

# INCREASING THE LORD'S HARVEST

Devotions

“But the seed on good soil  
stands for those with a noble and good heart,  
who hear the word,  
retain it,  
and by persevering produce a crop.”

Luke 7:15

# INCREASTING THE LORD'S HARVEST

## Devotions

### **Day #1: Hearing the Word**

Two men were talking one day. One of them said, "My wife talks to herself a lot." His friend answered, "Mine does too, but she doesn't know it. She thinks I'm listening." Oh, yes, us guys are notorious for our problem of not listening to our wives... and it is not just when the Packers are playing! Marriage counselors spend much time teaching communication. So called "Active Listening" involves not only turning off the TV, setting down the newspaper, and having eye contact, but also observing body language... how our spouse is speaking; AND even carefully observing what is not being said... the ability to read between the lines. If the relationship of marriage is to exist, be strong and healthy, good listening must take place.

Listening is not only a problem in the home; it is also a problem in the church. That is our focus today. Since "***faith comes from hearing the message,***" (Rom. 10:17) that means for faith to exist and be strong, we have to be listening to God's message to us... REALLY listening. In His parable of the Sower, Jesus taught that for there to be a bountiful harvest of the seed of His Word, the first thing that must happen is to "***hear the Word.***" (Lk.8:15) Thus if we really want to be INCREASING THE LORD'S HARVEST here at St. Peter's the first step is to: LISTEN! REALLY LISTEN!

### **Day #2: Hearing the Word, Attention of Mind**

***"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*** (Lk.8:8b) That's what Jesus said to His disciples after He told the parable of the Sower. That's what He kept on saying in His vision to John as He concluded each of the seven letters to the seven churches... over and over again: ***"He who has an ear, let him hear."*** (Revelation 2:7,11,17,29, 3:6,13,22) There is the old saying that God in His infinite wisdom gave us two ears and only one tongue because He wanted us to do half as much talking and twice as much listening!

Whether that is the case or not, there is no question that God has given ears... to hear! The function of our ear is one of the countless absolute amazing miracles our Creator God has built into each of our bodies. That little anvil bone vibrating on our ear drum, our brain able, from those signals, to discern the whole range of sound around us.

And what a blessing! One of the many we take for granted UNTIL we loose it. Can you imagine not hearing... the leaves

crunch,... a baby cry,... beautiful voices singing,... the birds greeting the sun as it rises on a fine summer morning,... a loved one sharing their heart and life, or simply a thought or experience???

Some might think that losing eyesight would be the worst possible thing; but I think that to lose our hearing would be equally horrendous. If we cannot hear the people around us, we become isolated, cut off from them... What a lonely existence!

The only thing I can think of that would be worse would be to be cut off from our God! And the only way we will feel isolated from our God is if we are not listening to Him... that's why He gave us ears. Jesus said, "***My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow me.***" (Jn.10:27) They LISTEN! REALLY LISTEN!

The wise writer of Ecclesiastes makes a very interesting statement: "***Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.***" (Ecc.5:1) What is he saying? He is saying you can go all wrong in going to church! That's right! Some think that just putting in an appearance is "going to church." Not so! If you do not come to listen,... if you only came to put in an appearance, or chat with a friend, or even if you have come only to sing... you have offered "***the sacrifice of a fool.***" He warns us to guard our steps when we come to the house of the Lord.

If we are going to LISTEN! REALLY LISTEN! We first of all have to be in ear shot of God's Word. We have to make it a priority to open the Book in our home... or to come to Church to worship. And then when we get here real listening must take place. We have to pay attention. I make my poor confirmation students take sermon notes all of the time... and the reason I do is to try to train them to pay attention. And if any of you who are not in my confirmation class have trouble paying attention, I would recommend the same to you... go ahead, take notes!

Real listening means finding your most alert time to open your Bible for personal devotion... getting a decent night's sleep before coming to church... paying attention. I found a quote by a man named William Ames who said, "***The receiving of the Word consists of two parts: attention of mind and intention of will.***" What we have been talking about so far is Attention of Mind. But even if we are not offering the sacrifice of fools and we have our ears wide open, we are only half way there!

