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John Botha, Willows Methodist Church, 2024-08-11

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Introduction

So, both worship leader and preacher this morning: double dose! I want to start with prayer, and it's going to be a bit of a window into my soul, as you shall see.

Dear Lord God,

I thank You for the awesome privilege of standing here before You and before Your children, my brothers and sisters in Christ. You alone know what has led up to this point, and I make this earnest request known to You — namely that You will use me to bring Your Word to this congregation of the Saints: those here now, as well as those listening, watching, or reading later. May I say all and only what You want me to say, and in the way you want me to say it.

Amen.

As I said, a bit of a window into my soul, and so will be this sermon, the full text of which is already up as a PDF on our web site, at

willows.org.za/sermons

That will allow you to go through the sermon more slowly, or if you want the references.

OK, let's go!

The Life Group of which I am a part is slowly working its way through the book of James, using this book as guide:

James for You:
Showing you how real faith looks in real life

By Sam Allberry

I looked yesterday, and you can get it electronically for under \$10. Also note that it is the full length book, and not the shorter study also by Allberry.

While the book starts off a bit slow, it quickly lives up to the title and sub-title. This past Wednesday, just before we left for home, one of our Life Group members said that for next week we should each look for practical ways we can do what both James and Allberry write about. He went on to say that if we were to put it into practise, we'd probably all become radicals.

Why is that? The answer is simple: our behaviour would change. That (changing our behaviour) is the essence of what this sermon is about and is why the title is

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Body

As I mentioned in a recent devotion, I am on the mailing list of an organisation which helps people effect change in their organisations, and recently they quoted from their first newsletter, which went out almost 20 years ago. In it the author brings together the result of research into how to change the *culture* of an organisation — an easy way to define culture is 'that's the way we do things around here' — and he concludes that THE ONLY WAY (and he put it in capitals) to change the culture of an organisation is to change the behaviour of its employees¹.

If you've been in Christian circles for long enough, you'd probably know that in James² we read that faith without works is dead. James goes on to say this:

You believe that God is one;
you do well.

Even the demons believe — and shudder!

— James 2:19

But doesn't Paul write that salvation is by faith? So are the demons saved?

No, they are not. You see, there is a difference between belief and faith. According to Thayer's Greek Lexicon³, the Greek word used here for belief means mere acknowledgement of God's existence. In Hebrews 11:1 The Bible tells us that 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' Believing that something is one way or another is very different from placing your hope in someone. We place our hope in God's Word — in Jesus Christ Himself — and in His promises. The demons do no such thing.

Placing our hope in God and His Word is a Big Thing, with implications not only for the by-and-by, but for the here and now. To put this into perspective I want to quote from two books, first from Allberry, and then from a book by Peter Scazzero, called *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*:

Allberry tells us:

God's grace prompts repentance in His people — a heart change that will lead to transformed behaviour.

— Sam Allberry

¹ https://mailchi.mp/manager-tools/newsletter_2024_7_1, quoting Mark Horstman; emphasis in the original.

² James chapter two.

³ See the entry for James 2:19 at <https://biblehub.com/greek/4100.htm>.

That sounds wonderful, but then we get this reality, where Scazzero quotes from Ron Sider's book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?*:

According to Gallup polls and sociologists, one of the greatest scandals of our day is that 'evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centred and sexually immoral as the world in general.'

Scazzero then comments:

The consequences of this on our witness to Jesus Christ are incalculable, both for ourselves and the world around us.

We miss out on the genuine joy of life with Jesus Christ that He promises (see John 15:11). And the watching world shakes its head, incredulous that we can be so blind we can't see the large gap between our words and our everyday lives.

As wrong as the world is about Christianity, if your behaviour is out of line with what God wants, they will know, because the results will not be good.

Getting back to the quote that the only way to change an organisation's culture is to change the behaviour of its employees, think about espionage. The key to successful infiltration is that your enemy believes that you are one of them to the point of trusting you with their secrets. All they have to go on are your actions (which include your words): they have no idea what you actually believe.

