

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Sword of the Spirit

The Sword of the Spirit
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *The Sword of the Spirit*

Hopefully, you are becoming increasingly hungry for God's Word. You are growing in your desire to feed on the Word, and to know the joy and rejoicing of heart that comes from doing so (Jer. 15.16).

The Word of God leads us into a covenant relationship with our Creator and Lord, so that, through Jesus Christ, we may realize the precious and very great promises of God as a banquet of spiritual vitality and delight.

But God calls us not only to *feed* on His Word – bearing the fruit and showing the evidence such feeding produces – but also to *wield* His Word in the world. The Bible is God's primary weapon, used by His Spirit, to advance His rule of righteousness, peace, and joy. And God has given us His Spirit both to *teach* us the Word, and to *empower us to wield* it for God's glory.

If we truly hunger for God's Word, then we will hunger to use that mighty spiritual sword in all the ways He intends. In this brief study, we will consider what it means for us to make use of the covenant Word of God in seeking and advancing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 A Two-Edged Sword

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God... Ephesians 6.17

A Word to be wielded

The Apostle Paul explained that Christians are continually engaged in a spiritual warfare, for which we must daily prepare, and be fully equipped to do battle, lest we lost the time of our lives to powers of wickedness (Eph. 5.15-17).

Spiritual forces of wickedness in high places mean to do us in, to render our faith of no value in furthering the Kingdom of Christ. This they do in many ways, but one of the most effective tactics of the devil is to cause believers to regard the faith of Christ as a matter of their own personal wellbeing, and not much more. Doing battle in the Lord's army, fighting the good fight of good works and loving truth, is not something many believers see themselves as called to do.

But this is not the way the Scriptures present the life of faith.

Psalm 149 summarizes what it means to be part of that people in whom the Lord takes pleasure:

*For the LORD takes pleasure in His people;
He will beautify the humble with salvation.
Let the saints be joyful in glory;
Let them sing aloud on their beds.
Let the high praises of God be in their mouth,
And a two-edged sword in their hand,
To execute vengeance on the nations,
And punishments on the peoples;
To bind their kings with chains,
And their nobles with fetters of iron;
To execute on them the written judgment—
This honor have all His saints.
Praise the LORD! (vv. 4-9)*

Salvation is a gift of God which leads to gladness, praise, and singing on the part of those who possess it. Belonging to the Lord, being part of His people through the saving work of Christ, is, indeed, a great source of personal comfort, joy, and hope.

But God has not saved us simply so that we'll feel good about ourselves before Him. He has saved us to deploy us in the spiritual warfare that everywhere rages on the earth. And He has put His two-edged Sword in our hands for that purpose.

Wielding the Word of God

The Old Testament references to warfare, and all the armaments and tactics that go with it, should be regarded, through the lens of the New Testament, as addressing the *real* and *ultimate* warfare in which we are engaged – the spiritual warfare. Jesus showed the way in Matthew 4.1-11, when He came under attack by the devil. He fought the devil and resisted his temptations by wielding the Word of God. Thus He bound His adversary and made all the devil's holdings vulnerable to His gracious and liberating work (Matt. 12.22-29).

Throughout the course of His ministry, Jesus showed us the true nature of our warfare, and Paul enlarged on His example by calling us to be fully equipped for daily battle.

The Sword of the Spirit

The Word of God is a two-edged sword. It is doubly sharp to penetrate chinks in the armor of the Lie, to expose the soft flesh of unbelief, and to penetrate to the depths of human souls, where it accomplishes the work for which God sends it out (Heb. 4.12; Is. 55.10, 11). And God has placed that two-edged Sword of the Spirit in the hands of His chosen people, that we might use it each day to fight the good fight of faith, resisting the devil and his many temptations, exposing the lies of unbelief, and advancing the rule of King Jesus within our own spheres of influence.

This is why it is so important that Christians work hard at learning how to handle the Word of God, understanding its overall thrust and primary themes, becoming familiar with the whole counsel of God, reading, meditating, studying, discussing, and sharing the Word with one another. We are called to “take up arms” in the cause of Christ and His Kingdom, and we will not be fit for the battles we must engage each day until we become adept at wielding the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

But let us learn to wield that Word consistently, and with effects, and we will understand why Jeremiah declared the Word to be the joy and rejoicing of his heart (Jer. 15.16). For this is why God has called us to His Kingdom and glory, that we might wield the Sword of the Spirit unto righteousness, peace, and joy in the Kingdom of our Lord.