### **Day #3: Hearing the Word: Intention of Will**

To HEAR! REALLY HEAR! ...besides the Attention of the

Mind, you also need Intention of Will. *“The receiving of the Word consists of two parts: attention of mind and intention of will.”* - William Ames. That sounds complicated, but it’s really not. All Mr. Ames is saying is that to really hear something you have to not only hear with the ear, but you must be INTERESTED in hearing in what is being said. Aye, there’s the rub! That is why our wives get so angry with us, guys, when we are not really listening... it says that we just DON’T CARE what they are saying... which in turn, they think, means we don’t care about them! ... or at least that they are somewhere down on the list of important things, way down there somewhere behind the news, the cross word puzzle, the Packers, and L.A. Law. And we promised they would be first!

Do you recall Luther’s explanation of the Third Commandment? *“We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.”*

Do you recall what Jesus said to a very disturbed Martha one day in her home? *“but only one thing is NEEDED. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.”* (Lk.10:42)

You see, when our Bible lays on the shelf collecting dust,... when opportunities to study the Words of our God are totally ignored,... when week after week goes by and our place in the pew is empty with no good excuse, what does that say to God? Does it not say we DON’T CARE about Him? When He says listening to Him is the *“one thing needed,”* are we not out and out with our actions calling Jesus a liar? And ultimately does not neglecting His Word say we are not really His sheep, for He said, His sheep listen to His voice?

Not only is despising preaching and His Word, SIN (pure and simple)! But it is the worst possible kind of sin; for it is a sin that stifles faith, isolates from God, and cuts us off from the one thing needed! It dare not be taken lightly because it weakens and destroys souls!

There is only one thing that will give us “Intention of Will”... a true desire to hear when God speaks to us, like the Psalmist who said, *“I was glad when they said to me, let us go into the house of the Lord.”* ... and that is the Word itself. In other words you have to be hearing the Word to want to hear the Word... (or hearing the Word in itself creates the desire to hear the Word even more.)

How can that be? Note, we have missed a part of our verse: *“He who has an ear, let him hear ... WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS to the churches.”* Hearing, really hearing God’s Word is so important and so powerful because the Spirit of God Himself is at work in that Word. The Word is the road the Spirit travels to reach our heart. The Word is the tool the Spirit uses to capture our heart. The Word is the pipe line

through which the Spirit brings to us the grace of our God. The Spirit uses the Word to connect you intimately heart to heart with Jesus (for He is what the Bible is all about). The Spirit uses the Word to ignite and excite faith in your heart. The Spirit uses the Word to tear down the barrier sin constructed between you and your God.

In other words the more you LISTEN! REALLY LISTEN! to the Words of God, the more you will WANT to hear God speak.. The Spirit of God does that.

Standing around the camp fire Monday evening at our Pastor's conference someone asked one of the vicars there what led him to decide to be a pastor. He said that in his sophomore year of high school he decided that every year he would read through his Bible. And lo and behold as he did, he learned to love to study the Word. He said what better deal can you get than to get paid to do what you love to do most... study the Word!

Because the Word of God is the dwelling place of the Spirit of God and His chosen tool, there is no question in my mind that when God's people are LISTENING... REALLY LISTENING to God's Word, that the blessings will come pouring in like the grain is pouring out the grain spouts of the combines in our fields this year. We will be INCREASING THE LORD'S HARVEST in our midst.

#### **Day #4: Retain the Word**

*“Last eve I paused beside a blacksmith’s door,  
And heard the anvil sing the vesper chime;  
Then, looking in, I saw upon the floor  
Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.  
“How many anvils have you had,” said I,  
“To wear and batter all those hammers so?”  
“Just one,” he said, then, with a twinkling eye,  
“The anvil wears the hammer out, you know.”  
And so, I thought, the anvil of God’s Word  
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon;  
Yet, though the noise of falling blows was heard,  
The anvil is unharmed — the hammers gone.*

- Dr. John Clifford -

The famous preacher Spurgeon said, “*Defend the Bible? I would just as soon attempt to defend a lion. I say, let it loose; it will defend itself.*”

And yet we are instructed to guard the Word of God. Jesus' well known words remind us, “***Blessed rather are those who hear the***

**word of God and obey it.”** (Lk.11:28) In the last two devotions we thought about the hearing part of that verse; now we look at the obeying part. Actually the NIV Bible has done a disservice in that translation. The word Jesus actually used has to do with guarding the word of God... guard... you know like armed guards pacing back and forth. And the word Jesus used to describe the good ground that multiplied the seed a hundred-fold was those who hear the word and “**retain**” it... keep it... really hold on to it.

In other words, if we are going to INCREASE THE LORD’S HARVEST here at St. Peter’s, we also need to not only be hearers, but also to BE KEEPERS OF GOD’S WORD.

