**THE WORD OF GOD**

**Sermon – Bible Sunday, January 13, 2019**

 This world and the next are constantly vying for our attention. Whichever one grabs our attention, even if only for a short while, will gain the ability to determine the direction of our lives. That’s why we must be concerned with what we allow into our hearts and minds. Just as one act of love responds to another act of love, too much of one bad thing can lead to an appetite for many bad things.

 Have you heard the expression “garbage in, garbage out”? It is an expression that relates to what we hear, what we read, and what we see. If we hear, see and read things that are worthless then we will expel these things from within ourselves. What we put into our minds, what we allow entrance through our eyes and ears, will eventually affect our heart and mind and come out through our tongue. Just as what goes up must come down, what goes in must come out. As Jesus said, *“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks”* (Luke 6:45).

 Though this is true throughout life it is especially true as we age. What we have sown and cultivated throughout the long decades of our existence we will reap in our later years. When we are young we have more energy and more will power to resist the evil that resides within us. But as we age that energy diminishes and the desire to filter our mouths also decreases. So if we have allowed the filth of the world to influence us when we are young we will surely bring forth that filth when we are old. That’s why it is important to cultivate goodness while we are young so that when we are old we can draw from this well of purity and not become bitter over life’s circumstances.

 Proverbs tells us that *“As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he”* (Proverbs 23:7). What we dwell on, what we watch, what we see, what we pay attention to, will shape our being, affect our soul, and control our thoughts. This applies to the people we associate with as well. Because we all have a tendency to become like those we spend the most time with we need to choose our companions carefully. Paul tells us in Corinthians that *“bad company ruins good morals”* (1 Corinthians 15:33). I found that statement to be true in my life.

 I moved away from my home town for the first three years of high school but returned in my senior year. As a virtual newcomer to the school I was hungry for friendship so I hung around people that I had known since grade school. Unfortunately these people had matured into not so nice people. Their moral compass had strayed from grade school innocence to unencumbered high school selfishness. They cared only for themselves and would demean anyone who did not agree with them. Thankfully I came to my senses and left that crowd, knowing it might mean the end of long-time friendships. But I felt it was worth the risk. I was hanging around people of bad morals and I did not want what little morals I had left to become ruined because of them.

 Now don’t get me wrong. I was not a truly moral person myself. I had my own vices and compared to God’s standard I was no better than those friends which I had forsaken. But I did recognize that I could easily fall deeper into the immoral abyss if I continued to hang around my grade school friends. So I separated myself from them and sought out friends who had a better moral compass than I.

 The Scripture says that God seeks after us and draws us to Himself (John 6:44). That was certainly true for me. In my search for a moral compass whose true north never wavered, God directed my path into a circle of friends at college who were born again Christians. These friends became my lifeline throughout all four of my college years. As they demonstrated true morality and true compassion towards me I found myself desiring what they had. In my third year of college I realized that in these four friends I had seen with my own eyes the very God after whom I had been seeking. The Lord Himself was visible to me through their words and actions.

 Since I was already seeing the Lord’s presence with my eyes and hearing His voice with my ears through the lives of my friends, I decided to read for myself the book from which their moral compass had been set. So I went to the college bookstore at Hayward State in February of 1968 and purchased the J.B. Phillips version of the New Testament. Besides the Good News Version, this was one of the first modern English versions of the Bible. I brought it back to my dorm room and began to read it from cover to cover – Matthew to Revelation.

 Before I reached the end I knew that Jesus Christ was God and the One for whom I had been searching for so many years. I gave my heart to Him in that small dorm room at Carlos Bee Residence Hall in Hayward, California and have never looked back. Though one of these friends has died and I have lost track of two others, the remaining believer became my closest friend and after 50 years of friendship he continues to influence my life.

 When I became a Christian while attending college neither my parents nor my siblings were believers. So I decided that for Mother’s Day I would buy my mother the New Testament in modern English that had caused me to “see the light”. I knew that we had an old King James Bible that sat on the shelf. But that was never read. My hope was that my mother would find this version easier to understand and would, as I had done, read the Bible for herself and find the Light that was hidden inside.

 Unfortunately that Bible soon found its place alongside the dusty old King James Version and sat on the shelf until my mother passed away. I think she might have glanced at it when I first gave it to her. But I don’t think she looked at it again. She had no interest and no idea what treasures lay inside the covers of that book.

 I know I didn’t at first. It wasn’t until I was so unhappy with my life that I was willing to look anywhere for something different – something or someone that could change my life – some power beyond myself that could alter the course of my life and change the direction I was headed. And when I saw the difference that Christ had made in the lives of my friends at college I decided to read for myself the source material from which they drew their strength. Admittedly I was ready for a God encounter. But I did not suspect that I would have that encounter within the pages of the Bible.

