

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The text we’re studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16. From this text, we are going to learn how to experience the word of God at work in us. We are going to identify our part in allowing the word of God to transform us from the inside out. We are going to see how to unleash the power of the word of God to change us for the better.

This is important because, as believers, we have a moment-by-moment choice to make with respect to the word of God.

We can put it to work.

Or we can put it on hold.

To put it on hold we don’t have to do anything. That is our default. That is the path least resistance.

Today we are going to learn how to override the default and put the word to work.

The key verse in our text is the first one, □ 1 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that 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.

The focus of this verse is on □ “the word of God.” Paul describes the word of God as something □ “which is at work in you believers.” The rest of the verse is packed with information about the process of putting the word of God to work.

Let’s take a few moments to catalog some observations from the text. Good interpretation begins with careful observation. We’re not yet trying to interpret, we’re just observing.

First, □ Paul says, “you received the word,” so we’ll list that.

Second, □ Paul describes the word as something, “which you heard from us.” So, we can put, “You heard the word from us” on the list.

The □ third observation is not expressed but implied by the second, namely, “We conveyed the word to you.” The Thessalonians could not have heard the word unless Paul and his partners first conveyed it.

Fourth, □ Paul says, “you accepted it.” So, we can put, “You accepted the word” on the list.

Fifth, □ Paul says, you accepted it “not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.” So, we can add to the list, “The word is from God.”

Sixth and finally, □ Paul describes the word of God as that “which is at work in you believers.” So, we can round out the list with “The word is at work in you.”

So, we’ve got our □ list of six observations. You will notice that the list is not in chronological order. It does not reflect the order in which things happen. For example, first on the list is “You received the word.” But to

receive the word, it first has to be heard. And to be heard, it first has to be conveyed.

So, let's □ rearrange our observations in chronological order as follows:

1. The word is from God.
2. We conveyed the word to you.
3. You heard the word from us.
4. You received the word.
5. You accepted the word.
6. The word is at work in you.

I interpret this rearrangement to represent a basic, six-step process by which the word of God comes to work in believers.

God's part is at the beginning and end of the process. Our part, as believers, is in the middle.

Let's first briefly consider God's part.

In the □ first step, the word comes from God. This word is what God wants us to know. It is his message to us. We use words to convey to other people what we want them to know. That's precisely what God does, too.

Nevertheless, God has chosen to convey his word to us through selected men of God he inspired to speak for him in history. This is the □ second step in the process. God inspired people like the apostle Paul to speak and write the very word of God. This word of God is recorded for us in various writings collectively called Scripture or the Bible, which includes 1 Thessalonians. The Bible is what God wants us to know. It is the word of God.

In □ 2 Timothy 3:16, the apostle Paul explains,

ESV 2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God . . .

In □ 2 Peter 1:21, the apostle Peter corroborates,

ESV 2 Peter 1:21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

So, God's initial part in conveying his word to us, represented by steps 1 and 2, is already done. In the Bible, we have what God wants us to know.

But God's part doesn't stop there. God sees to it that his word works within believers. This is the □ sixth step. The nature of this work is described beautifully in □ Hebrew 4:12.

ESV Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The word of God is like a CT scan or an MRI or a PET scan. But one difference is that God uses his word to reveal to us the workings of the soul—our inner thoughts, our true intentions, our worldview, our spiritual condition.

Another difference is that God's word doesn't just reveal the soul; it revolutionizes it. God's power, working through his word, transforms us into the likeness of Christ.

We see evidence of this power in the lives of the believers in the church at Thessalonica. For example, back in □ 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul says to the Thessalonians,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:9 . . . you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

Now that's a dramatic change! They went from serving idols to serving God. The central purpose of their lives changed. Their motivation changed.

They no longer idolized their net worth; they served God.

They no longer idolized their own pleasure; they served God.

They no longer idolized their own power and prestige; they served God.

And they didn't change into some weird, extremist group to which we can't relate. In □ 1 Thessalonians 1:7, Paul writes,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 1:7 . . . you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

They became an example to all the followers of Christ in their country, not just to a few weirdos.

The original word translated, "example" means a pattern or template to be followed. So, these Thessalonians showed all other believers in their country how to be transformed by the word of God. And their model is timeless. They show us how to change today.

