

God's Word at Work

1Thessalonians 2:13-16

Have you ever taken some time to think about how you came to know the LORD?

I do that every now and again, especially when someone asks me about it.

Early on in my Christian life the focus of my thinking in answering that question focused strongly on the actual moment where I confessed my sins to God and trusted in the work of Christ on the cross to deal with all of my rebellion and failure.

It was a powerful moment where I felt the compulsion of the Holy Spirit and it changed my life.

Without taking away from any of the significance of that one moment, I have come to see over the years many more moments that were every bit as important as that one.

Moments where God's was at work in clear and powerful ways that I didn't really appreciate at the time.

One of those moments happened at a youth event.

It was the first youth event I had ever been to at the church I would later attend.

I went because the activity sounded fun to me, not because I had any interest in joining the group or attending the church.

I was right, the event was fun, but I didn't expect what happened later.

The youth pastor did what he always did at youth events, he opened his bible read a passage and then explained what it meant.

Something happened in me in that moment. I said to myself, "I want to hear more of that."

It was a powerful moment that changed the entire course of my life.

[Have you ever had a moment like that? Things like that are really powerful. It is amazing to see it in our own lives and it is equally amazing to see those things happen in the lives of others. Reading the work of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament shows us that he had the joy of seeing things like that happen in the lives of many people. Our text this morning

1Thessalonians 2:13-16 is an example of that. Similar to my experience he reflects on how the Thessalonian believers received the preaching of God's Word. There are many important aspects to the Christian faith and without a doubt one of the matters of highest importance is how we see and understand the Scriptures. Because that is true, I hope all of us will resolve to do our best to give our attention to the lessons given to us in these verses. In verse 13 the attention is on those who believed the preaching of the gospel and their response shows us that...]

Point #1 – God's word works in believers. (Verse 13)

The Bible is more than ink and paper, it is the living and enduring revelation of the Creator of all things which He uses to grow and mature those who are alive in Christ.

At the beginning of verse 13 the apostle Paul tells the believers something about his prayer life.

He says, “We also thank God constantly for this...”

This is something we see pop up in Paul’s letter to churches regularly.

It is a really important phrase. It shows us that these people are on his heart.

They are precious to him.

It also shows us that he understands the fruit of his gospel work depends on the LORD.

Few if any have worked harder than Paul, but he knows everything good comes as a gift from God.

He gives thanks to God for a number of things in different passages all of which are vital to living the Christian life and that is what we see here.

(Verse 13).

This is one of the bedrock issues of being a Christian.

As Christians we believe this book is God’s word and as such is objectively true and authoritative over every area of life.

This verse tells us something of how God gave His word to His people.

Do you see it there in the text? It says, ‘...you received the word of God which you heard from us...’

If I asked you the question this morning, “Who wrote the Bible?” how would you answer that question.

One way we could answer that question is we could start listing the authors.

Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, Jude, etc...

Most scholars will say that the bible was written by over 40 authors over the course of about 1500 years.

No credible Christian scholar would ever deny that. Paul is teaching that very fact here.

Paul was doing the preaching and teaching to these people, but look again at how they received it!

He says, “...you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.”

Yes this book is written by men, but they are writing under the influence of the Holy Spirit so that what is written is God’s Word being spoken through His chosen servants.

That reality means we can either recognize it as God's Word or fail to accept it, but that decision has no impact on what the Bible actually is.

[I wonder if there are some kids in service today who might help me with an illustration. If so, come on up and pull something out of this box and hold it up for everyone to see. Who know what this is? Did your knowing what it is make it what it is? No you simply recognized it for what it is.]

We have to understand that when it comes to the bible.

The Bible did not become God's word when a bunch of church people got together in the 4th century and said all these books are God's word.

The only thing the church did was recognize it as God's word.

There are lots of arguments to give people as to why we recognize these books as divinely inspired but none of those things make it God's word.

It is God's word because He spoke through His servants under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Besides inspiring specifically chosen servants to speak and write God's word, the Holy Spirit also makes God's word living and active so that it works in the hearts of believers.

Have you ever felt the Word of God do surgery on your heart?

Have you ever felt conviction when reading or hearing God's word? I have heard the bible compared to a mirror on occasion, it shows us what we are like and you know what brothers and sisters often times the reflection is far from attractive.

Of course the Scriptures do more than show us the ugliness of our sin, they also call us to what is right and good.

God's ways work brothers and sisters, have you ever felt the blessing of becoming a little bit more like Jesus?

Have you ever felt awe over the beauty and majesty of the LORD?