For reflection

1. How would you counsel a new Christian concerning the spiritual warfare? What is it? How should we expect to engage in it? What’s at stake?
2. Why is the Word of God like a sword? Why is it good to think of the Word as the Sword of the Spirit?
3. Discuss some ways that you are presently engaged in wielding the Word of God in spiritual warfare.

Next steps – Preparation: Is your approach to the Bible – how you read and study God’s Word, and put it work in your life – sufficient to equip you for the daily battles you must face in seeking the Kingdom of God? Talk about this question with your spouse or a soul friend.

2 Begin Here

For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God? 1 Peter 4.17

A Word for judgment

The Bible has been given to us, in the first place, to lead us to deeper levels of faith, so that we might serve the Lord by making sound judgments. That word – judgment – doesn't sit well with many believers: Aren't we supposed to resist the temptation to judge others?

Well, no.

Jesus commands us to judge with righteous judgment, and the Bible is the primary source the Lord has provided for equipping us to think, feel, value, speak, and act in righteous ways (cf. Jn. 7.24; 2 Tim. 3.15-17). God intends His Word to penetrate the very depths of the human soul, exposing the darkness of sin and unbelief, cauterizing the wounds of death and transgression, and performing spiritual surgery for the renewal of every aspect of human life. Then it can do the work of bringing forth faith in greater measures, for joy, rejoicing, and a life of obedience.

But this work begins in judgment. The Spirit of God, Who is our Teacher, wields the Word of God to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and *judgment* (Jn. 16.8-11). He opens the Word to us so that we might be convicted of the sin in our lives, and in the world around us (Ps. 139.23, 24). He convinces us from the Law and all the Word of God concerning what true righteousness requires (Rom. 7.12). And He warns any who may balk at being so *judged* that judgment from God awaits all who hesitate to follow the path of righteousness (Heb. 12.3-11).

The Word of God is a two-edged Sword, in the first place, for judgment. And that judgment must begin with us, the beneficiaries of God's covenant and members of His household.

Exercise all vigilance

Before we can be effective in fighting the good fight of faith in the world, we must learn to be effective in fighting it in our own lives. The law of sin continues to work within us (Rom. 7.18-25), inclining us away from God's will to our own selfish desires; the sinful world confronts us daily with all manner of enticements (1 Jn. 2;15-17); and, of course, the devil and his ilk are always prowling and stalking about, looking for ways to overthrow our faith and render us ineffective in the spiritual warfare (1 Pet. 5.8, 9).

We are continually under attack by spiritual forces seeking to capture the moments and opportunities of our lives for their own evil purposes (Eph. 5.15-17). Thus, we must exercise all vigilance, as we read and study the Word of God, against sin making any gains in our own souls, our own lives, and our own communities.

We must examine ourselves daily in the light of God's Word, listening as we read and meditate, for the Spirit to speak to us and to reveal any thoughts, affections, or priorities which are out of line with the Kingdom of God. Confession and repentance are the daily responsibility of all who follow Christ, and one of the first fruits of reading and hearing the Word of God; but we will not be likely to engage either of these disciplines until we learn to listen to the Spirit.

We must allow the Spirit to judge not only our thoughts, affections, and priorities, but also our words and deeds, every one of them, in the light of the Word of God. As we discover areas where our speech or works are not in line with the teaching of God's Word, we must confess our sin, repent of any wicked practices, and hurry back to the path of the Lord, revealed in His Word (Ps. 119.59, 60).

The Sword of the Spirit

We must be continuously vigilant over our soul and life, looking to and listening for the Spirit to use God's Word to expose our sins, and convict us of them.

Stimulating one another

But we must also exercise accountability with one another, being bold and loving to discourage one another from sinful practices and to encourage one another in love and good works (Gal. 6.1-10; Heb. 11.24). Growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord is a community effort; each of us must find study partners and soul friends whom the Spirit can use to convict, instruct, encourage, and edify us in our journey with the Lord.

Wielding the Word of God involves wielding it on ourselves first of all. Do not read or study the Bible merely for information or insights concerning the needs of others. Let the Spirit drive His Word deep into your soul, and wield it in every area of your life, and you will be equipped to serve the Lord with that Word in every area of our life.

