

The Key to Standing Strong  
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When I was with my Eastern Orthodox friend this summer and we attended these Orthodox services I didn't recognize a word they kept using in their liturgy and worship. The word was pronounced *theotokos*. They venerated the *theotokos*; they prayed to the *theotokos*. So I leaned over to my friend and asked, "What's this *theotokos*? What does that mean?" And he told me, "That's what we call Mary, the mother of God."

*Theotokos* is a Greek word meaning God bearer; the one who brought forth God. *Theos* means God and *tokos* means bearer or to bring forth - *Theotokos*. Orthodox aren't the only ones to revere Mary; our Catholic friends do that, too. I know many of you have Catholic roots; maybe this jogs your memory of your Catholic catechism when you were a child. You probably can still recite the Hail Mary by heart. If you don't have Catholic roots you're probably thinking, "What does Aaron Rodgers throwing Hail Mary touchdowns have to do with Jesus?"

Where does this come from? Why do some Christian churches and communities feel so strongly about Mary? Why would they even go so far as to venerate her? (The word *venerate* means to revere greatly; it's a step down from worship. Worship, glory, and praise is due to God. But Mary is pretty important so she is venerated or greatly respected.) Why would some pray to Mary? Is there any biblical support for that?

We studied this a while back when we began our study of the Gospel of Luke so let me refresh your memory. After Mary is told that she will indeed be the God-bearer, that she will carry and then give birth to the Son of God, she sings a song that's recorded in Luke 1. In vs. 48 Mary says, "For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed." Elizabeth, her relative, says of her (1:42), "Blessed are you among women." And that indeed has been the case. Christians all over the world from the beginning of the church have considered Mary the most blessed woman to have ever lived. That is true. Mary is a blessed woman; she is deserving of respect and admiration from all those who follow Christ. Mary found favor with God to be an incredibly important instrument in the salvation of humanity and the eternal glory of God. We should happily agree with what we read about Mary in Luke 1, that she is a blessed woman. I do not think we should go so far as our Orthodox and Catholic friends as they pray to her and praise her.

I share all of this because of what we are about to read in our passage this morning. What we will read makes me happy and content that I don't hold those more lofty (and I would also say, faulty) views of Mary and it also gives you and I are bearing in a life that challenges our faith. So, let's read Luke 11:27-28 (READ).

It's not hard for me to imagine this scene. One of the things Korby and I have noticed and talked about together is how we take joy and pride not only in our own boys, but in their

friends and classmates, too. All these kids are growing up and it's so fun to see that. We remember when those friends, those classmates were in kindergarten with our boys and we're happy to see them grow, too. Those friends, those classmates kind of feel like "our boys and girls." Jesus is one of them; and he's helping so many. A woman looks on and is so pleased by what she sees in Jesus; she's so thankful for his help. She's probably thinking, "If he were my boy, I'd be so proud, so happy." So, she raised her voice in the midst of this crowd and gave a good shout saying, "Blessed is the woman who bore you; how your mom must be so proud!" I'm sure Mary is happy and proud.

But Jesus' response is quite startling. He doesn't say, "Yeah, she really is so blessed." (Remember, she is!) He doesn't give a polite thank you. He corrects this woman; he actually gives her a gentle rebuke. It's not that she's wrong per say; it's just that she's misguided and not conformed to the Kingdom way like she should. So, get what Jesus says (and I'm paraphrasing here), "No, no... don't think my mother is blessed; blessed instead are those who hear my word and keep it." Jesus is trying to make a really strong contrast. There is not 1, but 2 contrasting words in this sentence. "But," Jesus says and then continues saying, "on the contrary." It's almost like the woman's words jolt Jesus' conscience; he's somewhat shocked that someone would even think that's what makes someone blessed. True blessing from God doesn't come through family association; we don't find true blessing from God because of some past mission or assignment from the Lord. God's favor and kindness isn't based on some history we have of completing a task from the Lord. And remember, he's talking about his own mother. The theotokos - the God-bearer; the Blessed Virgin Mary. That's who's in Jesus mind when he says, "On the scale of who is blessed, it's not my mom."

