

October 10, 2021

God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha
V. Sharper Than Any Two-Edged Sword
I Kings 21:1-29, Hebrews 4:12

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses in American Christianity today – or perhaps it has always been one of the greatest weaknesses among the disciples of Christ – is our unwillingness to hear the more difficult words of Scripture. In our Bibles, we regularly underline the passages which console and reassure, but rarely the passages which chide, challenge, and convict. In our application of the Word of God to our lives, we are ever looking for upbeat notes of affirmation and helpful practical advice – ever seeking the silver lining of blessing without even noticing the dark cloud of judgment.

Sometimes literally. Will Willimon tells of two sermons preached at seminary chapel services on consecutive days. The Scripture for both was the parable of the talents, where three servants are given differing amounts of money to use for their master while their master is away. The master returns and each servant gives an account of what they have done with their share of the money. The first sermon on this passage was preached by a visiting professor of preaching who, Willimon says, preached a sermon that was “*a rather stereotypical exposition of the parable, stressing how gifted we all were, how blessed.*” The next day a seminary student preaching on this same text and took a very different approach. She stood in the pulpit and said, “*This is a parable of judgment. Jesus says that, in the end, we shall be judged. We shall one day be made to hold our lives in our hands and to answer for what we have done with what we have been given. We shall be judged.*”¹ Same parable, two very different readings – guess which one was the favorite? We feast upon the words which bless, even as we turn up our noses at the words which challenge and convict.

Skye Jethani talked about this in the book we read together during this past Lenten season – his book on the Sermon on the Mount entitled, What If Jesus Was Serious? In the introduction, he told a story about what had helped motivate him to write that book:

Several years ago, I taught a class at my church on the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus’ most famous message, which contains many of our faith’s most important ethical teachings. On the first day of the class, after reading the full sermon together, I asked the students, “How many of you think Jesus actually expects us to live out these commands?” No one raised their hand. I was surprised, so I dug deeper. I asked, “Why shouldn’t we take the Sermon on the Mount seriously?”

“It’s impossible to obey,” one person said. “No one can live like this.”

“Jesus was just showing how we all need God’s grace,” another student shared. “He was illustrating what a perfect life looks like and how none of us can attain it.”

In their view, Jesus must have preached this sermon while frequently winking at His disciples to communicate, “Don’t worry. You don’t have to take any of this seriously.” Never mind that He ended the sermon with a story about the perils of not obeying His words. Today, many Christians simply dismiss the Sermon on the Mount as irrelevant, even as they stridently proclaim their allegiance to Jesus in the culture.²

When it comes to our religion, we want consolation without conviction. We want reassurance without repentance. We want wholeness without holiness. We do not want to die to our sin in order that we might live into Christ – we just want Jesus to grease the wheels of our lives as they already are, so that everything will just be a little easier for us. We don’t want to be transformed – we just want our conformity to be made a little less troublesome. We don’t really want to be saved, meaning both forgiven and sanctified – we just want Jesus to relieve our stress and make us happy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this “cheap grace”.³ But whatever we call it, the important thing to know is that it just simply will not work – neither as a “happy life” strategy, nor as a way of being genuinely Christian – this unwillingness to hear and to heed the harder words of Scripture.

It will not work because God’s Word is not something passively placed in our hands for us to use whenever and solely as we see fit. As the letter to the Hebrews puts it: the Word of God is not a passive tool in our personal well-being toolkit. Rather the Word of God has a vitality, a power, a purpose all its own – independent of whatever we would make of it. The Word of God, says Hebrews, is *“living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* Meaning as much as we want to read only of blessing and never of judgement or command, the Word of God can’t be separated out that way. The two-edged sword – one edge to cut, the other to heal – cannot be divided. We can’t have the one edge without the other. The Word of God wounds us in order truly to heal us – a two-edged sword. The Word of God pierces our defenses in order to make us genuinely safe – a two-edged sword. The Word of God is living and active – a two-edged sword – with one edge calling us to repentance and to transformation, and with the other edge forgiving our sin and making us new.

And if we would truly have the Word of God, the only way we can ever truly have it is on its own terms and whole – the parts we love to read, as well as the parts we love to avoid. One of the hardest things we must learn, but one of the most important if we would grow to be true disciples of Jesus Christ, is that all of God’s Word is equally for our benefit – the judgment as well as the blessing. That it is all for the happiness and wholeness and fulfillment we seek – the passages which chastise and command, as well as the passages which comfort and console. That it is all for our salvation – this two-edged sword of the Word of God, living and active. Even when it is wounding us, it is doing so only that we should be healed.

Case in point, our friend King Ahab. Well, I suppose he's not our friend – he was as rotten a king in Israel as ever there was. We may all be sinners in the eyes of God, but none of us is anywhere near as rotten as Ahab (at least, I don't think so!). Still, this morning we see that while we are not as rotten as Ahab, we do have at least one point of connection to him that we might not have previously identified: he hates hearing the harder Word of God every bit as much as we do. And yet, also as with us, it is through this convicting power of the Word that Ahab finds something very much like healing.

Ahab, and his queen, Jezebel, had a palace in Jezreel. And right outside the palace walls lay a vineyard which belonged to a man named Naboth. Ahab wants that vineyard more than anything he has wanted in a long time. *“Give me your vineyard,”* he says to Naboth, *“that I may have it for a vegetable garden . . . or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money.”* Ahab doesn't really strike me as a vegetable garden kind of guy – I suspect he really only wants Naboth's garden because it is there, and he is the king, and the heart wants what it wants. But, in any case, Naboth says no. But note something here, Naboth says no not just because he doesn't want to sell his vineyard, but because such a sale was forbidden by Old Testament law – both Leviticus and Numbers contain instructions from God forbidding such a sale of property in the Promised Land.⁴ To his credit, Ahab seems to acknowledge this – at least in the sense that he himself does not then force the sale.

