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Hebrews #12

The Sharp, Two-Edged Sword of the Spirit

Hebrews 4:12-13

Today, in our study of these two verses in Hebrews 4, you are going to hear something about Bridgeway Church and our philosophy of ministry that you may never have seriously considered before. You are also going to learn something about me, although I trust that those of you who've been here for a while already are aware of what I will say. You who are new to our fellowship likewise need to know what drives me and accounts for what I do on a Sunday morning and the way that I do it. Simply put, you will hear today what we believe about the Bible and how it governs all we do.

But before I jump into the deep end of the pool, let me set this beautiful passage about God's Word in its context so that you can see how it relates to what has gone before.

Last week we were confronted with a sharp and urgent warning. In Hebrews 4:11 our author urged us to "strive to enter" God's rest, "so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience." The "disobedience" he has in mind was the failure of the Israelites to hear and heed God's word. Again, he writes in 4:2, "For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened." The people of Israel in the exodus generation *simply refused to trust God*. They refused to believe him when he made certain promises. They hardened their hearts and mocked him and murmured when he promised that he would provide for them in the land.

Notice again it was "the good news" (v. 2) that they rejected. It was the "message" or "word" that they heard but disbelieved. And what we are now being told in chapter four is to be very careful lest we commit the same sin and fail to put our hope in God's word and promise.

Clearly, then, the word "for" with which v. 12 opens indicates that *Hebrews 4:12-13 is giving us reasons or grounds for an obedient, believing response to the call issued in v. 11*. In other words, if someone should ask the question, "*Why* should I strive to enter God's rest, and why

should I be careful not to fall into the same sort of disobedience' that they did," the answer is given in v. 12 – "**BECAUSE** the word of God is living and active . . ."

So let me summarize. The goal is to enter God's rest. The goal is to receive salvation and peace and joy and confidence of eternal life and forgiveness of sins. If that is to happen, we must believe God, trust God, hope in God, and look away from all our efforts to atone for our sins and rest in the efforts and accomplishments of Jesus. But **to believe and trust God we must first hear his Word**. We must hear the "good news" (4:2) and understand the promises he has made to anyone who will repent and believe. Faith is only possible when the word of God's good news is made known. Finally, we must be diligent lest we yield to the temptation to drift away and neglect what God has provided and proclaimed. This is what our author has repeatedly said to us in Hebrews 2:1; 3:1; 3:12; and 3:15.

Now we are prepared to look at what our author says about God's "word" and what it is and what it does.

What is the "Word" of God?

We first need to identify what the "word of God" is that he mentions here. The primary reference is to the spoken word, the message, the good news that he mentioned back in 4:2, the word of promise and provision that the exodus generation of Israel rejected and refused to believe. It was the "word" that the church in the first century heard from God concerning the urgency of paying heed to what they had been taught. And for us today it is the written "word" of God, the Scriptures, that contain God's revelation and promises to us.

The bottom line is that ***the "Word of God" is whatever form of communication or revelation we receive from God that calls for a response of faith and obedience.***

Five Features of God's Word

So what is it about this "word" that is so important? What does it do or accomplish? Why is it so crucial that we listen to it and respond to it? The answer is found in **five** characteristics of the word of God.

Before I say anything else about the characteristics of this Word, let's not skip over the critically important fact that is in, indeed, the Word of **God**. It is **God's** Word, not man's word, not human speculation. We would be in an utterly helpless and hopeless and spiritually pathetic condition if left to our own thoughts and agendas and wisdom. The word of "Sam" or any other teacher or preacher or pundit is largely useless unless what I speak is what God has already spoken. My words are of value to you and can make a lasting difference in your life only to the degree that they accurately represent and explain and apply **God's** word to you.

Let us never forget that what Scripture says, God says. It is the transcript of divine speech. Paul applauded the Thessalonians because, and I'm reading from 1 Thessalonians 2:13, "when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."

(1) The word of God is LIVING! But how can this be? If the primary expression of the "Word of God" today is the Bible, how can we say this book is living? It is inert matter. It is paper and ink bound together by imitation leather! It doesn't move under its own power. I move it. It doesn't think or feel or make choices. So how can we speak of this book, the Word of God, as *living*?

