

Words Versus Images

We Learn God's Way Through Words

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Have you ever thought seriously about the difference between your life today and the life of one of your ancestors back in the 19th century, a little more than a hundred years ago?

It is amazing that these two worlds are hardly comparable!

Your ancestor lived before the widespread use of electricity, telephones, automobiles, airplanes (we just saw the hundredth anniversary of the Wright Brothers, and their airplane, at the end of 2003), and just before many of our modern conveniences were invented.

These are things that we take for granted—these modern conveniences—and, indeed, we consider most of them to be necessities, whether they are or not. So, this ancestor lived in a time that if we were taken from our time and placed back there, we would hardly know what to do. We could hardly keep ourselves fed, or clothed, because we are so used to all these things that have made our lives so much easier—things that have changed life, changed the way we live over the past hundred or so years.

Now, people who study language and communications are generally aware of the linguistic and communicative changes—sometimes very major—between centuries. If you were to go back to your ancestors' time, just a hundred or so years ago, they would look at you, at least askance, just when you opened your mouth and talked, because we do not talk like they spoke. They spoke very elaborately and we will get onto this a bit later. But, we speak very simply.

Our vocabulary has shrunk considerably. We contract ourselves quite a bit. And we use a great many slang expressions that would not have been used back then even if they had been known because it was just not considered to be proper to speak in such a way, normally, at least in what was considered polite conversation.

Now, sometimes these changes have occurred between centuries, like I mentioned, sometimes just between generations. It takes very little time for some things to change.

For instance, words go in and out of vogue. Just think of the word that was in vogue, in style, used by everybody, at least by every young person in the 1950s, and that is the

word "swell." "That's swell! I really like that!"

That became "neat!" And, then that became "cool!" And, then that became "boss!" And, then that became "bad!" And, then that became "cool!" again. And now, who knows what the in vogue word is for something that you really think is interesting.

Words change usage. It only took about one generation for the word "gay" to be hijacked from meaning "merry and exuberant," to become "a homosexual."

Now if you say that you had "a gay old time!" as in the Flintstones' theme song, people would look at you like you had just sprung "out of the closet!"

That only took a few decades.

Even whole modes of expression change.

Did you know that in 1863—I believe it was in November—they had a memorial service, or day, at the Gettysburg battlefield? The battle had been waged in early July, and they had come to memorialize the dead, and make speeches over them. Of course, this is when President Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address.

However, he was only the second speaker of the day. The other one was a man by the name of Stanton. He spoke for two and a half hours! He was known in his time as a wonderful speaker, rhetorician or whatever that word is. They were able to follow him, out in the elements for two and a half hours, and not get up and leave.

We could also talk about the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Do you know that those Lincoln-Douglas debates went on for about seven hours! I believe the schedule went something like this: One of them was given three hours or so to give his side. Then they had thirty minutes for another to give his rebuttal. Then *he* would have three hours to give his platform, and the first man, then, gave his thirty-minute rebuttal.

Could you imagine sitting, or standing, listening to somebody's train of thought for—we do it here for an hour and fifteen minutes—but, people at the time were content to listen to somebody go on about politics for three hours!

Today, if the President goes over in the State of the Union Speech, like Bill Clinton did, people call him long-winded! And he only went over about fifteen or twenty minutes—about as long as one of our sermons!

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But, a person speaking an hour or an hour and a half is now considered to be boring! People do not have the ability to listen to someone that long any more. You have to remember that in our television culture there is only maybe 10 minutes between commercials. Advertisers have found that that is about the length that they can expect people to sit, and listen, or watch anything. Until they feel they need to get up, and stretch, and go to the refrigerator, hit the bathroom, or whatever, because people have been trained over the years not to pay attention.

Now, two books that I have recently read. I have them here with me to show the people in Fort Mill. This one is by Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. I recommend this very highly. The other here is by a man named John McWhorter, *Doing Our Own Thing: the Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care*. That gives you the tone of the book.

Both of the men are semanticists, or one is a semanticist and one is a linguist. Dr. Maas will have to tell me if there is a difference.

Postman was the professor of communications at New York University and was also editor of the *Journal for General Semantics, Etc.*, for many years.

