

“The Word is the Source”
Ezekiel 33: 7—9; Romans 13: 1—10; Matthew 18: 1—20

The old vacuum cleaner had reached the end of its usefulness. It wasn't removing dirt so much as it was spreading it around to new places. So the young couple went shopping and splurged and bought a top-of-the-line bagless vacuum that allegedly had the suction power of a small tornado. They brought it home, got it out of the box, and rushed to assemble the appropriate parts, and with great expectation, flipped the switch and...nothing. No sound, no suction, no little tornado. They examined the directions, picked up the vacuum, looked it over, flipped the switch numerous times, still nothing, and they began to feel upset, because they had invested quite a bit of their monthly budget into this machine that was beginning to look like a lemon, until they made a discovery—a discovery that began as embarrassment, which quickly gave way to laughter. In their excitement to put their new vacuum to work, they had never plugged it into the electrical outlet. They had everything they needed, except for a source of power.

I tell you that story as a way to talk about God's Word. What's the connection? It's simply this: God's Word, the content of the Bible, is the source of power that everyone needs. The Bible teaches us how to live wisely. The Bible lays out what God expects of you. The Bible announces the mission that Jesus accomplished in order to shower you with love and forgiveness and courage. This message is a power source, ready to fill you; ready to give you life and motion and activity. Doesn't that sound great? But there's just one thing. Like our couple with the vacuum, you have to plug into this power source, or nothing is going to happen. You and I have two choices, and it really is this simple: plug in and let the vital power of God's Word speak into our lives; or not plug in, and try to make the machine work on our own. But no matter how hard you push, it's not going to roar to life if you're not plugged into the right source.

When you plug into the Word of God; when that becomes regular, when it becomes a routine, God is able to write His story into you. He is able to form new ways of thinking in your mind, ways that lead to health and strength. He will challenge and confront you. He invites you into a way of living that is not natural to you or me, but it is fundamentally right, and you learn to love what it right. You learn to love God. All three readings today are perfect examples of this process. All three deserve their own sermon, but I'm going to buzz through each one to show what happens when we plug into the power source of God's Word.

First, from Ezekiel. God says to his prophet, “7 “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.”

Ezekiel was given a tremendous responsibility. If God gave him a word of warning to speak, he was supposed to speak it. He was to broadcast a message of repentance; a message that doesn't downplay the destructive power of sin, but names it, and calls it out as the poison that it is. If you plug into God's Word, you also will be called to repent. You will be called on to move away from the sins that cause your heart to rot, and to move towards the forgiving, restoring love of Jesus. The call to repentance is not motivated by hate; it is motivated by love. It is motivated by God's love that wants us to disavow the self-destruction of sin and instead, to embrace Him in life-giving faith.

Next, from the letter to the Romans. The apostle Paul writes "13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." And, "10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." This is a summary of a fascinating passage about citizenship that, incredibly, never mentions partisan politics! Instead, Paul shows us how followers of Jesus are to relate to civil authorities and fellow citizens. If you plug into God's Word, you will encounter practical passages like this, that help us navigate the delicate dance of being citizens of both the United States and God's kingdom of grace.

Then there is today's Gospel Lesson, where Jesus does all kinds of teaching, touching on the importance of humility; the seriousness of sin; the intensity of God's compassion; and how to deal with conflict with a fellow Christian. Each one of those points deserves careful study and reflection. If you plug into God's Word, you give yourself the gift of having Jesus become your instructor. More than that, when you plug into God's Word, you let Him build these qualities into you. Think of how much that is needed. The world says, "Brag on yourself and back it up. Go take what you deserve." Jesus says, "Humble yourself like a child." The world says, "Sin is an outdated concept. Do whatever you want." Jesus says, "Your sins are killing you." The world says, "Don't let anyone tell you what to do. Go invent your own truth." Jesus says, "If you wander away from me, I'll never give up searching for you." And, the world says, "If someone hurts you in any way, make them pay for it!" While Jesus says, "Your goal should be reconciliation and forgiveness." Do you see how much we need the voice of Jesus to speak? If you're not plugged into God's Word, you won't hear His voice. Other voices will rush in to fill the void, voices that have a much different agenda than reconciliation and restoration and sacrificial love.

And of course, this "plugging in" is not limited to these three readings. The idea is to let every part of the Bible speak to every part of you. And it will. Whether it's faith or finances or family; whether it's race relations or romance; beginning, middle, or end of life; at the moment of your biggest victory or your greatest defeat; God has a Word of guidance for you. A Word of blessing and encouragement. He wants to write His wisdom into your story.

Again, you have two choices, and it really is this simple: plug in and let the power of God's Word speak into your life; or not plug in, and try to make the machine work on your own. Vitality or futility. Which do you choose?