It is living because the God whose word it is, lives. God's word takes on God's own characteristics. The Bible is no dead letter. It's not like the newspaper that you read today and then discover tomorrow that it is outdated, riddled with errors, and of no further benefit.

It is also living because it is the *instrument* God uses to impart life to us. In other words, the Bible is the living Word of God primarily because of what it **does**. Peter put it this way: "you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, ***through the living and abiding word of God***. . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23-25). James echoes Peter's sentiment: "Of his own will he brought us forth ***by the word of truth***." Not by our own will but by his divine and sovereign will were we born again, and that by the word of truth.

Why do I so emphatically stress God's Word? Why do I preach the Bible the way I do? Why are you unlikely ever to hear me speak without reference to Scripture? Why do I not employ drama or other forms of modern entertainment in my efforts to communicate with you? Is it because I have a big head? Have I been bewitched by all my education? Is it due to

intellectual arrogance? Do I simply lack emotions and feelings? Or perhaps I just enjoy the sound of my voice? No!

I preach and teach the way I do and devote my life to the study of God's Word because of what the author of Hebrews and Peter and Paul and all the NT authors say about it. And what do they say that this "Word" actually does? The answer is found in the second characteristic mentioned here in v. 12.

(2) The word of God is ACTIVE and ENERGETIC! In other words, the word of God actually *does* things. It accomplishes things. It produces effects. It comes through on what it promises. Of course, it only does this when the Spirit is active and enables us to understand and respond to what it says it does.

You often hear me pray Psalm 119:18 before I preach: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law [or your Word]." Note that we are not by nature open to what God is saying to us. We need the gracious work of God's Spirit to enlighten our eyes and to illumine our minds and to quicken our hearts to rejoice in and to receive what God has revealed. If the Spirit doesn't anoint the Word and empower our minds to grasp its message we will find nothing "wondrous" or "beautiful" in it. Apart from the Spirit, the Word is just a bunch of words that will prove enigmatic, confusing, and disheartening to us.

So, what does the Word of God do when joined with the Spirit of God? Think of it this way.

Experts study *sociological dynamics and trends* in order to set the agenda for how we should do church and organize our ministries. With all due respect to sociology, in ten years studies will show that what used to work is now passé and ineffective. **And through it all the Word of God, through the work of the Spirit of God, will have remained true and unchanging and ever powerful, always active and energetic.**

Experts study **psychological factors** that supposedly govern human behavior and provide us with sure-fire formulas for better living and emotional and mental health. With all due respect to psychology, in ten years new studies and additional research will overturn and veto what was earlier believed to be true, perhaps even offering advice entirely opposite to what we were given years before. **And through it all the Word of God, through the power of the Spirit of God, will have remained true and unchanging and ever powerful, always active and energetic.**

Experts study **philosophy and political theory and economic trends and church growth models and community dynamics and principles that govern interpersonal relationships**. And with all due respect to the brilliance of such men and women and the short term help they bring us, in ten years the pendulum will have swung back and we will be told to ignore earlier discoveries and to embrace yet another theory of what makes life work and what enhances the testimony of the church and what will serve to improve our physical and spiritual welfare. **And through it all the Word of God, by the Spirit of God, will have remained true and unchanging and ever powerful, always active and energetic.**

Let it be the **anchor** for your soul. Let it be the **rock** on which you stand. Let it be the **compass** to guide you through trials and tragic times. Let it **govern** your choices and renew your heart and restore your joy and ground your hope. Build your life on its moral principles. Embrace its ethical and moral norms. Believe what it says about the nature of God. Believe what it says about the nature of mankind.

God has invested the biblical text with the power to change human lives and transform the experience of the church. If for no other reason we must think about, meditate upon, and study the Word.

To put it simply: the Word of God pulsates with power. It is active and energetic.

(3) The Word of God is SHARPER than any two-edged sword, PIERCING to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow.

When he talks here of soul, spirit, joints, and marrow he is not providing us with a psychological or anatomical analysis of the human personality or our bodily constitution. Rather it is a metaphorical portrayal in graphic terms of the precise, piercing power of God's Word. It probes and exposes the inmost recesses of our spiritual being, bringing to light subconscious and unspoken motives. In other words, he could just as easily have said it pierces to the dividing of heart and mind or of emotions and will and in doing so have made the same point.

