

Judica
John 8:42-59

Jesus says,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My Word, he will never see death” (v. 51)

The word keep here in the Greek is *τηρέω* and it has three main meanings. I believe Jesus has all three meanings in mind when He uses this word.

The first and primary meaning of the word is to keep watch over something like a special treasure. In this same sense, it can mean keeping watch over a prisoner but since we’re talking about the Word of God, I think it’s more helpful to think of it as a special treasure. God’s Word is Awesome. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 19,

“The Torah of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure making wise the simple;... More to be desired [is God’s Word] than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.” (Psalm 19:7, 10)

If you look in your ESV or NIV, you’ll see the “Law of the Lord is perfect” in Psalm 19. But Torah is the Hebrew word for the Law here and means so much more than commands of God or what we think of as the Law. The Torah includes the full council of God, both the Law and the Promises!

So, you are to treasure God’s Word. This means that you care about the Word. You meditate on God’s Word which comes with a promise:

Blessed is the man [or woman... whose] delight is in the Torah of the Lord, and on His Torah he [or she] meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1a, 2)

You are blessed by God's Word. That is to say you are happy and prosperous. You aren't happy and prosperous in the way of the world but in the way of Jesus. In trials and temptations, you are secure in the knowledge that you have a dear Father in heaven who loves you and cares for you. The fruit you produce is an eternal fruit and not some temporal fruit that rots and decays.

But to say that you treasure God's Word is also to say that you treasure the Small Catechism. It has been called the "Layman's Bible" for good reason. It is drawn directly from Scripture and teaches you everything you need to know for life and salvation. Since it is drawn from Scripture it is meant to be meditated upon and prayed. God tells you to teach His Word diligently to your children in Deuteronomy 6 and 11. Each section of the Catechism starts off with, "As the head of the family should teach..." How many of us have failed in teaching our children the Small Catechism? How many of us fail to memorize it ourselves and meditate upon it regularly?

When Dr. Luther died, Lutheranism almost disappeared. The Emperor Charles V and the Pope tried to eradicate Lutheranism by force. During the skirmishes, Saxony Elector John Frederick was captured and thrown in jail with the sentence of death hanging over his head. He wrote Emperor Charles a letter from his jail cell in which he said:

"I cannot refrain from informing Your Majesty that since the days of my youth I have been instructed and taught by the servants of God's Word, and by diligently searching the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures I have also learned to know, and (this I testify as in the sight of God) unswervingly to adhere in my conscience to this, that the articles composing the Augsburg Confession, and whatever is connected therewith, are the correct, true, Christian, pure doctrine, confirmed by, and founded in, the writings of the holy prophets and apostles, and of the teachers who followed in their footsteps, in such a manner that no substantial objection can be raised against it." (Editor's

Introduction to the Formula of Concord, Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, pg. 449)

How many of us could make such a strong confession before princes? Charles was enraged and ordered the Bible and Luther's writings to be removed from Elector Frederick's jail cell. He "responded that they were indeed able to deprive him of his books, but could never tear out of his heart what he had learned from them." (Concordia, pg. 449) How many of us could make the same claim? There's an attack on Christians and God's Word in the United States. It seems impossible that they would be able to remove our books from us, but they probably thought the same thing in Russia when the same kind of attack on the Word happened there.

Jesus treasured His Father's Word. Later in John, He says,

For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent Me has Himself given Me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me." (John 12:49-50)

We treasure Jesus' Words because they are life and salvation.

The first meaning of "to keep" is to keep watch over something like it is precious treasure. This means we treasure the Word of God. The second meaning of "to keep" is to hold someone or something as in rituals. This is one of the main ways "to keep" is used in the Greek Translation of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament there were many rituals to keep.

