

Casting out a demon: When the Word Comes Alive

Have you ever considered how something can be dead or alive, depending on what you do with it? I'm referring to the written Word of God. How does it come alive and accomplish great things? In two ways:

- 1) When it is given out with authority.
- 2) When it is received in humility.

Let's see how this works in the account in Luke of a man with an unclean spirit.

And came down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power. And in the synagogue there was a man, which had a spirit of an unclean devil, and cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art; the Holy One of God." And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the devil had thrown him in the midst, he came out of him, and hurt him not. And they were all amazed, and spake among themselves, saying, What a word is this! for with authority and power he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they come out. And the fame of him went out into every place of the country round about.

Luke 4:31-37

The context of this miracle is near the start of Jesus' ministry in Capernaum. And as He begins to teach, His teaching is like nothing they have ever heard.

The Jews had the written Word up to that time – the Tanakh – our Old Testament. That Tanakh was 'preached' in the Synagogue every Saturday, Tuesday and Thursday. Now synagogues had arisen during the Babylonian captivity. They did not replace the Temple, but became local congregations for prayer and the preaching of the Word.

Though the Jews had the written Word, it was not the living Word. It had not come alive for them. It is possible for this to happen: as **1 Thessalonians 1:5** says, *"For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake."*

Dead: The way the Word was given was not with authority

Here are some observations from this passage on why the Word may've been – and may still be for us – ineffective.

1. Many of the Rabbis spent their time quoting other Rabbis

They did not so much focus on what God said, but on what others had said about what God said. Any time we start to focus more on what other men have said about God's Word, than on God's

Word itself, the Word loses its power. Becoming too attached to one or another teacher is a sure way to deaden the effect of God's Word.

2. The Rabbis spent their time majoring on the minors

They could spend hours defining what constituted work on the Sabbath, and what constituted clean and unclean, but they did not speak about knowing God, loving Him, being godly like the God they claimed to know. In other places in the gospels we see Jesus rebukes them with words like, *"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel"* (**Matthew 23:23-24**).

3. The Rabbis taught the letter of the Law, but not the spirit of the Law

Jesus' sermon on the mount is an entire sermon devoted to saying, 'You have been taught this – but that is deficient – that is only the letter. The spirit of the command is this...'

Any time the preaching of the Word gets sidetracked onto all kinds of minor diversions – you can be sure the Word will lose power. Think about when preachers spend whole sermons talking about 'Should we celebrate Christmas?' or "Why books about witches and wizards are evil" or "What is the mark of the Beast?" These topics may have their place, but if you make them your focus and neglect the weightier matters – the Word will lose power. When preaching does not hit the core – knowing and loving Jesus Christ, it is missing the mark.

4. The Rabbis misinterpreted the Bible

Because of their dedication to their group, because of their insistence at following what other men said, they soon had turned the Bible on its head. As Jesus points out to the Pharisees, *"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it"* (**Matthew 23:16-22**). Any time the Word is not rightly divided – when it is misinterpreted and misapplied, it loses its power. It becomes fire in the hands of a fool.

5. The Rabbis did not live out what they preached

They were full of knowledge, but empty of God's righteousness. *"Saying: 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do'"* (**Matthew 23:2-3**).

Any time the Word is preached, but those who preach it do not seek to implement it in their lives – the Word will lose its power. God does not bless hypocrisy. Contrast the Pharisees with Ezra: *"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel"* (**Ezra 7:10**).

6. The Rabbis did not love the people they preached to

In fact, they despised other people and looked down upon them. Anytime the Word is preached just to get attention, just to be a scholar of renown, just to have people admire that person as a great preacher – the Word loses its power.

What was the *result* of this kind of teaching?

1. There was spiritual poverty and spiritual ignorance

The result was that people did not understand the Word of God. They did not understand God's plan. This is clear from the instance when Nicodemus came to see Jesus: he did not understand Jesus, or the teaching on being born again. Jesus had to say to him, *"Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?" (John 3:10).*

2. There was spiritual oppression

Jesus described this, saying, *"For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers" (Matthew 23:4).* The people were burdened down by a religious system. They were not in a relationship with God.

