

“Keep the Word”

St. John 8:51

March 29, 2020

SERMON 1902

by Michael David Henson

The sermon text is from John 8:51, “Amen, amen, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.”

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman by the well in John 4, He claimed that He could give her “living water...water springing up into eternal life.” She responded, “**Are you greater than our father Jacob?**” (John 4:12). After a conversation, she brings up the Messiah, He says, “**I who speak to you am He.**” She came to believe in Jesus.

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus makes a similarly outrageous claim, “... if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.” In contrast with the Samaritan woman, these Jews, who were arguing with Him would not come to faith. Though Jesus speaks to them the Word of God, clearly and correctly, they could not understand His teaching. They adamantly reject Him, saying, “**Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead?**” Jesus concludes with this Messianic declaration, “Most assuredly, **I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.**” Response: They sought to kill Him.

Before we can get to the reason for the Jews’ rejection of Jesus in John 8, we need to see the importance of **the transmitted message or word of Jesus**. In this sermon I desire to explain to you what it means “to keep” the words of Jesus. Furthermore, I want you to keep Jesus’ words and never see death. So let’s begin.

In today’s Gospel reading, the verb “keep” is used with the object “My words” twice. In v.51 Jesus says, “...if anyone **keeps My word** he shall never see death.” Mockingly the Jews repeat Jesus’ claim in v.52, and say that it proves that Jesus has a demon.

Nevertheless, Jesus doesn’t back down. In verse 55 He says, “...but I do know Him{*the Father*} and **keep His Word.**” Thus, Jesus equates His words with the Father’s words. That is, the content of the word is the same. They claim to have God as their Father, but they refuse Jesus’ word, which is the Father’s word. This is impossible. Thus, Jesus determines they are not of God. Later in John 15:20 Jesus said, “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. **If they kept(ἐτήρησαν) My word, they will keep(τηρήσουσιν) yours also.**” This time Jesus equates His own Word with the Apostles’ Word.

It’s time for a little high school mathematics or algebra. The transitive property of equality states that if $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a = c$. The Father’s Word is Jesus’ Word. Jesus’ Word is the Apostles’ Word. Thus Father’s Word is the Apostles’ Word. They all agree completely.

Here is the message which the Heavenly Father has been teaching since man's Fall into sin. Here is the message which Jesus spent three-years teaching. Here is the message which the Apostles carried to the end of the earth: **Jesus came to take upon Himself the sins of world.** The church spends a great deal of time speaking about the suffering, death and resurrection of our Savior. He lived a perfect life and died as our ransom for sin. Through faith in His sacrifice on our behalf we have eternal life. It is right and good that we preach the message of the promise of the Gospel. For the gospel message "is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

Today, we need to remember that **we would not know that gospel message, except that our Lord spent three years preaching to the people and teaching His apostles that same message.** Mark 1:38 records Jesus saying, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth." And after His resurrection, Jesus sends out His Apostles saying, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. ¹⁶He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16). **The content of Jesus' words from the Father and transmitted to the Apostles are none other than the message of salvation, which is able to save us from death.**

Jesus' message of salvation includes both Law and Gospel. In Matthew 9 we hear that Jesus has "not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (v.13). After Jesus was baptized, Matthew 4:17 says, "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" That repentance includes both sorrow over sin worked by the law, and faith in the Savior worked by the Gospel.

What does it mean "to keep" Jesus' words? "Keep" literally means to hold on to something. Holding on to something makes it your own. In John 8, **"Keep" is a synonym for believe or trust.** Jesus' message is the promise of the Father to give you Christ's atonement. When we believe the Gospel, we are believing in the One whom sent Jesus. John 5:24 says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life." The phrases are interchangeable: hear and believe, hear and keep.

That being said, you might wonder about the four references in John from chapters 14 and 15, in which **the word "commandments" are used with the verb "keep."** These verses are all spoken in the context of teaching what believers in Jesus do. They love God and desire to do His will. The beginning of today's Holy gospel says, "If God were your Father, you would love me..." (8:42). That is a statement of fact. Believers in the Father and His promise of salvation secured by Christ, love Jesus. That is what believers do.

Similarly, Jesus speaks of the love of believers, as keeping the commandments. John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep(τηρήσετε) My commandments(ἐντολὰς)." Also in John 14:21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." Having been saved by Christ, we desire to believe in the Gospel and we desire to obey God's law. John's gospel doesn't use the word "commandments" to refer to the Ten Commandments exclusively, but to both law and Gospel. According to John, Jesus commands us to obey His Law, as well as to confess our sins. Jesus commands us to believe the Gospel and to follow Him.

How we keep something depends on the object? When the Scriptures say that St. Paul was kept in prison, it involves locking up. That is a bit different from keep with a teaching or propositional truth. If we are to keep the Christian faith, it is to consider the teachings to be true. If we are told to keep the Ten Commandments, we would say obey. If we are told to keep the good news, then we trust in God's promise in true faith. Jesus includes both law and gospel when he says, "John 15:10 "If you keep(τηρήσητε) My commandments, you will abide(μενεῖτε) in My love, just as I have kept(τετήρηκα) My Father's commandments and abide(μένω) in His love."

This brings us full circle to the rejection of Jesus and his message by the Jews in John 8. In John 8, Jesus clearly gives the reason why these Jews could not understand Him. **First, their father is the devil.** Like obedient children of their father, these men want to do the desires of their father. **Second, the devil is a murder. They have already made plans to murder Jesus.** The only reason they haven't done it is that they haven't had an opportunity to do it. **Third, their father is a liar, and thus they are, too.** These liars claim to have the truth even while they hate Jesus and seek to murder Him. They do not stand in the truth, nor will they be swayed by the truth.

Those Jews, who have refused to follow the Word and are determined to reject Jesus, will not come to faith. Though Jesus has led a perfect life, they will call Him a Samaritan and someone demon-possessed. Though He speaks to them the correct interpretation of the Word of the Old Testament, they will consider Him to be a blasphemer. Jesus says of the Father, "I do know Him and keep His word." But these men do not know God. They are not able to listen to the truth, much less understand it. The problem was not with Jesus' word, but that they clung to the desires of their own sinful heart.

Our Triune God works through the preaching of the Word to create faith.

St. John says that His Gospel was written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (Jn 20:31). Today our Lord sends out pastors, whom the Holy Spirit has made "overseers" over His flock (Acts 20:28). These pastors are to preach Jesus' words, which are the Apostles' words, which are the Father's Word. St. Paul told Timothy, "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). Pastors are to teach the Word in season and out of season. That is, they are to preach to the Jews of John 8 and to the Samaritan woman of John 4.

What does our Lord desire? He wants us to hear His Word and keep it. It is for that purpose that He sends out "pastors and teachers" (Eph 4:11) today. He does not just want us to passingly hear, but as we heard in the parable of the sower, "with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15). Through faith in the promises of His Word we receive His gifts. Keeping is believing. John 5:24 says, "...he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life..."

The Jews were not able to point out even one sin of which to convict Jesus. Nor were they able to point out one falsehood, for Jesus always speaks the truth. When Jesus says, "Amen, amen, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death." You can count on His promise. A double amen is double-ly true. God's desires that we believe in His Son's suffering and death for the forgiveness of sins. Let us rejoice to see the day in which we hear the words of Jesus and keep it.