 Since I did not grow up in a Christian home my impression of the Bible came from my family. They did not believe there was anything special about it. It was just another book written by imperfect men. Besides the dusty old King James we had one large, ornate Bible that was known as the “Family Bible”. In its pages were places where you could record your family history. It was a book that was meant to be passed down from generation to generation. And though it was called a Family Bible, no one in the family read anything in that book other than the names of deceased relatives. I don’t remember anyone ever opening that or any other Bible and hearing the Word of God read in our home.

 Once it became known that I had become a believer in Christ the skeptics in my family began to challenge my faith. Though they knew very little about the Word of God they questioned its accuracy. Some did this out of a desire to know more, others did it to mock the Word of God and people like me who believed in what they considered “nonsense”. I learned very quickly in my infant stage of Christianity that I was not equipped to answer the deeper questions of theology that some posed to me. I also learned that I did not need to answer fools who mocked a God they did not know. I could remain steadfast in my faith without knowing where Cain’s wife came from or why Christianity was better than Buddhism. I did not need to respond to either inquisitor to know the truth of what I had read. As much as they might have hoped it would, their questions did not undermine my faith in God.

 Not too long ago there was a saying that was bandied about by people whose mind was closed and not open to another’s opinion. They would stick out their hand and said, *“Speak to the hand.”* They did this because they had no intention of paying any attention to what the other person had to say. I found this to be true of my relatives as well. As much as they professed a desire to know the answers to their questions, what they were really desiring was a verbal challenge; a debate if you will - their beliefs against mine. There was no heart desire to know the truth; Just a not-so-subtle challenge to the authority of God’s Word.

 Even when I feebly attempted to answer their questions, their ears remained deaf to the Word of God. They were figuratively holding up their hands and saying, “Speak to the hand”. After several unsuccessful attempts to reason with them I soon learned to be obedient to the words of Jesus as recorded in Mathew.

**MATTHEW 10:14**

***“Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or* city, *shake the dust off your feet.”***

 What Jesus was saying to me was that I should not waste any more time with those who were resistant to the gospel. My time would be better spent with those who would listen. So I moved on and began searching for those who were receptive to the Word of God.

 Like my family, the world is constantly telling us to *speak to the hand* because their ears are also deaf to the Word of God. They have no desire to hear it and no desire to know it. So there is a great lack of knowledge and understanding of what the Bible teaches. Unfortunately the church is also full of people who are ignorant of God’s Word.

 According to a survey done in 2013 by the American Bible Society, (<http://religionnews.com/2013/04/04/poll-americans-love-the-bible-but-dont-read-it-much/> ) the average American household has 4.4 Bibles in their home. Even though more than half of Americans think the Bible has too little influence on the culture at large, only one in five Americans read the Bible on a regular basis. 88 percent said they own a Bible and 80 percent think the Bible is sacred but only 61 percent wish they read the Bible more. The 57 percent of the people who read their Bibles said they only read it four times a year or less. Only 26 percent of Americans said they read their Bible on a regular basis (four or more times a week). As for the youth, the younger generation seems to be moving away from the Bible. A majority (57 percent) of those ages 18-28 read their Bibles less than three times a year, if at all.

 Doug Birdsall, president of American Bible Society, compares the problem of Christians not reading the Bible as to obesity. He said this: *“We have an awful lot of people who realize they’re overweight, but they don’t follow a diet. People realize the Bible has values that would help them in their spiritual health, but they just don’t read it.”* Why is this? What is the “disconnect” between desire and doing?

 Since the beginning of time man’s will has had a direct influence on his behavior. What we choose to do, what we choose to listen to, what we choose to read, determines what we will do. If we choose not to read the Bible we are choosing not to follow its guidelines. There is life to be found in reading the Scriptures, for within its pages the heart of God speaks directly to the heart of man. But if we know not what that life is we cannot absorb it into our lives. Just as we cannot lose weight if we do not limit our intake, so we cannot follow the rules of life if we do not know what the rules are.

 Our own justice system says, “ignorance is no excuse for the law”. Failure to read God’s word is also no excuse. For God Himself says, even if we do not know the written Word of God, *“His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse* (Romans 1:20). Holding up a hand and refusing to listen does not excuse anyone from God’s Law. We will all be held accountable at the Throne of Judgment whether we acknowledge Him here or not. So if we are to be held accountable to God’s law how much better would it be to know what that Law is so that we can conform to it, rather than be ignorant and suffer the consequence of our ignorance.

 We are all influenced by something or someone. Even the scripturally ignorant would agree that it is far better to be influenced by truth than to be influenced by lies. But how do we know which is which? How do we know whether what is influencing us is true or not? That’s where reading the Word of God becomes helpful; For Scripture provides the discernment that we naturally lack.

