represents the very essence of Christ's teaching. Such is not the case. The heart of Christ's teaching is in the Gospel, as so beautifully set forth in John, chapter three.

In reporting the beginnings of Christ's public ministry, Mark tells us that "*Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,*¹⁵ *and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'*"³ Jesus preached the Law to convince people of the sinfulness of their nature, of their many transgressions and shortcomings, of their need of redemption from sin, and of their reconciliation with the holy God.

But for the most part He preached and taught the Gospel, the good news of the Father's great love which moved Him to send His only-begotten Son into the world, to fulfil all the requirements of the Law, which no one had kept or could keep perfectly, of His own intention to suffer and die on the Cross as all people's substitute, and thus to pay the penalty of man's guilt and reconcile sinful mankind to the holy God, and on that basis to offer forgiveness, full and complete, for any and all, so that He who believes should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Christ The Incarnate Word

In doing the Father's will, in fulfilling the promise given by God to Israel through Moses and the Prophets, Jesus Himself became the very embodiment of the Word of God. He was indeed *"the Word of God incarnate, the Wisdom from on high."* At the close of His earthly ministry, facing Gethsemane and Calvary, Jesus could say, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."*⁴

Hence, to accept the Word of Christ means to accept Him; to believe His Word means to believe in Him; and to continue in His Word means to cling to Him as the Saviour from sin, death, and the power of the devil; to abide in Him means to retain the blessings of His redemption and to be certain of His sustaining grace in life and in death.

2. Disloyalty Of Some Of His Followers

The temptation to reject the Word of Christ is always present; and the danger of thus losing Christ and the treasures of His grace is very great. When Jesus had fed the five thousand miraculously, they were deeply impressed and wanted to make Him their king.

But when He rebuked them sternly for their earthly-mindedness and told them they needed Him as the spiritual bread come down from heaven, without whom they could not live, many declared, *"This is a hard saying,"*⁵ and they walked no more with Him. They were in the first stages of discipleship; but, by being offended at His Word they lost Him, the Messiah, the Saviour. And thus they lost their souls.

Test of Loyalty

In this eighth chapter of John, from which our text is taken, we find Jesus engaged in a discussion with the Pharisees. They objected to His statement that He is the Light of the world, without whom men are in darkness.

They challenged His authority to make such a statement and questioned His right to quote God the Father as His witness. *"Where is Your Father?"*⁶ they contemptuously asked. Thereupon Jesus uttered a startling statement, *"If you do not believe that I am He [the Messiah and the Son of God the Father], you will die in your sins."*⁷

In support of this and other statements Jesus three times declared that He, as the Son of God on earth, was the Spokesman of the Father in heaven. ***“I speak to the world those things which I heard from Him.”***⁸ ***“As My Father taught Me, I speak these things.”***⁹ ***“I speak what I have seen with My Father.”***¹⁰

While such assertions embittered and even infuriated His enemies, they found acceptance and lodgement in other hearts. The words which Jesus spoke proved to be words of life. There were among His hearers, Jews who were moved to believe His words and thus to believe in Him as their long-promised Messiah and Saviour.

We read, ***“As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.”***¹¹ Surely this fact brought great joy to the heart of Jesus. But He knew the danger besetting these new disciples: the danger of being offended at His words and not continuing steadfastly in Him. So it was that Jesus addressed the words of our text as words of guidance and admonition to these new believers, ***If you continue in My word, you are My disciples indeed.***

Loyalty Of First Christians

Loyalty to Christ’s Word has been the fundamental test of discipleship through all the centuries. Of the early Christians in Jerusalem we read: ***“They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine.”***¹² The Apostles’ doctrine was none other than Christ’s doctrine, which He had taught them and which the Holy Spirit after Pentecost brought to their remembrance, leading them into all truth.

A few of these Apostles and a few other men the Holy Spirit inspired to make a written record of Christ’s doctrine as we still have it in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. Those who thus continued in Christ’s Word also dutifully and gladly spread it.

