

In Word, or in Power

by A.W. Tozer

A.W. Tozer's sermon emphasizes the necessity of receiving the gospel not just in words, but with the transformative power of the Holy Spirit that leads to true spiritual renewal.

Scripture: John 3:3, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 2:8-10, Colossians 3:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 1:5, 2 Peter 1:4, 1 John 3:9, Revelation 3:1

Topics: "Transformation", "Power of the Gospel"

Description

A.W. Tozer emphasizes the necessity of experiencing the gospel not just in words but in transformative power, highlighting that true faith results in a radical change, making one a new creation in Christ. He warns against a superficial acceptance of the gospel that leads to a life unchanged at its core, where individuals may appear religious but remain spiritually dead. Tozer illustrates that many engage in a 'game' of religion, lacking the genuine power of the Holy Spirit that brings about true transformation. He stresses that the gospel's message is both a gift and a call to moral change, urging believers to seek a deeper, more authentic relationship with God that shifts their motives from self to divine purpose. Ultimately, Tozer calls for a revival of understanding that true faith must lead to a profound inner change, reflecting the life of Christ within us.

Transcript

Excerpted from The Divine Conquest

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. (1 Ths. 1:5)

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. (2 Cor. 5:17)

You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. (Rev. 3:1)

To one who is a student merely, these verses might be interesting, but to a serious man intent upon gaining eternal life they might well prove more than a little disturbing. For they evidently teach that the message of the gospel may be received in either of two ways: in word only, without power, or in word with power. Yet it is the same message whether it comes in word or in power. And these verses teach also that when the message is received in power it effects a change so radical as to be called a new creation. But the message may be received without power, and apparently some have so received it, for they have a

name to live, and are dead. All this is present in these texts.

By observing the ways of men at play I have been able to understand better the ways of men at prayer. Most men, indeed, play at religion as they play at games, religion itself being of all games the one most universally played. The various sports have their rules and their balls and their players; the game excites interest, gives pleasure, and consumes time, and when it is over, the competing teams laugh and leave the field. It is common to see a player leave one team and join another and a few days later play against his old mates with as great zest as he formerly displayed when playing for them. The whole thing is arbitrary. It consists in solving artificial problems and attacking difficulties that have been deliberately created for the sake of the game. It has no moral roots and is not supposed to have. No one is the better for his self-imposed toil. It is all but a pleasant activity that changes nothing and settles nothing at last.

If the conditions we describe were confined to the ballpark, we might pass it over without further thought, but what are we to say when this same spirit enters the sanctuary and decides the attitude of men toward God and religion? For the Church has also its fields and its rules and its equipment for playing the game of pious words. It has its devotees, both laymen and professionals, who support the game with their money and encourage it with their presence, but who are no different in life or character from many who take in religion no interest at all.

As an athlete uses a ball, so do many of us use words: words spoken and words sung, words written and words uttered in prayer. We throw them swiftly across the field; we learn to handle them with dexterity and grace; we build reputations upon our word skill and gain as our reward the applause of those who have enjoyed the game. But the emptiness of it is apparent from the fact that after the pleasant religious game no one is basically any different from what he had been before. The basis of life remains unchanged; the same old principles govern, the same old Adam rules.

I have not said that religion without power makes no changes in a man's life, only that it makes no fundamental difference. Water may change from liquid to vapor, from vapor to snow, and back to liquid again, and still be fundamentally the same. So powerless religion may put a man through many surface changes and leave him exactly what he was before. Right there is where the snare lies. The changes are in form only; they are not in kind. Behind the activities of the nonreligious man and the man who has received the gospel without power lie the very same motives. An unblessed ego lies at the bottom of both lives, the difference being that the religious man has learned better to disguise his vice. His sins are refined and less offensive than before he took up religion, but the man himself is not a better man in the sight of God. He may indeed be a worse one, for always God hates artificiality and pretense. Selfishness still throbs like an engine at the center of the man's life. True he may learn to "redirect" his selfish impulses, but his woe is that self still lives unrebuked and even unsuspected deep within his heart. He is a victim of religion without power.

The man who has received the Word without power has trimmed his hedge, but it is a thorn hedge still and can never bring forth the fruits of the new life. Men do not gather grapes from thorns nor figs from thistles. Yet such a man may be a leader in the church, and his influence and his vote may go far to determine what religion shall be in his generation.

The truth received in power shifts the basis of life from Adam to Christ, and a new set of motives goes to work within the soul. A new and different Spirit enters the personality and makes the believing man new in every department of his being. His interests shift from things external to things internal, from things on

earth to things in heaven. He loses faith in the soundness of external values, he sees clearly the deceptiveness of outward appearances, and his love for and confidence in the unseen and eternal world become stronger as his experience widens.

