

# *The Power of God's Word*

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church  
Sunday, October 30, 2005; Bryn Mawr, PA*

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

## **Reformation Sunday**

*“When you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word...”*

Words have power. Think of advertising campaigns and you begin to understand the power of words. Simple words like “Imagine,” or “Freedom” or “Escape” or “Enjoy” all become a part of marketing campaigns and begin to carry ideas and connotations. The words, when connected to a product take on a deeper meaning. Even outside of the marketing world, words still carry and maintain power. Liberal. Conservative. Both are words that have meanings but when used as a label they carry power. The words can paint someone in a negative light; they can unduly smear one’s character.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas recognizes the power of curse words, and has a reputation for often interjecting expletives when he is teaching so his students will be caught off guard, and really listens to what he is saying. That is the power of words that they can throw us off balance intellectually or in reality. Words can label us, change us, effect us, lift us up and hurt us. “The pen is mightier than the sword,” cries Baron Lytton, and there is truth to his claim. Slander someone on a billboard or punch that person in the face, and tell me what has a greater and more long lasting effect. The letters and writings of the great individuals have a more prominent place etched in our own history than the actions of others in specific events. We remember words more than actions; words have power.

With this in mind, let us think of the one word, which we look to for hope and for life. Let us think about the power of God’s word as we hear it, live it and proclaim it.

We find God’s proclaimed word through the prophets. So many times Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others begin their proclamation with, “Thus says the Lord...” They are speaking the word of God and that word cuts through to what is right with the world and what is wrong with the world. That word proclaims God’s people as blessed, as holy and loved. That word proclaims actions that ignore the least of the world, the orphans, the poor, the homeless and the oppressed as abhorrent in the eyes of God. This is a word that says to Jeremiah, even in the time of drought, I will give you strength. This is the word that says to Isaiah, fear not for I go with you, I have called you by name and you are mine. The word of the Lord when spoken to the prophets and through the prophets carries a hope in a relational God, and power in the life we are called to live.

As Christians, we go further with God’s word, and claim that the word of the Lord is also found in Christ. Remember John 1:1 – in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. This is Christ. The word spoken by the prophets, the word heard by Moses, is the word that is Christ, God incarnate. This is the word that walks amongst us, that declares to us God’s all compassionate, all forgiving, and redeeming love. This is the word of love that reached out to the woman at the well, that reached out to the blind man on the side of the road, and that reached out to the disciples. This is the word that overcomes sickness that overcomes social boundaries, that overcomes demons, that overcomes darkness and that even overcomes death. This is the power of God’s word in Christ.

And we hear that word of Christ and know its power. We hear Christ and we know that we are forgiven for all that we do. We hear the name of Christ and we know that we are not alone in our anguish. We hear the name of Christ and we know that we are loved and held close to the heart of God. This is the power of God’s word in Christ.

When I cry out the name of Christ, I am crying out the name of a savior, the name of a redeemer, the

name of the lamb, and the name of the prince of peace. When we cry out that word, the name of Christ, we remember the commitment we all have made to him, we remember the sacrifice he made to all of us, and the hope we find in that sacrifice and that commitment. When I cry out the name of Christ we shout back the joy the grace and the peace that we all have experienced in that name. This is the gospel that Paul proclaimed to the Thessalonians, that they received and lived. This is the word that Paul preached. Oh yes my brothers and sisters, there is power in the word of Christ. And there is nothing, nothing that can separate us from the power of Christ, neither depth nor height, neither power nor principalities, nor angels nor demons, neither life nor death, there is power in the name of Christ and nothing can separate us from that power.

But we have tried. We have taken the word from God, yea even the word of Christ and have used it for selfish and oppressive reasons. Again and again, churches have taken the Word of God and offered it to the people wrapped with control and power. Centuries ago people were told that God's word could not be fully heard unless it was heard in Latin. Centuries ago people were told that God's word could not be read unless it was read in the King's English. Interpretations, understandings, and meanings have been passed down without leaving any room for questioning, for wondering and for disagreement.

In the medieval period, people were told that there is one meaning and understanding of the Bible and any other understanding would leave you outside of the walls of salvation. People were told that a "correct" reading of the Bible claims the presence of a pope. The Bible says that only the prayers of the priest can merit our own salvation. The Bible says that our actions, our good works will assure our salvation. Such are examples of the ways the Bible was offered to God's children.

Think of our own history of slavery. The Bible, the word of God, has been used, and is still used by many to justify slavery. A few have seized the word and have decided to dictate to the rest of us what it means. The Bible has been used to justify war, justify exclusion, justify hatred and justify oppression. We are told that through the word of God we can receive salvation, but only on certain terms. We are told that through the word of God we can gain a true life, but only if it is understood a specific way. Again and again, time after time the Bible has been bound up in chains of interpretation by one group of Christians or another. Again and again the Word of God has been locked in a box that can only be opened by one reading or another.

