

# We Must Hear & Understand The Word Of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] And at the threshold of this new year, and because we are creatures of time, and our time is really very short, and we're creatures of space, and we cover very little of that, we ask that you, because you are the eternal God, will, in your grace and mercy and truth, speak to our hearts as we open them to thee.

We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen. It's a great delight to see you. Some of you look as though you're suffering slightly from having worked too hard for the last two weeks, and that you need this morning a time of rest and refreshment and encouragement to face what inevitably lies ahead for all of us in terms of uncertainties and difficulties and trials and tribulations.

And I want to tell you that you've come to the right place. And that, indeed, is not St. John's Church, but St. John's Gospel. And in the beginning verses of St. John's Gospel, there is more than enough to meet your deepest needs and to give you such a sense of the presence and purpose of God, as will send you with a thrill of expectation into the year that lies ahead.

But that depends on whether or not you're able to hear it. Indeed, the text I've chosen for this morning suggests that you may not be able to hear it. And that text is John chapter 8 and verse 43, where Jesus was confronted by a number of people whom we learn in verse 31 believed in him, but only just.

[ 2 : 02 ] And you may have come this morning only just believing, not very far inside the gate of the kingdom. And so maybe we all are in that situation.

In fact, the word that I want to leave with you is John chapter 8, verse 43, which is rather a rebuke to us as it was to those to whom Jesus addressed it.

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. There it is. Why do you not understand what I say? That is, there are words pouring forth, but there was no understanding of them.

Jesus was making all the noises of the language that they understood and he spoke, but they didn't understand the word that he was speaking.

[ 3 : 09 ] And of course, the great danger for us as a people is that we will hear the sounds, but not understand them, not know exactly what it is that God is saying to us.

God speaks his word to us. Jesus speaks his words to us. Through his words, we come to recognize the word.

But the fundamental problem is that expressed in the question of John 8, verse 43, why do you not understand what I say?

It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. Okay, now let's go back and look at the gospel for the day, using that for the text, and you look at this magnificent prologue to the gospel according to St. John.

And what I'm getting at in this sermon is the strong desire I have that all of us should be a community which can understand the word that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ.

[ 4 : 29 ] And that is that it will take all the capacity that you have, intellectually and emotionally and volitionally, to hear this word from God.

That we need one another desperately to hear it. And that's why I'm anxious that all of you should be in small parish groups where together you seek to hear this word of God.

That's why in your bulletin this morning you'll see a green page. And this green page is to help you as you meet together in groups to come to grips with that passage of scripture which Archie will be preaching on next Sunday.

So that together we might, through this week, hear this word of God and understand it. You know as well as I do that the kind of ritual that is represented by our religion is one that is full of words. But if those words are not heard and understood, then they're wasted. Okay.

[ 5 : 45 ] So that's what John is speaking about. Let me tell you in a very cursory form what the gospel is about.

Are you looking at it? Page 87. There it is. The first paragraph of which. Do you know that if you put together a hundred of the finest scholars in the world and put them together in a super elite university and they represented every branch and discipline of science and they were to give themselves every hour of every day and every week of every month to the study of these 18 verses that they would, they wouldn't at the end of a year begin to exhaust the content of these verses. And yet in a simple way these same verses can speak to the heart of a single semi-literate believer and open to that believer something of the fullness of God.

That's the tremendous diversity. The difficulty for me as a preacher in speaking to you about this passage of scripture is that nobody has written a commentary on it that runs less than 500 pages. And that's a lot to cover between Sundays. And it is so full of content and meaning and the implications. It's as it were when Jesus said to the disciples that were out and struggling and taking nothing in their fishing boat he said let down your nets on the other side and so they let down their net and their net broke because they couldn't handle it.

[ 7 : 34 ] And when you come to this first chapter of John's gospel you in a sense let down your net and it couldn't possibly contain all that is there. And so I'm in a sense apologizing that I am standing up and preaching to you when all of us together and I have this kind of vision for us as a parent that we will use all the faculties we have all the accumulated wisdom all the learning all the intuition all the sensitivity all the aesthetic sense and feeling that we have to somehow begin to hear more clearly this word of God that we might come to grips with it.

And fundamental to that reality is that we come to grips with it when it takes hold of us. It's a kind of mutual thing. And that's why we meet together in somebody's living room or over breakfast of the morning in order to come to grips with this word and we strain our minds in order to grasp the meaning and understand the historical context and see what it says in order that as we grasp it it will grasp us and we will be held by the word of God and guided and directed and maintained and sustained and energized all by this word of God that it will take hold of us and we need in humility to do that.

That's why the problem of John 8.43 is so acute. You hear the words but you don't understand and not understand.

I wanted to be careful to say we hear the words and we don't understand because we have to belong to one another to hear this word. It's not that I've heard it and you must listen.

It's that God has spoken to us and we must listen. We must hear this word of God and you cannot hear them because you cannot bear to hear them.

[ 9 : 46 ] Well, what are they? How am I going to do it? John chapter 1. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

Matthew starts with Abraham. Luke starts with Adam. Mark starts with John the Baptist.

The Gospels. John's Gospel goes way back before the beginning. The beginning which was before time. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.

It's not a once upon a time story. It's before time. The word. And that God and the word are inseparable.

It came to me yesterday that if you read this passage carefully you will make one of the great discoveries of human life. And I, you can take this home and wrestle with it at lunch if you like.

[ 10 : 49 ] But I think that you would have to be drawn and in a sense confronted with the reality of this verse which says to you, you cannot argue that God does not exist unless God exists.

Try that one on. There is no basis of argument. There is no basis of knowledge. There is no basis of understanding.

There is no way that you can argue that God does not exist unless in fact God exists. Unless in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and those things are inseparable.

