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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at Richmond on Friday evening

983 26.4.74

Hymns 634, 1133 & 1135 (verses 2 and 3)

Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1 and 5

Text: 1 Thessalonians 1.5

"For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake".

We have assembled together dear friends this evening in the interest of the pastor of this Cause, and would desire to acknowledge the Lord's goodness to him in maintaining him as your Pastor for 18 years. I do not doubt but that he could look back upon many things in that space of time and see the hand of the Lord going before him, and in the trial of faith he may have had concerning his ministry, and many other things beside that only pastors really understand and have to walk in; but it is cause for thanksgiving that the Lord has spared him thus far here and enabled him to continue to preach the Gospel faithfully, and rightly to divide the Word of truth. So, as one of my sons in the faith may I say, I commend him to the Lord and pray that he may see a day even yet when his soul will rejoice in the goodness and mercy of the Lord to him, and may his ministry have free course and be glorified.

The subject I have read relates to the Apostle's ministry when he came to Thessalonica and its effects there. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that there were quite a number who believed, who received this testimony, but there were others who stirred up violent opposition to it, and did all they could to bring confusion and distress. Yet, in the face of all opposition the Apostle Paul could say, (and it was a great thing to say) "For our gospel came not unto you in word only". This is the first point I would endeavour to take up, because it is an important one that may call for self-examination in our own cases. Undoubtedly thousands of people hear the Gospel preached, but it comes to them "in word only", and what can be more solemn than this, if there is nothing beyond "Word only" and is destitute of any saving power and authority.

How many there are the Lord only knows who have had Gospel privileges, have heard a faithful ministry, and yet it has been "in word only". Is not this a searching thought then because of the responsibility of those who are favoured to hear the Gospel? I believe it is Dr. Owen who said that when people are hearing the Gospel preached they are under their trial for eternity. Is not this profoundly solemn? But there are others, mercifully of whom it can be said, as of some here, that it came not unto them in word only, and I feel persuaded that a number of you could bear witness to the truth that it has not come in word only, as I hope I can of myself.

The Apostle could avouch this of these Thessalonians that it came not in word only. "Our Gospel" - that is the Gospel that was committed to their trust to preach and proclaim, a solemn responsibility both to those who preach and those who hear; but it is a mercy where it can be felt that the Gospel has not come merely in word only. Here I might appeal to the conscience of some, I know quite a number here of whom I can confidently say that it has not come in word only; but I would appeal to the conscience of some here whom I do not know, and put this point, has the preaching of the Gospel been to you in word only, as it has undoubtedly been to many people? "For our gospel came not unto you in word only". I believe some of you can feelingly say that there have been occasions when it has not been in word only, as I hope I can say of myself, but I would bring home this solemn point, that to hear the Gospel preached and have no concern about it, more than merely coming and going, so that it is "in word only" will have very, very solemn consequences. "For our gospel came not unto you in word only". Some of you I know can bear witness to the fact that it has not come in word only. What a wonderful mercy this is!

"Our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power". The Gospel comes in power into the conscience of a sinner to convince him of his guilty condition, this has been the case many times, although it is not always precisely so in the first beginnings; but usually I believe that the Gospel comes in power to convince them of their guilty state before a holy, heart-searching God. Sometimes this has been through the instrumentality of the

preaching of the glorious Gospel, then it is not "in word only, but also in power". It comes in power to bring us down and to show us where we are in our lost and ruined condition. It comes in power to strip and empty us of our fancied goodness and to bring us down as guilty, before a holy, heart-searching God. It is a wonderful mercy where the Gospel comes in power in conviction of sin, for that lays the foundation of all that follows. It comes then in power to strip and wound, to kill and make alive. I wonder whether any of you fear that there has been nothing more than word only, for if there is a searching of heart in relation to this which brings a self-examination, and waiting upon the Lord for some testimony of His mercy, then it has not come in word only. It comes in power, as the Apostle says here, - "but also in power".

It comes in power then to bring us to feel our need; sometimes the Gospel comes in power to enable us to wait upon God and bring our case before Him. Have you felt anything like this? It may be that some of the Lord's dear exercised people fear that there has been nothing but word only, and yet where there has been a power felt in the conscience in conviction of sin it has not come in word only; for the Spirit of the Lord is applying it graciously to the heart and conscience it has come not "in word only, but also in power". It comes at times in some sweet revelation to the soul of the Lord Jesus as being suitable to your state and condition, and that draws forth your heart in prayer to wait upon the Lord for some further testimony of His mercy and love to your soul. It comes in power sometimes in the exercise of prayer, when a measure of liberty is felt in drawing near to the Lord, when the heart is opened, when you feel a nearness to the Throne of grace, and feel it good to be there, feeling a measure of sweet liberty in laying your case before the Lord. It comes in power also to support the Lord's people in the path of tribulation they are called to walk in, for it will be a path of tribulation more or less. It comes in power to support them as it did in the case of the Apostle Paul when the Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee". It comes in power then. Have you at times felt this? Has there ever been a time when you have felt a power in your heart in drawing near to the Lord, when it has not been a formality but when

you have felt, though the occasions may be rare, a sweet nearness and communion with your Lord at the mercy seat? Then it has not been in word only, has it? Have there not been times when there has been a token for good felt in your heart, when a word has come with some saving application, has raised you up, and given you to feel a hope in His mercy? Then it has not been in word only; and if there is life and grace in your soul you will pray that it may not be in word only. It is a divine power that is felt, not a creature power, it is the power of the Holy Ghost.

