

“Word Power”

Every month for umpteen years, Reader’s Digest has run an item it labels *“It Pays to Increase Your Word Power”* where you can discover words like

pilaster — a shallow column shape protruding from the wall

oxymoron — a contradiction in terms; combination of two opposite words, such as sweet sorrow, or bittersweet

virago — a loud, strong woman; and

ennui — boredom; a feeling of weariness, tiredness

We are never told how we may work such words into our daily speech, but occasionally you find useful such a word if you are writing your doctoral dissertation.

Words do have power.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never harm me,” we were taught to say as kids.

But the truth is names really do hurt if they are (another Reader’s Digest word?) derogatory enough.

Words can hurt — racial slurs, demeaning epithets (ooh! there’s yet another Word Power word) — you know that if you tell a child often enough that she will never amount to anything, that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Words also have power to bring about healing.

A *“thank you”* at the right moment has healing potential,

“Well done,” can bring much value to a person’s life, and can never be heard too often.

There are likely no more affirming and uplifting words than, *“I love you.”*

Do a small experiment with me. Make a circle with your index finger and thumb . . . Now, poke your head through that circle. It can be done. Watch me.

Here's another thing with words: Words often confuse us.

We think we're being very clear in what we are communicating, but we're just not getting through.

One of the many T-shirts/bumper stickers I like is the one that says, "*I can explain it to you, but I cannot understand it for you.*"

Yet, what that really is saying is that I have failed to explain it you in a way that you can comprehend. My words didn't work.

God tells us today, "*My words always work.*"

"... so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

This is spoken to a people to whom the prophet Isaiah was sent to announce that ruin and devastation were about to fall upon them.

But Isaiah is also sent to issue the invitation, "***Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.***"

Both those messages were from God.

Stay the course you have hitherto chosen, and it will destroy you.

Turn to me, and you will live.

God says His words will do just that.

God does not make idle threats; God does not offer empty promises.

God's Word is power — look at creation. How did God create? He spoke it into being. "***God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.***"

God's Word is essentially creative, constructive power.

It is found in yet another power: ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelled among us full of grace and truth.”***

Jesus expected us to take His words with utmost seriousness.

Comedian and religion critic Bill Maher not too long ago made this comment: “. . . *if you ignore every single thing Jesus commanded you to do, you're not a Christian – you're just auditing. You're not Christ's followers, you're just fans.*” Ouch!

We oftentimes do back away from things Jesus said to do. Things like:

“Love your enemies” . . .

“Do good to those who hate you” . . .

“Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

We back away because . . .

we find it hard to love those who do not love us . . .

we find it impractical to give like that . . .

and, if we are honest in our sin, we just don't want to.

That, I think, is why Jesus told this Parable of the Sower.

He tells us that the seed is ***“the word of the kingdom”*** — so we are not quite yet to equate this with the Bible.

From the very first, “the word of the kingdom” is this: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”***

But then Jesus describes these four soils.

Immediately, we want to look around and find who it is that is thorny soil, rocky soil, the pathway . . . because we just know that we must be “good soil”

I think Jesus is saying something else: In each of us these four soils — these stances, these attitudes, these lifestyles (what else can we call them?) — are always present.

You and I all too often let the evil one snatch away what the Kingdom brings . . . you and I don't allow the Kingdom's meaning go as deeply within us as it can . . . you and I allow the cares of this world to choke off Kingdom hope and resonance.

And, yes, there are times when you and I allow the Kingdom in, and it produces within us a way of living, and thinking, and believing that is life-altering . . . not just our lives but the lives of those around us.

So what accounts for this? First we need to define what we mean by “this”.

“This” is that tug of sinner and saint I was addressing last Sunday. The sinner (Luther likes Paul's term for that: “the old Adam”) in us just cannot seem to grab hold of this Kingdom message — nor lay claim to Kingdom joy, Kingdom hope, Kingdom faith.

Part of that is because to allow the Kingdom in, we need to let go of all things we have clung to so tightly to cover our pain, settle our emotional upheaval, get us through the night.

It is hard to let go of the defenses you have erected over a lifetime, even if they haven't brought you the release, the peace, and the consolation you sought.

The other part of “this” is the fruit, the yield, to which Jesus refers.

When we operate out of the flesh (as St. Paul tells us today), we cannot please God.

In fact, we are working at polar opposites from what God wants for us. Can we expect that God will then bless what we are doing?

The irony is that God sometimes does bless even those feeble attempts to do something — but blessing is promised to that which we do out of the Spirit.

The English District used to publish weekly blurbs to be inserted into bulletins or newsletters that were labeled “Stewardship Corner” (in fact, I wrote a number of them for the District years ago). The one for Pentecost V read: *“How we use God’s resources is guided by the Spirit, not by our weakened and sinful flesh. This is where the joy of giving comes from: we are guided by the Spirit to meet spiritual needs.”*

That’s just one aspect of our Christian living — in our witness, in our service, in our prayer life, in our family life, in our vocations, in the community — everything needs to be guided by and fueled by the Spirit.

Let’s take vocation: your calling in life — engineer, carpenter, homemaker, clerk, student, waitress, nurse, the list goes on.

We often refer to this area of our lives as our “job” — which compartmentalizes it away from our faith and Spirit-life.

It is your calling; it is where God has called you to represent Him to others.

Flesh-driven, you get through the day: *“Another day another dollar in the old salt mine.”*

Spirit-prompted, you ask yourself how you can use your talents to benefit . . . clients, customers, co-workers, employers, employees, salespeople — all those you encounter in a given day. God has placed you in this vocation to glorify Him.

“Ah,” you say, *“but I’m retired.”* From the job, maybe; but not from the calling!

The calling is to live out your life guided by the Spirit. That will inevitably come down to using words.

I can provide a man with a meal when he is hungry, and he may or may not be grateful, he may or may not express that gratitude.

He will wonder why I did it. He knows that not everybody will try to help him; he's asked and been turned away many, many times.

So maybe this time he asks: "*Why did you do this for me?*" (He might not ask, because that question does seem a tad impolite.)

If he were to ask, how do you answer?

"Because you were hungry." "Because you asked me." "Because I had the cash on me." "Because Jesus told me to." "Because Jesus loves you." "Because I love you."

Which of those responses (all of them not bad) do you think will speak to his heart?

God's Word has power to create, to recreate, to shape and reshape, to knock down and to build up, to kill and to resuscitate.

God's gives His word power to you. You hold it in your heart as you hold Him in your heart . . . and then as you hold in your heart those people He places into your life day after day.

"It pays to increase your word power" cannot be just a page title found in a magazine; it has to be our desire and goal by which we live out God's call to our lives.

Study the words you can use to bring God's love acting through you into the lives of others . . .

Practice the words, not just in a silent room, but on real, live people.

Affirm the words by your deeds of caring and love.

Let God's words become your words, for God declares: ***" . . . my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."***

Trust Him to provide the word you need when you need it.

Amen.