 The Scriptures tell us that the struggles we experience in life are not the result of battling flesh and blood but rather our battles against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies (Ephesians 5:12), So if we are not letting our minds be influenced by the Word of God then we are, by default, allowing our minds to be influenced by the world, the flesh and the devil (1 John 2:16). Each has its consequences for whatever influence we allow will eventually manifest itself in our actions. That’s why Paul tells us to be careful of what we allow our mind to dwell on.

**ROMANS 12:2**

***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”***

 In his book, “as a Man Thinketh”, James Allen says this:

**“A man’s mind may be likened to a garden, which may be intelligently cultivated or allowed to run wild; but whether cultivate or neglected, it must, and will, *bring forth (something)*. If no useful seeds are *put* into it, then an abundance of useless weed seeds will *fall* therein, and will continue to produce their kind.”**

 James echoes these thoughts in the area of temptation. What we allow our minds to dwell on will determine the outcome of our actions.

**JAMES 1:13-15**

***“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt any one. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”***

 But how do we change our thinking? How do we renew our minds? How do we resist sin? The Psalmist gives us His answer.

**PSALM 119:11**

***“Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee.”***

 Once again James Allen reminds us,

**“Just as a gardener cultivates his plot, keeping it free from weeds, and growing the flowers and fruits which he requires, so may a man tend the garden of his mind, weeding out all the worn, useless, and impure thoughts, and cultivating toward perfection the flowers and fruits of right, useful, and pure thoughts.”**

 Paul also provides a solution to keep our minds garden free of weeds.

**PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9**

***“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable,, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things which you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”***

 James Allen goes on to say:

**“Every thought seed sown or allowed to fall into the mind, and to take root there produces its own, blossoming sooner or later into act, and bearing its own fruitage of opportunity and circumstance. Good thoughts bear good fruit, bad thoughts bad fruit.”**

**“Good thoughts and actions can never produce bad results. Bad thoughts and actions can never produce good results. This is but saying that nothing can come from corn but corn, nothing from nettles but nettles. (People) understand this law in the natural world, and work with it. But few understand it in the mental and moral world…. and they, therefore, do not cooperate with it.”**

 These thoughts are consistent with the words of Jesus in Matthew.

**MATTHEW 7:17**

***“Every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit.”***

 In conclusion, James Allen goes on to make these observations:

**“(People) imagine that thought can be kept secret, but it cannot. It rapidly crystalizes into habit….and habit solidifies into circumstances….** **A particular train of thought persisted in, be it good or bad, cannot fail to produce results on the character and circumstances. (People) cannot *directly* chose (their) circumstances, but (they) can choose their thoughts, and so indirectly, yet surely, shape (their) circumstances.”**

**“(But) as the physically weak man can make himself strong by careful and patient training, so the (person) of weak thoughts can make them strong by exercising (themselves) in right thinking.”**

 I found this principle to be true in my own life. Prior to becoming a believer my mind was filled with all sorts of worldly things. The flesh was paramount, the self was primary, and the desire to satisfy my own lusts was overwhelming. I knew I was caught in a vicious cycle of sin and soon came to realize that I had not the means nor the method to overcome the power of sin in my life. I was powerless over the power which controlled me.

 Thankfully God encompassed me with friends who believed in the Word of God and followed its precepts. They surrounded me with love and acceptance and modeled for me what God was like. And they read their Bible daily. Desperate for what they had I too picked up the Bible and read it. And it was through reading the Word of God that I came to know and understand the love which God had for me. And through the love revealed in Scripture I found release from sin and forgiveness for my evil deeds.

 What happened to me - the transformation that I experienced that spring day back in 1968 - came from the Holy Spirit becoming active in my life through the reading of the Word of God. And that same transforming power continues today as I continue to read His Word daily. In 1Timothy Paul reminds us of just how powerful the reading of Scripture can be.

**1 TIMOTHY 3:16-17**

***“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”***

 That is why this church teaches and preaches the Word of God. Within its pages lie the catalyst for change and the hope of all who seek after it.

 I have been reading through the entire Bible every year for at least the past 17 years and I can say truthfully that God’s Word continues to bring about change in my life as I read His Word. Many times I have been grateful that God convicts me through the Words I have read that day - in the privacy of my own home, in my bedroom with the door closed - rather than confronting me in public because I refused to let Him enter my heart through His Word. I pray that you too would find comfort in the Scripture as you read through it daily and that you too would find the change that God’s Word can bring happening in your heart as I did in mine. God’s Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Psalm 119:105). So take up your light and let it shine before men as Jesus tells us to in Matthew.

**MATTHEW**

***“You are the light of the word. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”***

 Our light comes from God Himself. Our sinful nature has no light, only darkness. But the Spirit within us shines through us to illuminate the world. This light is found in Scripture. It is my hope today that you will let God shine His light on you through His Word, and that this Word will shine through you to others. Amen.

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