Enter Jezebel. Jezebel, remember, worships Baal – and so could care less what the Word of the God of Israel has laid out in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. She tells her husband that she will take care of the matter. Which she does – in a spectacularly evil and cold-bloodedly horrible manner. Naboth, who abided by the Word of God in refusing to sell the vineyard, is falsely accused of having cursed the Name of God. And before you know it, Ahab has his new vineyard, or vegetable garden. The Lord will deal with Jezebel and her evil, but that is another story. What concerns us is what happens next with Ahab.

Ahab is out in his newly acquired vineyard when suddenly he sees a familiar and most unwelcome face approaching him. For the third time now, the Lord God has sent Elijah to confront Ahab over the evil he has done. Ahab greets Elijah, as if already knowing exactly what is to come: *“Have you found me, O my enemy?”* We would never call the harder parts of the Word of God our “enemy”, I don't believe – but I think we can still find something of ourselves in Ahab's unhappy greeting, something of our own reluctance to welcome the Word of God when its message is something we, like Ahab, don't want to hear. *“Have you found me, O my enemy?”* Elijah comes straight to the point:

I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. Behold, I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin . . . Anyone belonging to Ahab

*who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies
in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat.*

Now, at that moment, a couple of different options lie open to Ahab. He was the king, after all. He could have, for example, dealt with his Elijah, difficult Word of God, problem once and for all by having Elijah killed on the spot. He could have just laughed in Elijah's face and gone on planting his vegetables. He could have simply refused to hear the Word of God Elijah had declared, turned his back, and walked away. But Ahab did none of those things. In that moment, the Word of God, that living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword Word of God, pierced down to the division of Ahab's soul and spirit, joints and marrow – clear down to the thoughts and intentions of Ahab's sin-deafened heart. And Ahab repented. Ahab repented – who would have seen that coming? But so the Word of God can do things in us, especially the harder parts of that Word, that we would have never thought possible.

And Ahab's repentance is real, it is no pretend show. We know that because no one less than God Himself is impressed by the depth and sincerity of Ahab's repentance. God even speaks to Elijah a little later on, saying to him, "*Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me?*" And because of Ahab's repentance, because of how that difficult Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword, had wounded Ahab and so had led him to a place of healing, so God lightens Ahab's punishment. Ahab is still a rotten, evil king, who has brought idolatry into Israel – but, in that moment, God receives and accepts the repentance of his rotten, but still belonging to God king.

And so the difficult Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword, will do in us – if we will, like Ahab, listen and take to heart what it tells us about ourselves. Especially when it tells us something we really don't want to hear. Fred Craddock, great preacher and teacher of preachers, tells of seeing this in a city church he was pastoring in Tennessee. He tells the story of a seven-year-old girl who came to church just about every Sunday – Sunday School and, quite often, Sunday worship also. Only her parents never came with her. She always came alone. Her parents would drop her off in the circular church driveway and then go off to breakfast. The parents were well-known in town as social climbers, upwardly mobile givers of elaborate parties. They always invited just the right people, and the parties were always full of drinking and wild and vulgar things. Everybody knew about it. And they were, indeed, climbing the ladder of success. But then there was their beautiful little daughter at church every Sunday alone.

One Sunday, Craddock says he looked out on the congregation and, sure enough, there was the girl. But lo and behold, there beside her were her parents. At the close of the service, as was customary, Craddock issued the invitation for anyone who wanted to profess their faith in Jesus Christ to come forward. And Mom and Dad got up out of the pew and came forward. Afterward, Craddock asked them in amazement, "*What prompted this?*" And they began to explain that last night they had been giving a rather wild party, and the noise woke their daughter. She had come downstairs and seen everyone eating and drinking, and she had said, "*Oh, can I give the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Goodnight, everybody.*" And then she had gone back upstairs.

God is not usually a welcome guest at a wild party, but through that seven-year-old girl and her faithful prayer, He had certainly crashed this party. Within minutes, everyone had made excuses and the party was over. As Mom and Dad were picking up the crumpled napkins and half-empty glasses, their eyes met. And Dad said out loud what both of them were thinking: “*Where in the world do we think we’re going? What in the world do we think we’re doing?*”⁵ That difficult Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing them through with the voice of their beloved daughter, and making them confront a truth about themselves and their lifestyle that they didn’t want to face – didn’t even know they needed to face. And so leading them to a healing they didn’t even know they so desperately needed.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer of Christ’s church, reportedly once said, “*The Bible is alive; it speaks to me. It has feet; it runs after me. It has hands; it lays hold of me.*” So may the Word of God, that two-edged sword, do also to us – speak to us, run after us, take hold of us. Both when it convicts us, as when it also consoles us.

¹ William H. Willimon, “Jesus Is Tough On Us,” Pulpit Resource, Vol. 37, No. 3 (July, August, September, 2009), p. 56.

² Skye Jethani, What If Jesus Was Serious? (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2020), pp. 10-11.

³ See his classic work, The Cost of Discipleship.

⁴ Leviticus 25:23, Numbers 36:7.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, “Have You Ever Heard John Preach?” in Thomas G. Long & Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., eds., A Chorus of Witnesses (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 41-42.