In addition, their transformation allowed them to suffer great hardship and remain faithful to the Lord. You may recall that some antagonistic

unbelievers had previously run Paul and his ministry partners out of Thessalonica, and the new believers who remained in the fledgling church faced much the same persecution. Such persecution was not new or unique. The churches in Judea had faced it, too. So, in □ verses 14 through 16 of our text, Paul encourages the Thessalonian believers and assures them that God’s righteous judgment will prevail. He says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 2:14 For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, □ 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind □ 16 by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!

So, returning to our process, □ we have covered God’s part, represented in steps 1, 2, and 6. God gets his word to us. Then, when God’s word gets into us, it works.

Our part in the process, which we have yet to cover, is represented by steps three, four, and five. Let’s consider them in order.

In □ step 3, the Thessalonians heard the word of God. The original Greek word translated “heard” is ἀκοή. It describes what most of you are hopefully doing right now, unless of course you are asleep or daydreaming about the Mexican food we’re having right after the service. In our text, it simply describes the faculty of hearing the word of God spoken. By extension, this would also include reading the word of God written.

This is certainly a necessary start to putting the word of God to work. First, you have to hear it or read it.

God has taken the initiative to communicate what he wants us to know in his word. If I do not regularly hear or read the word of God, I effectively put God's word on hold. God's word cannot be at work in my life if I am not hearing it or reading it.

While hearing or reading God's word is necessary, it is insufficient. If I dutifully read through the Bible, it won't make a difference if I stop there. I need to move on to the next steps.

In □ step 4, the Thessalonians "received" the word. The original Greek word translated "received" is παραλαμβάνω. It is a compound word made up of two parts. παρα means alongside. λαμβάνω means to take or receive. So, παραλαμβάνω literally means to receive alongside someone else. The image is one of knowledge being passed from one person to another for the purpose of learning. In fact, the word is used to describe the process of learning doctrines and traditions that are passed on from one generation to the next. Our educational system is based on this idea of teachers passing along knowledge to students, either orally, or in writing for them to learn.

So, to receive the word in our text goes beyond just hearing or reading. It is to learn it, to understand it, to grasp what it means.

While hearing and then receiving God's word is certainly necessary, it is also insufficient. I can be a Bible scholar and spend all of my time interpreting what Scripture says, but if I stop there, it won't make a bit of difference in my life. I need to move on to the next step.

In □ step 5, the Thessalonians "accepted" the word. The original Greek word translated "accepted" is δέχομαι. If you look up this word in the

Greek dictionary, one of the definitions is “to receive something offered or transmitted by another.”¹ And if you’re still paying attention, you’re probably wondering, “Wait a minute. That sounds exactly like the receiving in step 4. So, what’s the difference between receiving and accepting?”

The Greek words for receiving (παραλαμβάνω) and accepting (δέχομαι) are indeed generally synonymous. But the latter, to accept, adds the idea of appropriation or application.² To accept carries the added idea of doing something in response to what is heard and received.

In keeping with this applicational nuance, the Greek word δέχομαι, to accept, was used of welcoming someone into your home and letting them be a part of your life. This provides a helpful word picture. I can receive the word of God at the front door. But to really accept it means, I invite it in to live with me. I apply it to my life.

It is interesting that the three steps in our text—hear, receive, and accept—generally correspond with the three basic steps you learn in a hermeneutics class in seminary. Hermeneutics is the study of methodological principles of Bible interpretation. The three sequential steps in hermeneutics are: □ observe, interpret, and apply.

All three steps need to be taken in order for life change to occur.

This is not an unusual idea. We encounter it all the time in life. You can tell Junior to clean up his room. He may hear or observe your words. He may receive or interpret your meaning accurately. But whether or not Junior chooses to accept or apply your words such that he actually cleans up his room is an entirely different matter.

¹ BDAG, definition 1.

² Vine’s.

When it comes to the word of God, accepting it or applying it is absolutely critical.

The late Bible scholar, Howard Hendricks explains the importance of application in graphic terms. He says,

“Observation plus interpretation without application equals abortion. In other words, every time you observe and interpret but fail to apply, you perform an abortion on the Scriptures in terms of their purpose. The Bible was not written to satisfy your curiosity; it was written to transform your life. The ultimate goal of Bible study, then, is not to do something to the Bible, but to allow the Bible to do something to you, so truth becomes tangent to life.”³

Here's the big idea I draw from the text: Application puts God's word to work. Hearing or observing the word of God is necessary. Receiving or interpreting the word is also necessary. But application makes all the difference. Application puts God's word to work.