McWhorter is a man about my age, maybe born a year before me. He is a black man, and is something of a phenom among linguists. He just has a tremendous ability to learn languages. He is also a music critic. He is a music critic on Broadway, actually. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of California at Berkley. So, he has got a pretty good resume there.

I mentioned that he was black because he deals with the way that black culture has affected American W.A.S.P. (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) culture. He is a fairly conservative man, probably somewhat a centrist, but a little bit more toward the conservative end. He has written two other books that have made the best seller list. One is called, *The Power of Babel*, (not the Tower) meaning the power that is in all this confusion of languages. And the other one is called, *Losing the Race*, in which he basically told black people that they are losing the battle of this race controversy in America, because of the way that they are using their language, or not using their language. It was a diatribe against ebonics and other things of that nature.

Both of these men are social critics, you might say, who look at our culture in terms of language, or through the lens of language and semantics might be a better way to put it.

Both of these books discuss how the way that we communicate as the twentieth century

ended and the twenty-first began has changed for the worse.

Postman focuses on the differences between what he calls a Typographic Culture, which is primarily a written culture. But, it also includes speech patterned after written language. As I mentioned, Lincoln, and Douglas, and Stanton, all spoke like they wrote, especially in terms of public discourse.

Anyway, Postman sees a great difference between this Typographic Culture and what he calls the Image Culture. The Image Culture, he says, actually began with the telegraph, which then went to the telephone and from there into television.

What it did—and I should mention, that it did not end with television, but it made its way into movies, and even picture books, and magazines that are heavy in pictures. Of course, we are talking about *National Geographic*, *Life*, and even *Time*, *Newsweek* and those sorts of journals that have a great number of images in them. They basically tell you stories through images and very simplified language, what has come down to be called, "Sound-bites"—very short, very shallow descriptions of things.

His conclusion is that this major shift from verbal to visual, from words to pictures, has dumbed us down and weakened both the transmission and reception of ideas. This is a very important point in this sermon.

It has made us shallow.

Now, McWhorter fundamentally agrees with Postman, but he concentrates on the shift from highly refined and exact language, to what is essentially street lingo. He blames the 1960s for this change. He thinks that the 1960s was where everything began to go downhill, at least in terms of language in America.

Before then, the refinement of a person's speech revealed his upbringing, his education, and his social status. But, afterward the culture valued not a person's erudition, but his realness, meaning, "Is he like me?" a man of the street, a man of the earth. Is he like all the rest of us?

The culture also valued his accord with the common man, and not with the elite. That was the era of antisestablishmentarianism (anti-establishment). Also the culture, at that point, began to value informality to a great degree. This is not only seen in language, but also in our dress and other visible factors.

McWhorter says that we should care about this major change in our language because

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it reflects a major change in our culture away from refinement, and complexity—exactness and skilled effort—toward coarseness, plainness, imprecision, and improvisation. These are all signs of a culture in decline.

The only one that may seem to be out of place is plainness. But what he means by this is that people no longer take pride in their expression. They no longer try to make things pretty. In a way, it is away from beauty and toward drab.

So, we have gone away from refinement, complexity, exactness, and skilled effort, toward coarseness, plainness, imprecision, and improvisation.

Both of these men conclude that many Americans, and to a degree other English speakers, are beginning to lose—or have lost—their ability to think, reason, and communicate difficult, precise, and elaborate ideas.

It is not that they cannot think, or cannot reason, or cannot communicate, but it is that they cannot do these things with difficult, precise, and elaborate ideas. The more elaborate the idea, the more complex the thought, the fewer people that are able to really understand it.

Instead, most Americans want their views molded by image-heavy TV news, with sound-bite language; or if they care to read, they want their views molded by absurdly simplified language which is rendered in sixth grade English.

Sadly, the schools are going along with this trend, rather than bucking it. In fact, there are some schools that barely teach grammar any more. In fact, McWhorter does not seem to see anything wrong with that. He mentions it. But, he says that this is just a language in flux. It is being changed, and grammar is just something that has been forced upon the language.