Have you ever been reading your bible and been overwhelmed by Who God is?

Have you ever felt sustained by your daily bible reading? The bible in more than one place compares itself to food. Just like our stomachs are satisfied by eating a meal so too our souls are satisfied and sustained by consuming God's word in our hearts and minds.

[Lifeless words are powerless to do those things. God's word is alive. He has spoken through His servants across centuries and cultures giving us One story about how He has accomplished what seems impossible in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. He has miraculously preserved

it for us, and by His grace He enables us to see it for what it is. Whether you are a small child or on the home stretch of life if you can see that this book is God's Word it will change your life and give you hope into eternity. Sadly, there are those who refuse to see that the Bible is God's word or they only accept part of it as God's word or they distort what it says for selfish reasons. What happens when God's word working in believers comes up against things like that? Often times there is trouble because...]

Point #2 – The work of God's word can offend unbelievers. (Verse 14)

When followers of Jesus begin to pattern their lives after the commands of the LORD those that are still dead in their sins can often times despise what they see.

One of the questions I get regularly has to do with knowing whether or not someone is truly a Christian.

I always say, "We can't look into someone else's heart, only God can do that. What we can do is examine what we see and either find reasons to be confident in someone's salvation or reasons to be concerned for their soul."

Someone said to me once, "We are fruit inspectors not judges." I like that.

When Paul and his coworkers were spending time in prayer thanking God for the Thessalonians, they were able to look at the fruit that was growing among these believers and have some confidence that the word of God was truly at work in them.

He tells us about it in **verse 14**.

He calls these believers, 'imitators of the churches of God'.

He is saying that one of the ways that he can clearly see the word of God and work in these people is that he sees the same things in them that were seen in the lives of the first followers of Jesus.

What does he see? He sees suffering.

The word that is used there to describe their suffering is the exact same word that is used to describe Jesus' suffering.

Why did Jesus suffer? He suffered because He resolved with the fullness of His humanity to obey God the Father.

The willingness to suffer pain and loss for the sake of God's word clearly shows you believe it is God's word.

No one suffers for something they do not value.

In addition to treasuring the word of God the pain inflicted by their 'own countrymen' shows that the fruit of God's word could be seen in their lives.

The fact that it is their 'own countrymen' I believe is significant to understanding the point.

Here are people that you were like and you were called out from them to belong to Jesus.

Why were ‘the Jews’, likely a reference to the religious leaders like the Pharisees and Sadducees, so opposed to the preaching of the gospel?

For one thing preaching that Jesus was raised from the dead made it pretty clear they had committed the gravest of sins by having Him crucified by the Romans.

More than that it meant that the vast majority of what they taught and believed about God and being in a right relationship with Him was wrong.

It meant the system they had established in which they enjoyed power and authority was upside down and needed to come to an end.

They didn’t like any of that so they persecuted the church.

Similar things happened in Thessalonica.

Just imagine a Thessalonican Christian for a moment. Let’s call him Demetrius.

Somebody sees him and asks him, “Hey Demetrius I haven’t seen you at Zeus’ temple lately where have you been?”

He says, “I’ve worshipping Jesus because He is truly God and Zeus is just an idol.”

“What about the crazy town parties, why don’t you come?”

“Because what happens there is against God’s Word and because I love Him I want to please Him with my life.”

Can you see what happens? As unbelievers they were living just like all the unbelievers around them, but when they believed God’s word they were called out of that group to a different kind of life.

The inescapable message is that the former way of life is wrong and needs to be abandoned and often times those still living the old life are not happy with that.

[In 2Corinthians 2 the bible uses the sense of smell to illustrate this. All of us have things we like the smell of and things we find offensive to the nose. I love the smell of cutting wood in a wood shop. I hated the smell when I worked in a sewage treatment plant. Most often what do we do with things that offend our sense of smell? We get rid of it or get away from it.]

2Corinthians 2 says that the aroma of Christ is like the smell of death to the unbeliever.

What do they want to do with that smell? Get rid of it.

You probably know a little bit of what this feels like.

What happens when your friends are doing something wrong and you know it is wrong and hesitate to join in?

They will try and pressure you to join in. What happens when you don't? They might call you names or kick you out of the group or even threaten you in some way.

That is tough, I wish it didn't happen but sadly that is what can happen when people are confronted with God's word from the lives of His people.

If that happens be encouraged you are in good company.

That is what it has been like since the beginning.