3. There was satanic conquest

This miracle takes place *in* a synagogue. Who is attending this service? A demon-possessed man. Here is a man, indwelt by a demon, and he is happily attending the synagogue. He was obviously not disrupting the service when the Rabbi usually spoke. The Word that came across was so stripped of its power that a demon-possessed man could, without constraint, attend this setup. This is what sin and Satan can do.

However, when evil spirits are in contact with the real Jesus, they say, *"What have we to do with you, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us?"* – in essence, they seem to beg real Christians to leave them be! If you have not heard the Word in power, your life may resemble such people:

- **Spiritually ignorant** – unaware of the truth, blind to the beauty of God, walking around in a grey haze of religion, but not seeing light.
- **Spiritually oppressed** – burdened down, beaten down by a legalistic system of demands.
- **Spiritually in bondage** – unable to get free from your sins, held captive by old habits, chained by sinful attitudes, ways, actions, thoughts; made miserable by being a slave to yourself, a slave to self-centredness.

Alive: The way Jesus gave the Word was with authority

In the passages, the Lord Jesus Christ arrives at the synagogue, and He is as different from the Rabbis as day is from night. Jesus is the Living Word. As **John 1** says, Jesus is the expression of God. He is the communication of God the Father. The written Word conveys the living Word. All of the Bible is about Him.

Again, the Bible is the written Word, and when the Living Word (Jesus) takes up the written Word – it *lives*. Why was Christ's preaching so powerful?

- Because the Living Word didn't just quote from authority, He *had* authority: *"All power in heaven and on earth is given to me..."* (**Matthew 28:18**).
- Because the Living Word understood the heart of the Written Word: *"Ye have heard it said, but I say unto you..."* (**Matthew 5:38**).
- Because the Living Word perfectly kept the written Word: *"Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross,"* (**Romans 5:18**).
- Because the Living Word loved the people He spoke to: *"And having seen the crowds, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were wearied and cast away, as sheep not having a shepherd,"* (**Matthew 9:36**).

In short, the Living Word was full of the Holy Spirit. And now you know what to pray for in your preachers. Pray they will correctly interpret the Word, and get to the heart of it – to reveal Jesus Christ to know Him. Pray they will apply it correctly. Pray they will live out what they preach. Pray they will be filled with love and compassion for the hearers. Pray they will be men of prayer, filled with the Holy Spirit.

The effects of the Word with power

So what was the effect of Christ's words spoken with power? *"And they were all amazed, and spake among themselves, saying, What a word is this! for with authority and power he commandeth the unclean spirits, and they come out. And the fame of him went out into every place of the country round about,"* (**Luke 4:36-37**).

The people were astonished, and all talking about this kind of authority. His words stirred up opposition. But they also transformed a demoniac.

When the Word is preached in power, you will see these three things again. People will be amazed – the truth becomes so clear, so apparent, so forceful, so direct, so challenging. People will talk about the power of the Word. But you can also expect that opposition will break out. Challenges. Criticism. Division. However – lives will be changed. People will be saved. Believers will get committed and devoted. Marriages will grow. People will become more Christlike.

Question: If Jesus' Word is so powerful, why doesn't it transform everyone the way it affected the demon-possessed man?

Remember, some people rejected Jesus teaching. *"For the hearts of this people have grown dull, their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their*

eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them,” (Matthew 13:15).

How is that possible?

The answer is that God has added an additional factor when it comes to man. He has given man a will. He has made man a moral being – capable of choices. The winds and the waves *cannot* disobey His voice. A demon in a man *cannot* disobey His command. The fish in the sea, the water in a cistern, the bread in a basket, the disease of leprosy, the ailment of blindness, paralysis, deafness or even death *cannot* disobey His voice. But God has given man the capability to do that.

That is why God’s Word may come forth in all the power of the very voice of the Son of God – and you have the ability to say no to it.