### **Day #5: Keeping the Word: Guard It From It’s Enemies**

There is kind of guarding of the Word that immediately comes to mind as children of the Lutheran Reformation. How thankful you and I can be for the St. Augustines, the Athansias, the Martin Luthers who have defended and carefully guarded God’s Word from the countless errors and enemies of that Word. And even though Jesus words are and will forever remain true, “**Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words will never pass away.**” (Mt.24:35) Even though the anvil wears out the hammer; even though the Word defends itself; yet it is also true that God has chosen to guard and keep His Word through defenders whom He has raised up.

Thus Paul writes to young pastor Timothy, “**GUARD the good deposit that was entrusted to you - guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.**” (2 Tim.1:14) Every generation of the church needs to heed that call. The old evil foe will not resign; the enemies of the cross will not disappear. At our last Pastor’s conference one of the brothers was asked to research and report on some of the most popular TV preachers, the Benny Hinns and company. Their theology, though attractive, was shown to be a far cry from the message of the Bible.

And I fear that many of you are thinking that is for the pastors and theologians to fight over. And of course that is true, the shepherd is to guard his flock from the wolf in sheep’s clothing... but it is only partly true. The fact is that there would not be such a whole-sale departure from Biblical teaching as is present in main line Christianity as exists today, if more people in the pew would have stood up and said, “Pastor, that is not right.” But of course that takes Biblically knowledgeable people in the pew. Another important reason for all of us to be Bereans (Acts 17:11) and be searching the Scriptures to see if what we are taught is true. Each of us need to BE KEEPERS OF THE WORD. “**Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and**

*GUARD it.*” (Lk.11:28)

### **Day #6: Keeping the Word: Guard the Word in Your Heart**

But there is another kind of guarding of the Word that is our chief focus in these devotions. It is the kind of guarding that Mary did with the incomprehensible things that were happening to her. She pulled them to her heart and treasured them there. She “**PONDERED**” them in her heart. It is what the first church did when we are told that “*They DEVOTED themselves to the apostles teaching...*” (Acts 2:42) It is the heart of the Psalmist whose “*delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he MEDITATES DAY AND NIGHT.*” (Ps. 1:2) It is the spiritual rock, Peter, urging each of us, “*Like newborn babies CRAVE pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.*” (1 Pt.2:2) It is the great apostle Paul encouraging each of us, “*Let the peace of Christ RULE in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ DWELL IN YOU* (set up housekeeping, make it’s residence, live in you) *RICHLY as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*” (Col.3:15,16)

There is a time and place for just doing an overview of the Bible... learning to find our way around in that sacred library... catching the main thoughts and themes. Some of you have done something like that when because of busy schedules you have listened to tapes of the Bible in your car on your way to work.

There is nothing wrong with that; it has it’s place. But God’s Word also begs for meditation, pondering, to be taken in like the nicotine addict sucks the smoke into his lungs so that it soaks into every cell in his body. (Only God’s Word does not harm but heals and helps.)

Before refrigerators, people used icehouses to preserve their food. Ice houses had thick walls, no windows, and a tightly fitted door. In winter, when streams and lakes were frozen, large blocks of ice were cut, hauled to the icehouses, and covered with sawdust. Often the ice would last well into the summer.

One man lost a valuable watch while working in such an icehouse. He searched diligently for it, carefully raking through the sawdust, but didn’t find it. His fellow workers also looked; but their efforts, too, proved futile. A small boy who heard about the fruitless search slipped into the ice house during the noon hour and soon emerged with the watch.

Amazed, the men asked him how he found it. “I closed the door,” the boy replied, “lay down in the sawdust, and kept very still

Soon I heard the watch ticking.”

The question is not whether God is speaking, He desperately wants to be speaking to your heart. The question is whether we are being still enough, and quiet enough, to hear.

The Word of the Living God needs us to be quiet enough to hear. All too often the precious voice of God is lost in the noise and distraction of our lives. A famous German theologian whom Martin Luther would disown nevertheless said at least one thing that we can agree with. He said, “*The Word of God is demanding. It demands a stretch of time in our day — even though it be a very modest one — in which it is our only companion... God will not put up with being fobbed off with prayers in telegram style and cut short like a troublesome visitor for whom we open the door just a crack to get rid of him as quickly as possible.*” (Helmut Thielicke)

Have you reserved a quiet place and time for God’s Word in your busy life?