So, maybe to conclude our little teaching about Mary let me just say again: Yes, Mary is blessed among women and she is due our admiration and appreciation. We should want to imitate Mary's submission and obedience to God; she is a great example of faithful obedience. There's no need to denigrate the mother of our Lord just because others in the Christian community might wrongly exalt her. But Jesus himself is directing his people away from venerating and putting her on a pedestal; Jesus wants to redirect our thoughts on where truly blessing comes from.

So, who are the true blessed ones? It's as plain as the day is long, isn't it, FBC? Look at Jesus' words in vs. 28, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" In one respect, Jesus is just repeating what he already knows in the OT. I'm reminded of Psalm 1 that starts this way (vs. 1-2), "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." Blessed! Same word. We don't know this, but it wouldn't surprise me at all if Psalm 1 was in Jesus mind when he said what he said. God's blessings come upon our reception and action on the Word of God. There are three angles I want to highlight for you from Jesus' words in Luke 11 to motivate you and me to lift high the place of God's word in our lives so we keep standing strong.

First, notice the centrality and necessity of the Word of God. There are so many other things Jesus could have put at the center. Taking communion. Worshiping through song. Attending church. Yes, all of those things are critical to a faithful life. But Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hear and keep the Word of God.” So, why did Jesus say the blessed life is the one who hears and keeps his word? Why is the word given such primacy instead of baptism, or the Lord’s Supper, or giving to the poor? Two reasons come to mind.

First of all, the word of God is what gives shape to all those other activities and the rest of life. Why do we take communion? And how should we do it? When do we gather as a worshiping community? And how come? And what should we do when we are together? What’s the point of giving? What should our relationships look like, especially the ones that are most important like husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister in Christ? Friends, the word of God gives us the form to all of these practices. We get the answer to the questions I just posed to you in the Word of God. That’s one reason why the Word is so important and central to our lives.

Here’s another: The word of God is truth. In Jesus’ famous prayer in John 17 he emphatically says (vs. 17), “Sanctify [perfect, mature, complete] them in the truth; your word is truth.” Jesus’ hope and prayer to God the Father was that his people, you and me and all his church, would reach the ultimate goal of our salvation, a fully restored and reconciled relationship with God. And the mechanism, the instrument that Jesus says God uses to make that happen is truth. And that truth is the Word of God. Friends, in a world full of lies, where it’s so hard to know what’s true and who’s telling the truth, knowing that there is one place we can go and have complete confidence that we will hear the truth is such a gift from our God. What a blessing!

Notice how Jesus says the blessed man or woman is the one who both hears and keeps the word of God. We need to talk about each one of those. Don’t take for granted how much of a gift it is to hear the Word of God. I think I take it for granted. Every Sunday we gather together and we open up the Bible and hear the truth. We have countless Bible studies at FBC throughout the year. Most of us have Bibles in our homes and have the opportunity to read it on a daily basis. We hear God’s word all the time.

But that is a priceless gift. Right now, all over the world, there are peoples and places who have never heard the Word of God. They have no knowledge of Jesus; they’ve never been told the glories of his grace. Like we heard from Carla Unseth a few weeks ago, a new missionary we support who works translating the Bible, there are a couple thousand people groups who do not have the Word of God in their own language. And even right here in our own backyard, in an increasingly post-Christian culture, some of our own neighbors, our own classmates, and coworkers have never truly heard the God’s word. Yeah, they’ve heard of Jesus and see churches throughout the city, but no one has ever sat down and told them and explained to them John 3:16-17, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever would believe in him would not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his

Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” They don’t know this word. God loves the world - he loves you. He showed that by giving his only Son to die on a cross for you. Whoever would believe in Jesus, whoever will trust him, won’t perish for the sins he has committed, but will be saved. Why? Because God didn’t send Jesus to condemn the world in our guilt; he sent Jesus to save the world from our guilt.

What a gift to hear this word! What a treasure to know this truth! How blessed we are to have such accessibility to the word of God! Miracles happen when the word is heard. Romans 10:17 says, “So faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.” That’s one thing that’s true for every single one of us who have saving faith in Jesus. We first believed upon hearing. How blessed we are to hear the Word of God.