Our place in the front lines of the spiritual warfare will always be compromised until we learn to fall on the Sword of the Spirit and let it judge us, correct us, heal us, and direct us in the paths of righteousness which Jesus has trod before us (1 Jn. 2.1-6).

For reflection

1. Why is it important that Christians be ready to judge?
2. What does it mean to judge with "righteous judgment"? How does that relate to our everyday lives in the world?
3. Meditate on Psalm 139.23, 24. How might you practice this as an aspect of "beginning here" in exercising righteous judgment?

Next steps – Conversation: How would you describe the role of confession and repentance in your life? Talk with some other believers about how you can encourage one another to be more consistent in coming under the judgment of the Sword of the Spirit.

3 The Word of Life

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” John 6.63

All the Word is Jesus’ Word

Jesus explained that the entire Bible, all the sacred Scriptures, are about Him (Jn. 5.39). He is the Word of God, and the Scriptures bring us the words of the Word of God, making them the very Word of God as well. He is the fulfillment of God’s covenant, and all its promises cohere in Him. He is the food and drink to slake our spiritual thirst, and nourishment we need to break out of our famine of truth.

When, therefore, the Scriptures speak to any area of our lives for judgment and correction, we do well to take heed, accept the judgment of God’s Spirit, and adjust our ways accordingly.

But the Sword of the Spirit is not given to us merely to whack away at the sin and unbelief lingering within us. God intends His Word to bring us to *life*, to a deeper knowledge of Himself and Jesus Christ, a greater experience of His glory, more consistent realization of His presence and power, and a fuller experience of the eternal life for which we have been redeemed. We cannot realize the full and abundant life Jesus has gained for us apart from consistent reading, studying, and learning from the Word of God.

Life for the soul

The Word of God is life for the soul. It speaks to the mind, to how we think, what we think about, the hopes and visions and dreams that give direction to our lives. As we study the Scriptures we want to learn how to exercise more of the mind of Christ, which is given to us (1 Cor. 2.16). We want to take every one of our thoughts captive, and make them all obey Jesus for loving God and our neighbors (2 Cor. 10.3-5; Matt. 22.34-40).

The Word of God teaches us what to think and how to think, and it renews our minds day by day so that we can live more consistently for Jesus Christ (Rom. 12.1, 2).

The Word also illuminates the affections of the heart. Not every attitude, desire, feeling, longing, or hope which we entertain is consistent with the progress of the Kingdom of God and the life of faith. Our desires need to be reviewed and reformed daily. Our heart needs renewing light and grace from God’s Word, so that we love what we’re supposed to love, hate what we ought to hate, and are invested in all our affections in a manner consistent with the heart of God.

As we read and study the Scriptures, we need to listen for the Spirit to expose any areas of darkness in our heart, so that we may repent and take up a course of attitudes and affections more consistent with the life Christ came to bring us (Ps. 139.23, 24).

And the same is true for the conscience. The conscience is like the umpire in our souls. God has written the works of His Law on our heart, and the conscience “reads” that Law to help us in thinking right thoughts, feeling right feelings, and making right choices (Rom. 2.14, 15). The Word of God can help us make sure our conscience is, in Paul’s words, “good” and “right” before the Lord and our neighbors (1 Tim. 1.5)

Life for everyday living

As the Word of God thus renews and reforms our soul, it prepares us for every good work, whether by word or deed. Every day we are presented with opportunities for glorifying God in our life (1 Cor. 10.31). We will only do that, we will only display the resurrection life of Jesus to the glory of God the Father, through the words we speak and the works we do, with joy and rejoicing; and the Sword of the Spirit speaks volumes

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about each of these as manifestations of the life of Jesus Christ.

Reading and studying the Word of God shapes our soul, and sheds light on our daily lives as well. By showing us who we are in the light of God's Word, the Spirit then points us to Jesus, and ushers into the life of righteousness, peace, and joy He brings. Let the Scriptures teach you how to use your tongue and how to love God and neighbor in your everyday life. This may mean setting aside some ways of speaking and living that are not consistent with the Word, and taking up new ways that are more expressive of the life of Christ (Eph. 4.17-24)

We cannot do this on our own, of course, and this is why we have the Spirit of God in us, Who works with the Word of God to bring us to a richer, fuller experience of the *life* of God every day (Jn. 6.63; 1 Cor. 2.12, 13).

Let the Scriptures shape, mold, and guide you for *life*, life as Jesus intends it, life of joy and rejoicing in the Lord, to the praise of the glory of God.