And I guess, linguistically that is true. However grammar is basically just rules of proper speech and writing. It helps one to communicate with another person if you both agree on these rules, and therefore, you can understand. One can give and the other can take and you have a meeting of the minds.

Now, of course, my concern is spiritual. We might say, "Yes, God's way is initially simple." And God gives it to us sometimes in very simple language. I John 4:8 and 16, "God is love." That is very easy on the surface. But, the concept of what God is, and the fact that love is an overriding term that helps to define His character, is a deep subject.

A great deal of depth must be learned before we can be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. I hope to show today that God deliberately reveals Himself in words and concepts, some of them very complex, and hard to understand. Even Peter mentions that Paul brings in many things that are hard to understand, and people who really do not have the faculties for understanding them, twist them to their own destruction.

Anyway, God reveals Himself in terms of words and concepts instead of images—or even sound-bites, you might say—because He is teaching us to think, to reason, to discriminate and communicate just as He does.

Is He not forming us into the image of Jesus Christ?

That leads me to my first scripture. When we talk about words, this is the place to start. Words in terms of spiritual things. You all know this by heart.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The apostle John begins his gospel further back in time than any other biblical author, and the first thing that he does in order to introduce this Being, or to talk about this Being is to introduce the One who became Jesus Christ as the Word.

Of course, this is the word *Logos* in Greek, which is in itself, if you read any of the books or lexicons on this word, pretty complex. It is a complex term. It can be defined simply, as Mr. Armstrong did, as "Spokesman." But, there are many other ideas that are in this term. It is a quite far-reaching theological term. I guess one could do several sermons just on the word *Logos* itself and all of its ramifications.

Vine's defines it as, "The expression of thought, as embodying a conception, or idea." It can also mean, very simply, a saying, or statement. That is probably its most basic definition—a saying or statement.

It can also mean a discourse, a speech, just plain speech; and it can be refined down to instruction. When it is used as to what God says, it implies the revealed will of God.

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I think that Adam Clarke has a very interesting comment on this verse (John 1:1) because he is trying to help us to relate it to Jesus Christ, but he is also trying to show the breadth of the term.

Logos, which signifies a word spoken, speech, eloquence, doctrine, reason, or the faculty of reasoning, is very properly applied to him [Jesus Christ], who is the True Light which lights every man which comes into the world; who is the fountain of all wisdom; who gives being, life, light, knowledge, and reason, to all men; who is the grand Source of revelation, who has declared God unto mankind; who spake by the prophets, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy; who has illustrated life and immortality by his Gospel; and who has fully made manifest the deep mysteries which lay hidden in the bosom of the invisible God from all eternity.

Did you notice the broad range of ideas that were expressed in this word *Logos*? In just the first line, "word spoke, speech, eloquence, doctrine, reason, or the faculty of reasoning. . ." That covers a lot of ground.

Jesus describes Himself in John 14:6, another memory scripture.

John 14:6 I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Let us just stick this idea of the *Logos* in there; or "The Word," since Jesus is the Word. We could say that no one comes to the Father except through The Word. And then, start adding in that broad idea of what The Word is.

We come to God through His spoken Word. We come to God through Jesus', and the apostle's (who are speaking God's Word), eloquence. We come to God through His doctrine. We come to God through His reason. We come to God through His wisdom. We could add that we come to God through His revelation. We come to God through His testimony. We come to God through His gospel. We come to God through His manifestation of the mysteries of God. All of these things play a part in our coming to God through this One who is the Word, Jesus Christ.

In effect, we could say to sum this up that everything we know about God and His way of life, the means of coming to Him, as well as the application of what we learn, comes through words.

How many words are in this Book? There are over 31,000 verses in this Book. Each verse has maybe a dozen words. You do the math! Hundreds of thousands of words have been revealed to us. And, each one of them is helping us to come to the understanding of what God is, His way of life, and how it is that we can follow it.

This concept of everything coming through words was one of the things that was in the forefront of Jesus' mind, especially on this occasion. John 6 is the Bread of Life chapter. We are going to start in verse 53 as He is wrapping up His sermon to the people here:

John 6:53-57 Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living [Notice that word, "living." It comes up later.] Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever." These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life."