As the Apostles ***“rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name,”***¹³ and ... ***they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ,”*** so the believers, even in the day of great persecution against the Church by which they were scattered abroad, ***“went everywhere preaching the Word.”***¹⁴

Loyalty to Christ’s Word they set above all obedience to human government and all earthly values, even their own lives. As long as loyalty to Christ’s Word

was the dominant attitude in the Church, the believers multiplied, and the Kingdom of our Saviour was built on earth.

Decline of Loyalty During Middle Ages

But what do we find in succeeding centuries? Christ's admonition to continue in His Word in order to know the truth and to have and hold the freedom which He has secured for us and seeks to bestow through His Word — that admonition was largely unheeded. Error was tolerated.

Loyalty to Christ and His Word gave way to compromise between truth and error, between Christ and the world. The result was that the Church, though outwardly strong and rich, grew inwardly weaker and spiritually poorer and poorer, until over wide areas, the Church utterly forfeited the truth as it is in Christ and the liberty by which Christ has made us free.¹⁵

What became of those flourishing churches in Asia Minor, mentioned in the Book of Revelation? Failing to heed the warnings given to them, failing to remain loyal to Christ and His Word, they compromised with the world and finally became extinct.

In other areas, where the Church continued to exist, the very heart of the Gospel of Christ was lacking: the justification and final salvation of the sinner by God's grace alone, through faith in His shed blood. Formalism, ceremonialism, and works of self-righteousness displaced Christ's doctrine of grace; so men lost the peace and comfort and saving power of Christ's Gospel.

Source Of Luther's Strength

What, on the other hand, was the source of Luther's strength in the Reformation of the Church? It was the Word of Christ, the saving power of His redeeming love. He set the authority of Christ's Word above human traditions and inventions; yes, even above the authority of popes and councils.

He was ready to forfeit his own life rather than to yield on the Gospel. *"The Word they still shall let remain!"* He took the same stand over against the Sacramentarians — Zwingli and others. The immediate issue was the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament. But Luther saw that the real principle at stake was the sole authority of the Word of God to establish doctrine and to determine church practice. *"This is, This is My body"* he wrote on the

table during the Leipzig debate. *“The Word stands there too, mightily.” “One little word makes the world too small for me.”*

His opponents thought him uncharitable and stubborn. Historians still describe him as opinionated and unyielding. But in reality he was loyal to Christ’s Word. He by the grace of God met the Apostolic standard of *“bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ”* as written in 2 Corinthians 10:5.

By thus remaining strictly loyal to Christ’s Word he met the fundamental test of discipleship. Being loyal to Christ’s Word, Luther continued to grow in the knowledge of the truth. And the truth as it is in Christ made him ever more free from doubt and error, from fear of men and from the danger of compromising truth with error in order to please men.

Yes, this loyalty to Christ’s Word also preserved Luther from another subtle danger: that of becoming vain and self-reliant, of wanting to be somebody in his own wisdom and to do something in his own strength. In humble and yet trustful reliance on Christ and the power of His Gospel, Luther accomplished great things in the Kingdom of God.

Our Founding Fathers Loyal to the Word

A similar story presents itself in connection with the founding Lutherans in Australia. Within the Protestant Church of Germany there had been a progressive falling away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Rationalism, the religion of human reason, had largely supplanted the revealed religion of Christ’s Word. Learned scholars, who held the chairs of theology in the leading universities, no longer bowed submissively to the authority of the Word of Christ.

Those who had the appointive power in the several state churches would no longer appoint Bible-believing preachers to the prominent pulpits, but only those who would substitute human wisdom for divine revelation, and human righteousness in place of the righteousness that is in Christ Jesus. The Church was in a deplorable condition.

But in the hearts of many there was a divinely created hunger for the Bread of Life and the Water of Life, for Christ and His Gospel. While many preachers

and professional teachers of religion who called themselves Christian and Lutheran no longer met Christ's test of discipleship, there were still those who took up His cross and followed Him.

They preached the full truth of His Gospel, they preached the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in the crucified and risen Saviour. For this they were penalised and otherwise persecuted.