We see some of these in the New Testament. On the eighth day, Jesus was circumcised. (Luke 2:21) After 40 days, He was presented to the Lord and a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons were sacrificed. (Luke 2:22-24) Jesus commands a Leper He cleansed to "go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, for a proof to them." (Mark 1:44)

After anointing a blind man's eyes, Jesus instructed him to "go, wash in the pool of Siloam" to restore his sight. (John 8:6-7)

From the New Testament, we also know that Jesus fulfilled all the Old Testament ceremonies and rituals. This was an issue in early Christianity. Acts 15 describes the Apostolic Council that dealt with the issue of whether or not the Gentile converts to Christianity had to obey the Jewish ceremonial law. Peter confesses that,

"we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 15:11)

Paul says it like this:

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:13a, 14)

Jesus instituted new ceremonies for us to receive this amazing gift of grace through faith: Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Holy Supper.

Jesus establishes Holy Baptism in Matthew,

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

Disciples are made through baptizing and teaching. When Jesus says here "to observe," He uses the same Greek word we're looking at today, "to keep."

Jesus establishes Holy Absolution in John,

"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:22b-23)

Holy Absolution is a gift to those of us who live in a world constantly beset by sin, death, and the devil!

Jesus establishes the Holy Supper in Matthew, Mark, Luke and 1 Corinthians:

“The Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. DO THIS in remembrance of Me.’ In the same way also He took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. DO THIS, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’” (1 Corinthians 11:23b-25)

Jesus gives us nourishment on our way as we travel from this world to the next.

These new ceremonies are not something that we “do” for God. Jesus established them so that He can act upon us! And since He acts upon us, we know that our salvation is guaranteed by the One who rose from the dead as proof that He is the great “I AM.” We keep these ceremonies our Lord instituted with His precious Word because they provide so much comfort for us! Do we treasure them as we ought?

The first meaning of “to keep” is to keep watch over something like it is precious treasure. This means we treasure the Word of God. The second meaning of “to keep” is to hold someone or something as in rituals. This means to treasure our Lord’s gifts in the Sacraments. The third meaning of “to keep” has the idea of obedience in it.

This means you are expected to do good works as empowered by the Holy Spirit and informed by the Ten Commandments. Our confessions say it this way:

“Good Works certainly and without doubt follow true faith—if it is not a dead, but a living faith—just as fruit grows on a good tree.” (Ep IV.6)

James puts it this way:

“But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves... If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:22, 26-27)

Paul says it this way:

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2)

Jesus says it this way:

“A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:18-20)

In other words, no one should be surprised you’re a Christian.

We have a couple problems with this.

The first problem is that you fall into the trap of measuring your salvation by your works. This way lies madness. Literally. Your works are still tainted by original sin. And they will be until you die in the faith. No matter how spontaneous the good work or how well intentioned, if you look at it in the cold light of the law, you have no assurance of salvation. Those who live under this kind of understanding of good works either become Pharisees who are proud of their works or they become despairing because they know they can’t keep the law perfectly. What a beautiful gift the gospel is.

We treasure God's Word and Sacraments because God delivers salvation through them. In them we have full confidence in our salvation because we know God promised and God never lies!

The second problem with works is that we fall into the trap of ignoring them. We don't take seriously the task of remembering our baptism daily. We quit examining ourselves with the Ten Commandments and quit reassuring ourselves with the forgiveness of sins found in Word and Sacrament. You fall into the trap of "God loves me anyway." It seems we care more about what's happening on Facebook or the news than we do the state of our soul. Thank God for the beautiful distinction of Law and Gospel.

We turn to the Law so that we see what God expects of us and how we have failed. You have to know you need forgiveness of sins before you receive it. Then you turn to the abundance of means God has provided for forgiveness. That's living daily in your baptism!

And you know that you have Christ's righteousness. Jesus kept God's Word perfectly. He treasured it and was careful to give us nothing but His Father's perfect Word. He kept the Old Testament ceremonies in our place and fulfilled them. Then He established new ceremonies that are not law based but gospel filled. He obeyed God's Law perfectly. He is the only One who kept it whole and undefiled. That means His sacrifice on your behalf covers all your sins. And His righteousness covers you so that God your Father in heaven sees you as righteous.

And since Jesus delivers all of this to you through His spoken and visible Word, you too "keep" His Word! And in keeping His Word, you are truly blessed!

Amen.