

Sermon 9-2-18  
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W. Hempstead, NY

## **Make Your Bed**

Let's briefly review something from last week because it's in today's gospel lesson. Is there anything we can eat or not eat that will make us righteous before God? Will washing our hands before meals make us righteous before our Creator? Will not washing our hands make us unrighteous? If we obey all the commandments as best we can, will this make us righteous before God? Indeed, is there anything we can do that will make us righteous like our God is righteous? The answer to all of the above is no, and the reason is simple. Our sinful nature makes it impossible. We can draw near to God, but our hearts remain far from Him because of the sinful nature.

The sinful nature is that "likeness of God" thing that Adam and Eve chose. Therefore, we're born sitting on God's big throne – where we don't belong – deciding good and evil for ourselves. And we can easily call "good" everything that Yahweh calls evil.

Jesus said it's what comes out of us that makes us unrighteous before God. And He gave us the list in Mark 7:21-23, "21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man [unrighteous]." And this is by no means an exhaustive list. It's just a sampling of what we arrogantly decide we'll do or say whether God says it's evil or not.

So, if we're constantly polluted by unrighteousness because of the self-centered and wicked stuff that passes through our hearts and minds, what can make us righteous before the righteous God? Peter gave an answer to the question when he replied to Jesus in John 6:68-69, "68... 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'"

You have the words of eternal life. More than that, Jesus Himself is the Word of eternal life. For our sake He is the Holy One who was obedient to God even unto death on a cross. For our sake God raised Him as the firstborn from the dead. Jesus is the Word that will raise the dead and give those who have believed in Him eternal righteous life, remade in the image of God.

Remade in the image of God, no evil will ever come from within us again. The burden of the sinful nature will be removed from us completely. This is the great blessing believers in Jesus look forward to.

But for the present, we and all people are caught in a war of words. On one side is the Word of God calling us to Christ's righteousness. On the other, is all the words of God's enemy, Satan, the Father of all lies, and all the lies of the sinful nature. We're constantly caught up in an outward and inward war of words. Who are we going to listen to? Who are we going to believe?

Over the years I've read interesting testimonies from alcoholics anonymous. All twelve step programs are based on words. Every AA meeting is words – nothing but words. Yet, those words have the power to bring a hopeless drunk to sobriety. I recall the testimony of one man who explained how he felt about AA meetings immediately after he had stopped drinking. His head wasn't yet too clear. Thus, he regarded everything he heard at meetings as just "mumbo jumbo." But then he said there came a day when the mumbo jumbo began to make sense. The words of the twelve steps eventually became a way of health for him, a way of life.

Here's the secret. The two alcoholic men who developed the twelve steps were both Christians. They discovered that the power of God's Words could bring them to sobriety. They discovered that God's Words could rescue them from the giant devil of addiction. Therefore, they put God's Words into a twelve-step plan that even an unbeliever can follow to get sober. That's the power of mumbo jumbo.

Recently an experienced Canadian professor of psychology, Jordan Peterson, has become very popular on Youtube. In his videos He has words of advice for young twenty something men. He says if you want to change the world, start this way. When you get up every morning, make your bed. Then go on to clean up your room and keep it clean. It will change the world

Also on Youtube is the testimony of a young man who began to keep these words and others that Professor Peterson recommends. This young man said that when he first heard these things from Professor Peterson, he dismissed them as inconsequential. They were mumbo jumbo to him, nonsense. But there finally came a day when he made his bed. Then he started doing it every day. Then he went on to clean his room. In the video he went on to talk about the significant changes in his life that had come from simply obeying the professor's words. Again, here is the power of words.

On the other side, think of the suicide, homicide and other mayhem that has come about from bullying words spoken without, and words of despair spoken within. Words do have power – for good or for evil. Whose words, then, will we believe? Whose words will we put into action?

Jesus made a very significant claim in Matthew 7:24-27, "24 'Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. 26 But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.'" Jesus claimed that His Words have far greater power than the words of Professor Peterson, if we will put them into effect. For, we literally are what we believe.

So, if words have power, then we have an understanding of what we're doing here on a Sunday morning. To those apart from Christ, this service and this preaching is just a lot of mumbo jumbo. But even to them the power of God's Word can come through His Holy Spirit and this mumbo jumbo and convert their hearts. Remember, Jesus said in John 6:63, "'The words I have spoken to you are spirit and

they are life.” And so, to those in Christ, this service and this preaching are spirit and life.

Many search for the spiritual. Even in the church many search for spiritual experiences. Indeed, some consider a church to be a dead church unless people have certain spiritual experiences there on a regular basis. But this may actually be sitting down on God’s throne and demanding certain experiences that human beings consider spiritual. The real question is what does God consider spiritual.

Scripture declares that spirit and the spiritual are completely based upon God’s Word, nothing more and nothing less. We can be disobedient in the spiritual, but that comes from turning away from God’s Word. And it produces that list of evils.

On the other hand, God’s Word – the real spiritual – produces a different list. We find it in Galatians 5:22-24, “22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Love is the ability to make genuine commitment even to those that are unlovable. Joy is knowing that Jesus Christ has conquered our rebellion on the cross and those who believe in Him will be restored to the holy image of God in the resurrection. Peace is knowing that by His sacrifice Jesus has removed sin and condemnation from us so that we have genuine peace with God. Patience is being able to tolerate those who are slow growing in the Lord. It’s being able to wait for them to catch up. Kindness is doing good when you could just as easily do evil. It’s withholding judgment when you could just as easily judge or speak evil of someone. Goodness is simply taking on God’s chief characteristic and living life through that characteristic. Faithfulness is doing what you pledge yourself to do. It’s staying in proper relationship with those to whom you have pledged yourself. Gentleness is being firm with a measured response instead of a harsh or violent response. Self-control is the God-given power to squelch down your worst impulses – especially in the realm of anger and the realm of sexuality. It’s also the God-given power to discipline yourself, as in making your bed, for instance.

