

# Alive, Active and Penetrating

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Hebrews 4:1-13

**Sermon Series:**  
**Best Spiritual**  
**Practices**

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**W**illow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, is one of the largest churches in America. It's second only to Lakewood Church in Houston, a church made famous by TV preacher Joel Osteen. Willow Creek attracts 23,000 worshippers each Sunday to its 155-acre campus. It's been the prototype mega-church in America for the past 30 years.

This church has also spun off The Willow Creek Association, a collection of 12,000 member churches across the globe who ascribe to the Willow Creek model of ministry. Every year, Willow Creek sponsors a Global Leadership Summit, attracting 100,000 participants from 59 countries.

Willow Creek advertises itself as a seeker-sensitive church. Their mission is to turn irreligious people into fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Their mission is accomplished chiefly through programs. People's increased level of participation in their programs will enable them to become full-fledged disciples.

Two years ago, Willow Creek's senior pastor, Bill Hybels, shocked the religious world by announcing, "We made a mistake. We should have been teaching people to take responsibility to become 'self feeders.' We should have taught

people how to read their Bibles between services and how to do spiritual practices on their own. Spiritual growth doesn't happen best by being dependent on elaborate church programs but by the age old spiritual practices of prayer, Scripture reading and relationships."

I applaud Bill Hybels for his candor. This guru of seeker-sensitive churches tells us there is no substitute for people reading their Bibles and taking responsibility for their own spiritual growth. Willow Creek has been pumping millions of dollars into elaborate church programming that hasn't translated into solid disciples. They have the numbers but lack the disciples to show for it.

Pastor Gordon McDonald writes, "One of my personal regrets in 25 years of preaching is that I didn't teach people how to study the Bible for themselves. As I look back on my preaching, I was studying the Bible for people. What I should have done was to help them understand how I studied it and how they could study it for themselves."

I could have said that. I've invested so much time in reading the Bible for people that I haven't helped people understand how to read it for themselves.

We call the Bible "the Word of God." We believe what God wants to communicate is mediated through human words. We read in today's

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-Soren Kierkegaard

Scripture lesson, “For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). We learn three things about God’s Word from the book of Hebrews.

First, God’s Word is living. The Greek word, Zoe, has become a popular girl’s name. This Word can bring life to people.

Some of you may regard the Bible as a rule book for Christians. Let me set the record straight. The Bible is intended to bring life to people.

We’re honoring today our international mission partners sharing the good news around the world. The Bible is the only tool our mission partners take with them. Yet, this Word has the power to change lives and bring life to people.

Second, God’s Word is active. We derive our word energy from the Greek word, *energes*. The Word of God has the power to energize and transform people.

When I was in graduate school, I taught myself how to speed read. It was a matter of survival, given that each professor assigned us 2000 pages of required reading in a semester. The goal of information reading is to consume as much as you can as quickly as you can for use later on the final exam.

It doesn’t do us much good to speed read the Bible. We don’t read primarily for information, we read it for formation. God uses Scripture to form Jesus Christ in us. This type of reading will frustrate those among us in a

hurry, who want our religion on the run.

Third, the Word is penetrating. Let’s not bother with the Greek word since I can’t pronounce it! This Word cuts through our self-delusions and grandiosity. This Word, like a two-edged sword, brings both salvation and condemnation. Its words challenge as well as comfort us.

Let me forewarn you—this book doesn’t flatter us or curry our favor. The Bible can be uncongenial at times. There are hard things in this Word, hard things to hear, hard things to obey.

Soren Kierkegaard writes: “Let us collect all the New Testaments that are in existence. Let us carry them out to an open space or up upon a mountain, and then, while we all kneel down, let someone address God in this fashion, ‘Take this book back, we are not good at dealing with a thing like this, it only makes us unhappy.’” If we ignore this book’s precepts, it will make us unhappy.

Best Spiritual Practices is a sermon series designed to introduce us to the disciplines of solitude, Scripture, prayer, honoring the body, self-examination, discernment and Sabbath. We are asking you to read Ruth Haley Barton’s book *Sacred Rhythms* to accompany these sermons. We are inviting everyone to write his or her own rule of life based on your desires in relationship to these practices.

