

Title: Words and Actions; Action and Words

Series: Finding Grace at the Intersections

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

Date Used: October 30, 2022

Focus: The Christian witness is made up of a combination of words and actions. It can't be just one or the other, it must be both.

How do people come to faith?

What draws them into the Christian life?

Is it just the words we share?

Is it by our actions alone?

Is it the bumper stickers others see on the back of our cars?

One day this very cautious driver was being tailgated by a stressed-out driver that appeared to be in an incredible hurry. The light turned yellow, and the cautious driver did the cautious thing and he stopped – even though he could have beaten the red light if he had accelerated through the intersection. The tailgater blew a gasket – he slammed on his horn, screamed at the cautious driver in front of him and displayed his limited knowledge of sign language. As he continued his rant, he heard someone tapping on his window and looked to his side and into the face of a very serious looking police officer. The officer ordered the man out of his car and told him to place his hands against the car. The officer took the angry driver to the police station where he was placed in a holding cell.

A couple of hours later the man was released. As the arresting officer returned the drivers personal items to him, he said, “I’m very sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you and cussing up a storm. And I noticed your “Choose Life” license plate holder and your “Follow Me to Sunday School” bumper sticker and the chrome plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I just assumed you had stolen the car.”

Long before people here the good news of Jesus Christ, they may have been turned off by some messengers of the gospel they have encountered.

But the opposite is also true. When followers of Jesus allow Christ’s love to be demonstrated in our lives, when our words and actions are full of grace, the opportunity to share the source of that grace is multiplied. We can earn the right to be heard.

The pattern for people coming to faith that we see in the New Testament is that they saw, they heard and then they believed. People observed something, which prompted them to listen to the accompanying message, and then, in many cases, they came to believe. Seeing and hearing work together to bring about belief.

According to the gospel writer Luke, Jesus began his public ministry at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth by reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus opened the scroll and found the passage that begins with the words,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, (and) to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus shared with the hometown crowd what his ministry was going to be about, a combination of actions and words.

The good news will be conveyed through deeds of love and words of love grace. Jesus’ deeds of love will verify his words of grace and truth, and the word he proclaims will be verified by his actions. Words and actions, actions and words.

In order for us to have an effective witness, the connection between our words and our deeds needs to be just as seamless.

The founder of the Vineyard Church in Cincinnati, Steve Sjogren (Showgren), knows something about servant evangelism. The congregation he started grew from an average attendance of 37 to 6000 during the time he served that congregation. During his tenure he instilled the principles of servant evangelism in the life of that church. He writes, “It seems to me, we have spent an enormous amount of time talking about changing the world, but little time actually doing much to bring about change. By redefining the beginning point of evangelism from speaking to showing God’s love in the world, it’s easy to launch out. As we serve the unchurched in small ways they will ask (us), ‘Tell me, why are you doing this?’ No matter how (weak or) strong our evangelism gifts, any Christian can answer that question.”

The vast majority of people we love, serve and minister to will sooner or later ask us, “Why are you doing this?” And when they do, we must be ready to tell them why we do what we do.

Our good will, our loving actions become the platform for sharing the good news. We just have to be ready to share it when the opportunity arrives. We have to be ready to explain why we do what we do.

Elton Trueblood catches the importance of the connection between our words and actions when he writes, “Testimony must be both deed and word. The spoken word is never really effective unless it is backed up by life, but it is also true that the living deed is never adequate without the support which the spoken word can provide. This is because no life is ever good enough. The person who says naively, ‘I don’t need to preach; I just let my life speak,’ is insufferably self-righteous. What one of us is so good that one can let his one’s life speak (for itself) and leave it at that?”

Our deeds alone are insufficient to lead the curious to Christ. Again, Steve Sjogren addresses this point and writes that if we don’t follow our actions with words, others will only think we are nice people, they won’t come to understand that God loves them.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reminds us that we who have discovered God's love are people with influence. We influence the lives of other people. Jesus doesn't say that we could, we might, or we should influence the lives of others, he says we do influence the lives of others. He compares us to salt and light.

Jesus asks, "What good is salt if it loses its flavor?" Or "What good is a light that remains hidden?" Such salt and light have no influence, therefore, they are worthless.

Salt and light make a difference in their surroundings. Salt brings out flavor and light dispels darkness. It reveals what is hidden.

Jesus uses these two important yet very common elements to illustrate that a believer's life has influence in the lives of others.

And the degree of influence a follower of Jesus has in the lives of others is determined by the attractiveness and authenticity of the believer's life.

So, if our lives are attractive, it means that there is evidence of Christ's presence in our lives. It means that it is clear that God is at home in us. It is clear that God's Spirit has taken up residence within us.

And, if we are living an authentic life, it means there is a pretty high degree of alignment between what we believe and the way we actually live. Our lives reflect what we say we believe.

An authentic and attractive life are necessary to bring people to faith.

Fred and Jan had a new couple move in right next door to them, Eric and Donna. Fred and Jan did the neighborly thing and brought over a plate of cookies and greeted their new neighbors and welcomed them to the neighborhood. But they also took a couple of additional steps. Fred cut his neighbor's lawn the next day while Jan prepared dinner for the new couple next door. The new neighbors were extremely appreciative and said, "I think we moved into the right neighborhood."

A couple of weeks later Fred saw his new neighbor Eric working on some shutters that needed some repairs done on them and he went over to help. As they were working on the shutters Eric said, "You and your wife are wonderful neighbors." Fred thanked Eric for his thoughtful words and added, "I think God wants all of us to be good neighbors to one another." Fred left it at that. He realized that sometimes you can put too much salt on something and ruin the flavor and that too much light can be blinding. But just enough of both at the right time, is good.

Fred and Jan just kept looking and praying that God would provide them with opportunities to be salt and light to their new neighbors. One day Jan helped Donna plant some flowers around her house and offered Donna some perennials from her own flower beds.

Donna, like her husband, was just overcome with the helpfulness and generosity of her new neighbors and asked, “Why are you so nice?” I like Jan’s reply. She said, “It’s just who I am. I try to be the person that God through God’s love made me to be. God has touched my life with God’s love, and I hope and pray that my life will be a reflection of that love.”

Donna said, “I want to be more like you. How do I do it?” Right there in the middle of her back yard Donna invited Jesus into her life. That next Sunday Donna got her husband Eric to join she and their neighbors in church. Pretty soon, Eric invited Jesus into his life.

We have influence. Our own example may often be the best way to create an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with someone. Words and actions, actions and words.

Remember, bringing people into God’s reign is God’s work. It’s not about our being a good salesperson or having a slick presentation. Our part is to simply to be salt and light, to be a tool in God’s hands when we have the opportunity to connect people to God’s grace and help them to enter into a life changing relationship with Jesus.