

## **The Living Word Hebrews 4:12-16**

<sup>12</sup> *For the word of God is living 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.* <sup>13</sup> *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

<sup>14</sup> *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* <sup>15</sup> *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.* <sup>16</sup> *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Last year the Viroqua Fitness Center where I work out installed several surveillance cameras. That's probably a good thing given the fact that the fitness center is in the basement of the Landmark Center which is never locked. Anyone can come and go 24 hours a day. When we used to hold our worship services over there, on several occasions I arrived to find somebody asleep on one of the couches. The fitness center can get quite creepy in the evenings with several dark corners and a myriad of strange noises. It's kind of a cross between a haunted house and YMCA!

Surveillance cameras are becoming ubiquitous. The U.K has over five million surveillance cameras. Some of them are equipped with a speaker and some even have microphones attached to them. Can you imagine if you were standing on a street corner and the camera operator suddenly started speaking to you. "Hey you there in the blue jacket. Can't you read? The sign says NO SMOKING." We cannot escape the gaze of probing eyes and accountability. Thankfully we do not live in an area where this is the daily reality and I cannot imagine such an existence. It would seem to have the effect of turning everyone into a highly paranoid personality. I am sure I would not like it.

But whether you realized it or not, all of us are under 24 hour surveillance seven days a week. Hebrews 4:13 says, *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.* This is the kind of thing we tell our young children. "Just remember, God is watching you!" And it's true! God knows everything we say, do and think. It may sound cliché, but he knows us way better than we know ourselves. And notice that this statement comes in the middle of this well known and cherished statement about the word of God. *For the word of God is living 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.*

All believers love this section of Scripture because it is such a powerful description of the power of the word of God. We rightly place this text right alongside the beautiful words of Isaiah 55.

<sup>10</sup> As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

<sup>11</sup> so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:8-11)

But we too often forget what this text is really saying. This text is saying that...

### **1. The Bible uncovers our sin**

This text is instructing us that the Bible is not only a surveillance camera but it is a camera that can peer right into our souls. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. The Scriptures can look into the inner workings of our hearts and tell us what is there. Let's examine these phrases in more depth.

*For the word of God is living and active.* That is no mere book that you are holding in your hands. It is alive precisely because it is the very word of God. These are his words and by the work and power of the Holy Spirit, they become living and active. This book is not just history, poetry and pastoral letters—it is living and active.

But the word of God is also sharper than any double edged sword. But this phrase needs to be understood in conjunction with another. *Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.* This verse is describing you and me. What do you think the word uncovered means? The ESV has the most accurate translation with the word naked. The word of God completely exposes us. We are naked before its probing eye. The word for laid bare comes from the Greek word for neck. To be laid bare literally means to have your neck pulled back and exposed. So tell me—what happens when your neck is pulled back and exposed and the word of God is a sword? Can you picture this scene? This places us in an extremely vulnerable position.

I am not suggesting that God and his word are waiting to chop off our heads but the image we are supposed to have with this section is to truly feel vulnerable and exposed. We are naked before our Lord. Our proverbial necks are bared before his watchful eye. Usually when Christians quote this section of Scripture it is usually used as a source of comfort. We speak of the greatness of God's word. Don't misunderstand me—God's word is more than great. However, verses 12-13 are not intended to be a source of comfort but of reverent fear. Look what came before: *Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.* This description of God's word was given to help us understand that we cannot walk in disobedience. There really is no such thing as a secret sin.

The penetrating work of the word of God is the antidote to the deceitfulness of sin that we talked about two Sundays ago. God will reveal all of the ways that you have been deceived and continue to deceive yourself, but in order for this to happen, we must be in contact with his word in order to do so. Verse thirteen is right on. Nothing in all of creation is hidden from God's sight. God has sounded out the depths of our souls and knows all that there is to know. However, we need to encounter his word if we are to know what he already knows. Paul said that if it were not for the law he would not have known that he was a sinner. The word of God tells us what God already knows.

