

Sermon 22, The Penetrating Word, Hebrews 4:12-13

Proposition: The word of God is supremely energetic and sharp, and you'd better listen to Him because He will demand an account from you.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the best sermon on this text might be just to read it to you. If you know a single passage from Hebrews, I hope it is this one. An encomium praising the word of God, it is profoundly moving and rhetorically brilliant. It gives insight into another side of Jesus Christ the living word, and into the written word that lies on our laps. This morning with God's help I will preach this truth to you: The word of God is supremely energetic and sharp, and you'd better listen to Him because He will demand an account from you.

I. Soft-Hearted Listening to God's Word Is Paramount, v. 11

As I have preached to you the last four Sunday, Psalm 95 and Matthew 11 make it clear that soft-hearted listening to God's word is the paramount task of the Christian life. The way in which the Spirit transforms you into the image of the Son is through the word. Speech is our greatest gift, the sign of the rational mind, that which enables us to work together rather than being each on our own like deer and sheep. And speech is, above all, the way in which God communicates with us and shows us Himself. Today, if you will hear His voice with a soft heart, then you will enter His rest. That's what you're here to do — to hear.

II. The Nature of the Word of God, vv. 12-13

And what are you hearing? The word of God. Notice with me the seven characteristics of the word that the writer highlights. We will talk about each of these in turn, and close with a reminder that the God who speaks the Word demands an account from you about how well you listened to the Word.

A. Living

The first adjective applied to the Word of God is that it is living. To state the obvious, this is not a dead letter. That is a word spoken by a legislative body but no longer enforced. Almost all of us have these with our children. I remember when Mom went on a campaign to get us to wear socks in the house. We all rebelled, me most of all. I remember sneaking behind the recliner and removing my socks every chance I got. Well, the “you must wear socks inside” campaign lasted only two days before we won and Mom gave up.

Her word became a dead letter. She had said “You will wear socks in the house,” but our rebellion triumphed and we go barefoot in her house to this day.

The Word of God is not like that. He is living. “It’s alive!” That means it poses a threat in a way that a dead thing can’t and won’t. Does God’s spoken word have life? Only in a derivative sense. The words spoken by God are an expression of His living mind and will. But in the fullest sense, His singular Word, that is, His Son, is living. In fact, Jesus said “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (Joh 5:26 NIV). Did you hear that? Jesus is supremely, utterly, overwhelmingly *alive*. There is nothing dead about Him. He never has a lapse of attention, He’s never “dead to the world,” never “out of it” or “not all there.” He is alive in the same way as His Father, for He is the Word of the Father, the one who expresses all that is in the Father’s mind.

B. Active

He is not only living; He is energetic, supremely so. Jesus slept like other men. But God needs no sleep, and as the Word, He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. He does not yawn, does not say “I don’t have the energy for that right now.” We have talked frequently about God’s mighty, rushing energy. He is pure act. The energy contained in a semi truck hurtling its 80,000 lbs. forward at 80 mph is nothing compared to the energy, the ever-flowing waterfall that is the Son of God.

Imagine the text reading “The word of God is dead and passive.”

To say the least, it highlights how incredible it is to hear that His word is living and active. There is nothing dead about it, nothing passive about it, nothing enervated and weak about it. When the Word of God says something, there is no turning it back.

C. Sharp

Indeed, the Father’s Word is sharp. We use this adjective all the time to describe others (though rarely to describe ourselves). It’s generally complimentary: “He was really sharp.” Well, the Word of God is not just sharp. He is the sharpest, sharper than any sword.

Pastor Doug Wilson likes to use the insult “He was about as sharp as a bowling ball,” pretty much an equivalent to humorist Dave Barry’s “He had the IQ of a rutabaga.” The Word of God is sharper than fifty million supercomputers. He is sharper than any veneer-cutting blade or surgeon’s scalpel.

Do you know Jesus not just as meek and lowly (for He is that), but also as living, active, and sharp? “My Savior is the sharpest mind in Mensa,” or “You know the people at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton? He makes them look like bozos.” As Eliphaz put it, “He takes

the wise in their craftiness.” That’s how sharp He is. Scripture contains several other testimonies to the same effect:

1Co 3:19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

Job 37:24 "Therefore men fear Him; He does not regard any who are wise of heart."

Psa 9:15 The nations have sunk down in the pit which they have made; In the net which they hid, their own foot has been caught.

Pro 21:30 There is no wisdom and no understanding And no counsel against the LORD.

Isa 29:14 Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; And the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, And the discernment of their discerning men shall be concealed."

Jesus is sharp. The word of God is sharp. In the figure of the two-edged sword I think we can also discern the truth that it cuts both ways — to salvation and to destruction, positively and negatively, the one who wields it and the one against whom it is wielded. The word of God is unbelievably sharp.