Similarly, the world will judge you more by your deeds than by what you proclaim. Note that I am drawing a distinction between proclamations ('These things I believe') and words you use in every-day conversation. The latter are part of the proof of the former. If someone messes up at work and your response is 'You idiot! What were you thinking!', then no matter what you proclaim about Christian principles, you'd probably be at least ignored about that, or more likely be branded a hypocrite. A better response might be 'I see you struggled with that. Let me show you how I managed to do it in the past.' Simply honouring the other person as a fellow human being who most likely did not mean to mess up but made a mistake will get you far greater mileage than belittling or embarrassing them. If your words and their delivery do not match, then you can be almost guaranteed that the delivery will be what is heard.

This is all part of what I call our implicit witness: the times we are not explicitly witnessing about Christ, but when how we live our lives are our witness. In truth, we spend *far* more time witnessing implicitly than explicitly, so we really should take great care that we do so in ways which honour God. If not, don't expect your explicit witness to have much impact.

An extremely important point to this is that others have no way of discerning our motives. All they have to go on are our words and deeds. There is a lot more to say about this, and if you want more, look at my recent series of devotions called *How Will They Know?*, specifically Parts 3 & 4. They can be found at

willows.org.za/devotions

Conclusion

If you ever hear these words, take them as a warning from God: ‘Oh! I didn’t know you are a Christian!’ Why is that a warning? Because it’s a polite way of saying that you certainly don’t live like a Christian.

It would be easy at this point to feel deflated. If you’re like me, you have tried to live a righteous life — and failed, many times. Maybe you’ve given up, and are coasting along, not being particularly bad (in your own eyes), but you know deep down that you are probably not going to hear ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant.’⁴

The thing is, although we definitely have our part to play, we cannot live a righteous life in our own strength — we *have* to rely on God, and that happens when we are in *relationship* with Him. Relationship is not merely knowing *about* someone, it is actually *knowing* that person. You can have the most incredible Bible knowledge and not know God at all. Let that sink in a bit. You can know *about* God, but not *know* Him.

Sadly our seminaries and the departments of theology in our universities are not guaranteed to have Christian staff. You see, theology is the study of religion, whereas Christianity is a relationship with God. Part of that relationship is to get to know more about God, but the relationship is the key. It is quite possible for a child to have a closer relationship with God than for a professor of New Testament at a seminary.

Now don’t get me wrong: in no way am I minimising the importance of studying The Word; what I *am* saying that such study has to be *driven* by your relationship with God. Struggling with living a righteous life is a sign that your relationship with God is not where it should be. Look to Jesus: He *often* withdrew to lonely places to pray⁵. In the Garden of Gethsemane we see that an angel came to strengthen Him, just as angels attended to Him after His temptation by Satan. Not even Jesus as man was able to do it all alone. In fact, He said⁶ that He could do nothing of His own accord, but only what He saw The Father doing.

As we saw earlier, it is imperative that people can see that we live our lives differently to the way the world does, but as we know, that is really, really difficult — in our own strength. With God’s help, however, it is another story entirely. Bear in mind that in Matthew 7:14 Jesus said ‘For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.’ So then it is still not easy, but it is possible. OK, but why must it be so hard? After all, He also said ‘For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’⁷ Well, consider what a yoke is: it is a device which is used to guide animals to do the will of the person who is guiding them. It also keeps them together so that their strength is combined for the task. Jesus is not saying that we’ll float to Heaven in comfort and ease. Instead He is saying that He will place upon us *His* yoke, and that implies that He will guide us, and that as long as we are following that guidance, matters will definitely work out *in the end*, but consider: they will work out for His glory and for His purposes. Going against His Will causes unnecessary pain and suffering.

