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John 6:66-70

Learning Christ's Words

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I remember vividly, as a young Lutheran, my first day of Confirmation class. Pastor Looker handed everybody a piece of paper: old-school purple mimeograph ink, two columns, single-spaced typing, a list of Bible passages, chapter and verse, numbered 1 to 200. He said to the class, "You will recite these verses from memory by the end of the year." One kid raised his hand, and asked, "How many do we have to memorize?" "200," said the pastor, "From the King James Version of the Bible, please." And so we did. It nearly killed me. My parents nearly killed me; but I managed to memorize those 200 Bible verses.

Now, I know some of you old-school types are out there saying, "Yeah! That's what I'm talking about! Today's Confirmation students should be tortured just like we were tortured back in the day!" But times have changed, thankfully, in some ways. We don't use ditto paper anymore. We doth not use the King James Version. And we don't force the kids to memorize hundreds of Bible verses.

But, in one crucial way, times haven't changed. We still want our Confirmands today to learn the words of Christ. Not the same focus on saying Bible verses from memory, but an even more important focus: learning those verses, understanding them, and internalizing Christ's words of love, hope, and promise shared in the Bible.

And that's not just something important for young Christians, is it? It doesn't matter how old you are, or how long you've been a believer. You need to be learning, and re-learning

Christ's words. You and I need to be reading and studying our Bibles. We all need to be growing and stretching our understanding of God's will, God's plan, God's Word. Here's why.

In today's world, there are so many competing voices out there telling us what to believe: about science, about how the universe was formed, about how we should dress, how we should act, how we should spend our money. The culture around us, the media, the courts, and the popular trends out there all have a lot to say about our morals, our families, our parenting, our marriages, about the legal definition of "marriage." We're all shaped and influenced every day by our context – by the world we live in.

And guess what? The world doesn't buy in to Jesus as God. The world doesn't encourage you to walk with Jesus. The culture around you is not going to steer you in God's direction, keep your life on a straight moral path, or help you get to heaven. It will do – it does do -- the exact opposite.

This is why followers of Jesus need to learn his words. I'm not saying that you should memorize 200 Bible verses, so that you can spit them out whenever your faith is challenged, or when you have a moral decision to make. I've got to tell you, that didn't really work for me too well as a teenager. I needed to learn to take Christ's words seriously, in my heart, and take them personally -- not just memorize them in my head. I needed to read and study those verses in their context, and to sort out how they applied to my context. And every one of us needs to get more and more familiar with Christ's words, so that we can learn them, digest them, and internalize them.

That way, when we're challenged and tempted -- then, when we have to think for ourselves; then, in those moments when we have to decide whose voice we're going to listen to and

whose advice we're going to follow -- then we'll have the voice of the Savior already inside of us. Then we'll have his Holy Spirit working inside of our spirits, reminding us of all that Jesus has taught us, directing our steps, and influencing our choices. Living in this mixed-up world, struggling against the sin that's out there and the sin that's within me, I need that help every single day. I need Christ's words every day. Don't you? All of Christ's followers do. Learning Christ's words is one of the marks of a true disciple.

I love how today's Bible story, from John 6, illustrates this for us. Here we see St. Peter facing some peer pressure. Peter is living in the real world, just like we all are; and Peter has a choice to make. He's been following Jesus for a while now, walking with the Lord and learning from him. Jesus is starting to become well-known; and it's not just Peter and the other eleven disciples now. Large crowds are following Jesus. A whole lot of people are on fire for Jesus, and Peter, too.

But then some of the disciples start to fall away. Jesus, they realize, is making some serious claims. Jesus declares that he was sent from heaven, that his power comes from God. Jesus reveals that he and the Father in heaven are one. And not all of the disciples are ready for that. Watching Jesus heal sick people? That's cool and exciting. But accepting him as God? Putting their faith in Christ as Savior? Allowing Christ's words to actually shape and guide their lives? Some of the Lord's followers weren't ready to take that step.

It says, in John 6, "After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, 'Do you want to go away as well?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.'"

Isn't that beautiful? Isn't that powerful? Peter took his stand on Christ's words. "Lord, you have the words of eternal life." Peter could have walked away, like so many others did; but Peter had learned Christ's words. Peter held on to Christ's words, and Peter believed those words.

Friends, every day you and I are faced with our own choices, aren't we? Every day, we're pressured, challenged, and tested. Every day we can walk away from Jesus, too. Or, like Peter, we can take our stand on Christ's words. "Lord, you have the words of eternal life, and I need those words in my life today. I need help with my decisions this week, with my temptations. I need your strength, I need your forgiveness; but I need your words to guide me."

I challenge you this week, fellow Christians, to spend some time learning Christ's words. Open up your Bibles, if you haven't been doing that. Do some reading this week. In fact, let me ask you all to do two things this week with your Bibles.

First, read three chapters from the Gospel of John this week. You can read more than that, if you want; but let's all read John 6, John 7, and John 8 this week. You don't have to memorize those verses, and you don't have to read it from the King James Version. But do read John 6-8 this week. It won't take you long. You could read one of those chapters during halftime of a football game today. You can read these words of Christ online, if you want, or on your phone. You can read it by yourself, or read it with your family. But make an effort this week, take a little time, and read John 6-8. Everybody got it?

And here's the second request. Bring your Bible with you to church next week. Yeah, I know, we're Lutherans, and we don't normally do that. But bring your Bible with you to church next weekend, because we're going to talk about Christ's words to us in John chapter 8. It's Reformation

Sunday next week, and we'll start focusing on how disciples of Jesus not only learn his words, but apply them.

So, in closing, two assignments: read three chapters, John 6-8; and bring your Bible to church next week. Let's all take our stand this week on the words of Christ. Amen.