

October 10, Ordinary 28B (Hebrews 4:12-16)

## **The purpose of the word of God is not to make us feel condemnable, but to help us see what is commendable.**

by [Jesper Svartvik](#) in the [September 22, 2021](#) issue

Read the author's article on [preaching Hebrews without supersessionism](#).

In this passage from Hebrews, two Greek words particularly catch my attention. The first word, *kritikos* (critical), describes the word of God and its lens on the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The second, *parrēsia* (confidence or boldness), is that with which we are encouraged to approach the throne of God.

*Kritikos* occurs only once in the New Testament, in this description of what the word of God is and does, how it works in us and with us, and how it is related to the will of God. Regrettably, many Christians have been taught that in an encounter with God, there is nothing but divine condemnation. And there are Greek words for “condemnation” and “to condemn”—they have in common the prefix *kata-*, which means “down” or “against.” But those are not the words used here.

*Kritikos* is probably closer in meaning to what critics do when writing about literature or art. They do not put the pen to the paper in order to disapprove. They do it to sift what is good from what they believe is not as good. Behind *kritikos* we find the verb *krinein*, which means “to distinguish” and “to separate.” This is what critics do: they discern what is good. They do judge the merits of what they are reviewing, but they do so because they see value in what they study—because they are art lovers. This is why they have chosen to do what they do.

Philosopher George Santayana famously describes criticism as “an investigation of what the work is good for.” Criticism, he says, is “dividing the immortal from the mortal part of a soul.” This is a definition of *kritikos* that helps us understand what Hebrews seeks to convey. The purpose of the word of God is not to make us feel *condemnable*, but to help us see what is *commendable* and what is not. God does

not find fault for the pleasure of it. God's motivation is love for humanity: *philanthropia* (Titus 3:4).

Christians have been exceptionally adept at criticizing and condemning people. Many people have left Christianity because of what they perceived as disparaging teaching. The word *kritikos* should give us pause: we should ask ourselves what we are saying and what people actually hear. I believe that one of the most important functions of the word of God is to help us distinguish between what really matters in life and what merely seems to matter.

*Parrēsia* occurs 31 times in the New Testament and twice in Hebrews. It occurs most frequently in John (referring to the confidence the Son has because of his unique relation to the Father) and Acts (referring to the boldness of the first Christians).

In modern Hebrew the word for “advertisement” is *pirsomet*, which likely comes from the Greek *parrēsia*. Those who advertise a product need to have a certain amount of confidence and boldness. However, *pirsomet* is used not only for ordinary commercials but also in a specific theological context: the Aramaic expression *pirsumei nisa* (“publicizing the miracle”) is a frequently used talmudic phrase for what Jews should do on Hanukkah, when a special menorah is placed where it can be seen by others. It is often said that Hanukkah is the Jewish way of lighting a candle instead of cursing darkness. When Jews light the Hanukkah candelabrum, they proclaim the works of God.

It is worth pondering that Hanukkah focused not on the mighty Maccabean revolt itself but on a comparatively modest miracle in the temple, in which candles burned for days without oil. I often think of Hanukkah as a parallel to Elijah's experience in 1 Kings 19:11–12. The prophet realizes that God is not in the great wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence (*qol demamah daqah*).

These verses in Hebrews point to two important traits in our Christian faith. The word of God may help us discern and recognize more clearly what is vitally important and what is not, to separate what is essential and what is not. In a word, the word of God is *kritikos*.

The text also highlights the path to the throne of grace—and urges us to approach this throne with confidence, with *parrēsia*, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. God may multiply bread and fish by the Sea of Galilee, or let oil overflow in the temple in Jerusalem, or comfort those who grieve and are

desolate. The *word* of God proclaims the *works* of God, and we are to publicize these divine miracles, as the prophet says: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word” (Isa. 50:4).