With the ideas here expressed most Christians will agree, but the gulf between theory and practice is so great as to be terrifying. For the gospel is too often preached and accepted without power, and the radical shift that the truth demands is never made. There may be, it is true, a change of some kind; an intellectual and emotional bargain may be struck with the truth, but whatever happens is not enough, not deep enough, not radical enough. The "creature" is changed, but he is not "new." And right there is the tragedy of it. The gospel is concerned with a new life, with a birth upward onto a new level of being, and until it has effected such a rebirth it has not done a saving work within the soul.

Wherever the Word comes without power its essential content is missed. For there is in divine truth an imperious note; there is about the gospel an urgency, a finality that will not be heard or felt except by the enabling of the Spirit. We must constantly keep in mind that the gospel is not good news only, but a judgment as well upon everyone that hears it. The message of the Cross is good news indeed for the penitent, but to those who "obey not the gospel" it carries an overtone of warning. The Spirit's ministry to the impenitent world is to tell of sin and righteousness and judgment. For sinners who want to cease being willful sinners and become obedient children of God, the gospel message is one of unqualified peace, but it is by its very nature also an arbiter of the future destinies of men.

This secondary aspect is almost wholly overlooked in our day. The gift element in the gospel is held to be its exclusive content, and the shift element is accordingly ignored. Theological assent is all that is required to make Christians. This assent is called faith and is thought to be the only difference between the saved and the lost. Faith is thus conceived as a kind of religious magic, bringing to the Lord great delight and possessing mysterious power to open the Kingdom of heaven.

I want to be fair to everyone and to find all the good I can in every man's religious beliefs, but the harmful effects of this faith-as-magic creed are greater than could be imagined by anyone who has not come face-to-face with them. Large assemblies today are being told fervently that the one essential qualification for heaven is to be an evil man, and the one sure bar to God's favor is to be a good one. The very word righteousness is spoken only in cold scorn, and the moral man is looked upon with pity. "A Christian," say these teachers, "is not morally better than a sinner; the only difference is that he has taken Jesus, and so he has a Savior." I trust it may not sound flippant to inquire, "A savior from what?" If not from sin and evil conduct and the old fallen life, then from what? And if the answer is, "From the consequences of past sins and from judgment to come," still we are not satisfied. Is justification from past offenses all that distinguishes a Christian from a sinner? Can a man become a believer in Christ and be no better than he was before? Does the gospel offer no more than a skillful Advocate to get guilty sinners off free at the Day of Judgment?

I think the truth of the matter is not too deep nor too difficult to discover. Self-righteousness is an effective bar to God's favor because it throws the sinner back upon his own merits and shuts him out from the imputed righteousness of Christ. And to be a sinner confessed and consciously lost is necessary to the act of receiving salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. This we joyously admit and constantly assert, but here is the truth that has been overlooked in our day: A sinner cannot enter the Kingdom of God. The Bible passages that declare this are too many and too familiar to need repeating here, but the skeptical might look at Galatians 5:19-21 and Revelation 21:8. How then can any man be saved? The penitent

sinner meets Christ, and after that saving encounter he is a sinner no more. The power of the gospel changes him, shifts the basis of his life from self to Christ, faces him about in a new direction, and makes him a new creation. The moral state of the penitent when he comes to Christ does not affect the result, for the work of Christ sweeps away both his good and his evil, and turns him into another man. The returning sinner is not saved by some judicial transaction apart from a corresponding moral change. Salvation must include a judicial change of status, but what is overlooked by most teachers is that it also includes an actual change in the life of the individual. And by this we mean more than a surface change; we mean a transformation as deep as the roots of his human life. If it does not go that deep, it does not go deep enough.

If we had not first suffered a serious decline in our expectations, we should not have accepted this tame technical view of faith. The churches (even the gospel churches) are worldly in spirit, morally anemic, on the defensive, imitating instead of initiating, and in a wretched state generally because for two full generations they have been told that justification is no more than a not guilty verdict pronounced by the heavenly Father upon a sinner who can present the magic in faith with the wondrous "open sesame" engraved upon it. If it is not stated as bluntly as that, at least the message is so presented as to create such an impression. The whole business is the result of hearing the Word preached without power and receiving it in the same way.

Now faith is indeed the open sesame to eternal blessedness. Without faith it is impossible to please God; neither can any man be saved apart from faith in the risen Savior. But the true quality of faith is almost universally missed, namely, its moral quality. It is more than mere confidence in the veracity of a statement made in Holy Writ. It is a highly moral thing and of a spiritual essence. It invariably effects radical transformation in the life of the one who exercises it. It shifts the inward gaze from self to God. It introduces its possessor into the life of heaven upon earth.

It is not my desire to minimize the justifying effect of faith. No man who knows the depths of his own wickedness would dare to appear before the ineffable Presence with nothing to recommend him but his own character, nor would any Christian, wise after the discipline of failures and imperfections, want his acceptance with God to depend upon any degree of holiness to which he might have attained through the operations of inward grace. All who know their own hearts and the provisions of the gospel will join in the prayer of the man of God:

When He shall come with trumpet sound,

O may I then in Him be found;

Dressed in His righteousness alone,

Faultless to stand before the throne.