So what does he mean when he says the word of God is *“sharper than any two-edged sword”*? Some believe the “two edges” are a reference to the OT and the NT. Others say it his way of

saying that the Word speaks of both temporal and eternal matters. Or perhaps the point is that the Word has a two-fold result: it either saves or condemns. Or maybe his point is that the Word never fails to cut; it has no blunt side.

Then again it may be another way of describing its effectiveness. Consider Isaiah 55:10-11,

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

This passage always reminds me of an incident in the life and ministry of Charles Spurgeon, one that I’ve shared before but deserves to be heard again and again.

An aged woman on her death-bed in London told of how she was converted. She displayed a crumpled piece of a newspaper that had been torn from a page. On it was an extract from one of Spurgeon’s sermons. When asked where she got it, she said it had been used to wrap a gift sent to her by a relative in Australia! As best we can reconstruct what happened, Spurgeon had preached in London, after which the sermon was transcribed, printed, and put on a ship for the U.S. Upon arrival in New York, it was reprinted in a newspaper that eventually shipped across country to San Francisco. From there it was taken by ship to Australia where it was again reprinted in an Australian newspaper. The paper had been thoughtlessly cast aside only to be taken up and used to wrap a gift that made its way by ship back to London. There the elderly woman, without suspecting a thing, glanced at the torn page of newspaper and saw written upon it the Word of God that Spurgeon had so long ago proclaimed. And it was that Word, through the Holy Spirit, that performed its work in regenerating her heart and granting her eternal life!

(4) The word of God DISCERNS the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

When I read this I think immediately of what David said in Psalm 139.

“O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (Ps. 139:1-4).

We may hide from our neighbors and friends and even from our spouse, but not from God. God cannot be fooled by sham or hypocrisy. He knows what you’re thinking now and what you’ll think and feel ten years from today.

The word translated “discerning” in v. 12 is also rendered to “judge” in other translations. But he doesn’t mean the word “condemns” us. He means the Word *evaluates* our thoughts and intentions and *weighs* them and *assesses* and *analyzes* them. The Word of God penetrates deeply into the most secret recesses of our hearts and brings an awareness of what is there: is it good or bad, sincere or hypocritical, honorable or corrupt?

This is how God works through his Word to protect us against sin and temptation. You will recall that in Hebrews 3:12 he spoke of the “deceitfulness” of sin. Sin is deceptive when it burrows deeply into our souls and lies to us that we will be better off by sleeping around and ignoring God’s appeals and by amassing more wealth by illicit and illegal means and by pursuing that divorce even though we have no biblical grounds and by spreading slander about someone who stands in our way.

Our only hope is that we might find something that is powerful enough and sharp enough that it can penetrate through the fog of deception and shed light on my thoughts and intentions and reveal to me the lies that I’m so easily prone to believe. And the one thing that can do that is God’s Word!

(5) The word of God UNCOVERS and EXPOSES the SECRETS of our souls.

Have you ever turned over a two-by-four or large piece of plywood that has been lying on the ground for a long time? When you do it reveals an enormous city of bugs and spiders and ants, all dwelling in the dark, undisclosed damp place unseen by anyone. And they don’t appreciate being uncovered, all running off for cover once the light of day exposes their presence.

Many professing Christians live lives where secrets are covered up by darkness. People live in fear that someone someday will lift up the plywood and all will be seen. That's what the Word of God does! It pulls back the curtain on our souls. It lifts the veil on our thoughts and intentions. It shines a light into the darkness of our hearts and forces us to deal honestly with what is hidden deeply within.

Medieval map-makers would typically write on the edges of their maps where land and sea were unexplored: "Here be dragons and wild beasts." Similarly, there are unexplored and mysterious dimensions to the human soul that can only be seen and known and healed by the penetrating power of God's Word. When the Spirit of God takes in hand the truth of God, our deepest and darkest secrets are surfaced and brought into the light of day; our conscience is pricked; our hearts are inflamed; our hidden sins are laid bare before the God to whom we must all give an account.

Three Personal Illustrations of the Power of God's Word

I'm sure each of you has experienced a similar effect of the Word of God in your life, but allow me to briefly share three incidents of my own.