This big idea is at the heart of James 1:22, where it says,

ESV James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

We must not deceive ourselves into thinking that hearing and receiving God's word is enough to put it to work. We must also accept it. We must apply it. Application puts God's word to work.

Well, exactly how do you apply God's word to your life?

³ Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, 283-284.

Let me give you a recent example of how the process works for me.

First let me share how I try to put myself in a position to hear and receive the word of God with a view to application.

I have a Monday-through-Friday routine. I am not presenting it as the only or best way to go. It's just what works for me.

In one way or another, if you want to put God's word to work, you are going to have to find a way to regularly hear and receive the word, because you can't apply what you've never heard or don't understand.

I get up every morning somewhere between 4:00AM and 4:30AM. I don't use an alarm. That's just when I wake up. This is not impressive in the least. I am simply a morning person. I try to go to bed at 9:00PM, and I take naps, so I get sleep.

After I get up, I feed Opie our dog and Otis our cat. Then I get a cup of coffee and sit in front of the computer in our study. It's nothing fancy, but ☐ this is my sacred space where I normally have my quiet time with God.

I pray, asking God to speak to me through his word. Then I dive in. I use several resources—all of them through a Kindle app that is on my computer and my phone and my Kindle reader. That way I have all the resources available, even when I'm not in my sacred space.

Currently, I am using four resources. Some of these change over time as I finish them.

First, I am using ☐ *The Wayfinding Bible* to read through the Bible chronologically. Each day, I read one of the daily readings and there is a

little commentary that goes with it. I like reading through the Bible chronologically because it provides historical context.

Second, I am also using a digital copy of ☐ the Bible to read through one psalm each day. I like the psalms because they poetically and worshipfully speak of God and the human condition in an emotive way. As a person who tends to stuff my emotions, this is good for me.

Third, I am also using ☐ *Jesus Christ, The Greatest Life* which is a blending of all four gospels into one book. I like this because it allows me to read through the gospels chronologically, providing historical context and constant exposure to Jesus, the guy I want to be like. This resource is not divided up into daily readings. So, each day, I just read as much as I want.

Fourth, I am using a devotional book titled ☐ *A Year of Slowing Down* by Alan Fadling. Each day, I read a short biblical text along with Fadling's commentary on it. This is helpful because I have a hard time slowing down.

As I read the word of God through each of these resources, I am prayerfully looking for something that stands out to me, something that sparks my interest, something that seems especially relevant to me right now, because after all, I have asked the Lord to speak to me through his word.

Then I write down the specific text that stands out to me. Along with the text, I jot down a praise or a principle I draw from the text. A principle is sort of like the big idea. It is a timeless truth about God or people reflected in the text.

By the way, for writing down things, I like to use a ☐ Moleskine Classic Planner, weekly, hard cover, 18 months, black, extra-large. I like the

layout, and the paper is great for my Lamy Safari fountain pen, charcoal, extra-fine nib.

Let me show you what I wrote down for ☐ Friday, January 12. Across ☐ the top, I wrote down everything I read that day. From *The Wayfinding Bible*, I read Deuteronomy 15:1-18; from the regular Bible, I read Psalm 13; from the gospels in *Jesus Christ, The Greatest Life*, I read pages 442 through 445; and from *A Year of Slowing Down*, I read entry 223. Friday also happens to be the day I pray for our missionary partners, so I wrote down, “missions.”

From these readings, I wrote down ☐ John 13:34, where Jesus says, “A new command I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”

The principle I drew from this text is: ☐ Love like Christ.

My quiet time took about 45 minutes, which is typical for me.

At this point, I had read and received the word of God, but I had not yet applied it. I didn’t know how exactly. To love like Christ is so general. So, I prayed, “Lord, show me specifically how I am to apply this to my life today and in the days ahead.” And I waited, while trying to keep this text and principle on my mental desktop.

The following Tuesday, I got an email from a friend and former colleague of my wife Cathy. She was emailing on behalf of her brother-in-law who had been experiencing serious neurological problems. A couple of months earlier, I had connected him with a neurosurgeon I know at Barrow Neurological Institute. I have the connection and am somewhat familiar with Barrow because my daughter had nine neurosurgeries there growing up. Anyway, the neurosurgeon I know

discerned that this was likely not a surgical issue and referred the brother-in-law to a neurologist.

But somehow, the brother-in-law, whose symptoms were getting worse, had gotten stuck in the medical bureaucracy somewhere between the neurosurgeon and the neurologist, and they were wondering if I could help get him unstuck.