It is a distressing thing that a truth so beautiful should have been so perverted. But perversion is the price we pay for failure to emphasize the moral content of truth; it is the curse that follows rational orthodoxy when it has quenched or rejected the Spirit of Truth.

In asserting that faith in the gospel effects a change of life motive from self to God, I am but stating the sober facts. Every man with moral intelligence must be aware of the curse that afflicts him inwardly; he must be conscious of the thing we call ego, by the Bible called flesh or self, but by whatever name called,

a cruel master and a deadly foe. Pharaoh never ruled Israel as tyrannically as this hidden enemy rules the sons and daughters of men. The words of God to Moses concerning Israel in bondage may well describe us all: "I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." And when, as the Nicene Creed so tenderly states, our Lord Jesus Christ, "for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and the third day He arose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father," what was it all for? That He might pronounce us technically free and leave us in our bondage? Never. Did not God say to Moses, "I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey"? For sin's human captives God never intends anything less than full deliverance. The Christian message rightly understood means this: The God, who by the word of the gospel proclaims men free, by the power of the gospel actually makes them free. To accept less than this is to know the gospel in word only, without its power.

They to whom the Word comes in power know this deliverance, this inward migration of the soul from slavery to freedom, this release from moral bondage. They know in experience a radical shift in position, a real crossing over, and they stand consciously on another soil under another sky and breath another air. Their life motives are changed and their inward drives made new.

What are these old drives that once forced obedience at the end of a lash? What but little taskmasters, servants of the great taskmaster Self, who stand before him and do his will? To name them all would require a book in itself, but we would point out one as a type of sample of the rest. It is the desire for social approval. This is not bad in itself and might be perfectly innocent if we were living in a sinless world, but since the race of men has fallen off from God and joined itself to His foes, to be a friend of the world is to be a collaborator with evil and an enemy of God. Still the desire to please men is back of all social acts from the highest civilizations to the lowest levels upon which human life is found. No one can escape it. The outlaw who flouts the rules of society and the philosopher who rises in thought above its common ways may seem to have escaped from the snare, but they have in reality merely narrowed the circle of those they desire to please. The outlaw has his pals before whom he seeks to shine; the philosopher his little coterie of superior thinkers whose approval is necessary to his happiness. For both, the motive root remains uncut. Each draws his peace from the thought that he enjoys the esteem of his fellows, though each will interpret the whole business in his own way.

Every man looks to his fellowmen because he has no one else to whom he can look. David could say, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You," but the sons of this world have not God; they have only each other, and they walk holding to each other and looking to one another for assurance like frightened children. But their hope will fail them, for they are like a group of men, none of whom has learned to fly a plane, who suddenly find themselves aloft without a pilot, each looking to the other to bring them safely down. Their desperate but mistaken trust cannot save them from the crash which must certainly follow.

With this desire to please men so deeply implanted within us, how can we uproot it and shift our life drive from pleasing men to pleasing God? Well, no one can do it alone; nor can he do it with the help of others, nor by education, nor by training, nor by any other method known under the sun. What is required is a reversal of nature (that it is a fallen nature does not make it any the less powerful), and this reversal must be a supernatural act. That act the Spirit performs through the power of the gospel when it is received in

living faith. Then He displaces the old with the new. Then He invades the life as sunlight invades a landscape and drives out the old motives as light drives away darkness from the sky.

The way it works in experience is something like this: The believing man is overwhelmed suddenly by a powerful feeling that only God matters; soon this works itself out into his mental life and conditions all his judgments and all his values. Now he finds himself free from slavery to man's opinions. A mighty desire to please only God lays hold of him. Soon he learns to love above all else the assurance that he is well pleasing to the Father in heaven.

It is this complete switch in their pleasure source that has made believing men invincible. So could saints and martyrs stand alone, deserted by every earthly friend, and die for Christ under the universal displeasure of mankind. When, to intimidate him, Athanasius' judges warned him that the whole world was against him, he dared to reply, "Then is Athanasius against the world!" That cry has come down the years and today may remind us that the gospel has power to deliver men from the tyranny of social approval and make them free to do the will of God.

I have singled out this one enemy for consideration, but it is only one, and there are many others. They seem to stand by themselves and have existence apart from each other, but it is only seeming. Actually they are but branches of the same poison vine, growing from the same evil root, and they die together when the root dies. That root is self, and the Cross is its only effective destroyer.

The message of the gospel, then, is the message of a new creation in the midst of an old, the message of the invasion of our human nature by the eternal life of God and the displacing of the old by the new. The new life seizes upon the believing man's nature and sets about its benign conquest, a conquest that is not complete until the invading life has taken full possession and a new creation has emerged. And this is an act of God without human aid, for it is a moral miracle and a spiritual resurrection.

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