And that's what was in the beginning. That's what we are compelled to acknowledge by this verse. I'll never get through.

Press on. Okay. This first five verses covers before creation. Creation. The life in the Garden of Eden if you want in verse 3.

[ 11 : 49 ] All things were made through him without anything. Without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of man. And verse 5.

The darkness comes. Man's disobedience. And the darkness seeks to put out the light. And John chapter 1 tells you it can't be done.

Then it goes on to history and says there was a man sent from God whose name was John and he came to bear witness to that light. The pinnacle of the prophets of the Old Testament come and say this is the one.

The whole history of the revelation of God through the prophets are summarized in the man who points to Jesus Christ and says this is the one. Look at the next paragraph.

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. And this is the massive rejection of light. This is why we cannot bear to hear the word.

[ 12 : 58 ] Because there is in our hearts a rejection of that light which does not come from our own puny minds and of which we ourselves are not the center and source. This was a light which came into the world, came to his own and his own knew him not, came to his own home and his people received him not.

This was the massive rejection of God. And we live in rejection of God. That's the natural condition of man. And something has to overcome that natural condition of man.

Ever since the beginning it has been possible that it should be overcome and that man should find his true life. And his true life is through faith in God.

That's the very source of his life. It's not blood nor the will of man nor the will of the flesh but the source of our life is God. That's why we exist.

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. My friend told me yesterday that this was what brought Augustine to faith.

[ 14 : 09 ] The recognition that those philosophical words of verses 1 to 5 which he thought Plato had explained in its entirety but beyond what Plato had said was the reality that this word this principle of understanding became flesh and we can relate to him.

And that's why the simple soul over a simple supper can break bread and pour wine and bow his head in grace and stand in the very presence of God because the word has become flesh and dwells with us.

God is where we are and meets us in that place. Well then you go on and and it just goes from one great thing to another.

from his fullness have we all received grace upon grace. The law was given through Moses grace and truth came through Jesus Christ and man lives in mortal terror that if he ever confronts the truth he will be destroyed.

And so we avoid it in every possible way and by every contrivance that we can think of we guard ourselves from the truth breaking in on us. That's why we're back at 843 again.

[ 15 : 37 ] They could not tolerate the truth. Why do you not understand? Because you cannot bear to hear my word of truth. We choose anything else because we're convinced in our hearts and fear takes hold of us to tell us that it will destroy us if we ever confront it.

and so lie and lie and lie and lie and lie and build great empires out of lies if you want so that you never have to come to face grips with the truth.

But this thing says grace is found in confronting truth. Grace and truth come in Jesus Christ.

grace and truth is found the love and mercy and deep caring concern of God takes hold of us when grace upon grace is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Grace takes hold of us. And that's what the passage tells us and ends up with the fullness of God is in Jesus Christ.

[ 16 : 51 ] Christ and what we dread as being that which is going to destroy us we find is a breaking out of the new day in which the mercy and love and grace of God are revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

No one has seen God at any time this passage concludes but he has been God has made himself known in the person of Jesus Christ.

In Christ we see God. Well I can't Okay the question then is why do we not understand what I say?

Why would we not understand what Jesus is saying? We as a church very much need to understand what Jesus the Lord of the church is saying.

But Jesus answers the question you cannot bear to hear my word. the process of hearing the word of God is allowing it to put the finger on the reality of the sensitive areas of your life and we live a life of subterfuge in which we try and guard ourselves from that very possibility.

[18:07] There's an article in the Manchester Guardian this week about the development of AIDS as a disease and the book is called and the band played on and it's written by Randy Schiltz and it occupies a whole page in the Guardian.

Well he says the bad news of AIDS was known a long time before the scientific establishment would allow the reality of this dread virus to be known and the book convicts the scientific establishment because of their unwillingness to hear and to see the evidence that they were confronted with and to reckon the consequences and human pride and human arrogance would not allow them to acknowledge what they knew to be true and the church can very easily be similarly a kind of community that will not acknowledge what we know to be true but it's not bad news about a virulent disease which will wipe out millions it's the good news of God's grace and mercy but we in our pride will not listen we'll not give ourselves to getting hold and hearing this word and we must I want St. John's to be a community that wants desperately to hear this word may point out some of our the contradictions in our lives it may answer the questions we don't want to ask it may challenge our lifestyle it may impose decisions on us we don't want to make it may confront us with possibilities we don't want to consider it may settle us with responsibilities we don't want to assume well that's what the confrontation with the word of God is that's why these people backed away from it when they themselves were confronted by the word of God even Jesus Christ they backed away you might ask if I go to church on Sunday is that not enough yes

I hope it is enough if you find you are able to understand what is said the words of Jesus and you find that you can bear to hear them that's enough in fact that's all you need to do but I suggest to you that we need more than that we need to meet one with another we need to be among those whom we trust and who love us and reveal Christ to us and who help us to confront this word of God and give us the capacity to bear it and if you don't have that kind of exposure then going to church on Sunday is just going to become an increasing hypocrisy increasingly meaningless and a waste of time because unless unless you are unable to bear to hear this word of God the picture being again that this word comes and takes hold of your mind and heart and will and as you struggle to take hold of it you are meeting one with another in order that you might take hold of the word of

God through the words of Jesus Christ the words of the prophets the words of Paul that you might take hold of this word of God and that in the course of that it may take hold of you there is no freedom apart from the word of God having taken hold of you well that's what that's what's to happen and that's the verse that I want you to hear as we begin this year that we may be a community to which Christ cannot say why do you not understand what I say it is because you cannot bear to hear my word God grant to us that individually and together and in all the circumstances of our life in this community this province this country and this world of ours we may be we may be a community that is determined to be such as can bear to hear what

[22:50] God is saying and can support one another in that essential activity of our life together in Christ Amen