For reflection

1. Meditate on John 10.10b, 14.6, and 17.3. What is eternal life? How would you explain this to someone who does not have it?
2. Meditate on John 5.39. What do we mean by saying that the entire Bible is about Jesus and the life He came to give? Can you give some examples from various parts of the Bible?
3. Mind, heart, conscience – the three components of the soul: How does the Bible work to “judge” and shape each of these for full and abundant life in Jesus?

Next steps – Demonstration: What would you suggest to a new believer to help him learn how to read the Word of God for life? How well does this express your own approach to the Bible?

4 Here's Where You're Wrong

Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." Matthew 22.29

Captive to the Lie

The Apostle Paul described those who reject God and His Word as living under "the Lie" (Rom. 1.18ff). Because God is true, and His Word is truth, it makes sense that all who refuse to submit to that Word are going to choose a course in life that will take them increasingly far from the path of truth. No wonder there is so little true and lasting joy and rejoicing in our world today. People caught up in the Lie are increasingly out of touch with the Word Who can set them free (Jn. 8.32).

This is not to suggest that there won't be anything true about their lives, or that they won't do anything good or true, in spite of their rebellion against God. God is too gracious for that; only slowly and reluctantly does He give people up to the folly of their unbelieving ways, and all the bad decisions and consequences that issue from that (Rom. 1.22-32). As ungrateful, unbelieving people continue in rebellion against Him, God maintains His steadfast love and faithfulness toward even them (Ps. 52.1). He causes His rain to fall and His sun to shine on the just and unjust alike (Matt. 5.43-45).

But that does not negate the fact that, having chosen the way of the Lie, many people are now captive to it, and they are going to embrace opinions, make decisions, and follow courses of action in life that will simply be just plain wrong.

And it is part of our job, as those who wield the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of Truth, to help them see how this is so.

Squeamish?

Now let's admit right away that we're perhaps a bit squeamish about suggesting that others – anyone – might be *wrong* about something. We might want to *disagree* with someone's chosen way of life. Or we might not find their choices to our liking. But to say someone is *wrong*? That's sounds, you know, judgmental.

But haven't we already decided that we're not supposed to *not* judge others, only to judge them *with righteous judgment*, which is the way we ourselves would like to be judged (Jn. 7.24; Matt. 7.1, 2)? And our source of righteousness being the Word of God, the Sword of the Spirit, we must learn to wield it ways that leave no "wobble room" for those who prefer to live the Lie. We must speak truth to them in love, so that the Sword of the Spirit may engage their souls as it does ours (Eph. 4.15).

Jesus did not say to the religious leaders who challenged Him, "You know, I disagree with your view; here's My own take on this." No. He told them flatly, "You are mistaken." And He could do that because He knew the Word of God, and He understood their views to be not only *not informed* by the Word of God, but *completely out of line with it*.

They were following the Lie, and it would do them no good to hear His "take" on the matter; they needed to be told they were simply wrong.

What this requires of us

Before we launch out into the deep here, we need to make sure of a couple of things. First, whatever the subject of discussion may be – an issue of the day, a moral opinion, some practice, or whatever – we need to be good listeners and patient observers. We need to be clear about what others are proposing, and not just deal with straw men. If people are wrong about something, we need to show them in specific ways. If some straw man is wrong, and that's all we're discussing, folks can simply shrug that off as not applying to them.

The Sword of the Spirit

We don't want them to wiggle out from under the weight of truth so easily. Remember, we are called to wield the Sword of the Spirit in a warfare for the souls of men.

Second, we need be clear about what the Bible teaches concerning the issue or practice in question. Only thus will we be able to keep the conversation from degenerating into some form of "So's your old man." We want people to understand where their views or lifestyles differ, not with *ours*, but with the teaching of the Word of God. We need to be able to say, like the prophets of old – and like Jesus – "Here's what the Bible says about that."

Now, make no mistake, people may simply laugh in your face and say, "What's the Bible got to do with it?" But don't back away when that happens. Simply say, "Well, the Bible is God's Word of Truth, and even if we don't agree with it, we need to hear what the Bible has to say"

So we have a good bit of preparing to do if we're going to help people see that the Bible stands opposed to their views or practices about this, that, or the other.