I spoke with someone recently who has been struggling with some serious sins. This person seems to be winning the battle for a while but he has a long way to go. I found it interesting that even though the person obviously knew that he was struggling with sin, he was still deceived by his own sin. Even though the struggle is thirty years old, it wasn't until a few years ago that he

realized that he was a hypocrite. He had built this wall between his private life and his public life such that the two didn't seem to have anything to do with the other. He behaved one way in private and a completely different way in public. His private self had this ongoing struggle with sin but he had encapsulated this struggle to the point that even he was completely deceived by it. In looking back on his own deception this man said, "It was all about me." He had finally seen the depth of his depravity and the degree of his hypocrisy.

Why was this person so completely deceived for so long? I know that he had regular encounters with the penetrating word of God. He was laid bare time and time again. How is someone like this able to not be affected by the word of God?

Let me paint you a rather grotesque picture. This time of the year many men in our church will be out cutting wood for the winter. Let's say you were cutting through a log with your chainsaw and it slipped and sliced you on the thigh. You can imagine what a nasty sight that would be. Your jeans would be soaked with blood and the cut itself would be ragged and filthy. But being the miser that you are—and most guys tend to be cheap—you decide not to go to the emergency room. You go out to the pasture and pull out a few hairs from your horse's tail. You grab a sewing needled from your wife's sewing kit, clean up the wound in your bathroom and proceed to stitch the gaping wound yourself. Such a scenario is rare in our day but this is something that people have done for thousands of years before there was such a thing as an emergency room. When you are finished, you clean up the mess, slap a bandage on the wound and continue to cut more wood for your stack of firewood.

What are the chances that this wound will heal normally? The chances are not very good at all. It will probably become infected and then you will have to clean it out again, maybe throw a little antibiotic ointment on it and keep going about your daily life. Even if it does heal, you will be left with a nasty scar for the rest of your life. This is a small picture of what it is like when a person attempts to cover their own sin. God has the sword and his word cuts deep into our flesh. No believer can be unaffected by the word of God. It cuts sharper than any double edged sword. It penetrates to dividing soul and spirit. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Everyone who encounters the word of God has this happen to them at some point—hopefully many, many times. In one sense, God does give us a wound by his word. It really does cut into our soul and reveal what is there. But if we attempt so stitch up this wound like the guy who stitched his chainsaw wound, this bandaid mentality might work for a while. It might give you the appearance of health. You might be able to ignore the pain for a season or two—maybe even for decades, but the wound is still with you.

Has this happened to you? Has the word of God cut into your soul and exposed the attitude of your heart...but you have ignored it? What are some of the lies you have believed? What are some of the secrets that you have held onto—either things done by us or to us? We usually bandage our own wounds for one of two reasons. Either we don't think the wound is all that bad or else we truly don't know what to do with it. When the word of God exposes our sin, when we are left naked and exposed, either we run and hide and pretend all is well or else we run to the Savior for help. Let me show you why we should always choose the second option.

## **2. Jesus paid for our sin**

We should run to the Savior because Jesus has paid for our sin. *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* In God's economy, the high priest was the mediator between God and man. The high priest would offer the sacrifices for sin once per year—first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus is our great high priest<sup>1</sup> for several reasons.

First, he is great in status, in importance and character. He is, after all, God incarnate. He has gone through the heavens. He created the heavens. He stands apart from us and above us in every possible way. Jesus is what theologians like to call transcendent. Transcendence is beautifully illustrated in Isaiah 55.

<sup>8</sup> *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.*

<sup>9</sup> *“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* Jesus is transcendent. He is not like us. He is sinless and perfect which is the very thing which allows him to be the great high priest.

Second, Jesus is great in degree of holy attributes. He not only possesses all divine attributes but he possesses them in an infinite degree. He is infinitely holy and infinitely merciful and infinitely just.

Finally, Jesus is great in the sense of being surprising, shocking and astonishing. When you really get a grasp his atoning work on the cross, it has a powerful the WOW factor. We should be wowed by the cross. It should take our breath away. We should routinely be able to say, that is great!

## **3. Jesus can relate to our sin**

Jesus is transcendent—he is not like us. But he is also the opposite of transcendence. Jesus is immanent. This is the theological term for presence and personal. He is right here with us in the most intimate of ways. This is what verse fifteen is all about. *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.* He understands the power of the temptations you face on a daily basis.