And this isn't new. Even when Paul was teaching and spreading the Gospel, he was competing with wordsmiths. He was competing with individuals who were taking the same gospel and twisting and turning it in such a way that there were hoops through which one had to jump to fully experience the hope of the Gospel. This is way he has to go through such a length to point out his conduct, so that at least the nature of his character can give some credibility to his teachings. Almost from the start, the Word of God was being used and perverted for power and selfishness. Perhaps this is why Hauerwas suggests that we take the Bible out of the hands of the lay people until they can be properly educated, and maybe he is right. But is he suggesting that there is one way to read the Bible, a right way, and all other interpretations are wrong? Would he then also find himself with the rest of those groups of people vying for power and controlling God's word?

One of the critiques of the Baptist movement was our willingness to give the Bible to anyone, and let that person read the word for him or her self. We were told that such free readings, such free interpretations could lead to a dangerous understanding of God's word, and we could not be so free. Obadiah Holmes was whipped in Boston MA because he read the Word of God and came up with something different than the establishment. The word was suppressed and repressed, and is continued to be suppressed and repressed.

On this day when we remember the reformation, such questions are important to ask. For this is one of the critiques of the reformation – that the power of God's word has been silenced, compromised and controlled. One of Luther's critiques when he nailed the 95 theses on the wall was that the Bible was not available to the people. This also was the critique of the early Baptist, Leland, and many others. The reformers again and again saw the practices of one church or another trying to capture the power of God's will and they said, "no."

In the movie, *Saved* there is a scene when one of the characters played by Mandy Moore is disgusted with another character. Moore's character was pious, holy and righteous, and the other character was a teenage mother-to-be, was beginning to question the Bible, religion and all that a strict Christian school had taught her. Out of her disgust, Moore's character threw a bible right at the other character. The other one picked up the

bible and said, this is not a weapon.

So many churches have again and again hurled bibles, hurled God's word at others in hopes to crush, hurt, and control them. The movement of reformation has again and again picked up the Bible and said to those churches, "this is not a weapon." One needs not read the bible through the eyes of an authority; one need not understand the bible through the lens of the church. *Sola scriptura*, and the scripture alone is all that need be placed in the hands of any who desires to be with and experience the grace of the God's word. This has been the critique of the reformers, and it continues to sound out today.

So how do we offer and accept God's word? This is the risk that is suggested by the reformers – that we let the Word carry itself, without any outside interpretation. Now hold on, because this is scary, risky and dangerous. Are we really to just give the Bible to others and let them read it on their own? What if they get it wrong, what if they misunderstand and go down some fringe fanatical road? This is a danger, a very real one that we must be aware of. But on the other hand as soon as we begin to tell people what the word means we are quickly slipping down that road of control and power. Here is where perhaps we can turn to the example of Paul as offered in Thessalonians. Paul doesn't just spend all day proclaiming the gospel; he is living the gospel. He isn't calling the people to accept the words of the Gospel, but to live the life of the gospel. It is his actions which give his words power. It is the way he proclaims the gospel that gives him credibility.

Can we do the same? Can we offer the power of God's word in a pure, honest and authentic way? Can we offer the power of God's word with integrity and humility? This is not a church that declares to have the truth, but one that dares to live the truth. This is not a church that demands acceptance of doctrines, dogmas, and biblical litmus tests but one that invites people to engage, hear, respond and live the word together. We will hear the word of God, not as a human word, but as God's word, and we will offer it in the same way. We offer it as something so large, so amazing, and so powerful that we cannot hope to control or define it. It is like going to the Grand Canyon. When you get there you cannot tell someone exactly what to look at. You cannot force the power and grandeur of that sight into a box. All you can do is sit and experience with those around you. That is the power of God's word, free and unfettered. And as a church, as individuals we accept God's just as that, God's word and offer it in the same way. The power, the hope, the peace and the life that is offered through God's word, through the Gospel of Jesus Christ is too great, too awesome, and too overwhelming for us to be caught up in or offer any truncated, postcard, controlling version of the Bible. We offer the word as we hear it – as God's holy and powerful word.

Then we continue to live that word. We stop worrying if we have it right, and just are glad that we have it. We stop worrying if we are going to upset others with our interpretations, upset others with our grace and love. Instead of keeping the Bible closed to the world but through our interpretation, we open up the gospel of Christ, that gospel of love and forgiveness so wide that the world becomes a part of it. And then we live it. We let God's word become our life, we let the Bible interpret us, and we live the love and the grace that we hear in God's word. That is the power of God's word, a word that not only effects our lives, a word that not only gives us hope in our lives, but a word that becomes our lives. Keep watch that you let the word guide you challenge you, and transform you. Only then is the word free from interpretation and free for living.

AMEN