If you were trying to come to an understanding of what this hard saying means, one way of encapsulating or simplifying it, is that to eat His flesh, and drink His blood means that we must ingest the word (that is His teaching, His revelation, His mode of life) and imbibe of His life (that is live it, and practice it—apply it).

That is only one way of looking at it. There are other things involved in the Passover service for example—the symbolism. But I am speaking in terms of words in this sermon. And He is the Word, and He says that we have to eat His flesh, the flesh of the Word, and imbibe of His blood, which was His own life that He lived.

But, everything here revolves around words. Receiving them, considering them, understanding them, applying them, and ultimately teaching them to our children or to others in the congregation.

He then, right here at the end—actually not the end of His discourse, but it is the end of where I stopped—throws in that His words have a spiritual dimension to them. That means that they affect our minds, our beliefs and our character. And if we keep them and follow them where they lead, well, He tells us where they lead. Ultimately, they bring us life—the life of God, eternal life.

If you want to jot down John 17:3, it says that eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ, whom He sent.

So, it all comes back around again. These words reveal Christ, and then we come to know Him; and by coming to know Him, we have life.

This was not a new idea. The God of the Old Testament taught this to Israel in Deuteronomy 8. It was given in a little bit different form, but it is the same idea.

Deuteronomy 8:3 So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know. . .

Remember? Jesus mentioned in John 6 that what He was not talking about was the manna which the Israelites ate and died. But, He was talking about something more spiritual in terms of His flesh.

Deuteronomy 8:3 . . .and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

Of course, Jesus repeats this in Matthew 4:4 and Luke 4:4 as a way to hold off Satan the Devil in the first temptation. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the Mouth of the Lord."

So, here we have the Old Testament foundation for what Jesus was speaking about in the New Testament, which basically says that a person will truly live an abundant life if he follows every instruction of God.

This could be taken in a physical sense, that God's way, if we follow it, will bring us blessings! It is just automatic. But, if we take it up one notch higher, and put it into the

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spiritual realm, this is exactly what Jesus was saying. If we live by every word of God, and keep His commands, if we do what He says, and follow in His footsteps, we will ultimately have eternal life.

Deuteronomy 8:6 shows what this "living by every word" entails.

Deuteronomy 8:6 Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.

This is a kind of three-part process. The first is keeping the commandments, which is, in a way, coming to know what God says. The first part has to do with doctrine. The second part is walking in His ways, which is application. And the third part is fearing God, which has to do with our attitude.

So, if we cover these three parts—doctrine, application, and attitude—doing what God has revealed to us in His Word, then the ultimate end of all this is eternal life.

Each one of these parts, though, getting back to the theme, is dependent upon knowing, understanding, and assimilating words and concepts. It always comes back to these words.

Hebrews 4:12 expands on the working of God's words.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Paul's metaphor, here, is really striking. It is almost as if he says that what God says is a living, dynamic creature; like it has life of its own. And this creature—this living, powerful, active, effectual, dynamic, energetic creature—cuts us open when we receive the words. It is like it is cutting us open and it penetrates far into the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds.

And while it is there, it does not just sit there. It exposes, or reveals or analyzes our emotions, our reflections and our desires. Of course, in the next verse the idea shifts to God, and he says that there is no one who can hide from God. He sees everything.

But, the Word of God—the things that He teaches us—works this way in us. It goes in,

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and it kind of opens us up, and exposes everything to the light of the truth. In a way, we could say that while words normally do not have a great affect on us (our normal conversation—something on the radio, or movie, or television), God's words, though, are like bombs! Just waiting to explode within us.

For some people, if they have the right attitude, it clears out space for growth. But, in other people, when those bombs go off, they demolish and destroy. That is the two-edged sword. One edge is destructive and the other one is constructive.

Consider a sword, which is normally used for warfare, and killing; but on the other hand there is the scalpel that a surgeon might use. His intent is to do good. But, they both are still the edge of a knife.

God's Word is the same way. It can have the same effect. It can either convict and convert, or it can condemn and destroy. By what are we going to be judged? By the Word of God! It is that central and powerful.