Many of these then banded themselves together into emigrant groups and came to Australia. They did this for the sake of the truth of the Gospel. By the grace of God these men and women nobly met the fundamental test of Christ's discipleship. They continued in His Word.

Thus our church was established on the solid foundation of the Word of God and His grace in Christ. Other groups, thank God, and individual preachers and teachers, laymen and women, throughout the Christian era in similar experiences stood this test of Christian discipleship. Thus the Holy Spirit has maintained the Church of Jesus Christ, and will so maintain it that the very gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In the light of Christ's Word we must now ask ourselves whether we are Christ's disciples in very truth, or in name only.

Disloyalty Of Insincere Christians

Without passing uncharitable judgement on any individual, we nevertheless must recognise the fact that there are many who are Christians in name only. Their lives show it. They utterly fail to meet this test of loyalty to Christ's Word. On what, then, do they base their claim to be Christians?

They may point to the fact that they were baptised in infancy or childhood. Now, God forbid that we should say anything against infant Baptism. We sincerely believe according to the Gospel that Jesus Christ instituted Holy Baptism as a Sacrament for infants and children as well as for youths and adults. Since every child is born in sin, the Father of mercies has by His Son provided the new birth of water and the Spirit for all. In Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit works a spiritual miracle.

But, sad fact, many parents and sponsors fail to keep their pledge made in the baptismal ceremony: they fail to tell the growing child about the grace of God in

Christ bestowed in Holy Baptism. They fail to have the growing son or daughter instructed in the Word of God. Thus the work of the Holy Spirit is thwarted.

God's covenant remains. But such a baptised person knows nothing of this covenant except its name and outward form.

Then there are others who after infant Baptism are properly instructed in the Word and confess Christ as their Saviour in confirmation, and with their own lips pledge Him loyalty until death.

But they break that pledge and *“walked with Him no more.”*¹⁶ Some of these may become utterly indifferent to all religion; while others may unite with a Church that has corrupted the Gospel of Christ and adulterated His Sacraments. In either case they fail to meet this test of discipleship: loyalty to Christ's Word.

Still others there are who, having been baptised and confirmed in the Lutheran Church, retain an outward connection with the same by making an annual contribution, perhaps communing once a year, occasionally attending church to please a relative or friend.

But in many ways they show that they are indifferent toward Christ and His Gospel. They are not concerned for the salvation of their fellow men and thus are not interested in the missionary work of the Church. They may even declare that they “don't believe in foreign missions” or that one religion is as good as another. Is it not obvious that such professing Christians are not meeting this test of Christ's discipleship: loyalty to His Word?

Applying The Text To Ourselves

Today our blessed Lord and Saviour stands before us and asks each of us: *“Are you My disciple indeed?”* What will our answer be? He knows the answer. It is we who need to make sure of the answer by self-examination in the light of His Word and our own life. We are professing Christians. We are members of the Lutheran Church, a Church that has been built on Christ's Word.

But keep in mind: Continuance in Christ's Word means more than an intellectual acceptance and acknowledgement of the truth of His Word. Continuance in Christ's Word means that we continue faithfully to hear and read that Word, that we may grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It means that we also duly receive the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood for the continued nourishment of our spiritual life. It means that we shall daily seek communion with Christ in prayer; that His Spirit may dwell in our hearts and rule our thought and action.

Continuance in Christ's Word will mean for us that we, like His first disciples, will follow Him wherever He may lead; that we will serve Him among men willingly, gratefully, and lovingly.

Finally, continuance in Christ's Word will mean for us that we confess Christ before men. Let us conclude with His gracious promise: ***"Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven."***¹⁷ Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ The other tests are brotherly love, fruit-bearing, and cross-bearing

² John 17:14

³ Mark 1:14-15

⁴ John 14:6

⁵ John 6:63

⁶ John 8:19

⁷ John 8:24

⁸ v 26

⁹ v 28

¹⁰ v 38

¹¹ John 8:30

¹² Acts 2:42

¹³ Acts 5:41

¹⁴ Acts 8:4

¹⁵ Galatians 5:1

¹⁶ John 6:66

¹⁷ Matthew 10:32