

# “The Word that Works!”

## *Reformation Day*

### *John 8:31-36*

“If you abide in my Word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” John 8:31

Did you know that words really *can* hurt people? At least the insurance company GEICO thinks so. In a recent popular and frequently run commercial that I am sure many of you have seen, *GEICO* demonstrates how exactly words can hurt people. The commercial flashes to a scene of a cowboy riding off on a horse into the sunset. As the cowboy, rides the words, “THE END” flash on the screen and he suddenly hits his head on the letter “E” in the word “END,” falls off his horse, and crashes to the ground. Yes, words really can hurt people. At least, in a GEICO commercial they can.

In our Gospel reading we learn that Jesus agrees, in part, with the insurance company. In particular, Jesus tells us that remaining or abiding in the wrong “word” hurts people.

On the day that we celebrate the Reformation of the Church and the work of Martin Luther to recover the true biblical teaching of the Gospel, we listen to a reading where Jesus tells us that to be true disciples and to know the truth, we must *abide* in his Word. Abiding in the wrong word doesn’t work. It is a path that ultimately hurts and leads to harm. Only abiding in the true Word of God works. So how do we *abide* in a word?

Perhaps it is best to first unpack that word, “abide.” The word translated “abide” often means “remain.” To abide in something is to live in it and remain in it. When understood that way we can begin to see how a person can abide or remain in things. We can abide in homes. We can abide or remain in relationships with other people. We can abide or remain in a Church as a member. We often abide and remain in things.

So we can also abide or remain in words. We can take someone’s words to heart. We can listen to someone’s words and truly hear them. We can hang on a person’s every word. We can take a person’s word at face value. We can trust a person’s word and believe that they will do what they say. These are some ways that we can abide in a word.

And we do abide in all kinds of words, don’t we? The problem is that we too often abide in the wrong words. It started at the beginning of creation when Adam and Eve were tempted, deceived, and led to distrust and doubt God’s Word. Instead, they abided in a word that was contrary and opposed to God’s

Word and Will. They trusted in Satan's word. Ever since then we as human beings are born not trusting and abiding in God's Word and Will. We are not born automatically into a relationship of faith in God. In many ways this is the meaning of the teaching we know as "original sin"—abiding in a word that is not God's Word.

Today we celebrate the work of the Reformation. In some ways, the Reformation happened because the Church was abiding in the wrong words. In short, the Church was abiding in, taking to heart, and listening to the words of a pope and church councils rather than the words of God in Holy Scripture. Rather than the Word of God having the sole authority in the life of the Church to guide belief and practice, the words of men became authoritative. The Church began to abide in the wrong words and it led to all kinds of actions that were contrary and inconsistent with true biblical, Christian teaching. The practice of selling indulgences, buying the forgiveness of sins. The practice of purgatory, and the false teaching that one merits God's grace and favor through their own works rather than trusting solely by faith in the work of God in Christ. The problem of abiding and remaining in a word contrary to God's Word that started in the Garden of Eden continued in the city of Rome and was visible in harmful ways through the teaching and practice of the Church.

The problem of abiding and remaining in a word contrary to God's Word is a problem you and I wrestle with even as members of the Church today. Our society urges us to abide in words and actions of tolerance and political correctness. The world in which we live calls us to abide in our passions and desires, to follow our hearts and pursue our own happiness. Do what makes us happy, we are told, even if it might be something that is ultimately harmful for us and hurts those around us. Even as Christians we are tempted to let go of our convictions and push aside the Word of God to abide in another word. We can so easily exchange God's Word for something else. We can cave to the cultural pressures. We may let the prevailing cultural opinion convince us that God has changed his mind about certain "hot button issues"—abortion, the definition of marriage, cohabitation, and homosexuality. We become ashamed of abiding in God's Word and let the names that people call Christians stick without objection—judgmental, bigots, misogynistic. And so perhaps for the sake of being comfortable and not being labeled in a certain way, we may seek to abide in another word—at least in certain situations and areas of our lives. But abiding in another word is not abiding in God's Word. Abiding in a word that is not God's word hurts.

The problem is that abiding in a word other than God's Word leads us down a path of falsehood rather than truth. It leads us to found our beliefs and actions and behavior and lifestyles on a foundation that ultimately disappoints us, hurts us, and harms those around us. Abiding ultimately and trusting in a word other than God's Word to guide our belief and practice gives the appearance of being right and leading towards true happiness, but ultimately leads us down a path of eternal disappointment. We do not find true peace. We do not find true comfort. We do not even find true happiness—down a path contrary to God's Word. We see this at the beginning of creation with Adam and Eve and we have been seeing the same story play out over and over and over again.

So how do we as Christians abide and remain in God's Word even when we struggle and often fall short of doing so? How do we get the courage to remain in God's Word and so be his disciples? In short, by listening and acting on the Words of Jesus that we heard this morning—*"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free"* (Jn 8:31-32). That is, to abide in God's Word is to abide in the Word become flesh. It is to abide ultimately in the person of Jesus. To abide in Jesus is to abide and remain in his forgiveness, life, and salvation that he purchased and won for you and the whole world two thousand years ago on Calvary. To abide in the fruits of Calvary is to receive those fruits of forgiveness, life, and salvation regularly where they are given personally for you. We abide in Jesus when we hear these words, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." We abide in Jesus when we regularly hear these words, "Take, eat; take, drink, for the forgiveness of all your sins." We abide in Jesus when we regularly turn in prayer, in thought, and in action, away from that which we were abiding in and trust in the words and the identity God created for us personally when he said these words to each of you, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The Word that Vanessa heard and trusted in this morning as she was baptized.

To abide in Jesus is to live your whole life as one of repentance—turning from that which we abide in that leads us down a path of disappointment, falsehood, and ultimately death, to abiding in Jesus and his love and forgiveness that leads us down a path of peace, comfort, truth, and ultimately life. To abide in Jesus and his Word is to be who you were recreated to be as God's baptized, forgiven child. To abide in his Word is a struggle. It takes courage. It will mean being countercultural. But to abide in God's Word in Christ is to abide in truth. It is a Word of help. It is a Word of healing. It is a Word that ultimately doesn't hurt us. It is to abide in a Word that works—now, and unto eternity. Blessed Reformation Day to all of you! Amen.