The **first** came at a time when I was struggling to make sense of God's sovereignty in salvation. I wasn't fully aware at the time of how my theology was being shaped and driven by my pride. I wasn't fully aware or conscious of the fact that *I didn't want to submit* to God's authority and power over my life and my eternal destiny. And then Romans 9:20-21 virtually leapt off the page and punctured my pride. All the air in my arrogance and self-determination was let out and I was left humbled in the presence of God. Here is what Paul said:

"But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" (Rom. 9:20-21).

I can remember where I was when this passage sliced me open like a sharp two-edged sword. It was the summer of 1972 and I was sitting on a bench outside one of the classroom buildings at OU. I had set aside the day to pray and fast about this issue of God's sovereignty in salvation and no sooner had I read this text than my heart was laid bare and I was left utterly defenseless. I can still recall my thought process at the time:

“Oh, my, Lord. *You* are the potter. Not me. I’m only the clay. *You* created me. *You* called me into existence out of nothing. I only live because your mercy sustains me. I deserve eternal damnation and you in grace have chosen to give me eternal life. Forgive me for questioning your ways. Forgive me for judging you and arrogantly thinking that I exist to hold you to account for what you do. Forgive me for presumptuously thinking that I know how to do things better than you do, more justly than you. I am the clay. Mold me and shape me however you see fit.”

A **second** occasion when God’s Word pierced me with painful but redemptive power happened not too long ago. It is what resulted in my preaching the sermon that I titled, “Why We Stink at Evangelism.” I was again reading in Romans 9, this time in vv. 1-3, and these words suddenly stripped away all the layers of self-protection and rationalization that insulated my heart from the condition and peril of lost souls:

“I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:1-3).

There are lost souls and they going to hell! Why do I not feel the same anguish as Paul did? Why do I not share the gospel with them with urgency and clarity and confidence? I again have to thank God for his sharp, painful mercy in opening my eyes to something I had avoided for far too long.

A **third** and final example I want to give you happened while we were still living in Ardmore. I don’t remember the year, but it was probably sometime in the late 1980’s. Many years earlier I had preached through 1 Peter for the first time and had been powerfully convicted by the exhortation concerning how husbands are to treat their wives. In 1 Peter 3:7 we read this:

“Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered” (1 Pt. 3:7).

Years had passed since I preached that text. Something had taken place between Ann and me. I don’t recall what, but I do remember justifying my actions or words, making light of it as if it really didn’t matter that much. I was actually in the shower feeling pretty smug and satisfied with myself when suddenly, as if out of the blue, I heard this voice in my head: “***But does it honor***

her?” Boom! I seriously doubt if that would have had the impact on me that it did if I hadn’t already been quite familiar with the use of the word “honor” in 1 Peter 3:7.

Folks, there’s simply no other way to put it. On each of those occasions, the sharp, two-edged sword of God’s Word pierced me, convicted me, and exposed the thoughts and intentions of my heart. I was no longer able to hide from God’s sight, as we read in Hebrews 4:13. I was on each of those occasions suddenly “naked and exposed to the eyes” of the God “to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13b).

I experienced precisely what that word translated “exposed” expresses. It is rendered “laid bare” in another translation and is a graphic portrayal of what God’s Word does. The word was often used in the ancient world to describe a *wrestler* who would grab hold of his opponent’s head and pull back, exposing the neck for the final, fatal blow.

But here’s the wonderful news about all this. God’s intent in “exposing” my heart in these ways wasn’t so that he might make a mockery of me or shame me or ultimately harm me in any way. What God’s Word did in me was far more than expose my pride and self-protection and arrogance. Yes, it was convicting. Yes, it was painful. But it was *redemptive and healing and empowering* as God’s Word, through the Holy Spirit, brought me to life at least in regard to those three issues.

That is what God’s Word does! That is why I refuse to feed you with a lot of self-help, five-ways-to-make-your-life-livable nonsense that might make you feel better for today but that you will likely forget in a week or two.

Here at Bridgeway we believe this about the Word of God. We don’t study it and preach it and memorize it because we want a big head and the inflated ego that comes with it. We are devoted to God’s Word because of what it is, *God’s* Word, and because of what it does: it pierces, and divides, and discerns, and exposes. But we especially love it because, since it is *God’s* Word, it shows us God! It mediates meetings with God. We encounter him in and through his Word. We see him in it. And we savor all that it says.