I spoke last Sunday on the first of these practices: solitude. I urged us to create space and structure for

***“A text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text.”***

God. By coupling solitude with Scripture, let me illustrate how I practice these disciplines in my own life.

I practice solitude most mornings before 9AM. My favorite spot is a big overstuffed chair with requisite ottoman by the living room window. I’ve noticed lots of things from this vantage point, including a family of skunks living under our porch. So you see, there are untold benefits of solitude.

I begin each day by reading one chapter from the Bible, alternating between Old and New Testament. I read through the text to get a sense of the passage. Then I sit with it awhile, trolling for key words and trying to follow the author’s train of thought. I then take the passage into prayer with me. Yesterday’s passage from 1 Peter urged its readers to put aside malice, hypocrisy, envy and slander. I asked God to graciously bring to my awareness instances of hypocrisy and envy. You see what’s happening now? I’m not only reading the text, I’m living into it. This word is speaking into my life. This is similar to the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* that Barton references in her writing.

Let me demonstrate how this type of spiritual reading helped me prepare for this sermon. When our pastoral staff lined out this sermon series months ago, I chose Hebrews 4:12 to go with the topic of Scripture. On Tuesday, when I began work on this passage, I was tempted to preach from a single verse, since I failed to see any

correlation to what preceded or followed it. But, by ignoring its context, I would break one of the cardinal rules of Biblical interpretation—“A text without a context becomes a pretext for a proof text.” We can make a passage say anything we want it to say when we separate it from its context.

I was saved from doing so by the little word that begins verse 12. In the NRSV, the word is “indeed,” in most translations it is the little conjunction “for.”

We have been teaching God’s Big Story in this church for several years. The Bible is one big, sprawling story connected with little words such as “therefore,” “so,” “because,” “for” and the like. Imagine the Bible as a chain linked together with little connecting words. Somehow, God’s Word as “living, active and penetrating” connects with verse 11, “Let us make every effort to enter that rest.”

What does it mean to enter “that rest?” Whatever it means, it must be important, since the word rest appears nine times in a span of 11 verses.

After consulting Bible commentaries, I did what any preacher would do—I googled “Hebrews 4-the rest of God.” A total of 16,800,000 entries appeared on my screen. With the help of reputable sources, I traced “rest” back to chapter 3. The people of Moses’ day fail to enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief (3:18). So now, rest has something to do with unbelief.

When I come to chapter 4, I’m told the promise of God’s rest still stands (4:1). There are people

***Why do you think we work so hard? We work hard to prove our self-worth.***

mentioned in this chapter who fail to enter God's rest because of unbelief and disobedience (4:2-10). Some enter God's rest by believing, and some fail to enter by unbelief. Now we're getting somewhere.

You see, you don't have to be theologically trained to read this book. Come on, if fishermen and shepherds can read this book, we can, too.

When Peter, Paul and Mary first released the song, "Puff the Magic Dragon," some people interpreted the song as having a hidden reference to marijuana. The magic dragon was supposed to be the marijuana, which, of course, is something you puff.

The song went on to become a popular American folk song. When Peter, Paul and Mary, went on a reunion tour some years ago, Peter Yarrow put this rumor to bed with the comment, "Many people thought this song was about drugs, but it never was. It was a simple song about a boy and his dragon, and the sorrows of leaving boyhood. I should know. I'm puff's daddy."

Some people think the Bible is like a riddle to be solved or a code to be broken. No, the Word of God is "living, active and penetrating." Hebrews declares we enter God's rest by the finished work of Jesus Christ (4:15). I wish we had time to show how our high priest Jesus Christ, ushers us into God's promised rest. But I'll tell you this much. We don't earn our way into God's rest. We can't buy our way

into it. God's rest comes to us as a sheer gift.

This is huge, folks, especially in a culture like ours that bases self-worth and identity on human achievement. Why do you think we work so hard? It's not all about the money. We work hard to prove our self-worth.

No wonder we are tired. We are relentlessly trying to prove ourselves. God's gracious Word invites us to stop our endless doing and enter God's rest.

Have you entered God's rest? Have you experienced the rest Jesus Christ can give? Jesus issues the gracious invitation, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29).

***"Come to me...and I will give you rest."***