### **Day #7: Keeping the Word: Guard the Word in Your Heart**

I know that your life is busy. We live in such a crazy world. But let us not forget we are talking about “***the one thing NEEDED.***” Choose a quiet place, a place where you will not be disturbed. Carve out a special time; it is possible. Even if it is just fifteen or twenty minutes. Did you know that reading at an average pace in that time every day you would actually read through your whole Bible in a year? But the point is not to reach a goal; conquer a mountain, but spend time listening, really listening to God. Taking His Word deeply into your very being.

Is there something you guard religiously in your weekly schedule... maybe it is a special time with your spouse (That’s fantastic!), or a favorite show on TV, or how about your work schedule (after all it is your bread and butter... very few things would make you miss a day of work). Make that little hour that we have agreed upon as a congregation in that special place we call St. Peters, an equally precious time; guard it religiously (literally) so that it is top priority. Allow nothing to push it to the back burner.

When was the last time you actually put a precious passage to memory? ... back in confirmation class? Why not when you are reading or listening to a sermon...and you come across something memorable, that touches where you are in your life...go ahead put it to memory and take it with you all day, all week long!

We read the paper, watch the TV, surf the net, chat and text on our cell phones. Did you know Martin Luther said of his own books, “I



*myself am an enemy of my books, and I often wish that they might perish, for I am afraid lest they hinder the reader from reading for himself, the Bible, which is the fountain and source of all wisdom."*

And let us recall once again why guarding the Word in our heart is so essential. It is simply this: here is where you meet Jesus, the Water and Bread of life. On the bronze statue of Martin Luther in Wauertown is this quote, *"Therefore he who would earnestly and profitably read Scripture should see to it that he finds Christ in it; then he finds life eternal without fail."* - Martin Luther -

Along with Mary, David, Peter, and Paul; along with many of our great grandfathers who came in from the field at noon, sat down and opened the Bible at the kitchen table, may we each BE KEEPERS OF THE WORD... especially in our own hearts. Jesus said it not me: ***"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and GUARD it."*** (Lk.11:28) Amen.

### **Day #8: Put the Word Into Practice**

The most complete sermon we have which Jesus preached is His famous Sermon on the Mount. If you visit Israel today, one stop you will likely make is to the Church of the Beatitudes way up on the hillside overlooking the north end of Sea of Galilee where it is believed Jesus preached that sermon. It is a beautiful and quiet place.

Do you know how Jesus ends that sermon? He concludes that sermon by telling about two men who built houses. In the first case: ***"The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall,"*** (Mt.7:25) But, when the storm came the other man's house, ***"it fell with a great crash."*** (v.27) Do you remember why one house crashed and the other stood in the storm? (Not because one used inferior materials, or that his workmanship was slipshod; but because one was built on a rock and the other on shifting sand). Now for the tough question: What was Jesus talking about? What does it mean to build on rock or on sand? (We might think it means to build our life either on Jesus, or on worldly things... and finally that is true; but...) Interestingly... this was Jesus point at the end of His sermon: ***"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and PUTS THEM INTO PRACTICE is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."*** (v.24) In other words if you who have listened to My sermon (says Jesus), do not PUT INTO PRACTICE what I have said, you had just as well have stayed home; your life will crash in the end.

God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel complaining about the same thing: ***"My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before***

*you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice.*” (Ez.33:31) James says the same thing: *“Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”* (James 1:22) And so does John, *“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.”* (1 Jn.3:18)

“Jimmy... Jimmy are you listening to me?” (*Texting... playing a video game*) “Yes, Mom.” “I would like for you to please pick up the clothes that are lying on the floor of your room and take them to the laundry room so I can wash them.” “OK Mom, I will.” (*Later...much later*) “Jimmy, did you do what I told you?” “Do what, Mom?” ... Has that ever happened at your house? How do you think that mother is feeling right now? Wouldn't you say mom wasted her breath?

Do you suppose God feels the same way, when after a service people go out of church and say, “Good sermon, Pastor”, then go home and immediately forget what God said?... And their life the next week is exactly the opposite of what the sermon said. I once heard about a pastor who preached the same sermon three Sundays in a row. What do you suppose he might have said when someone asked him why he did that? (He said he was going to keep preaching the same sermon until he noticed that it made a difference!)