D. Piercing

It is also piercing. An edged sword with no point is, well, pointless. A pointed sword with no edge is also not particularly useful in battle. But a sword with both point and edge is effective for every work of the soldier. The word of God pierces to the subatomic level in the physical world, and to the roots of the personality in the spiritual realm. It divides the soul from the spirit in spiritual terms. The soul is the principle of life, while the spirit is the rational faculty, the inner core within that principle. The word of God can cleanly slice between those — in other words, it can obliterate any ensouled creature. We speak of a mere flesh wound, of being grazed, of having been pierced only through soft tissue which will heal quickly. This is the opposite end of the scale. To have your joints and marrow separated from one another is to be physically disassembled in the most complete way. There is nothing left; you are a stain on the wall or mark on the carpet. Same goes for the separation of soul from spirit. If you think death, the separation of body and soul, is traumatic, you should try the utter destruction of the personality. We speak of death rays and vaporizers; they are fearsome weapons in the physical realm, even if they remain entirely imaginary. But the word of God is so piercing that it can and will divide your soul and spirit from each other — in other words, it will not only destroy personality, but annihilate its very roots. The spirit is the life-principle inside the life-principle that forms and animates the body. To separate those two is to deprive you not only of physical life, but of every form of existence, even the most attenuated. Even the most hardened materialist dares not speak of a death ray that can obliterate ghosts and disassemble spiritual entities into their constituent elements. But that is the prerogative and action of the Word of God.

I’ve quoted to you before Chesterton’s words about how you will never see a statue or picture of Christ in wrath; the thought is more than we can bear. But have no doubt that this: this central quality of the seven is well within His power and His rights. Forget lightning bolts or fire from heaven; forget a bullet to the brain; forget Force chokes. His power is subtle, deadlier, and infinitely more frightening, for there is no coming back from a mortal wound to the human spirit.

E. Judging

Oh, and by the way, this infinitely sharp, infinitely piercing Word is well placed to judge. In fact, that's one of His jobs. Pope Francis may have famously said "Who am I to judge?", and Jesus Himself said to someone who asked Him to force his brother to share the inheritance "Man, who made me a judge and divider over you?"

But that disclaimer aside, Jesus is indeed the judge of all the earth who will certainly do what is right. As judge, He is perfectly able to execute any penalty He assigns.

F. Penetrating

He is also able to judge with perfect righteousness, for He has perfect knowledge of the facts and the law. Every extenuating circumstance, every aggravation, every provocation and every mitigation — He sees them all. Nothing is hidden from His sight. Iran, so we believe, has hidden its nuclear program in a cave so deep that even our biggest bunker-busting bomb can't hit it. We have a 15-ton bomb whose explosion can penetrate nearly two hundred feet deep. But the Iranians have buried their nuclear facility at least 260 feet deep. That hides it from our prying satellite eyes. It's only a matter of time before they get the bomb, and who knows what blackmail they may try to pull on the Gulf countries across the way. It's not called the Persian Gulf for nothing.

But to return the word of God: His eyes can penetrate 260 feet of rock as easily as yours can penetrate 260 feet of air. He can see through lies, through clothing, through minds, through planets and stars and light-years of distance. Nothing can shield you from His gaze — nothing.

G. Inspecting

And believe me, that gaze is interrogating what it sees. He is inspecting everything; He is the judge of all, and He takes that responsibility seriously. You will never see God saying "Well, I don't know whether I should just overlook that." He knows what deals are big and which are small. He knows what's right and what's wrong, and He decides between them so accurately that a single part per trillion is noted and scrupulously accounted for.

God inspects. It's not just that He can see; He does see. He is actively looking. Unlike us and our AI systems, He can process all of it at once.

Lori told me that the SSA stopped her husband's Social Security immediately upon his death. "Eighty million people [enrolled] and they stopped it right away." Guess what: God's gaze is even more accurate, more surveillant, than the Social Security Administration's.

That is the sevenfold character of the word of God.

III. The God Who Speaks the Word Demands an Account from You, v. 13c

And the God who speaks this word demands an account from you — from *you*. You have to deal with the one who is infinitely sharp, infinitely piercing and judging and active and, well, *dangerous*. He has seen everything. He has seen your actions, good and bad. Our passage poses two questions in particular that He will ask you.

A. Did You Listen to Him with a Soft Heart?

The first one, posed by the entire previous passage, is whether you listened to Him with a soft heart. Did you hear His voice today? Was your heart soft? Did your life and actions perceptibly

change as a result of what He said to you? Or did you simply let it go in one ear, out the other, and walk away?

The whole extended meditation on Psalm 95 — probably the longest exposition of a Scripture passage in the New Testament — poses the question of whether you have come to worship with a malleable heart that is ready to change in response to His instructions.

B. Are You Entering His Rest?

The second question that He is going to ask is whether you are striving to enter His rest. Is the rest of God important to you? Are you spending a day today learning from Jesus to be meek and lowly in heart so that you can find rest for your soul?

Brothers and sisters, the word of God is not dead and passive. He is living and active. He is not dull, but sharp as a whetted razor. He is able to disassemble your body on a molecular level, and slice your soul into its constituent elements as easily as you can separate two Legos. “Seemed like a good idea at the time” is not going to be a satisfactory response. “But Lord, I thought you liked me being a tyrant at home and a self-righteous fundy at work.” He won’t like that either. Nor will He want to hear that you had good intentions but just never got around to it because you had too much to do.

Brothers and sisters, even though Jesus has taken our sin, we will still stand before His judgment seat. We will be called on the carpet in a very real and inescapable way. Are you making your decisions today based on that future moment of accountability?

Don’t envy sinners. Always be zealous in the fear of the LORD. Remembering what His mighty Word is like will help you do that. You would never dream of attempting to stick your fingers into the fan on a large diesel engine — it’s sharp, it’s powerful, and it will damage you severely. Do you fear the Lord more than you fear belts, fans, traffic, and speeding bullets? You will give an account to Him. Meditate on the properties of His word. Fear Him; yes, I tell you, fear Him. Live in such a way that when you come to give an account, you need not fear because you know that the Word has already evaluated you and said “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.” Amen.