

Does the word work?

By [David Lower](#)

July 7, 2014

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Does the divine expression, the word, really work? Does it make a difference in our lives and in the world?

My yearning for the difference-making word drew me to James Crockett's work in the Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago. James spent eight years in prison for crimes he committed as a gang member. But the word, so he tells it, reached him in prison. James read words of God's love and sacrifice, and he was overcome with emotion and a sense of clarity. James knew he was to dedicate his life to sharing this love with other hungry and weary souls.

Now free, James devotes his life to "real talk" with young men about reforming from the wayward ways of gang life. He teaches them the word of righteousness, a ministry James calls "C247," or "Christ 24/7." James is now known in the neighborhood for walking up to young men on street corners and asking them, "Hey, man, what do you know about the Jesus piece?"

James's courageous conversations have produced a weekly Bible study consisting of about 30 recovering gang members seeking to get right with God, family, and community. A recent study of Matthew 5:38-45 occurred in the context of murders at the hands of a rival gang. Feelings of anger, frustration, and despair were stirred together with Jesus' teachings about turning the other cheek and loving your enemies. In a holy moment, I heard some of the most powerful sermons I've ever heard about how we are created for greatness and not violence, how the cycle of violence can stop with us, how the great kingdom that lies ahead for all can begin here. Sometimes the word makes all the difference in the world.

Other times it doesn't. While encounters with the word regularly inspire and move people, many of us can also remain wounded, anxious, and resigned—and most of our undivine habits, customs, and systems continue along untransformed. Clarence Jordan once said that “proof of the resurrection is a church on fire.” Most churches, however, steadily simmer along.

*Read more in [Lower's Living by the Word column for this week](#).*