So how can we get better at PUTTING GOD'S WORD INTO PRACTICE? A good question to ask is: “What did God's Word today want me to think, or believe, or do?” How about if we actually think about that when we are reading the Word or hearing it... and maybe even write down what that Word of God instructed us to think, or believe, or do, so we can think about it during the week? That might be a good start. Why will we want to think or believe or do what God's Word says? (God's Word is our life and always tells us to think, believe, and do what is good).

But the real answer to the problem of PUTTING GOD'S WORD INTO PRACTICE is to do what we have talked about in the former devotions... to really listen to the Word and guard and keep it in our hearts. For it is the Holy Spirit, working through that Word that will actually motivate us to actually put into action what would otherwise remain merely a good intention... to be doers of the Word. God's Word is powerful... It alone can move us to action.

### **Day #9: Put the Word Into Practice:**

The Parable of the Sower has provided us the framework for these devotions on INCREASING THE LORD'S HARVEST. What produced the bumper crop? Jesus said it is those who *“hear the Word, retain it, and ...*(our focus for these final days:) *by persevering produce*

*a crop.*” (Lk.8:15b) Literally it is those who “produce (its) fruit in patience.” And it’s true, the farmer needs great patience. It takes time for the seed to produce its fruit; it doesn’t always produce exactly what we expect. Some plants produce only once every other year, or even less.

When it comes to bearing the fruit of the Word a great deal of patience is in order. But it is the nature of the seed to produce fruit. It WILL produce fruit. That is the core lesson of Jesus parable of the Ten Minas, Luke 19:11-27 *“While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. He said: “A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. Put this money to work,” he said, “until I come back.” “But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, ‘We don’t want this man to be our king.’ “He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. “The first one came and said, ‘Sir, your mina has earned ten more.’ “Well done, my good servant!’ his master replied. ‘Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.’ “The second came and said, ‘Sir, your mina has earned five more.’ “His master answered, ‘You take charge of five cities.’ “Then another servant came and said, ‘Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.’ “His master replied, ‘I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? Why then didn’t you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?’ “Then he said to those standing by, ‘Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.’ “Sir,’ they said, ‘he already has ten.’ “He replied, ‘I tell you that to everyone who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away. But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them — bring them here and kill them in front of me.’”*

There is no question; God is expecting a return on His investment in you and me. And if there is not a return, there is judgment in store for us: *“even what he has will be taken away.”* If there is no return on God’s investment in us, we will be like the fig tree that Jesus came to one day and found no figs on it, so He pronounced a curse on it so that it would never produce fruit... it’s leaves withered.

So does that mean that good works are necessary for salvation? As children of the Reformation and students of the Scriptures we know the answer is, No! ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** (Eph. 2:8,9) Our good works are not the CAUSE of our salvation; we cannot earn heaven; it is the grace of God which is the sole cause of our salvation... GRACE ALONE.

And yet, every one who is saved will produce fruit... will bring the King a return on His investment in us. James explains the seeming contradiction and conundrum in this way: ***“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”... “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”... As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.***” (2:7,218b,26) It is the nature of a seed to produce fruit. Our good works are the fruit of our faith. Our good works are the product of, the result of our salvation. Our good works are the evidence that the seed of the Word is alive in us.

The real problem, Jesus says, is that they, ***“did not want me to be king over them.”*** That is why there was no return on the Mina; there was no real faith; they wanted to remain their own king; that is the real reason harsh judgment came upon them (the failure to bring a return on investment was only a symptom).

What God wants is YOU; and if He has you, he will have your works. Oh may the precious seed take root, spring up and bear abundant fruit... in each of our hearts and lives. PUT THE WORD INTO PRACTICE.

### **Day #10: Put the Word Into Practice:**

Paul said of the Thessalonians, ***“When you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”*** (1 Thess. 2:13) God’s Word is powerful and active... it is at work in us. It makes us to be like a tree planted by streams of water.

Psalm 1:2,3 ***“But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”***

The Word produces fruit in us. The question is: what is the fruit of the Word? The Psalmist says first of all it is that our ***“leaf does not wither.”*** Our old sinful flesh will never want Jesus to be our King, will resist Jesus till the day it dies. The world around us wants to choke

out our spiritual life with all of the distractions and diversions of this busy and attractive world, which may not be evil in and of themselves, but when they take God's place in our attentions, they are deadly. And the devil would like nothing better than to pour a pail of cold water on our living faith and watch it sizzle and cool until it becomes ashen and dark. Do you recognize these enemies of your soul? Do you recognize that hearing, treasuring, putting into practice the Word of God is the ONE and ONLY way your leaf will not wither?

