

The Power of the Word

By Lindsay Olesberg

“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop -- thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times what was sown.” -- Mark4:20

Jesus ingeniously uses the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20) to teach his people the true source of influence and impact. The apparently simple story depicts a farmer sowing seed. There is nothing remarkable about the farmer. He sows his seed in the customary fashion, scattering it widely upon the ground. There is nothing unusual about the different types of soil. Each of the four kinds of soil produce exactly as one would expect. Indeed, the only thing unusual at all in the story is the amount of yield of the plants that bear any fruit at all. Most farmers would be thrilled with six or eight fold return. What is this amazing seed that produces thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times what was sown?!

Through his parable, Jesus draws our attention to the power of God’s word. Whether it is spoken, read, taught, or lived out, when people come in contact with the word of God, it has power to bring about enormous fruit. There is power in the word itself. As the author of Hebrews says, “...the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword...” (Heb. 4:12). It is not a merely words on a page. The living God has inspired it and made it spiritually alive, able to reach the heart, soul, and mind of those who hear it and respond to it.

Our confidence as teachers of the word is not in our skill, our personal charisma, or our knowledge of the scripture. Nor is our confidence found in the social dynamic of the group we teach or the analytical skills of the students. Our confidence, as we open up the scripture with a group of students, is that the word of God has spiritual power in and of itself, and if we create space for students to interact with it, there will be some who are “good soil” and will bear incredible fruit. Likewise, we know from Jesus’ parable that not every one who hears the word really hears it and responds to it. Our job as teachers is to teach the word in faith and respond to the word ourselves. The fruitfulness in the lives of those we teach is a work of God.

The goal of all ministry is to cultivate faith in others and ourselves. Faith is a funny thing. It is rooted in the heart, yet is affected by the mind, experiences, relationships, and the will. As staff workers, we seek the transformation of the heart, leading to the transformation of the rest of life. Yet we cannot touch the heart directly. Instead, we pray and we create space for students to encounter God in the scripture. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17)

Carol Davis, the missions pastor at Church on Brady in Los Angeles, tells of a young man named Bill who was quite socially awkward. He signed up for an urban ministry internship, motivated by his love for God and desire to grow as a Christian. She seriously doubted his ability to do effective ministry, especially in a cross-cultural setting. Bill did not speak Spanish, but somehow made a connection with a Spanish speaking family who had recently moved from Mexico. He met with them weekly and read to them a passage from the gospels out of a Spanish Bible. Then he read them six simple questions which he had been taught in his ministry internship that he had gotten translated into Spanish. The questions were: 1) What did you like

best about this story? 2) What did you like the least? 3) What don't you understand? 4) What did you learn about God? 5) What do you personally need to do about it? 6) Which phrase or verse do you want to take away with you?

Each week, Bill read the passage and then asked the questions one by one. Since he didn't understand Spanish, he just waited for the family to talk about the question he asked and when they seemed to stop talking, he asked the next one. Bill and the family continued on like this all summer long, without Bill knowing what they were talking about. At the end of the summer, a Spanish speaking Christian came with Bill to see his Bible study. The family eagerly turned to him and asked, "How do we become Christians?" Shortly thereafter they returned to their village in Mexico and began the same type of Bible study. Many people in the village converted through their ministry.

The most important thing you can do as a teacher is create space and time for people to get in front of the Bible and let it have its affect on them. It is valuable to grow in skill as teachers and to develop methods of Bible study that are appropriate for our audience, but our confidence must never be in our skills or our methods. God's word is powerful so we can teach the Bible and help students learn to study and teach it with full confidence that it will have a powerful affect in the hearts and lives of those who open themselves up to it.

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