

THOUGHTS AND INTENTIONS OF THE HEART

Hebrews 4:12-16

The word of God is alive. It is penetrating, perceptive, and powerful. It is *“living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart...”* Faith gives God’s word a reception in our hearts and faith conforms our intentions to God’s word.

The mail carrier paused for a moment to visit with a four-year-old about his baby sister. They discussed the wonder of the new arrival and the mail carrier asked, “Can she talk?”

“No,” the boy replied, “she has her teeth but her words haven’t come in yet.”

An essential message of Hebrews and the New Testament is that God is a God who speaks. God’s words have come to us. In many and various ways in the past God spoke to us. Then God made his ultimate speech in Jesus of Nazareth. God’s word has “come in” in Jesus and it went from a small “w” to a capital “W.” God’s word is real and dynamic, and it is crucial to hear and receive.

When the author of Hebrews writes about the word of God, he uses the same Greek word as John does in the prologue of his gospel – LOGOS. John wrote, *“In the beginning was the Word.”* The author of Hebrews was a Jew writing to Jewish Christians who lived in a world that was strongly influenced by Greek culture. For Jews the word of God was understood as authoritative creation, action and will. We see this in Genesis where the creation of the world takes place by the word of God. *“And God said...”* is

repeated through the creation story. (1) For Greeks the word “logos” from which we get “logic,” signified a divine principle of reason that is within and behind the universe; it maintains order and existence. (2) So, we may say that when the N.T. speaks of the word of God it means divine reason which creates and directs the affairs of creation.

Jews had profound ideas about the word and words.

They held that words are alive and dynamic. The word spoken by a person was an extension of the person him/herself. If a king gave an order to a subject, it was to be obeyed and honored; it carried the power of the king. The word spoken was bound up with the person and purpose of the speaker. And, they held that once a word was spoken it had an independent existence. It was not simply a sound signifying a meaning; it was a living thing that went forth and did things. For instance when a blessing was pronounced it had a lasting effect that could not be changed. This is why once Isaac tricked Jacob into blessing him instead of Esau, Jacob could not take it back and give it to the rightful heir, Esau.

Isaiah heard God say his word would always be

effective; it would always do what God intended it to do. It is part and parcel of Godself. As John says, “*The Word was with God and is God.*” The word accomplishes God’s creative purposes. John adds, “*All things came into being through (the Word) and without (the Word) not one thing came into being.*” God’s word is alive and dynamic.

Hebrews takes this theology deeper. It says the word of God is penetrating and “*sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow...*” It is as though the word of God has a diagnostic

perception that picks up inconsistencies of motivations and intentions between things as close a bone and marrow. No smoothing over outward actions. God's word sees the real purpose of the human heart. It's like a scalpel in the hands of a skillful surgeon, it penetrates and perceives what we really think and believe, desire and feel. (5)

In Elizabeth, NJ there was a 24-year old mother with a 5-year old daughter. Her husband abandoned her. So, to support herself and her daughter, she took on two jobs. During the week, she worked fulltime for a lumber company. On weekends she clerked at a department store at a mall. But she had a problem – no weekend childcare. She was forced to fire a string of babysitters who stole from her. At times they'd leave her daughter unattended and they'd entertain their boyfriends when they were to attend to the child. She had no relatives to help her. She loved her daughter and did not want to leave her alone.

So, what did she do? Believing she had no other options, this mother locked her daughter in her car, while she worked at the mall. One Saturday the police found the girl inside the car with a coat, a blanket, a flashlight, a stuffed animal, and a donut. They arrested the mother and placed the child in protective custody. The department store fired her.

However, the charges against her were reduced when prosecutors found out she was otherwise a responsible parent. "This was not a venal act, but a desperate one," noted a spokesperson for the store. They then offered her a fulltime job, a loan, and a baby-sitting service at a reduced rate. The key was the discovery of her intention. (6)

The issue of the intentions of our hearts is of supreme interest to God. The mission of God's word is to pierce our

hearts to perceive our intentions. Our intentions have a powerful impact on our relationship with God. When God's word pierces our hearts, it is looking for something specific – faith. It looks for our desire to trust, believe, and obey God. What matters in the Christian life, Scottish theologian, John Bailley says, is not momentarily emotion but the intention of faith.

Two things happen when there is faith in our hearts:

1. The Word of God comes alive in us, and 2. our intentions conform to the Word. In writing about God's Word in us John Calvin said:

Hearing is useless unless the word addressed to us by faith be received...Observe the connection between the word and faith. It is such that faith is not to be separated from the word and that the word separated from faith can confer no good...The word never puts forth its power in us, except when faith gives utterance. (10)

Remember what happened when the Israelites came to the edge of the Promised Land after spending years wandering in the wilderness. They sent out twelve scouts to spy the land. Ten returned and reported it was a good land, but it was populated by people who were very strong and well fortified. So, it was untakeable. Two others, Caleb and Joshua, called the Israelites to have faith and take God at his word, and proceed to enter and control the land God had promised them. The people listened to the ten and not to Caleb and Joshua. The result was that a generation of Israelites never received the peace and rest of the Promised Land. They did not have faith and missed the future God had promised them. (11)

Their lack of faith barred God's word from becoming a reality in their lives. Their intent was to avoid risk and their faith withered. God's word was separated from faith and, as Calvin later noted, could do no good.

When we are willing to walk in faith, to trust that the promises of God are for us, then God's word comes alive in our hearts. It has meaning and relevance for us. We find that the intentions of our hearts are conforming to it and it puts forth its power in us.

Emile Carlliet became a distinguished professor at Princeton Seminary. He tells how the intentions of his heart became conformed to God's word. (12) As a young intellectual in France, he set out to find Truth. He spent a decade studying the great philosophers and another decade trying to write his own philosophy. Both decades ended in failure. He returned one evening to find his wife reading the Bible. "Get that book of superstition out of this house," he barked. But with a gentle persuasion, she shared her faith that Truth could be found within the Bible. She moved him just enough that he decided to read some of it for himself. It began a process that changed his life. His comment on first reading the Bible was this: "Finally I have found a book that understands me." His faith grew and the intentions of his heart were conformed to the Word of God. His searching heart was rewarded when his thoughts were given over to God's word.

What Hebrews is saying to us is that in the end we will meet the eyes of God. Nothing can be hidden. Other people may judge us by our outer appearances and pronouncements, God sees us inside out. God knows our every thought and intention. This can be disconcerting.

However, God sends his Word to us to search for faith and to give us to faith. If we take God at his word, we will find our hearts conformed to God's word. God will delight in what he sees.

SOURCES:

1. Earl Palmer, *The Intimate Gospel*, Word, p. 17.
2. R.H. Lightfoot as quoted above, p. 18.
3. William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, WJK, p. 38-39.
4. *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 14.
5. Louie Evans Jr., *The Communicators Commentary*, Vol. 10, Word, p. 104.
6. *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 19, No. 4, p. 6.
7. Ibid, p. 8.
8. Ibid, p.7.
9. Worship Works, Vo. 4, No. 2, p. 8.
10. Peter C. Moore, *The Authority of Scripture*, E.V. p. 8