There is a power in real religion. A person may have a formal profession without any power in it; but when the Holy Spirit is at work in the soul a power will be felt there in various ways. Sometimes this power has been felt in the appointments and services of the Lord's house, as some of us have felt in our own experience in bygone days, when it did not come in word only, but when there was a power in hearing the preaching of the Gospel so that we have been revived, confirmed, and enabled to go on our way rejoicing. Can you feel to bear any witness to this, has there been a time in your life when there has been a power in the Gospel in your own soul? The Apostle states in one place that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth. Where there is a right believing it is something more than a mere sentiment, it is the power of the Gospel in the heart of a person where that believing is real. There is no real faith in a person in a state of nature, but where a work of grace is begun, and there is an exercise within, a spirit of prayer felt, and sometimes a good time in hearing, you can bear witness to the fact that it has not been in word only but in power. This then is a saving power, not a natural power, not an excitement, not some natural enthusiasm; it is a saving power. O how sweet it is to feel it even for a few minutes! Sometimes you may feel it in reading the Scriptures, when something comes home to your soul with sweetness, softens your heart, moistens your eyes, and brings forth a love to the Lord in your soul. It is not in word only then is it? It is in power, and saving power too.

Can we go as far as this then, and hopefully to feel that we have known something of the power of the Gospel in conviction of sin

in awakening our conscience from our ruined state by nature, and bringing us to cry for mercy like the publican when he said, "God be merciful to me a sinner". Sometimes this can be in a quiet moment of your meditation. You may be travelling about and meditating a little on these things, you feel a softening, a sweetness in them, your spirit is taken up and you have a little communion with your Lord. "Not in word only, but also in power". In these days in which we live we lack the power to a great extent; I would not say there is not any, but there does not appear to be much power. Still it is a mercy if there is a case here and there where the Gospel has not been in word only, and especially if you can look inside and feel some evidence that it has not been in word only but in power and in the Holy Ghost.

This is very solemn, for these points are all linked up. "In the Holy Ghost". It must be a Holy Ghost religion to take us to heaven, for is it not His blessed work to convince of sin and to bring a poor convinced sinner to the foot stool of mercy? "In the Holy Ghost". Sometimes it is in power in the Holy Ghost in a sweet opening up of the Scripture to you in a quiet reading of it. The Holy Spirit has applied just a sentence possibly and brought it home with some authority in your heart. It comes in the power of the Holy Ghost to make Christ precious in the desire for Him. It comes in the Holy Ghost to open up the beauties of our Emmanuel and to set the soul running after Him and, as I have mentioned recently here, when He becomes "as the apple tree among the trees of the wood". It comes in the Holy Ghost to apply the Scripture to the heart of an exercised one, it comes in power, not in word only. Some of you may have felt something of this as you have been travelling about the country, or in the silence of the night, or in the ordinances of the Lord's house, thus it comes in the Holy Ghost in a gracious revelation of the truth. It is the Holy Spirit's work to reveal the truth of the Gospel in the heart and make it real and precious there. Have you ever known this? Have you felt that inward power

in your heart at times of the authority of the Holy Scriptures? The Holy Spirit is the Author of the Holy Scriptures as we read, for "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost", and this good Spirit brings the Scriptures with power into the hearts of the Lord's people who can then bear witness to their divine authority. The word comes in the Holy Ghost to shed the love of God abroad in the heart. The Apostle refers to this, writing to the Romans, where he speaks of the love of God being "shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us". How blessed it is when the Holy Spirit applies to the heart of a child of God that of which He is Himself the Author. He applies it, and only He can. It is the Holy Spirit's office then to shed the love of God abroad in the heart of the Lord's waiting children and to reveal Christ and make Him precious in the view of faith, yea as "the chiefest among tenthousand and the altogether lovely".

"Our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Ghost". This power is an evidence and a witness to all real religion. It comes in the Holy Ghost to lead us into the truth. We read in the 8th. Romans of being led by the Spirit into the truth, and also of bearing witness in our own hearts to our personal interest in the blessed Gospel. He bears that witness in the heart to the authority and truth of the Holy Scriptures, and He bears that witness to one's own interest in the truth of the Holy Scriptures and of the blessed Gospel. "In the Holy Ghost and in much assurance". This does not indicate that we live at all times under a feeling of assurance of our personal interest, but the Holy Spirit bears a witness in the soul to the truth of the blessed Gospel, the Holy Scriptures, and to the doctrines of divine grace as they may be revealed and made known. He bears a witness to the glorious and blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This assurance, then, is of the truth itself, but it can also be of one's personal interest in it and when this is felt it is very, very blessed and I wonder how many of you can go as far as this, you can, if the Holy Ghost sheds the love of God abroad in your heart. Then you can read some

