

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Practical Christian Witness: Witnessing by our Actions

The story is told of a missionary visiting a remote village in China. Wanting to tell the people there about Jesus, he started off telling them about the things that Jesus did – how He was helpful to people, the kind things that He did, His readiness to receive all kinds of people, regardless of their position in society. After the missionary had been speaking about Jesus in this way for a little while, one of the villagers said, “That man used to live in our village”. At first, the missionary dismissed the remark as foolishness, but he later realised that another missionary had been in that village before him. That first missionary had so lived Christ before the villagers that one of them supposed that this was the one of whom the second missionary had been speaking. The villager had made a mistake, of course, but what a happy mistake to make! I wonder, could the same thing have been said about me, about you, had we lived in that village?

In this series of talks, we are looking at our practical Christian witness, not so much in the things we say, but rather in the things we do. So far, we have looked at ‘Witnessing by the way we dress’ and ‘Witnessing with our money’. Of course, it is important that we be able to tell people about the Lord Jesus. After Jesus had healed the man possessed by a legion of devils in Gadara, He expressly told the man, “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you” (Mark 5:19). But it is equally, if not more, important that we be able to show them by the way we live that we belong to Christ.

We have become used to the fact that, in a court of law, a witness is expected to tell what he has seen. What the witness says may have very important consequences for the man or woman in the dock. The importance and validity of our Christian faith is attested to, not only by what we say, but also by what we do. It is not for nothing that it has been remarked, “What you do shouts so loud that others cannot hear what you say”.

It is surely significant that the early followers of Jesus were known as followers of the Way. When Saul of Tarsus went to Damascus intent upon persecuting the Christians there, Luke tells us that it was “so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2). After Paul was converted and came to Ephesus, preaching the Gospel, there were those who refused to believe. Luke tells us, “But when some...did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude...” (Acts 19:9).

Luke’s description of followers of Jesus as followers of the Way is interesting for two reasons. First of all, it reflects Jesus’ own words, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Secondly, it shows that the followers of Jesus were known as much for their way of life as for what they said. Part of that way of life is summed up for us by Luke: “Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:44-47).

We need to be quite clear that our actions will not in themselves get us into heaven. That way is to be found only in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins on the cross of Calvary to open up the way for all who come to Him in faith. That is why He could declare, as we have already seen, “I am the way...No one comes to the Father except through Me”. As we receive Him as our Saviour, so we receive God’s gift of eternal life in Him. Our actions, as Christians, flow from that new life within and are a visible witness to others of that new life.

The first Christians in Thessalonica provide us with a striking example of witnessing by our actions. We can read in Acts 17 how Paul, Silas and Timothy brought the Gospel to Thessalonica. They had to leave Thessalonica hurriedly because of the violent opposition of those Jews who refused to believe the Gospel. Shortly afterwards, they wrote a letter to this infant church in Thessalonica. In it, Paul writes, “We give thanks to God always for you all...remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father...For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true

God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivered us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:2-10).

This new found faith of these early Christians in Thessalonica was being talked about in the surrounding areas, not so much for what the Thessalonians said, but rather for what they did. They bore witness to their new life in Christ by the dramatic change in their lives – from idolatry with all the immorality usually associated with that, to the sanctifying service of God. "For all is changed when Jesus comes to stay" says an old hymn.

The writers of the New Testament are united in their insistence that faith in Christ needs to be seen in the actions that flow from that faith. James, perhaps more than any other, insists that this must be so: "Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:21-22). He continues, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (2:17-18).

Paul writes to Titus about the role of bondslaves in society. At that time, these were the lowest of the low. How could a Christian bondsman witness to the saving grace of God within him? Paul writes, "Exhort servants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things" (Titus 2:9-10). Just think of that! Could anything be more beautiful than the doctrine of God our Saviour? Yet Paul holds out to these who occupied the lowest place in society the opportunity by their faithful day to day obedience of, as it were, making the teaching about God even more beautiful in their master's eyes!

Later on, writing about that same saving grace of God, Paul goes on to say, "This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:4-8). He goes on to say, "And let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful" (verse 14).

