



SUNDAY FEBRUARY 4  
9:00AM | 11:00AM

WORDS  
AND  
DEEDS

WORD  
POWER  
WINTER 2024  
SERMON SERIES

Sunday, February 4, 2024  
“Words and Deeds” | Charlie Berthoud  
Matthew 7:21-29

I read the book of Exodus during the month of January, as did many of you. I used my study Bible some days, and other days I used an online Bible. I read the devotions written by people from Covenant. Some days I used the printed devotional, sometimes I read from the email.

Dozens of people—maybe hundreds—in Covenant read Exodus and the devotional last month as well.

The reasonable question for someone to ask me or anyone who spent time reading Exodus is..... “So what?”

More specifically, the someone else might legitimately be wondering: “You read a bunch of words, you prayed well written prayers, you went to Bible studies, and you pondered the ancient words from the Bible, from Exodus.... So what? What difference does it make?”

It’s a good question.

Today is the last day of our sermon series on WORDS. Over these five weeks we’ve reflected on the importance of words.

As important as words are, by themselves, without action or deeds, words lose a lot of power. Words are generally meant to lead to action.

The Bible, along with all sorts of ethics and philosophy teachings warn us of the danger of hypocrisy, of saying one thing and doing another. The word hypocrite has Greek roots, referring to an actor, someone wearing a mask, pretending to be something else. When our deeds don’t correspond with our words, we’re being hypocritical.

Three examples from the Bible:

**1)** The Sermon on the Mount is collection of the teachings of Jesus in chapters 5, 6, and 7. It's a great resource for people who want to learn more about what being a Christian is. Jesus teaches about prayer, and loving neighbors, and not judging, and trusting God, and much more.

At the conclusion of the section, he answers the "So what?" question rather bluntly.

Jesus said, 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

'Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!'

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

**2)** The little letter of James also answers the "So what?" question, reminding us that words by themselves don't mean much. In chapter one, we read:

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived.

This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world. --from James 1 (*The Message*)

In survey after survey, people say that one of the main reasons they don't go to church is because they think Christians are hypocritical. We have to be super intentional about making sure our words are aligned with our deeds.

**3)** One more example: About eight centuries before Jesus, the prophet Amos denounced the hypocrisy of rich and powerful people who gathered for worship but ignored suffering in their midst.

I hate, I reject your festivals;  
I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies.  
Take away the noise of your songs;  
I won't listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Clearly the words we read and pray and sing and ponder aren't met to just sit there by themselves. They are meant to change us, to lead us into something, to be put into action.

Jesus Christ came to this world, as the Word made flesh, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God—a new reality of forgiveness, hope, and abundant life. With that proclamation, Jesus called people to live in new ways.

We strive to it words into action here at Covenant. Our calling is Learning God's Love, Living God's Love, which reflects this movement of putting words into action. We gather together to study God's word, to learn about God's love, and then we go forth to make this world a better place.



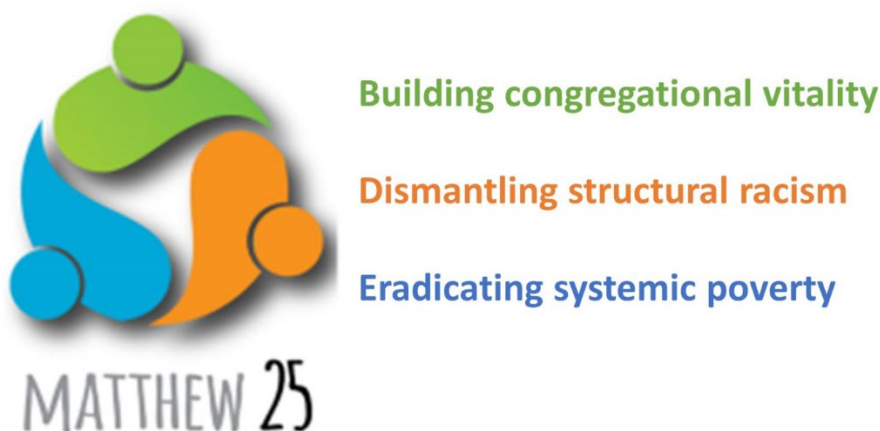
You could say “learning God’s word and living God’s word.”

Sometimes at the blessing, when I raise my hands up, I want to kind of push you out the door, to go out into the world for service, to put the words into action.

The Matthew 25 initiative has given us a good framework for putting the word into action. In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, we read the words of Jesus, showing compassion for the lost, the least, and the last.

Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

The Matthew 25 initiative calls us to action, building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism, and eradicating systemic poverty.



I’m glad to see us working on those initiatives. By reading scripture and planning CONNECT events we’re working on congregational vitality. The Session is going to be discussing what this vitality looks like in the coming months.

Through ongoing partnerships and the Black History for a New Day Class we’re building relationships and becoming less racist, as we wrestle with the big issues of structural racism.

As for eradicating systemic poverty, we’re starting to work on that. One effort begins tomorrow with a four week Zoom discussion with hundreds of Presbyterians around the country, focusing on Matthew Desmond’s book *Poverty, By America*, where he looks at systemic issues.

So sometimes God’s words translate into direct action, as it is doing with Matthew 25.

But I also know that the words into action process happens more subtly and over a long period of time.

Words have a way of sinking into us, and like river water gradually smooths out rocks, God's word has a way of smoothing us out and making us new people, and the words eventually become deeds.

Here at Covenant, we regularly cite Jesus' admonition to love our neighbors. While hearing these words doesn't necessarily make us run home and make cookies or buy flowers for our neighbors, I'm confident that over time these words have helped us think about our neighbors in new ways.

Every first Sunday we read Ten Commandments in worship, and they are found in Exodus chapter 20. I believe that the monthly repetition of "We will not covet our neighbors' things" has changed the way we think about things.

I also believe that saying "We will honor our parents" has subconsciously inspired some phone calls, or words of appreciation, or hugs, or patience with our parents. And I certainly hope that the repetition of the words "We will not commit adultery" has changed people's thoughts and actions.

Words matter. Words have power.

We hear God's word, we learn God's word, we pray God's word, we sing God's word—not just to pat ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves for being smart or enlightened. We learn to live, to live better, more faithfully, more authentically.

We come to church not just to listen to some words and have a donut, but to be open to God's spirit to transform us, to equip us, to make us better people.

And we share Communion not just to have a snack or to mindlessly do a ritual, but to reaffirm that we are part of the body of Christ, called to work for God's kingdom, to remember the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and to have strength to feed a world hungry for food, hungry for justice.

Words have power to inspire, challenge, and shape us. Ultimately power of words is how they are translated into action, to make us more faithful followers of Jesus. So keep reading, listening, praying, pondering.

I'm excited to read a book I just learned about this week: *Reading for the Love of God: How to Read as a Spiritual Practice*, by Jessica Hooten Wilson.

May our words and deeds be a blessing to others and honor our calling as God's people.

To close I want to share a traditional prayer of confession which makes the connection between words and deeds.

Let us pray:

*Most merciful God,  
we confess that we have sinned against you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.  
We have not loved you with our whole heart;  
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.  
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.  
Have mercy on us and forgive us;  
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways.  
May your kingdom come and your will be done. Amen.*