

12 Pentecost 2003  
“Walking and Wielding the Word of God”  
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

I have a picture in my mind from the news this past week. Many of you saw it. It's about the size of a washing machine. It's made of granite. It weighs about 5000 lbs. Until recently it's been displayed in a very public place. It's inscribed with the 10 Commandments. You all know what I'm talking about, right?

It's that monument at the State Courthouse in Alabama that has been getting so much attention this past week. The controversy swirling around it shows the disputed place of God's law in our modern life.

What's striking to me is not that the law of God is opposed – which I guess is to be expected. **What's striking to me is that it's actually proposed.** It's striking to me that there's a concerted effort *in favor* of the 10 Commandments and the Word of God in modern American life and that there's 77% public support for it!

After all, that law is 3500 years old. Back then it was an obscure revelation, from a little known God, to an insignificant tribe wandering in the desert. And here it is now front and center in the news in America 2003. Amazing, isn't it?

So how is it that God's Word is still so much with us? **And what are we supposed to do with it?** Our readings this morning tell us. They tell us how to use it, how we misuse it and how we need to share it with the world.

They tell us how to use of the Word of God. In Deuteronomy Moses gives God's Word to Israel. We read it aloud in church and we have it in our Bibles. So what do we do with it? It's simple. He wants us to USE IT. God's Word wasn't just to sit in sacred books or be read in sacred assembly or be inscribed in blocks of granite. No, God's laws are to be learned and lived. Moses says Israel was to "observe them diligently," to "give heed to them" and so are we.

**God has spoken.** In the midst of a confused world, he has shown us what is true, good and right, what he requires of us. He's given us a vision of life in perfect harmony with God, with each other and with the world. That's what the law taught Israel. As God's Word forms our consciousness, our conscience, our priorities, our loves and lifestyles it kind of screws our heads on straight and help us see new possibilities for life.

**So if you follow God's Word, what's it going to do to you?** It makes us stand out, doesn't it? It was true of ancient Jews and its true of modern Christians. That's what Moses was talking about as Israel prepared to enter this strange land God had promised them. By being faithful to God's Word, they would claim his promises and occupy the Promised Land.

When the people of Israel entered the land across the Jordan and organized their life around the law, Moses says, "this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples...What other great nation has a God so near it as the Lord you God is ...and what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law?"

Do you see what's happening here? **God is getting some free advertising.** By living the Word of God, Israel was witnessing to the greatness, wisdom and goodness of God. By BEING they're bearing witness. That's what "evangelism" is. So how do we use the Word? You live it. And when you live it your proclaim it.

And that's why the law of God is still with us today, still bearing witness – even when it's being forcibly removed from the public square. But you have to be careful because there are difficulties and temptations in using God's Word.

It's easy to misuse the Word. That's what Moses warns Israel about. "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it". **There's something in us that's not content with the Word God gives us.** Like a new pair of pants we want to tailor it fit us better. Trim it in a little here, let it out a little there.

On the one hand there's the temptation to trim the Word of God. This is obvious, right? Holy Scripture confronts us with a very high standard of behavior, of which we all fall short. You know the feeling, right? You know it's wrong but here we go anyway. **We make a choice. Either I have to change or IT has to.** And often we are more committed to our falling shorts so we trim the law of God by ignoring or rationalizing its standards, or by relaxing and even *revising* them.

**That's the underachiever in us.** The Israelites had that problem when they went into the land. They wanted to follow the lifestyle of the pagans around them and worship other gods. That compromised their ability to live and share God's Word.

But there're two sides to this coin. We also ADD TO the law of God. There's something in us – and some people have it more than others – that wants to make God's requirements MORE stringent. We want to do more than God requires, as if to say, "I do ALL THIS. I must be a good person." Do you ever do that? It works especially well when comparing yourself to "those" people.

**That's the overachiever in us.** The Pharisees and Scribes have that problem in our Gospel lesson. They tried to be more righteous than God, so they raised the standard of righteousness far above what God actually required in the law. They developed this elaborate tradition of the elders, but in the process ended up burying the Word of God. It compromised their ability to live and share it with the world. It ruined their evangelism. Which brings us to the third point.

We must share the Word. For that we turn to Paul, for he shows us how. Just as

Israel was looking forward to entering and claiming the land God had promised them, Paul now looks across the Roman Empire and feels God's call to a similar sort of mission. He wants to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, not just passively with his lifestyle but actively with his Words.

So Paul sees himself as an ambassador, bringing the Word from King Jesus to the whole world. **But the good news isn't universally greeted as such.** You see there's already a king whose Word was law. His name was Caesar, the divine emperor of Rome and he takes a dim view of any competition. That's why Paul is "ambassador in chains." He's been thrown into prison for his testimony.

So Paul faces great opposition at great personal cost and pain. He FEELS the conflict. It's a war, but it's not just conflict between nations. It's not just politics. It's not just human jockeying for position, possessions and fame. It's not just interpersonal conflict.

Rather, behind these conflicts there's a spiritual struggle between God and what Paul names as "the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." There's a malevolent intelligence, an evil conspiracy that's discontent with God's rule so they've rebelled and seek to corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. **The conflict between good and evil runs through the world and through every human heart.**

The Good News that Paul is preaching is that through Jesus God is winning the victory in our lives and in the world. He is forgiving us our sin, saving us from evil, making us new and turning us around to be powerful influences for good.

**So we, too, join the struggle.** And Paul wants us to be well equipped for it. He likens us to Roman legionnaires in full battle-dress, with shields inter-locked, swords drawn, marching to overcome the evil around us.

And the Word of God figures prominently in our equipment. Paul says, "As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel." And he urges us to use "the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God." So the Word of God is **the shoes get you to the battle and sword that gets you through it.**

So when a granite monument of the Decalogue raises the question, "what are we supposed to do with God's Word," we have an answer. We're supposed to USE IT – not misuse it. We are supposed to live it and in so doing bear witness to all the world of God's greatness, wisdom and goodness and his victory over evil in Jesus Christ our Lord.

For Paul, the Good News of God's Word is like a good pair of shoes and a sharp sword. **God's Word must be walked and wielded.** And that's what evangelism is all about. AMEN