

Sermon Series – Reformation 500 Themes

The Power of God's Word

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

¹Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Theme: The Power of God's Word

Have you ever tried to force something, and it only made things worse. There are those times when something seems to be stuck, so I just pull harder, and suddenly something breaks. I can't begin to remember all of the times that I did that at my dad's gas station. I broke a lot of bolts that had to be drilled out. It never made my dad happy. It seems that at such times, if we just had a little more patience, everything would have been fine.

That is the gist of our Reformation theme today, the Power of God's Word. We are tempted to be impatient and force things, but God's word is powerful. We just need to be patient and give it time.

I. It is very tempting to try to force things.

Some of the Reformers tried that. You might remember when Luther was at the Diet of Worms, he made his famous "Here I Stand" speech when he was told to retract his teachings. He was condemned as an outlaw and taken to the Wartburg Castle for his safety. It was there that he translated the New Testament, so that everyone could read the Bible. But while he was at the



Wartburg, things began to take a radical turn in Wittenberg. Professor Carlstadt incited the students to break into churches where mass was being held and drive out the priests and the people. On Christmas Day he had the images, altar, crucifixes, and candles thrown out of the church. Another group from Zwickau began to claim that they had special revelations from God. They rejected infant baptism and denounced all clergy. Carlstadt even came under their influence. He decided that it is sufficient to rely on the inspiration of the Spirit and that no human learning was necessary. He encouraged the students to go home. Carlstadt had grown impatient. He was going to forcefully spread the Reformation. He brought the entire city into confusion.

To be very honest, it is very tempting to get impatient today. We look at our world today, and it appears as though the Gospel is not working the way that it should. It seems that every church body is losing members in the last ten years, church attendance in almost every congregation is going down. We are not the only congregation which has seen its income go down dramatically. It is happening all around us. It is happening in our families. It was once a concern that kids stopping coming to church after confirmation. Actually today, if they make it that far, they keep coming. The problem is to get parents to bring their children to the baptismal font or to Sunday School. We look at our society, our families, and even the temptations that we all struggle with, and we think that something has to be done. We've got to do something. When we have that attitude, we usually make things worse.

II. It is God's Word alone that has the power to change hearts.

That is what happened at Thessalonica. Here Paul witnessed the power of the Gospel. He writes in verse 4, "*We know brothers love by God that he has chosen you because our Gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit.*" When Paul came to Thessalonica in Acts 17, he preached that Jesus is the Christ for three weeks at the synagogue. Many people believed the Gospel, but some of the Jews were jealous. They formed a mob and started a riot. Paul had to hide. When it was night, they escaped the city. A short time later while Paul was in Athens, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (3:1-5) to see what happened to those who believed there. In the meantime Paul went to Corinth. Timothy returned to him there with the good news that this congregation was not just alive. It was flourishing. Out of the most difficult circumstances, this congregation that had so many afflictions was filled with joy in our Lord. But it didn't end with them. Paul writes in verse 8, "*The word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere...*" The Gospel not only brought them to faith. It went out through them to people throughout Greece. God's Word was even more powerful than Paul expected.

Luther encouraged the people to put their hope in the power of God's Word when he returned to Wittenberg. When he heard of the chaos in Wittenberg, he decided that it was time to leave the Wartburg and go back. It is significant that he brought calm and peace back to the city by preaching. He preached a series of 8 sermons in 8 days, which are called the "Invocavit Sermons." I have always found the second sermon to be very good. He encourages patience and says, "**It is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure. I can get no farther than their ears. I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. It is God's work alone who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it.**" (vs 53, page 76) He goes on to say,

“In short, I will preach [the Word], teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing. The Word did everything.” (p 77)

That quote was rather long, but it makes the point that if we try to force people to believe, we will only cause havoc, but if we share the Gospel and put our trust in it, it will do more than we could have ever imagined.

That is still true today. We need patience. That means that we take time to listen. At last week’s pastors’ conference, Pastor Wangerin and I had an interesting experience on Monday evening. We thought that a number of pastors were sitting around a firepit at our hotel. It ended up being 2 younger couples and another young woman. For some reason they opened up to us on their thoughts on faith and spirituality. We spent a lot of time listening. One couple had been Catholic and now attend a nondemonational church. It seemed that the other couple was Catholic and doesn’t attend anywhere, and the young woman was a devout Jew. It was fascinating as we listened to their very different view points. It was clear that God was calling us to listen and share the good news of Christ where we could.

At our sessions on preaching the speaker make the remark that we often sound mad when we preach the Gospel. But there is nothing sweeter than the Gospel. As Paul writes in verse 3, it gives us faith, hope and love in Christ. It breaks our hard, sinful hearts, so that we believe that Jesus died and rose for our forgiveness. He gives us the hope of everlasting life, and He empowers us to love one another as He has loved us.

That simple message that Jesus loves you is the most powerful message in the world. It alone is what can change our lives, our nation, and our Lord’s Church. It frees us from our sin and gives us new life as the children of God. May God help us to put our trust in nothing that we can do to change our lives or world. We will only make things worse. Trust in the power of God’s Word, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ will work miracles that you could have never imagined in your heart and in our world.

Amen.

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