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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## *The Power of the Word*

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SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ NOVEMBER 12, 2017

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The other day, I was walking from the Family Ministries Center to my church office, a path that I take about 20 times a day. I rounded the corner of the Art Gallery—which, by the way, has some great pieces right now—and there, sitting on the couch, was one of our members whom I know well. I turned to say hello, and though I know better than this, in my busy work brain as I was extending salutations, I mistakenly called her by her husband’s name! Have you ever had the experience of saying something that you immediately wanted to take back? I am sure that has never happened to you! I called her the wrong name, and the moment I said the words, I wanted to reach out and pluck those words out of the air before they could fall on her ears.

Sometimes situations like that are innocuous and can be quite funny, like when we call someone by their spouse’s name. Sometimes, though, the words we utter can be much more damaging. Have you ever had the experience of saying something, maybe to a spouse, a family member, or close friend, and the words that came out of your mouth took on a life of their own? I am sure you have never had that experience, but maybe you have been on the receiving end of someone else’s words that took on a life of their own.

A friend recounted a story from his past when words that were said to him changed his life forever. He is now about 55 years old, but he recounts the story as though it were yesterday. When he was in school, his teacher said to him, “You’ll never amount to anything.” It is unimaginable that someone, especially a teacher, would say something like this. Talk about words that I would want to take back! For my friend, those words did not just land upon his ears,

they continued to echo throughout his life. For my friend, those five words have reverberated in his mind every day since! So significant were those words that I imagine if you were to ask him, he could tell you the teacher's name, the exact location where he was standing, how old he was, and perhaps even what he was wearing. For him, those words were so powerful and so significant that, in a way his entire identity has been defined by wrestling and subduing the dreaded potential ghost of the future.

**Words are powerful.** Often, we spew words without giving too much thought to what we are saying; we may long to get them back, but those words may take on a life of their own. As it says in Proverbs 18:21, "The tongue has the power of life and death..." Isn't that the truth? Once words are spoken, when they take on a life of their own, they wield the power to affect change. The words we use can change minds. They can soften or harden hearts. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word will stir up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). Words can be used to foster relationships, or they can tear them apart. Words on the lips of the wrong individual can cause great suffering. But, for the individual suffering and grieving, a tender word can be like a healing balm. There is a power, a life, in words. Whether we speak words of life or words of death, the words we use have a power to them.

Some time ago, a monk was invited to move to a small university town in Europe. Somewhat reluctantly he agreed to go. As he looked at the corruption of his day, he began to compile a list of grievances to discuss with the academic elites of this small European college town. In fact, he had 95 of them. This monk, by the name of Martin Luther, wrote down his complaints and nailed them to the 16th century equivalent of the town bulletin board: the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. You may recall that we celebrated this historical event just a few weeks ago. As history would reveal, these words—penned by Luther but empowered by the Holy Spirit—had the power to change the face of Europe in countless ways; not just church life, but the political, the economic, and the educational landscape as well.

**Words are powerful.** Once spoken or written, they can take on a life of their own. They can be words of life or words of death. To express this reality, some have used a phrase that I am sure you have all heard, **“The pen is mightier than the sword.”** This phrase, often accredited to the 19th Century English playwright and author Edward Bulwer-Lytton, means that words can have more influence and effect than military force. Though Edward Bulwer-Lytton is given credit for coining the phrase, there are numerous versions of it, both contemporary and from an earlier time: one is accredited to Thomas Jefferson, one to George Whetstone, and one is even attributed to William Shakespeare. It is possible that the origin of the phrase is even older than that. Some turn to a somewhat mysterious document, an ancient masterpiece, scribed in the first century by a follower of Jesus. Listen to the incredible, unique power that is ascribed to God’s Word in Hebrews 4:12.

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Although the words you and I speak or write have a certain power in them, God’s Word is incomparably more powerful. While our words can impact the people around us, sometimes even altering the course of someone’s life, the Word of God creates and transforms the world around us. While we might say that our words have the ability to take on a life of their own, the Word of God is **ALIVE** and speaks life into those who hear it and believe it.

Consider this: It is likely that very few of our words will outlive us once we have passed from this life into the light of God’s eternal rest. There are a few outliers like Bulwer-Lytton, who have penned phrases that seem to live on, but most of us will not have that experience. The words we speak, though we recognize their power in the present, will disappear like a mist shortly after our departure. It is fascinating that there is a library of 66 books, spanning more than 1,500 years and written by some 40 diverse authors, which have an

incredibly unified theme that has outlived each of the authors. The impact of this book has shaped the world more than any other. It is the world's all-time best seller! Simply put, the Word of God, as breathed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, still has the profound ability to transform our lives.

What exactly is the power of the Word of God and in what way is it living and active? To understand that, we must look at a few places in the Bible to which I believe the writer of Hebrews may be alluding. First, let us go back to where it all started: Genesis, chapter 1. According to Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep...." And then what happened? "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." The Word of God brought forth light. Throughout Genesis 1 there is a pattern for each day. Each day of creation is spoken into being by God. On that last day of creation, the sixth day of the week, "...God said, 'Let us make man in our image...,'" and it was so. According to the scriptures, the Word of God is not only living and active, the very activity of God's speaking brought about life. While our words can take on a life of their own, God's Word **created** life and sustains it!