But if we don't do this, we will fail in our calling to wield the Sword of the Spirit to help others escape the Lie discover the way of life.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to say that someone is "captive to the Lie"? Do you really believe this? What evidence do you see to indicate this is true?
2. Why do we have so much difficulty saying to people they're mistaken about something, when it's clear they are wrong? How can we say this and still be heard?
3. What would you describe as the skills of a good listener? A good observer? How would you rate yourself with respect to those skills?

Next steps – Conversation: What are a few topics that come up in your sphere of influence that might serve as a "flash point" for talking about matters of truth? Try one or two of these with some of the people in your Personal Mission Field.

5 We Propose

“Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you...” Acts 17.23

A great proposal

Christians can sometimes “clam up” about the truth they find in the Bible because they think others will regard them as trying to “cram religion down their throats.” That might especially be the case if we’re making bold to say to people that their views or lifestyles are wrong for being out of sync with the Word of truth in Scripture.

We won’t get very far in knowing or sharing the joy of the Lord if this is the case.

Much of this feeling of being bullied or preached at comes not so much from *what we say* to people as *how we say it*. Christianity – the truth of God, revealed in Scripture – is not like some bad-tasting medicine we have to force people to take because it’s good for what ails them. Christianity is the truth, the very truth of God. It offers life and hope and blessing and joy through the Good News about Jesus and His Kingdom. But before people can make an informed decision about whether to embrace that truth, they need to have opportunities to hear it clearly.

Part of our calling in wielding the Sword of the Spirit, therefore, is in setting before the people around us the grand, overall story of the Bible – the story of Jesus and the coming of the Kingdom of God – and in doing so in a way that is conversational, personal, patient, and engaging. We have learned that this story is true, and if others are going to learn this as well, someone needs to put it before them – to *propose* the Gospel and the Word of truth as being worthy of consideration.

As we *grow* in God’s Word, and the joy and rejoicing it brings to our soul, we will naturally want to *share* the Good News of that Word with others.

Take it easy

Communicating the Gospel has a kind of urgency attached to it. Lives and eternal destinies are at stake. We know this, but those to whom we would propose the Gospel do not. We need to be patient, loving, and conversational with people, asking questions and being ready to answer theirs, as we work our way through the Bible’s teaching about Jesus and His Kingdom. This may require more than one conversation, and we need to be willing for that to be the case.

When such opportunities arise – perhaps growing out of a previous conversation on some issue or topic of the day – guard against becoming too emotional or emphatic, seeking to overwhelm people with passion. The Gospel is true and the Bible is true, and we know it. We can rest in the power of the Word and Spirit of God to do the work for which God sends it out through us; but we need to make sure, like Paul in Athens, that we are considerate, gracious, and patient, as well as clear.

Make it relevant

People are more likely to listen to the truth of God if they see how it impacts their lives. Like Paul in Athens, affirming the religious intensity of the philosophers, and even their faulty worship of God, we can always find something to affirm in others, something which even God would approve, and which could be a kind of starting-point for deeper conversations about truth.

Is our friend particularly diligent in his work? We can commend him for this, and let him know that God approves of his work ethic as well, since it reflects His original purpose for human beings. Does our friend seem to appreciate nice things? Beautiful things? This too, we might point out, is an indication of God’s

blessing, since God loves beauty as well.

The point is simply that, in *proposing* the truth of Scripture so people will listen and engage with us, we need to start where they are, and show them how the Word of God is relevant to their interests, concerns, or situation in life. Think of Jesus with Nicodemus or the woman at the well (Jn. 3, 4). What can you learn about the people around you that might serve as a starting-point for affirmation and conversation, so that you can propose the truth of Scripture for their further consideration?

Take the initiative

We don't have to wait around for people to seek us out on the Word of God. Jesus came, He said, to *seek* the lost people of Palestine. He didn't just go to Jerusalem, rent a facility, and hang out a sign reading, "Religion at 11." He went to people; He engaged them; He listened; He did good to them; and He proposed and proclaimed the truth of God as the answer to their emptiness and sin.

Jesus said that, as the Father had sent Him into the world, so He has sent us. Are you ready to wield the Sword of the Spirit in proposing the truth of God to the people around you? Let the Word of God dwell in you richly, basking fully in its joy and rejoicing, and you'll find it fairly flows out from you as situations and opportunities allow (Jn. 7.37-39).