There is an Old Testament counterpart to this as well. This is not quite the same metaphor, but it gives you an idea of the dynamism—the activity and effectiveness—of God's Word. Isaiah writes:

Isaiah 55:11 So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void [empty or unfruitful], but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

God's words are not just little bits of ink on a page. Properly used, in a proper attitude, they are alive within us. And they must be! It has to be this way! Because, what are they producing? What is the fruit of these words?

It is life, God's life! This is the way that God has chosen to reveal Himself, and to move us along the way—through words.

Now, let us go to the other side of this for a moment.

Deuteronomy 4:15 is a reiteration and somewhat an expansion on the second commandment:

Deuteronomy 4:15 Take careful heed [I want you to notice God's wording here: be especially careful] to yourselves, for you saw no form when the

LOORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire. . .

Now, of course, He is probably speaking primarily to Moses here, but we could say that this is also at Mt. Sinai when He gave the law. That is probably more of what it is.

Deuteronomy 4:16-18 . . .lest you act corruptly and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth or the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground or the likeness of any fish that is in the water beneath the earth.

Deuteronomy 4:23 Take heed to yourselves [He repeats it!], lest you forget the covenant of the LOORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the LOORD your God has forbidden you.

And then this is later quoted in Hebrews:

Deuteronomy 4:24 For the LOORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. [That is Hebrews 12:29 I believe.]

Now, notice this! God gave us words in order to understand Him. He allows us to describe Him in words of our own within the parameters of what He has revealed—what is in this Book. But, He strictly forbids us, and tells us to take especial care, not to make any image of Him—any statue, any painting, any drawing, any kind of picture, or representation of Him at all.

Why?

Obviously, the first reason is that it leads to idolatry. Just as this commandment says if you were to go on in Exodus 20:4. It says that you shall make no image of Him, and verse 5 says, "neither shall you bow down to one." Of course, that is primarily what He is concerned about in the second commandment—any form of idolatry.

But think about this: If we were to make a physical representation of God, whether by statue, picture, drawing, whatever, and even if it were perfect (Take Michelangelo, and you get him to make an exact representation of God in the medium of his choice, and he

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gets God's image down to the "freckle"—the smallest part I could think of), it would still be a misrepresentation of Him? It would be a lie!

Think about this for a minute: Even if we got an exact, perfect representation of God, it would be a lie! Why? Because any image is woefully incomplete! A picture, a statue, a drawing, whatever, cannot express the eternal, holy *character* of God! There is a saying, and you all know it: A picture is worth a thousand words.

What do a million *words* express? Something far deeper and more meaningful than a mere momentary image, because that is all an image is—a moment in time, frozen. But, what happened before? And, what happened after? Now, a statue is three-dimensional, and a picture is two-dimensional. But, God is multi-dimensional! We could say that He is at least four-dimensional because He is eternal. Add in the element of time!

Of course, we have to add in all the dimensions of His character, and what that means, and what He has planned—what He is trying to get accomplished. What He wants from each of us.

Any picture would be a lie.

Men have written billions of words in an attempt to understand God, and it is still not enough. Images are limited, and static, capturing a mere second in time. They have no depth. And, when you really think about it, you cannot learn very much from them at all. Do you know what images are best at conveying? Raw emotion! From hate to consolation, or what have you—some saccharine-love. But, images really have a hard time of expressing any kind of complexity at all.

I mentioned this a short time ago that Kristy and I, and David, and the others involved in the editing process, particularly the graphics process of the *Forerunner*, every month have to think of an image to put on the front cover. But, we are dealing with issues, doctrines, ideas that cannot be expressed by an image. How, for instance, do you express "justification" in an image?

Now, somebody may be able to come up with something, maybe use ruled, lined paper, and expect people to understand that margins are justified. But, that is hard to get across in a picture.

Of course, anything that has to do with God in His Person, we are forbidden by the second commandment to capture graphically. And so, we search high and low for images that can at least in some way convey the idea of one of the articles.

I just went crazy with glee and joy a few months ago when Mike Ford did that article on snake handling because here was an article that we could put a picture with! Finding a picture of someone handling a snake got across the idea of the article! That was great. Kristy did not think it so great because she had to go look for it. It took her a long time. She had to go back many years of photos to find somebody handling a snake. We ended up with a black and white picture, which she colorized so that it would appear a bit more up to date and better on a color cover.