*I set the boundaries of the ocean vast,
Carved out the mountains from the distant past,
Moulded a man from the miry clay,
Breathed in him life, but he went astray.*

*I hold the waters in My mighty hand
Spread out the heavens with a single span,
Make all creation tremble at My voice,
But My own children come to Me by choice.*

*Even the oxen knows the master's stall,
And sheep will recognize the shepherd's call
I could demand your love - I own you twice,
But only willing love is worth the price!*

*I own the cattle on a thousand hills,
I write the music for the whippoorwills,
Control the planets with their rocks and rills,
But give you freedom to use your own will.*

– The Whippoorwill Song (I Give You Freedom) by Alfred B. Smith

The Word must be received with humility

So, how can the Word have power in our lives? Consider **Hebrews 4:2**: *“For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.”*

If it is given forth *without* authority, it will not accomplish much. If it is given forth with authority, there is still another ingredient – it must be received with humility. What does that look like?

1. Believe it is the very words of the living God

“For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe,” says **1 Thessalonians 2:13**

If you hear the Word of God rightly divided, and you say, ‘That’s not true’ – what are you saying to God? Consider **1 John 5:10**, which says, *“He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son.”*

When some of the Jews said to Jesus, *“...You have a demon...”* (**John 8:48**), do you think their hearts were ready to receive it in power? When they said to him, *“This is a hard saying, who can hear it”* (John 6:60), they demonstrate that were not ready.

2. Recognise it is true in your life

This about the parable of the sower. It illustrates how the Word of God is received by different hearts, and why it doesn’t bear fruit in all of them. There weren’t four kinds of seed – there were four kinds of soil. The Word is the same – it is the state of the heart that makes the difference. The kind that brought forth fruit is described by Jesus this way: *“But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience,”* (**Luke 8:15**).

An honest heart recognises what is true, and believes it to be true of itself. A lying heart says, ‘That might be true – but it’s not true for me!’ If you want the Word to be powerful in your life – receive the Word of God not as something for someone else, not for that other person – but as what *you* need. Recognise it as true about you. The Word will never plant in your heart if you are always deflecting it.

3. Yield to God’s authority

Listen with a view to changing, to obeying. Yield to the authority of Scripture as binding over you. As **James 1:22** puts it: *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”*

If you do not have a plan to implement what you hear, you are like someone who visits the mechanic with his car, but never books it in for repairs. You are like a man who goes to the doctor and sits in the waiting room but leaves before your actual appointment is up. You are like someone who is always getting quotes to renovate your house, but you have never spent a cent on doing it.

Your car won’t run just because you park in the mechanic’s garage. You won’t get better just because you sat in the waiting room. Your house won’t improve by just finding out what it’s going to cost you. You have to book the car in, sit with the doctor and take your medicine, hire a renovator and pay the money. You have to hear what God says with a view to implementing it the first chance you get! That’s how it becomes powerful in your life.

Does that mean that the Word fails if a human heart is proud?

No. *“For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it,”* says (Isaiah 55:10-11).

God’s Word will achieve that which it’s purposed to do. Even if that is a negative result. If you harden your heart, the Word will assist you in hardening your heart. The same sun that melts the snow hardens the clay. The same water that softens a potato hardens the egg. And if the Word comes forth with power, and you receive it in pride, it will harden you all the more, and you will stand more guilty before God.

But if you receive it with humility, it will be seed to the soil, water to the seed, sunshine to the plant. It will be food to the appetite, and appetite for the food. It will be the powerful means by which God casts out all manner of evil from you and makes you new.

God’s Word is like a hammer that breaks the rock in two. So yield to God’s Word today. Believe it is the very words of God, a Heaven-sent library, a memorandum from God, a book authored by the Creator of the universe. Receive it in an honest heart, saying, ‘This is for *me* – for *my* life, for *my* change.’ Yield to what it says – do not delay, do not make excuses. Trust and obey.

God gives you His Word. What’s happening to it in your heart is your responsibility.