[If people don't like us because we are jerks there is nothing to be thankful for in that. If people don't like us because we believe the Bible is God's word and God is making us more like Jesus when we hear it, that is something to be very thankful for. Being thankful, even joyful for the goodness of God's word being worked out in our lives is different from being happy that people don't like the Bible. Two things are true at the same time. One we ought to be happy that being called out to belong to God is actually an observable thing in our lives. Two, we ought to be sad when people are offended by God's word and lash out against it. It ought to make us sad because of what we see here in verses fifteen and sixteen. We see that...]

Point #3 – Opposing God's word hurts people. (Verses 15-16)

Working to prevent people from hearing what the scriptures teach is an attempt to keep them from life and true joy and leave them in the brokenness and pain of rebellion against the LORD.

That is as clear as can be when we look to how the Jews treated Jesus and His servants.

It is somewhat staggering to read the Old Testament and see how many times the LORD graciously sends a messenger to His people to warn them about their sins and how many times the people get angry with the messenger and seek to harm him.

That trend continues when Jesus begins to teach God's word to people.

The number of amazing things that Jesus says and does for everyone to see is amazing.

He left no doubt whatsoever that He was the Son of God, no doubt that He is the saviour of the world, and instead of bowing before Him they killed Him.

It is very important to say that He allowed that to happen, because His unjust trial and conviction was the perfect picture of what was really happening.

What was really happening was the innocent taking the place of the guilty.

Jesus did more than die at the hands of sinners, He died in the place of sinners.

Jesus did more than endure the punishment of the Roman whips and nails, He endured the fullness of God's wrath to pay our debt.

He died so that those who killed Him could be forgiven, but even after He was raised from the dead many of them remained hardened in their hearts.

Instead of repenting at the news of the resurrection, they doubled down and sought to drive out the Christians from Jerusalem, Israel, and even the world.

Look with me at what that continued hardness of heart does (**Verses 15-16**).

Two big things stand out in those words.

God is displeased with those who oppose His word, let's come back to that in a moment.

Secondly, opposing God's word means opposing mankind.

God's ways are good and they work. Every command He gives to humanity is for our good.

When people live in ignorance or rebellion to what the LORD says people get hurt.

We need more than the moral commands given in the Bible as well.

If we only have God's laws all we can receive is condemnation because everyone is a law breaker.

The message that these servants of Jesus are focused on is the gospel of salvation in Christ.

Hindering people from hearing that message is trying to keep them from the gift of eternal life.

It means participating in people going to their eternal destruction.

What can be more hurtful and destructive than that?

[The people of Israel standing on the banks of the Jordan River came to my mind as I thought about this. Moses had sent twelve spies into the land and they all came back with a glowing report about the land, but ten of them said, "We can't do it because the enemies of God are too big and strong!" Two of them said, "Trust the LORD and we will win." Remember who they listened to? They listened to the ten. Remember what happened as a result? Everyone twenty years old and up died in the desert. Ten opposed the word of God, convinced the people to doubt the word of God, and millions of people suffered harm as a result.]

When rulers and authorities suppress God's word it hurts people.

When teachers train students to despise the Bible people get hurt.

When fathers and mothers live as hypocrites and train their children to believe the Bible is a sham, people get hurt.

That is as serious of an offense as I can imagine.

Is it any wonder it says here such people 'displease God'?

Verse 16 here is really sobering when it says, those opposing God's Word '*fill up the measure of their sins*'.

The fact that there is a measure means that God sets limits on what those opposed to His Word can do.

No one who seeks to suppress the good news of the gospel will be successful in a final sense.

What they can do, however, is fill up to the maximum their offenses.

Look at where that leads! It leads to 'wrath (clearly God's wrath) coming upon them.'

That can happen in the here and now and it will certainly happen at the end of all things when everyone will come before the throne of God and receive judgment.

I shudder to think about the fate of the politician who has trampled upon the Bible and mocked God.

I shudder to think of the teacher who has worked to destroy the faith of his students.

I shudder to think of the father who teaches who either by example or direct opposition trains his children to ignore or despise God's Word.

Perhaps most serious of all is the pastor or church leader who encourages people to disregard what the LORD says.

It is no small thing brother and sisters to "fall into the hands of the living God."

Why choose that when the gift of life has been so graciously set before us.

This book is the most incredible book in existence.

It is "*living and active, sharper than a two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit.*"

God's word works in believers.

When that work is seen it can offend unbelievers and yes that can be costly and it will hurt people, but we need to remember that it will cost the unbeliever far more than anything we might have to endure.

The LORD in His justice will honour His Word throughout all eternity, the question is "will we?"