But, you see my point. Spiritual concepts are hard to get across through images. But, in comparison, they are easy to get across in words.

Words are far more descriptive than any picture! That is precisely what God has told us to do in His Word in terms of His way of life. We are to think of them in terms of words, and reason them through with words. Discuss them with words. Teach them with words.

In a way, this is exactly what Neil Postman's conclusion was about our television image culture, and the way that it has impacted public discourse in America. He contends that before, in the 19th century, people really thought about the issues of the day, and they were willing to sit there in the sun, or in the cold of November, to listen to a politician who had an idea about the best course for America. And they were willing to sit there for three hours, and three more hours to hear his rival give his opinion on it.

After seven hours of discourse, you could come to some pretty meaningful conclusions about things, provided the speakers had something worthwhile to say. But how much time do people spend listening to, thinking about, reading about things that impact upon each individual American? You could say that we really do not understand the issues at all in comparison.

I know this for a fact. I heard this just yesterday, that the Congress of the United States voted on the Patriot Act before they had even read it. This was back in October of 2001, just after the 9-11 incident. They rushed through the Patriot Act before it was even printed. This was three-hundred and something pages of laws (and I am not sure just how many were in it) of regulations, and they merely voted on it because the administration convinced them in sound bites that it was necessary.

It has come to the point that every issue that comes through America is a matter of "what good does it do for me?" rather than, "is this right and good for America?" or, "what are its ramifications?" "How is this going to affect not just us, but generations of Americans to come?"

Just think about the recent Medicare drug bill. That thing has the potential of sinking our ship, or at least the Medicare ship. But, because there were millions of Americans who wanted a free hand-out from the government in terms of their medical care, it passed. And now, we have got to find a way to pay for it, to implement it. There was no thought to what it may do to the country down the road.

And, that is the way with every issue that comes up. It is a matter of, "how much does it mean to me?" Maybe it has been that way all along, but at least years ago, there was some thought put into it before the decisions were made.

Now think about this in terms of believing and living God's way of life. After Christ's resurrection this idea, in John 20, was on His mind. Verses 24 through 31 have to do with "doubting" Thomas. Notice what Jesus says here.

John 20:24-26 Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

He wanted to see the image. He wanted to see Jesus Christ.

John 20:26-28 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

And, to his credit Thomas has a wonderful answer. . .

John 20:28-30 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Many, many, many people saw Jesus Christ during His ministry. Is it not a little bit amazing that not one of them left us a picture, a painting, a mosaic, or a carving of Him?

Think about it. There must have been some artists in the crowd. But, no representation of Jesus Christ has come down to us from that time. And, these millions of people probably saw Him in the course of His ministry. Also, we know that hundreds saw Him after He rose from the dead, but none of them left us an image of Him.

Do you know what they did leave us? Four gospels! Four books full of writing and description of Him, His manner of life, and His teaching and of course, His death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven as well.

The purpose of these words Jesus says here, is to create faith in us so that we will not just believe, but practice God's way of life in preparation for living that way eternally. We walk by faith, not by sight!

We will see a similar thought by the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15. Just as he gets into the resurrection chapter, he writes:

I Corinthians 15:1-2 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

The word is so important and fundamental to our salvation. **That** is what we have to cling to. It is on that that we stand, and we endure, and we keep on keeping on so that one day we will be given eternal life in full.

Now, we will make this a bit personal. Luke 8 is the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. We will start in verse 4 and read all the way to verse 15. As we are going through this, think about what kind of ground are you for the word of God.

Luke 8:4-8 And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He

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had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

This was an important thing to God and Jesus Christ.

Luke 8:9 Then His disciples asked Him, saying, "What does this parable mean?"

They at least got the idea that this was important.

Luke 8:10-15 And He said, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience [endurance, perseverance].

Which one of these pieces of ground are we?

We all like to think of ourselves as the last patch of ground—the fertile ground. But, if we are honest—if we really think deep about this—each of us are varying degrees of these. A lot of the time it depends on the specific teaching that hits our ears.