Notice that anyone who has this spirituality is quite different from the average human being. And it all comes from Jesus, the Word of God, and His Spirit residing in us. For Lord Holy Spirit brings the Word to us and establishes Christ in our hearts. For this reason, Lutherans believe that everything spiritual happens only through God’s Word and His Sacraments – even the giving of spiritual gifts.

Almost forty years ago now I popped a most excellent teaching tape into my little cassette machine. (Who has one of those any more?) As I remember it was about an hour and a half long. It fully covered the subject of being filled with the Holy Spirit and it spoke about spiritual gifts, in particular, tongues. From that tape I realized that the Word of God teaches that this controversial gift is in most cases simply prayer to God. Only it’s praying with speech syllables that are not in the normal order of my mother tongue, English. To pray in the Spirit – the other name for tongues – one has to trust Lord Holy Spirit for the order of the syllables. In addition, one has to trust the Word of God that babbling away in meaningless syllables has value in the Kingdom of God. God assures us it does. He is the giver of the gift. He is the giver of the language and He understands the language He gives. And trusting Him we pray in the Spirit according to His will. Again, everything spiritual happens

only through God's Word and His Sacraments. It was through God's Word and faith in His Word that I began to pray to the Lord in this way. God's Word has power.

Now, there are various spiritual gifts taught in Scripture and Lord Holy Spirit apportions them to us as He sees fit. Indeed, like everyone else, there are many more spiritual gifts that I'm not used in than I am used in. That's what makes the body of Christ so important. Others do what I'm not called to, and I do what they're not called to. Only together are we the body of Christ. So, understand that not everyone will be called upon to pray before the Lord in languages they have never learned. But if you are called, you will be attracted to it through God's Word.

Now, even if we participate in a meeting where someone attempts to impart spiritual gifts, consider carefully what Paul says about this in Romans 1:11-12, "11 I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – 12 that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." Notice that impartation rests upon faith – and faith is not something that hangs in mid air by itself. No. Faith attaches the heart to the solid Word of Christ. The Word is how gifts are imparted.

Now here we've got to come back to our starting point for a minute. We need to ask: does participation in any spiritual gift make me righteous before God? Does not participating in a specific spiritual gift make me less righteous before God? Does exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit make me righteous before God? No. Absolutely not to all these questions. However, those who have been made righteous by faith in Jesus Christ exhibit the good works of spiritual fruit, and the good works of various spiritual gifts as Lord Holy Spirit apportions those gifts. Understand this. Good works never declare us righteous. Rather, all good works flow out of the righteousness we have already graciously received in Christ through the gift of faith in His Word.

And this brings us back to the mumbo jumbo of the service. Every church uses liturgy of one kind or another. Go back week after week to any particular church and you'll see the same things happening. For instance, everybody takes up an offering. Right?

Now, here at Trinity we use an historic liturgy. One of the advantages of doing so is that it's entirely based on the Word. Most obvious is the three lessons we read every week. But the confession of sins and the absolution are based entirely upon the Word. So are the greetings and the various musical elements of the service such as the Sanctus – the Holy, Holy. Holy Communion is straight from the Word. Even the benediction is from Numbers chapter 6. The whole service is designed to proclaim God's Word so that faith may be generated in our hearts by Lord Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther believed that a good way to teach people Christian doctrine is through music. Therefore, Lutherans tend to write hymns full of the sound doctrine that brings eternal life and spiritual health.

And here we get into another realm of the spiritual. Music comes directly from our Creator. He designed us to make music together, to sing together, to chant together. He put His Word to music, as in the musical tunes David and others used to sing the psalms three thousand years ago. Those tunes have long been lost.

However, the church continues to sing the psalms. At present, it's possible to do so in a variety of modes both historic and modern.

There is also Scripture in song. Indeed, I have memorized verses of Scripture that someone has put to a catchy tune.

Unfortunately, modern pop music has made everything a solo or a performance. Therefore, people no longer sing together. I see people singing in their cars alone. But who sings together as a group anymore, especially a large group? Indeed who sings together anymore so that eternal life, spirit and truth might come down through the Word? Don't you know that this is the purpose of singing together in the service? That's why we don't do much in the form of a performance.

In conclusion, words rule life. The words we hear in our heads rule our lives. The words we believe set our course day by day. When a change occurs in the words we believe, then our lives are transformed – for the better, or for the worse.

So, ultimately, the church is never irrelevant. Jesus is never irrelevant. Throughout history His Words have changed many hearts. That people might want to escape Jesus' Words in the present time and believe something else doesn't make His Word irrelevant. All words have spiritual power, and too many people today want evil words and the power to live the kind of life that comes from them. But that doesn't make Jesus irrelevant. His Word is more powerful than any other. Only His Word can give eternal life and righteousness.

Now, God has a way of making His Words look less powerful in this world than the devil's. He's done that from the beginning, starting with Adam and Eve. It's a test of faith. Who will we believe? What will we believe?

But there's nowhere else to go for the words of eternal life. Only Jesus can make us righteous before God. Only Jesus' Words can transform a life lived for self or a life lived for evil into a life lived for God. The human heart is the stage on which the drama of words is played out. Therefore, we do church so that the words of eternal life might prevail in all our hearts. We do church so that we might be made alive in spirit and in truth. We do church so that men and women of all stations in life might hear and believe life-transforming words. Indeed, if "make your bed" can transform a life, how much more can "this is my body, this is my blood." Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.