For reflection

1. What's the difference between *proposing* the Gospel and "cramming it down someone's throat"?
2. What would you suggest as a good approach to proposing the Good News of Jesus and His Kingdom to someone you've known for quite some time?
3. Think of the people you see each week. What would it mean if you were to become more active in seeking them, like Jesus did?

Next steps – Preparation: Make a short list of the people you see each week. Beside each one, jot down some things you know about them – interests, hobbies, observations. Then, see if you can come up with a few Biblical ideas, truths, stories, or examples they might find interesting. Write a "conversation starter" for each person, and begin working to get the conversations going right away.

6 We Proclaim

“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” Acts 17.30, 31

A proposition with bite

We are considering what is required of us as followers of Christ in wielding the Sword of the Spirit within the context of our spiritual warfare. The joy and rejoicing of heart we know as we study the Word of God seeks expression in our daily lives. We begin with ourselves, but then we want to bring the Word of truth to bear on all aspects of life, and for all the people we care about who are captive to or may be enticed by the Lie of unbelief.

Like Paul at Athens, we propose to set the truth of God before people for them to consider as an alternative to their mistaken views about life. We do not judge others; we let the Word of God do that. Our purpose is to help them to understand God’s plan and purpose for their lives. To that end, we seek to engage them in conversations about the truth of God as it relates to their everyday lives.

But our purpose is not simply to affirm those who are still captive to the Lie. Our purpose is to *alert* them to God’s truth, to *inform* them of where they stand in relation to that truth, and to *call* them to turn from their mistaken ways to embrace Jesus and His truth as their new framework for life.

What is required

To that end, we must do more than just propose; we must also proclaim.

The Gospel and the truth of God are not like items in a smorgasbord, or opinions on an op-ed page. You can’t simply pass them by, because they might seem unpalatable for the moment, or you just don’t agree with them, and expect your life to go on just fine. We must not be content merely to *discuss* the truth of God; we must *insist on obedience* to that truth, if people are to know real life.

There is truth, and it is in God’s Word, where Jesus is revealed in all His glory, unto joy and rejoicing in our hearts. He is the truth of God, the explanation of all things, and the very fount of life. Knowing this as we do, *not* to proclaim Jesus, and to urge others to receive and follow Him, would be the greatest disservice we could render.

In proclaiming the truth that is in Jesus, we must call people to a total change of direction in life – what the New Testament refers to as repentance. As we apply the Sword of the Spirit to our own souls and lives, God will not bring us more fully into the new life of His Kingdom until we have laid aside our old ways of thinking, feeling, valuing, and being in the world. We must be born again, and being born again entails repenting of everything which is not true, and reaching out to Him Who is the Truth, even our Lord Jesus Christ.

The call to repentance implies the presence of sin. Here again we need to let Scripture do the talking. We do not accuse anyone of being a sinner; God’s truth, however, does. We will want to show our unsaved friends and colleagues precisely where the Scriptures make such a claim, so that their argument will not be with us, but with God. *He* is the One Who calls them to turn from their old lives if they want to begin walking in the truth.

Three responses

Paul’s proposing and proclaiming in Athens elicited three responses from those who heard him (Acts 17.32-

34). We can expect the same.

Some people, probably a few, will hear us and believe the truth of God and the Gospel. We'll want to help them get started in the life of faith in every possible way.

Others will listen politely but without coming to a decision for Jesus; they may, however, indicate a willingness to talk further. We will want to keep our conversations going with these folks, always looking for new ways to help them see how the Word of truth speaks to their everyday lives.

And some folks will be upset with us and tell us where to get off. What we should do then is, get off. Back away from our conversations about the truth of God, but do not back away from continuing to love. We need to keep caring for those who reject God's truth, and praying for them. Don't respond in kind if they become nasty or threatening. Just back off, continue to love them, and be available should the Lord pique them to seek a reason for the hope that is in you at some point in the future (1 Pet. 3.15).

We need to be ready with the Sword of the Spirit for every opportunity the Lord may present us each day, proposing and proclaiming the truth of God's Word as often as we can, and with all the grace the Spirit can muster within us.

For reflection

1. What are the basic differences between proposing and proclaiming? Why is each important?
2. Why do you suppose that most Christians go through their lives without proposing or proclaiming the Gospel to anyone? What's holding them back?
3. Summarize the three responses to his proposing and proclaiming that Paul realized in Athens. Which of these have you experienced?