There are other matters that speak to all of this as well, but this is a sermon, not a book. The key point I want to make flows from what we earlier saw Sam Allberry says: ‘God’s grace prompts repentance in his people — a heart change that will lead to transformed behaviour.’ *Transformed*

4 See Matthew 25:14–30.

5 See Luke 5:16; 6:12–13.

6 See John 5:19.

7 See Matthew 11:28–30.

behaviour! Not just a tweak here or there! Think of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly! They are *completely* different: they don't even eat the same things.

I am going to leave you with more than just saying 'Study The Word, pray, and behave like Jesus.' There are incredible resources available to us to help in our study and our application of God's Word, and I have chosen a few books to help, depending on where you need help. These are all listed in the PDF that you can download from our web site right now, but feel free to take a photo of the screen if you're close enough. Other than Allberry's book, they are in no particular order.

Sam Allberry, *James for You: Showing you how real faith looks in real life*

At first glance, the book of James ranges across many different topics, but it actually has a structure to it, it is just not as easy to see as in, say, the book of Romans. Allberry does an excellent job of explaining how the seemingly disjointed pieces fit together. That said, it is not a deep dive into James, but it certainly is challenging, as James is very direct and speaks to common topics in our lives. This book opens one's eyes to the impact of our behaviour and I heartily recommend it.

Graig Groeschel, *The Power to Change: Mastering the habits that matter most*

As always, Groeschel's writing is clear and practical. He shares how he used to struggle with these exact issues, and how he overcame them. A key quote is 'training is doing today what you can do today, so that you can do tomorrow what you can't do today.' It's not just theory, though, as he shares his struggles and how God helped him in practical ways.

John & Lisa Bevere, *The Story of Marriage*

It might seem strange to include a book on marriage, but remember that marriage is supposed to model Christ's love for His Church⁸. It is thus an extremely important aspect of our implicit witness. It is also a key point of attack by Satan. The authors make the point that they are both quite strong-willed, and that they had years of difficulty, so they speak from the position of people who have had their marriage transformed by God.

Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: Unleash a Revolution in Your Life in Christ*

Unless you have had an absolutely model childhood, you are probably still bearing and probably still causing pain. Maturity encompasses emotional maturity, and this book touches many aspects of that. His approach requires quite a bit of discipline, but the rewards are great. Even so, I recommend that you first work through Groeschel's book before trying to put part two of this book into practise. The core point, however, is this: *It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.*

Paul David Tripp, *Do You Believe?: 12 Historic Doctrines to Change Your Everyday Life*

The title is not particularly 'sexy', but the reality is that our beliefs impact and even guide our behaviour. If you believe incorrectly about, say, sex outside of marriage, then your behaviour will most likely be sinful. Tripp looks at 12 doctrines which impact how we live, spending two chapters on each: first explaining it, and then looking at living in the light of that belief.

Joel Manby, *Love Works: Seven Timeless Principles for Effective Leaders*

⁸ See the last part of Ephesians chapter five. The entire chapter speaks to our behaviour, and is worth study.

This smells like a business book title, and it is, but it is so much more: Manby shares how he completely transformed a business by applying God's principles to the business. One of the owners and co-founders writes in the Foreword: '... doing the right thing in business doesn't have to come at the expense of the bottom line. ... Love works. Trust me — I see the proof every day that I go to work with Joel.' This book is worth at least a sermon of its own, if not one per chapter, but if you are in business, read it, and then do it!

We are done for now, so please will the Worship Team come up as I close?

I encourage you: if today has been a challenge, then rise to it! God does not want you to fail, but to succeed. The *measure* of that success, however, is His and His alone, so if you feel you have failed, check your relationship with God. Consider Galatians 1:10:

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

While I move over to the piano, read the closing prayer on the screen. If you feel that you can pray it with me, then let's do so together, as I wrote it in the first person on purpose.

O God, I come before You with a simple request: I desire that others would see the fruit of Your Spirit in my life and that I would not engage in any of the works of the flesh. I need Your help to do this, Lord, and I thank You that You desire the same for my life.
Amen.

References and Sources Consulted

For other references, see the footnotes.

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