of those choice chapters by John and feel that they are for you. The Spirit bearing a testimony, "in much assurance" - in much assurance of your personal interest in the Gospel. This has been, in some cases, after many years of inward exercise, much soul conflict, many days of darkness, and much bondage; but even where this is the case, in the Lord's own time He appears, and brings the soul out of prison to praise His name. He opens the prison doors and brings one long held in darkness and bondage into the light and liberty of His glorious and blessed Gospel. It is very sweet when you can read the Scriptures under a feeling hope that you have an interest in them. The Apostle felt a confidence in these Thessalonians. He was able to give thanks unto the Lord for them and remembering "without ceasing their work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God". How is a poor exercised one to know his election of God? I would say that he may know it when the Gospel comes in some power into his soul, for that is a witness to his election of God. "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only", so if you can feel that there has been a time when you have felt something of the power of the Gospel in your soul, that power is a witness to your divine election, "Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God". The Gospel comes in power and in the Holy Ghost in the appointment of the Lord through and by the Gospel ministry, and this is the point with the Apostle here, the Gospel came "not unto you in word only". His testimony among these Thessalonians was not in word only; here we have an evidence of divine election, and it can be an encouraging point too, for one might say, "I do not feel that I have ever had any witness in my own heart of divine election, that I am one of the elect of God to my soul's satisfaction; but perhaps you can say that there has been a time when you have felt something of the power and authority of the Gospel in your heart, when you have received a token for good, when something has softened you, when the Lord Jesus Christ has been precious, if only in the desire for Him. Well then in that you have an evidence of your election of God, "Knowing, brethren beloved,

your election of God".

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So, beloved friends, it is a wonderful mercy to know and feel something of the power of the Gospel, and to be able to point to a day or a sermon or a quiet time you may have had in meditation when you could say it was not in word only. When it is in word only, there is nothing beyond reasoning of the creature, but when there is a little power and unction coming with it, it is of God, for a creature of himself cannot function anything spiritual independently, it must come from the Word Himself, not "in word only but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance". Oh is not this a sweet moment? Have not some of you known this just for a little space when the Sun of righteousness has shone into your heart and you have felt able to say, "My beloved is mine and I am His"? when you have sat down under the apple tree and adored His glorious Majesty that He should ever show divine compassion to such a hell-deserving sinner; and yet even so He has made you to feel it, and even if you bring up some objections He will sweep them away, and bring into your soul that sweet softening sense of His favour toward you, and it may be under some view of the Lord Jesus Christ in His beauty and glory so as to draw your heart forth unto Him. That will make you in a right way anticipate the day when it will not be as it is down here, "through a glass darkly", for that is the most we can see while we are here, for our nature could not bear very much of His glory. We see through a glass darkly; but even so when there is a little opening up of the love of Christ in your heart and you feel it, He becomes the chiefest among ten thousand and the altogether lovely, "in much assurance". It was a choice moment when the cloud dispersed, when a light shone from heaven into your heart, and you beheld His beauty, the beauty of your glorious Emmanuel. Then you could say, "My beloved is mine and I am His".

How profoundly solemn it will be to come to our death-bed with nothing more than "word only", if so we shall come short of what is necessary. What a mercy if on the other hand when we come to the end of our pilgrimage, whenever that shall be, and, as often is the case, the dawn of heaven breaks, the light begins to shine, and

faith anticipates the day. Oh what a glorious prospect is before the redeemed of the Lord! The Apostle Paul could say, "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us". If you can just get into the 73rd. Psalm where that good man was brought after all his conflict and can say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee, and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee"; then it is not in word only is it? No, no, with some of you, and myself, if I am not greatly deceived, there have been a few instances, even if only one or two, when the Lord has **appeared**, and has been in my soul the chiefest among ten thousand and the altogether lovely. Not "in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance!"

In closing I would just say that I hope that the labours of your pastor here may not be on the part of the hearers in word only. How solemn. Speaking to a brother minister the other day I enquired about a certain man whom I knew in his congregation in the very early days of my ministry and I said, Is he still attending your chapel, he said, yes, he is still attending but that is all I know; he has attended about 40 years, and I have never had a single word from him. How solemn, there does not appear to be much evidence of it not being in word only, perhaps he could not feel able to mention anything; but it is solemn to sit under a Gospel ministry and feel little, if any, concern, about it. To hear is a Gospel privilege, and I believe that where people come praying and waiting upon the Lord for something for their souls they can be a great help to a minister, whether he knows it or not, for a living ministry is only suitable for living hearers, although the Lord has used such a ministry, especially in the days of Berridge and Whitfield and many others to awaken the conscience and convince many in a saving way. Here is the point then, has the Gospel ever been in power in your heart here in this Chapel, here at Richmond, those of you that attend here; have there been times when you have felt a power in the ministry of your pastor, or are you like those who come and go year after year and to whom apparently it has been in word only? It can be a heart-searching point, may the Lord help us then, and may He help your dear pastor here, still maintain and favour him, and if the Lord will, give him yet to see more signs following. Amen.

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