There is a temptation among believers not to take seriously Jesus' temptation. Do you know what I mean? Many people reason that since Jesus is fully God then how could his temptations have been real? Could Jesus have actually succumbed to temptation? I do not believe that Jesus could have sinned because he was God. God is infinitely holy and cannot sin under any circumstances. But doesn't that change the level and severity of the temptation? Can you really and truly be tempted if there is no possibility of sinning? This is what many of us think but rarely express. Was Jesus really tempted in every way, just as we are? Yes, he was and I know this because it is stated as a plain fact in this verse and in dozens of other Scriptures. His temptations were as real as ours. I think it is helpful to remember the difference between temptation and sin. It is not a sin to be tempted and even though Jesus could not sin, his temptations were every bit as real as yours and mine. If it were not so, then we would not have been given this precious promise.

We must remember that there is no other religion that makes this claim. For example, the god of Islam is a transcendent god. This god—which of course is not god at all but rather a Satanic pretender—is far off. As the Muslims explain, Allah is far off. He does whatever he pleases. No one can thwart his will. But you can never know where you stand with this god because he is intensely impersonal. He did not take on human flesh. He did not humble himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross. He did not bear the sins of the world. He stands far off. One could say that he is aloof and wholly indifferent to human desires, needs and trials. He demands obedience but he does not assist obedience in any way.

But Jesus is intensely personal; we are laid bare and exposed before him but he understands this neck baring kind of honesty and weakness. He sympathizes with the power of the temptations that we face. And the other reason why his temptation was real is because he actually did bear our sins. He himself was sinless, but in bearing the sins of the world and the wrath of his Father, he understands sin and temptation better than we do—better.

Because he has both paid for our sin and can relate to our sin—because he is both transcendent and immanent—because he is both infinitely holy and infinitely personal—because he cannot be in the presence of sin but nevertheless became sin on our behalf...

#### **4. Jesus waits for us to confess our sin**

In verse sixteen we have this wonderful invitation. *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

I want to focus on the word confidence. Think about the way in which Aaron and the high priests approach the ark of the covenant in the inner sanctuary? Were they filled with confidence? Their response to the holiness of the Lord was nothing short of abject terror. We have got to understand the fear they experienced or we will never understand the confidence that we should be experiencing. The contrast is as stark as black and white. They approached with fear and trembling because they were in the process of working out their own atonement and the atonement of two million people. The Day of Atonement only happened one day in 356 and approaching God with confidence would have been the very last thing on Aaron's mind.

Aaron and the other high priests after him were not able to approach the throne of God with confidence but we are instructed to do this very thing. Ephesians 3:12 says the same thing. *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.* The word for confidence here means courage, boldness, confidence, frankness.<sup>2</sup> I'd like to take that a step further and suggest some more definitions of confidence. The manner in which we should approach the throne of grace is with a spirit of Christian impudence. Still other descriptive words would be chutzpah, nerve, spine, audacity, the possible appearance of arrogance, gutsy, presumptive.

This is the type of confidence that literally presumes upon the grace and mercy of God. Now be careful here. I most certainly do not mean the kind of presumption described in Romans 6:1. What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase? That is a sinful presumption that really doesn't want grace but a license to sin. The kind of presumption that we are encouraged to have is one where we are certain that God will extend grace when we ask for it. It is the kind of presumption that never has a speck of doubt that our secret sins are safe with

Jesus. People may reject us. Other believers may not extend grace and mercy, but the throne of grace will always be a fountain of grace.

Jesus uncovers that sin with his powerful word. Jesus paid for that sin with his precious blood. Jesus can relate to that sin because he was tempted more than we will ever know. And Jesus wants you to confess that sin and find grace and forgiveness. But it's not just secret sins that he invites to the throne of grace. Fears insecurities, pain. Hurts done to you that you can't seem to forgive.

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September 11, 2011

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<sup>1</sup> Great High Priest in the original language is *Mega* High Priest

<sup>2</sup> παρρησία (*parrēsia*); Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. DBLG 4244, #1