Fast forward to the New Testament Gospel of John, from which today's Call to Worship was derived. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, writes in John 1:1-3, "In the beginning...," which sounds like the other beginning which we just discussed. The author wants to lead us back to the creation. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This "word" is not just a thing, but a person. "Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made." He was with God in the beginning; all things came into being through Him. And then, amazingly, in verse 14, John tells us that "... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The amazing theological brilliance to which John points is that Jesus is the **WORD** that God spoke and through whom all things came into being.

Does that give you a sense of what the Living and Active Word of God means? God's Word, spoken over the formless void, caused all things to come into being. God's Word eventually took on flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ, the One through whom God's great rescue plan for all humanity was accomplished. When the book of Hebrews says that the Word is living and active, this is the life and activity of which it speaks. It is the beginning of the whole narrative (Hebrews 1:1-3):

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. <sup>3</sup>The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things **by his powerful word**. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

God's Word never goes out and returns empty, but rather it accomplishes everything that God intends to accomplish. God's Word continues to speak to us today through the pages of this 66-book library from which we read every week. It proves to be amazingly alive and powerful! It, more than any other book, has changed the world precisely because it is God's Word, uniquely testifying about Jesus Christ. How does it do so?

I often think of it like this. I love the theology, the teaching, and the writing of Bishop N.T. Wright from the Anglican tradition. I have taken several online courses taught by him. I have read many, though not all, of his books. I have become so familiar with his work and the sound of his voice, that though I have never met him in the flesh, I feel as though I know him. When I read his books, I can nearly hear his voice as if he were narrating the words to me.

It is the same with the Scriptures. The Creator of all things continues to speak, and today the Bible alone enables us to hear the

voice of God. We not only hear God's voice, we are introduced to Jesus, the very Word of God. There is no other book that can claim that reality. And there is one more secret weapon which enables us to know God through the Scriptures: The Holy Spirit. As we read the Word of God, inspired by the Spirit, the Spirit of God continues to be at work. It is because of the power of God's Word that those who have gone before us have been so insistent that the Bible be made available to us in our own language.

Let us go back once more to that little academic town of Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther was a brilliant monk who passionately and feverishly sought God. In his early days, he was plagued by an overwhelming sense of alienation from God, and the guilt caused by his own sin. In that little academic town, Luther prepared to teach on the New Testament book of Romans, chapter 1 verse 17. As he was studying this scripture, the powerful Word of God broke through the darkness of his depression and enabled him to hear and to understand the peace and rest of Christ. Though he had been seeking God, God found him and spoke through the pages of the Scripture. His life was forever changed. No longer did he fear God and feel alienated from God; he began to trust in God's grace. It was truly in this moment of encountering Christ, illuminated by the Holy Spirit in the pages of the Scriptures, that his life was profoundly changed. He went on, albeit somewhat by accident, to change the face of the church and indeed the continent of Europe.

Later in his life, Luther would actually credit the Scriptures for bringing about the Reformation. He said that God had enabled him to do what he did through his praying and preaching. Luther said, "The Word [of God] did it all!" **Words are powerful.**

Let us return to where we started. The words you speak are powerful. Sometimes they can take on a life of their own. Our words are not living and active in the same way as the Scriptures; however, when we share the Word of God with others at just the right time, it can profoundly impact a life. That is why we are dedicating to God

those in our church who will be seeking to accomplish this in the lives of the children and youth of the church. They will be seeking to communicate the Word of God to our children, to introduce them to the Savior they have come to know and love. By the grace of God, this will make a huge difference.

When I was in college, I had a friend who was struggling with the typical challenges with which college students struggle. He was in a prayer group with other Christians and me. He confessed that he had had some recent failures. Our friend Peter asked about his devotional life and our friend confessed that he had been focused on praying, but that his Bible reading had begun to wane. Immediately Peter said, "You've got to add some of God's Word back into your life," and he quoted Psalm 119:11, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Those words, spoken at that point in our friend's life, were words of **life**. Carried along by the Holy Spirit, he began to engage again with the scriptures daily. The power of God's Word drew him closer in his relationship with Jesus, and he found a new power and strength to overcome the complexities of college living.

The point of this message is not to simply convince us to believe in the power of God's Word. There is so much evidence of that power in the world that I really do not need to do that. My hope today is that you will continue to find what many have found. Phillip Keller reflects on the power of the Word in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*.

In the Christian life it is of more than passing significance to observe that those who are often the most serene, most confident, and able to cope with life's complexities are those who rise early each day to feed on God's word. It is in the quiet, early hours of the morning that they are led beside the quiet, still waters where they imbibe the very life of Christ for the day. This is much more than a figure of speech. It is a practical reality.

May you come to see that the Word of God is living and active. It was breathed by the Spirit and will continue to speak and create and transform our lives today. With transformed lives, may you speak words of life into the lives of those around you. ■