But Jesus keeps going and says, “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and *keep it!*” This is probably a little more important for us to consider than hearing. The reason for that is we all have heard! If you’ve been coming to FBC for any length of time you’ve been hearing the Word of God. Maybe you’ve participated in some Bible studies. You’ve tried to read the Bible on your own. You hear God’s word.

Do you keep it? Do you obey it? You know, there’s actually quite a bit in the scriptures about the importance, in fact, the necessity, of keeping and obeying God’s word. Just consider the following things the scriptures say about us if we hear, but fail to keep the word of God.

- You are deceiving yourself if you don’t keep God’s word (James 1:23)
- You have a dead faith if you don’t obey God’s word (James 2:14-20)
- You don’t fear God if you don’t obey God’s word (Ex. 9:20-21)
- You’re disobedient to God if you don’t keep his words (Ps. 119:4)
- We show ourselves to be liars and fools when we don’t keep God’s word (Lk 6:46-49)

So, friends, can I ask you: Does this describe who you are and what you’re like? Are you self-deceived? Do you have a dead faith? Do you not have any fear of God before your eyes - that’s how God describes the wicked? Are you a disobedient servant? Are you a hypocrite? Obviously, none of us want to be like that and maybe you’re taken back, “I’m not like that!” Well, you are if you don’t keep God’s word.

Is it wrong for me to say, “It doesn’t matter what we say about God or about our faith; it only matters what we do?” That might sound rather harsh, but isn’t that exactly what James says in James 2:18, “show me your faith apart from works, and I will show you my faith by my works?” Isn’t that the point he’s driving home? That true, authentic faith, which is the only thing that saves you (you are not saved by your obedience, your good works, the times you are able to keep the Word of God) is displayed and shown and proven by your obedience to God? Your obedience to God’s Word doesn’t save you, but your obedience to God shows that you do truly believe him. Knowing that distinction is absolutely critical.

I'm wondering how many of you are not experiencing the blessing of God because you are not keeping God's word. And you kind of know it; you can perceive it. You're looking at your life and you're thinking, "Things are not well. My relationships are strained. My faith is dry. I'm angry all the time. I've got no hope. I don't feel any joy about anything." The last thing you say about your life is that it's blessed.

Well, can I ask: are you keeping the word of the Lord? Are you obeying God? The favor of God, the blessing of God, is directly connected and linked to obeying God's word in faith. Now, the blessing of God doesn't mean an easy, comfortable life. We know that sometimes life actually grows more difficult and challenging because of faith. God's blessing is ongoing favor and grace; it's abiding joy in God while depressing circumstances plague us; it's peace in turbulent times; and it's character transformation to do the right thing when you're so tempted to do the wrong thing. So many of us don't have that; we're not experiencing God's blessing because we're not keeping the Word of God. Yet, we're scratching our heads wondering, "What's going wrong? Why isn't this working?" Friends, it's not a mystery; God is telling us right here.

I don't say these things to criticize; I say these things to be an instrument of God to wake us up. I say these things to call you back home to God. And do you know what you will find when you come back home? You'll find a gracious God ready to forgive you and welcome you. He's not looking to hurt you; he wants to help you. He helps you by forgiving you of your sins; he also helps you by changing you into the kinds of people who do obey his words. That's what's so great about God and his word; we always end with good news. Maybe you're convicted this morning; maybe you know that you're missing out on God's blessing because you know you're ignoring the Word of God that you do hear. So, what should you do? You should repent. You should turn back to God and his way. You might ask, "Ok, but how do I do that?" Well, start with confessing your sin. Start with coming clean. If you've got secret sin, bring it into the light. If you're battling unforgiveness, admit that and admit that it's wrong to withhold forgiveness. That might sound impossible. It is without the power God, but with the power of God it is possible. Remind yourself of Prov. 28:13, "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he would confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."

Key vs. Luke 11:28

#### Questions for the week

- Did today's message help you at all on how you should view Mary the mother of Jesus? How so?
- Have you changed your thoughts on the importance of God's Word in your life?
- Did you experience any conviction today to make some changes? Which ones? What will you do to ensure change takes place?