

The Power of Memorizing Scripture

Adapted from “If My Words Abide in You,” a sermon by John Piper.

Jesus’ Testimony

Jesus says, “If you abide in me, and *my words abide in you*, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Let’s simply linger for a few minutes over the words “If . . . *my words abide in you* .” What does this mean, and why do the words of Jesus have the effect they do, and what does this have to do with memorizing Scripture?

More Than Memorizing

First of all, having the words of Jesus abide in you is more than memorizing them. We know this for several reasons. First, we know it because the devil can memorize Scripture. He quoted it to Jesus in the wilderness to tempt him (Matthew 4:1–10). Second, we know it because of what Jesus says in John 5:38. He said to the Jews who were questioning him, “You do not have [God’s] word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.” But these people knew much of God’s word from memory. Jewish people who are serious about their faith have always memorized Scripture. But Jesus says that God’s word is not abiding in them. So clearly when the word of God is abiding in us, it is more than mere memorizing.

Bearing the Fruit of Faith and Holiness

What then does it mean?

It means that the words of Jesus take root and bear the fruit of faith and holiness. John 5:38 connects the word and faith: “You do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent.” If the word abides in you, you will believe in the word and the one who spoke it.

His Words Finding a Home in Us

The abiding of Jesus’ word in us means that his words find a home in us. They fit. They belong. In John 8:37, Jesus says, “I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you.” That’s the opposite of the word “abiding” in us. When the word abides in us, it finds a place, a home. It’s not foreign. It belongs. You move other things around and even get rid of some things so that the word has room and “feels at home.”

The words of Jesus don’t “abide” without effect. When they take root, they produce faith and holiness. “Sanctify them in the truth,” Jesus says; “your word is truth” (John 17:17). So when his words abide in us, sanctification happens. We are transformed. Holiness, Christlikeness, happens.

So, in sum, the abiding of Jesus’ words in us means that the words of Jesus take root and bear the fruit of faith and holiness.

Why This Effect?

Why do the words of Jesus have this effect? There are at least three reasons we can see in the Gospel of John.

1. Jesus' Words Are God's Words

One is that Jesus' words are the words of God. John 3:34: "He whom God has sent utters the

words of God." So when Jesus is speaking, God is speaking. No man ever spoke the words of God more perfectly or consistently than Jesus. When the apostles taught in their office as apostles, they spoke with the truth and the authority of God. But every time Jesus opened his mouth, we are hearing the word of God. And the word of God is powerful. That's the first reason why the abiding of Jesus' words in us has the effects it does.

2. Jesus' Words Are Life-Giving

Second, the words of Jesus are life-giving. Jesus said in John 6:63, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." The Spirit of God gives life through the word of God. And Jesus' words are those words. So his words are "spirit and life." They quicken the spirit and impart eternal life. That's why Peter says five verses later, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

3. Jesus' Words Conquer the Devil

So the words of Jesus are the words of God, and they impart eternal life. And third they produce faith and holiness because they conquer the devil. We have a supernatural adversary, the devil. He hates us. He hates our marriages. He hates our children. He hates our church. And he hates God. In ourselves, we are not as strong as he is. That is why John says that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The world has no defense against the devil. None.

But listen to what John says of the young Christians in 1 John: "I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and *the word of God abides in you*, and you have overcome the evil one" (1 John 2:14). Do you see the connection? "The word of God abides in you, and you have overcome [conquered!] the evil one." The devil cannot stand against the indwelling word of God.

Awhile back, someone asked me if I thought a Christian or a Christian family could be cursed. My answer is this. If the word of God abides in you, you overcome the evil one. No demonic curse can stand against the gracious, liberating, transforming, devil-defeating word of God when it is abiding in our hearts.

What About Scripture Memory?

So we ask finally, what does all this have to do with memorizing Scripture?

I will come at this with a broad biblical answer (...)

1. Bringing God's Word into Connection With Our Minds

First, the broad biblical answer. The Holy Spirit awakens life and faith and personal transformation (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and more, Galatians 5:22). God the Holy Spirit does that. But he does it through the word of God (1 Peter 1:23; John 17:17). How? If you carry your Bible around all day and never read it, will the Holy Spirit make the nearness of the word of God in your purse or pocket effective in changing your life?

No. He won't. Why? Because "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). God gave us conscious minds. He gave us volition and emotion. The Holy Spirit makes the words of Jesus effective when they attach with understanding to our

minds and then to our wills and emotions. Christ is glorified when his word is heard and understood and affirmed and enjoyed. So that is how God has ordained for change to happen.

Therefore, anything that brings the word of God into connection with our minds will work to strengthen faith and promote understanding and bring about the fruit of the Spirit and the transformation of our lives—and not just our own, but the lives of others also. Memorizing Scripture makes this kind of connection between God’s word and our minds more constant, more deep, and more transforming. Realistically, nothing else can take its place. (...)

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