And on the other hand "*Whatever he does prospers.*" The most popular TV preachers would have you believe that means you will live in a big house and drive a fancy car. That is not what Jesus taught it means to prosper. The most important fruit of properly using God's Word is that we stay heart to heart connected to our God; that we walk and talk with Him as Adam and Eve did in the Garden. Thus the fruit of the Word is all of the blessings that come with being connected in faith to our God: peace and contentment of heart; meaning and purpose in living. And finally the fruits of the Word will be somewhat different in each of our lives (each "*in season*") depending on what kind of tree God designed you to be. One of you will be an evangelist, another a comforter, another a supporter, and still another a leader.

Just do what the Word inspires you to do; PUT THE WORD INTO PRACTICE; produce the fruit the Word was intended to produce in you.

### **Day #11: Put the Word Into Practice:**

One cynic said, "*Men will wrangle for religion; write for it; fight for it; die for it; any thing but live for it.*" Well, that may be true of religion in general, man's idea of what is religion; but it is not true for true faith in the Living God. Martin Luther said, "*Faith is a living, active, efficacious thing, so that it is impossible for it not incessantly to do good works. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them.*" True faith lives that faith. As we have said it is the nature of seed to produce fruit; it is the nature of the Word of God to produce the fruit of the Christian life. True faith PUTS THE WORD INTO PRACTICE.

Galatians 5:16-25 takes us to the heart of the power of the Word to produce fruit in our lives. "*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immor-*

*ality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”*

The key to the victorious fruitful Christian life is the Holy Spirit. And the tool chest of the Holy Spirit happens to be the Word, both the written Word and the Word & promise of God attached to earthly elements in the Sacraments.

The famous cuckoo bird never builds its own nest. It flies around until it sees another nest with eggs in it and no mother bird around. The cuckoo quickly lands, lays its egg there, and flies away. The thrush, whose nest has been invaded, comes back. Not being very good at arithmetic, she gets to work hatching the eggs. What happens? Four little thrushes hatch, but one large cuckoo hatches also. The cuckoo is two or three times the size of the thrushes.

When Mrs. Thrush brings to the nest one large, juicy worm, she finds four petite thrush mouths, and one cavernous cuckoo mouth. Guess who gets the worm? A full-sized thrush ends up feeding a baby cuckoo that is three times as big as it is.

Over time, the bigger cuckoo gets bigger and bigger, and the little thrushes get smaller and smaller. You can always find a baby cuckoo's nest. You walk along a hedgerow until you find dead little thrushes, which the cuckoo throws out one at a time.

Paul says that spiritually speaking, you've got two natures in one nest. The nature that you go on feeding will grow, and the nature that you go on starving will diminish and die. When you feed the sinful nature the fruits are, well, I hate to even repeat the list again (especially since I am ashamed to admit that I recognize some of that miserable fruit from my own home and history). Praise be to Jesus for taking that rotten mess with Him to the cross!

What a powerful incentive to feed the new man. ***“Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again.*** (2 Cor. 5:14,15) And thus he exhorts us, ***“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”*** And what beautiful fruit comes forth, the fruits of the Spirit. When love and kindness and

gentleness are growing and flourishing, our families will be strong and vital. When patience and faithfulness are growing our congregational life will be robust. When joy and peace and self-control rule our hearts, we will live victorious Christian lives.

Our Lord has blessed our fields with record-breaking yields this year. The harvest has been phenomenal. We are grateful! But we recognize that there is another harvest that has eternal consequences. The Lord is looking for His Word to produce a bumper crop of faith, hope, and love... faithfulness, devotion, and service in our lives.

That is exactly what will happen here at St. Peters when we are a people who are hearing the word, treasuring it in our hearts, and putting it to practice in our lives.

May we each rededicate ourselves to that ONE THING NEEDED, for in so doing we will be INCREASING THE LORD'S HARVEST in our midst.

Almighty God, Your Word is cast  
Like seed into the ground;  
Now let the dew of heav'n descend  
And righteous fruits abound.

Let not the foe of Christ and man  
This holy seed remove,  
But give it root in ev'ry heart  
To bring forth fruits of love.

Let not the world's deceitful cares  
The rising plant destroy,  
But let it yield a hundred-fold  
The fruits of peace and joy.

When-e'er the precious seed is sown,  
Life-giving grace bestow  
That all whose souls the truth receive  
Its saving pow'r may know.