Next steps – Preparation: Put together a basic outline of the Gospel – the core of Biblical truth. Share this with your spouse or a friend, and ask your friend's help in getting this right. Then, begin praying for the people in your Personal Mission Field who need to hear this Good News. Make the most of each opportunity the Lord puts before you each day.

7 We Warn

“I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Luke 13:3

Hard truth

Jesus’ response to the question put to Him, about people who were slain or who died in a tragedy, can seem somewhat uncaring and hard.

Hard, yes. Uncaring, never.

Jesus is the embodiment of God’s love. Nothing He ever spoke was intended to do anything other than to further the cause of the truth and love of God. Even when He spoke hard words to His enemies, He longed for them to know the truth. In the account in Luke 13, the truth of the matter is that everyone is going to die, and if they do not repent and turn to the truth of God, their death will be as much a tragedy as any they could imagine.

Our job, in wielding the Sword of the Spirit, is to explain to people the consequences of rejecting God’s truth. That can be hard, but it need not be uncaring. We must do so on the authority of God’s Word, giving the Spirit free rein to work with that Word as He sees fit.

Fear of dying

Every human being carries around a mindfulness of death. We know it is inevitable, and at least two aspects of death cause some amount of consternation: the manner of our dying, and what will become of us after we die.

For those who have been born again into the Kingdom of God, the first of these concerns lingers, although we do not dwell on it, resting in the strength of the Lord to endure whatever we must. The last, the question of our ultimate disposition, has been resolved, and we rejoice in the hope of knowing God in His glory forever (Rom. 5.1, 2; Rom. 8.1).

For those who do not know the Lord, death hovers over them like a specter (Heb. 2.15). Consider the many ways that people try to euphemize or postpone death. The fear of death runs deep, and justly so, for human beings are not meant for death, but for life, the life which God offers in His Word. Those who reject the Word of God and prefer the Lie of unbelief need to know that, according to the Scriptures, they have no hope of ever realizing the life for which they have been created, apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not hesitate to warn people of the tragedy of unbelief – the tragedy of eternal death. Can we do anything less?

A warning to unbelievers

As we are wielding the Sword of the Spirit, talking with people about the things of the Lord, and urging them to consider Jesus and the Kingdom of God, we will reach a point with some when they will make it clear they do not want to hear any more about such matters. Before we back off completely from our spoken witness however, we need to make sure such people understand three important teachings of the Gospel.

First, by rejecting the Gospel and the Word of God, *they are still in their sins* (2 Cor. 13.5). Nothing, apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, can deliver people from their sins or relieve them of the guilt and shame which, though they suppress them, necessarily accompany a sinful way of life. All who reject the free offer of the Gospel are thus still in their sins.

The Sword of the Spirit

Second, sin is an *ever-worsening condition*, as Paul makes clear in Romans 1.18-32. Sin is a kind of spiritual cancer that grows and increases, corrupting our thoughts, affections, values, and actions. People who continue in their sins are likely to find, over time, that their lives are changing such that moral compromise with the spirit of the age undermines their preferred values, frustrates their noblest thoughts and intentions, and causes them to become, increasingly, a reflection of the social and cultural temper of the times.

Finally, as Jesus indicated, those who persist in this condition *will die in their sins, without hope of ever knowing the life for which they were created.*

We do not expect those with whom we share this Word to accept it. That's not the point. The point is that we must make sure they *understand* what the Word of truth teaches concerning where they stand in relation to Christ, His truth, and His Kingdom.

Such a witness for truth may be hard, but it need not be uncaring. Love for our neighbors demands that we tell them the whole story of the work of Christ, and this warning of wrath to come is certainly not to be excluded.

For reflection

1. What does it mean to tell people "hard truth" in loving and caring ways? What does this require of us?
2. Summarize the three conditions that describe where people are who have not obeyed the Gospel.
3. Suggest some things to pray for those in your life who have not received Christ and His Good News:

Next steps – Preparation: Talk with a Christian friend about the wrath of God and the coming judgment. What can your friend suggest about an effective and gracious way of incorporating this truth into your presentation of the Gospel?

The Sword of the Spirit

For reflection or discussion

1. In what ways should Christians wield the Sword of the Spirit?
2. How does the Spirit of God use His Sword in our lives?
3. What are the greatest challenges in learning to wield the Sword of the Spirit?
4. How can Christians help and encourage one another in wielding the Sword of the Spirit?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you working to incorporate that lesson into your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the contribute button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.