To be honest, my heart sank when I got the email. For the prior six months, I had been immersed in my parents' medical issues, and at the time of the email, my dad was in the hospital and had taken a turn for the worse, and I was already feeling overwhelmed by the work I was facing that week. I was thinking to myself, "I can barely navigate the medical challenges in my own family. How am I going to be able to jump in the middle of somebody else's medical issues?"

I confess, I even had some embarrassingly unkind thoughts. I said to myself, "These people are smart, resourceful people with doctorates. Can't they figure this out?"

That is when I got the nudge. The principle that I had written down from God's word came to mind: Love like Christ. I had prayed just a few days earlier, "Lord, show me specifically how I am to apply this to my life today and in the days ahead." Now, he was showing me.

I am not suggesting that we must say yes to every opportunity that arises. Sometimes we should say no. But in this case, when I got the nudge, I knew I should help.

But I balked.

I find that applying God's word sometimes involves a crisis of faith. I didn't feel like I had the bandwidth to help. I didn't even know what I

could do to help because I had already tapped the only connection I had. I spent a few moments trying to rationalize my way out of it—in effect, arguing with God.

I finally decided to give up and obey, asking God to help me. I did a little investigating, typed up a suggested course of action, and fired it off. It took an hour or two I didn't think I had.

Later that same day, the brother-in-law was unstuck, and his wife emailed me saying, “Thank you so much for the great advice. . . . We are in the queue for an appointment. This is a huge relief. We deeply appreciate your help.”

And lo and behold, that week I got everything done that really needed to be done.

This is an example of God's word at work.

And it does not always involve something to put on a to-do list. It often involves something to know. Or something to be. Or something to feel.

For example, two days later, on the afternoon of Thursday, January 18, the palliative care doctor told me there was nothing else they could do for Dad. And I signed papers that would transfer him to in-patient hospice care. As I walked out of the hospital, I was crying.

And then I got another nudge. I remembered what I had written down just that morning, not knowing what was going to happen that day. Here's the □ entry in my planner. The verse is John 16:33, where Jesus says, “. . . In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world.” The principle I had written down was □ “Take heart, the Lord has overcome and will redeem my troubles.”

In that moment, I again experienced God's word at work in me, comforting, consoling, reassuring.

Two weeks later, guess who shows up at my father's memorial service? It's the friend whose brother-in-law needed my help. She doesn't go to church. I am not sure what she believes. But I do know that I was so glad that I had previously allowed God's word to work in me to help her brother-in-law. Perhaps his work will bring life to her and her family.

If so, it won't be because I am an intrinsically good person. I'm not. I simply allowed the word of God to do its redeeming work in the dark neighborhoods of my soul.

You may be wondering, "Bob, how often do you have quiet times?"

My goal is to have a quiet time □ five days a week, Monday through Friday. Weekends are free; sometimes I have one, sometimes I don't. I looked back over my journal entries for the past 52 weeks. In 48 weeks or 92% of the time, I reached my goal of at least five quiet times per week. In the 4 weeks where I fell short, I had 4 quiet times each week.

I say this not to brag, but to show that this is doable. I am not so different than you. I don't have a lot of free time on my hands.

And besides, my consistency is not born of virtue; it is born of desperation and delight.

I am a desperate man because without the word of God at work in me, I don't like who I am, and I cannot do the job I love. Jesus says, "apart from me you can do nothing." And doing what amounts to nothing feels lifeless and empty.

I am also a delighted man because the word of God at work in me is the lifeblood of my relationship with God. It can take a while to get used to the workings of the relationship. But the process of hearing, receiving, and applying the word of God through quiet times has become a delight for me, not drudgery. It is the primary way I abide in Christ and experience him.

And I want that for you.

Let's pray. Lord, help us to develop the habit of hearing and receiving your word with a view to applying it, by your power, that it may be continually at work in us. And thank you for the food we are about to eat. Amen.

I would like to invite you to join us for lunch in the lobby. We're having Mexican food. The suggested cost is \$5 per person.

If you are hesitating because of the cost, forget I said anything about money. It's on us. Nobody will know whether you paid or not. By design, there is no payment line you have to go through to get to the food. As you are able and whenever you want—before, during, or after the meal—you can pay at the Connect Counter. Or not pay at all. We just want to be with you. And we'll be done way before the Super Bowl.