Our experience has shown that any teaching of God that we do not receive and keep, and use, can—I am not saying that it *will*—can cause us to stumble and even forsake the truth altogether.

I mean, just think about all the things that have driven people away from the church. They are of a broad spectrum of the truth of God. Whether it is something essential like one of the Ten Commandments (the Sabbath is absolutely essential), or a twiggy matter, it has bearing on our worship and practice (like the calendar). Both of those

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things have led people away from the church, and away from God. But, they may have agreed on most everything else.

So, in many cases they were fertile ground, but in this one area, they were the wayside, and Satan came and gobbled them up.

From verse 8, which I stopped at, and made the comment about Jesus there—to Him this is an extremely important concept.

Part of our fertility as ground for God's Word depends on God opening our minds to accept the truth. The other part, though, concerns on how well we have prepared ourselves to deal with this Word. We have a responsibility to make sure that our ground is fertile.

How well have we trained our minds, not just to receive God's Word, but to process it, to think it through, to see where it fits in the jigsaw puzzle of all of God's truth? How can we apply it in our lives, personally? How diligent are we at trying to understand more than just the basics of God's way of life?

Which leads me to Romans 11, verse 33. Paul writes:

Romans 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

God's way may be simple at first, but there is so much depth to what He has revealed to us through His word. Paul says:

Romans 11:33 How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

He is telling us that these things are so deep, and so complex, and so spiritual, and holy that they are beyond our ability to grasp some of them.

Romans 11:34 For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?"

Who knows more than God? Who are we to tell Him, "This is the way that it should be."?

Romans 11:35 Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?"

The obligations fall always on the other side. He always gives to us and then we repay to Him.

Romans 11:36 For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Think about what Paul just said here. There are things in God's Word that are way out there as far as our ability to understand them. And that is the truth. There are many things that are hard for us to understand. We either do not have the background, or we do not have the mind power, or we do not have quite all the essential truths that we need to come to understand them; or simply, God has not revealed some certain fact that we need to make it all come together.

But, what does Paul say? He says not to stop trying to figure them out! Be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you can prove what God's will is at any time, and in any situation, whatever the matter. Do not let the depth of God's truth keep you from searching it out; from making it a part of you.

In other words, we have to exercise our minds with the help of God's Spirit to search out what God requires of us, digging ever deeper so that we can come ever more fully into the image of the One who is the Word, Jesus Christ.

I am just going to go quickly through II Timothy 2 because this whole sermon, in a way, has been an exhortation for us to study more, and deeper, and to think, and meditate on God's way more and deeper, and not be confined to the television mentality—not be confined to the sound bite— but to try and go back to the way that it used to be, at least in this country, when people took the time to try and understand things.

We need to especially do this with God's Word, and not allow ourselves to be distracted by this culture.

II Timothy 2:15 Be diligent [Paul tells Timothy]. . .

That means to really put your nose to the grindstone.

II Timothy 2:15 . . .to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

You get the impression that it takes diligence, and a lot of hard work to rightly divide the word of God. That means that you cut a straight path. It means that you come to understand what it actually means, and how it applies in a proper way.

II Timothy 2:16-17 But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer.

That means to get rid of the distractions that keep you from doing these things. Do not get involved in the rumors of the time, or the interesting little side-lights that might actually lead you right out of God's church. Many people have done this to their destruction.

II Timothy 3:14-17 But [as for you] you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

It takes diligence and hard work to do anything. My father-in-law says, "Learning is a painful process."

Whether it is learning how to speak a foreign language, play an instrument, conjugate a verb, solve an equation, work through an experiment, or discern what God wants us to learn from a trial, all these take a measure of work, and perseverance, and oftentimes failure, because we become distracted by what is not helpful or true. And then we must, as the saying goes, try, try again.

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I have read these scriptures here in II Timothy 3 because this is our assignment. Continue in the things that we have learned, and press on in learning more and going deeper.

We have to put renewed effort, as the time draws near, into our study and meditation on God's Word. It is what God has given us—His Word—to make us wise for salvation through faith.

It is what God has given us to make us spiritually mature with all the tools and skills that we need to render service to God and our fellow man.