

Power Beyond Words
1 Thessalonians 1:1–10
Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: *God, without your word, we have nothing to say. And without your Spirit, we cannot listen nor obey. So give us your word and your Spirit so that we might glorify Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.*

In the musical *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle finally reaches her breaking point. She has had enough of speech lessons from Professor Higgins. And she has had enough of hearing Freddie sing to her. So she bursts out:

“Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words! I get words all day through. First from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?”

Can you relate to Eliza? I think many of us can.

We’ve all been there. Every day, we are bombarded with words *ad nauseam*—from endless advertisements and talk shows to political leaders making empty promises. We live in a culture saturated with words. Words are everywhere, yet they often seem to say so little.

Danish singer-songwriter Agnes Obel captures this feeling in one of her songs. She sings, *“I wanna buy you roses ’cause the words are dead.”*

Her point is simple. A small act of love says more than a thousand words ever could. A rose can communicate what words fail to express.

But that raises an important question. If words are dead, if words can be empty, what makes them meaningful?

And that question matters to the church, too. We, too, are people of many words—pastors perhaps most of all, with their sermons and prayers.

The theologian Molly T. Marshall makes an observation that many of us can understand. She writes, *“Christian services of worship, entailing sermons, are so full of words that our eyes glaze over with the surfeit of language.”*¹

¹ Molly T. Marshall, “1 & 2 Thessalonians,” *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (WJK Press, 2022), 28.

Marshall says worship services, including sermons, can be so full of words that people become overwhelmed.

In other words, sometimes we talk so much that people stop listening. And if people are already tired of words, the answer cannot simply be to give them more words.

We need to ask a deeper question: **What makes our words believable? And what makes them powerful enough to change lives?**

Now, let me be clear. Words themselves are not the problem. We need words. We use them to share ideas, express feelings, give directions, and explain what we believe. Words matter. But words alone are not enough.

The problem is relying on words alone when you need persuasive power. Our words are powerless. And I'm not referring to filler words: *um, uh, like*, or softeners and hedges: *kind of, sort of, somewhat*. Or overused words: *just, great, basically*.

The question is not simply whether we have something to say. The question is whether what we say has any power.

And that brings us to Paul's words in our Scripture reading.

Writing to the church in Thessalonica, Paul reminds the believers that the gospel did not come to them in words alone. He says:

"For our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (verse 5).

Notice what Paul says. The gospel came in words. But it came with something more. It came with power. It came through the Holy Spirit. And it came with deep conviction.

Think about it. We can usually tell when someone really believes what they are saying. We hear it in the way people speak. We see it in the way they carry themselves. And, most importantly, we recognize it in the way they live.

There is a difference between someone who simply talks about something and someone whose life reflects what they believe.

We see that difference in political speeches. We see it in the news. We see it in our workplaces and our homes. And yes, we see it in the church.

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to understand that his message was trustworthy for more than what he and his companions said. It was also reflected in how they lived.

But Paul points to something even deeper than human sincerity or good example.

The Spirit was working in the people who heard the gospel. The Spirit helped them receive the message, trust its truth, and respond to it with faith. The Spirit was changing lives.

And that same Spirit is still at work today.

The gospel is not just a collection of religious ideas. It is not merely a set of teachings to memorize or doctrines to defend. **The gospel is the saving power of God at work in our lives.**

Of course, the Holy Spirit does not work apart from the people who share the good news. God often uses ordinary people to make the gospel visible.

That is what we see in Paul, Silas, and Timothy. They did not simply tell the Thessalonians what it meant to follow Jesus. They showed them. Their actions matched their message. And that mattered.

And for Paul and the Thessalonians, living out the gospel was not always easy.

In Acts 17, we read about Paul's visit to Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. Thessalonica was a busy, diverse city in what is now northern Greece. It was home to people with different religious beliefs and cultural loyalties. The Roman imperial cult was also prominent.

In that setting, proclaiming Jesus as Lord was no small matter. To follow Jesus meant giving your deepest allegiance to someone other than the emperor. It challenged the religious and social expectations of the day.

And that could come at a cost. Those who embraced the gospel risked rejection, hostility, and persecution.

Still, the Thessalonians remained faithful.

Paul had suffered for the gospel himself. He knew what it meant to face opposition. He did not simply tell the Thessalonians to remain faithful. He showed them what faithfulness looked like.

That makes me think about the people who have shaped our own faith. Most of us can name someone who taught us what it means to follow Jesus. Perhaps it was a parent or grandparent. Maybe it was a Sunday school teacher, a church member, or a pastor.

And when we think about that person, what do we remember most?

Sometimes we remember a sermon. Sometimes we remember a particular Bible verse or a piece of advice.

But often, what stays with us is the way that person lived. We remember their kindness. Their humility. Their patience. Their lives preached a sermon of their own.

For me, that person was the pastor of my youth, the Reverend Francisco Espinosa. He served a small United Church of Christ congregation in my hometown in the Philippines. Rev. Espinosa was kind and caring.

But to be honest, he was not what you would call a gifted preacher. He had not attended college or seminary. And he sometimes struggled to put his sermons together.

In the Philippines, preaching in English was often seen as a sign of education and prestige. Other ministers who visited our church could preach in English. At the very least, they could weave English sentences into their sermons.

To me, their messages sounded sophisticated and scholarly. They impressed me.

But when God called me into authorized ministry, it was Rev. Espinosa who inspired me. And I believe God began using him in my life when I was just twelve years old.

One Sunday, he asked me to deliver the children's sermon. I have no idea what he saw in me, and I cannot remember what I said to the other children. I doubt I offered any profound theological insight. And I certainly did not preach in English. I couldn't then.

Yet, somehow, God was at work.

By the time I answered God's call to become a pastor, Rev. Espinosa was no longer serving our congregation. But I believe he would have been pleased to know what became of that young boy.

Many years later, I returned home and asked one of the older women in our church about him. She told me that he had retired to a small island. But he had not really retired from ministry. He continued to share the Gospel, starting new churches on the island as a volunteer. Quietly. No fanfare. No applause. Just what Paul calls a **labor of love** (1:3).

The least formally educated pastor I have ever known helped inspire me to enter authorized ministry myself. Not through eloquent preaching or scholarly theology, but through the authenticity, humility, and integrity of his life. He lived the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Rev. Espinosa may not have always found the right words. But his life spoke volumes.

And that brings us back to the heart of Paul's message: **The gospel is more than words. It is the power of God at work in us and through us.**

There is a saying often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "*Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.*"

Our faith speaks loudest through how we love, serve, and treat others. May the Holy Spirit empower us to live with such faith and integrity that our lives reflect the good news we proclaim and bear witness to God's redeeming love and justice for all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.