Peter, who had been with the Lord Jesus throughout those three years of His public ministry, was in no doubt that those who were Jesus' followers should demonstrate the same kind of behaviour as He showed. That man of action writes, "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Peter, no doubt, would have a good deal of fellow feeling with those today who wear a bracelet inscribed with the letters, WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? Note that, not so much 'What Would Jesus Say?', although that is important, but 'What Would Jesus Do?'

In those early days of the Christian Gospel, there would be homes where a husband or wife would become a Christian, but the other remain unconverted. What was to be done in such situations? In that male dominated society, the position of a Christian wife with an unconverted husband, would seem to be especially difficult. What could she do? Peter writes, "Likewise you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear" (1 Peter 3:1-2). Have you come to faith in Christ as your Saviour, but your spouse has not yet done so, in spite of your fervent prayers? Be encouraged by these words of Peter! What you do may, in the grace of God, be used to the salvation of your spouse.

Finally, we should just notice that the apostle John is united with James, Peter and Paul in insisting that the Christian life needs to be seen in action. Writing about Christian love, that greatest of all human emotions, John emphasises, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). The love of God is far too precious merely to be talked about; it must be seen translated into action in the lives of those who are His children! John goes on to highlight the inconsistency of those who say they love God but do not show love in action: "If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also" (4:20-21).

These strong words of John must make us sit up and take notice. John would have heard the Lord Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, speaking about the importance of proper behaviour between one another: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder,' and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22). These solemn words of Jesus, taken together with those of John, show us the importance of not only saying what is right but also doing what is right.

It is, of course, important that we be able to tell people about the Lord Jesus and what He has done for us. Peter reminds us of this: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear

conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15-16). That answer must be more than a verbal response. It has to be accompanied with a Christ-like life. People may not like what we say, but they cannot deny the power of a life lived for Christ.

Jesus met a Samaritan woman at Sychar's well (see John 4). Because of her bad reputation (she had had five husbands and the man she was currently living with was not her husband – as Jesus had to remind her), she had come at a time when the other women would not be there drawing water. Jesus spoke to the woman about the living water, springing up into everlasting life, that He was able to give her. In this way, He went beyond her physical need of water and met her deeper spiritual need. John continues the story, "The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" Then they went out of the city and came to Him" (verses 28-30). Perhaps more than the words she spoke, the evident change in that woman's life spoke to the men of the city so much so that they were ready to go and meet Jesus! What she did spoke so loudly that others had to hear what she said!

The challenge comes to each of us this morning: What is my life proclaiming about my relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ? Since my actions speak louder than my words, what message are they proclaiming? It has been pointed out that each of us is writing a Gospel, as it were - not a Gospel like those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In the wisdom and grace of God, those written records have been given to us so that we might know all that is necessary for our salvation concerning His beloved Son – His birth, His sinless life, His atoning death at Calvary, His resurrection and ascension, the hope of His coming again. But today many people choose not to read their Bibles and are largely ignorant of what those Gospels proclaim. But the people you meet with day by day – in the home, at work, or wherever it be – cannot ignore the message of a life lived for Christ and like Christ: the Gospel according to you!

God used Paul to bring the Gospel to Corinth. As a result, many of the Corinthians turned to Christ. Some years later, Paul wrote to them, "You are our epistle (or, letter) written in our hearts, known and read by all men; you are manifestly an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:2-3). Those Corinthians had been brought up in a city which was renowned throughout the then known world for its immorality. But having received Christ as Saviour, their lives had been transformed. Those around could not but read in those changed lives the wonderful story of the grace of Christ. That transformation had been brought about, not by their attempts at self-improvement or by their good resolutions, but rather by the power of the indwelling Spirit of the living God. That same Holy Spirit indwells each believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in His power alone that we can lead lives that will speak to others of the Lord Jesus Christ. May He enable us each one to do just that and so to be living letters for Him!

This morning, let us make our prayer the words of the hymn writer, KB Wilkinson:

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

*May the word of God dwell richly
In my heart from hour to hour,
So that all may see I triumph
Only through His power.*

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