

48 - Louder than Words

John 8:25-31

When people speak about “witnessing for God,” they usually mean talking about Him. We think of a “witness” as someone who boldly declares their faith. And telling others what we believe is certainly an important element in witnessing, but words alone are never enough. People watch what we do far more closely than they listen to what we say, and there is one quality, above all, that they observe. It's not how confident we are, or how successful we are, or even how healthy we are. It's how selfless we are. Do we put ourselves or others first? Each of us answers that question everyday by the choices we make. From big decisions down to the smallest, most subtle decisions, we all make choices that expose the deepest, most foundational attitude in our heart: Who do I love the most? It shows in how I drive my car. It shows in how I spend my free time. It shows in how I dress. It shows in the way I listen and in the way I speak. It shows in how I treat children, or the elderly, or the disabled, or the poor. In fact, it shows in almost everything I do.

The problem many of us face is that it is very difficult to admit to ourselves that a choice we made was selfish. So we defend it by explaining to ourselves and others that circumstances forced us to choose the way we did. We didn't want to make that choice. In another situation we would have made the selfless choice, but in this case we had no option. In fact, we really did what we did to benefit someone else.

The problem is, we may fool ourselves with such talk, but we don't fool those who watch us. They simply observe our choices, especially those little decisions we're not even aware we make, and over time they can't help but notice that a pattern emerges. Either I tend to put me first or you first. And that habit can't be hidden.

But why would it matter if I'm selfish or selfless? Why would someone study my choices before they listen to what I say? I think every human being intuitively knows the answer. We often say it this way: “Actions speak louder than words.”

The final proof (Jn 8:25-31)

• DBS (Sun-Fri)

For at least a year and a half Jesus had been telling these religious leaders that the words He was speaking to them were sent from God. But many didn't believe Him. They thought He was just like them: selfish. They assumed He was an ambitious, religious zealot who was trying to maneuver His way into power, their power. And not even the miracles He was doing could convince them otherwise. His words were brilliant, and in a debate they couldn't match His logic. He shamed them every time they tried. But His brilliance and the beauty of His words didn't change their minds about Him either. Losing arguments to Him only frustrated them and made them more determined to kill Him.

The answer

They asked Him: “Who are You?” But rather than rehearse statements about Himself that He had already made, He pointed to an event in the future and said that when that event took place they would know the answer to their question. His actions would speak so loudly they would have to listen to His words. He said, “When you lift up the Son of Man then you will know that I am [He], and I do nothing from Myself, but just as the Father taught Me, these things I speak” (literal). In other words, when you watch how I respond when you attack Me, what I do and say while I'm dying on the cross, the deepest motives of My heart will be exposed. No one can hide who they are when they are being crucified. That moment will prove My absolute submission to the Father and My love for you. In the most selfless way possible, I will put your needs ahead of My own. Then you will look back and realize that I always submitted to the Father and spoke only the words He gave Me to speak. By that statement Jesus taught us how to witness for God.

The greatest miracle

There is simply no miracle more profound than the transformation of the human heart. Humans by nature are selfish, all of us, and when one of us suddenly isn't selfish anymore, that dramatic change proves the reality of God more than all the words we say. Why? Because those of us who have tried to rid ourselves of that selfish impulse found we couldn't. It was too deeply rooted. Or if we tried to change someone else, sooner or later we discovered we had set ourselves to a hopeless task.

God alone can change the human heart, and when He does, it is a real change. That's not to say that the person becomes perfect or never again wrestles with selfishness, but the pattern of their choices changes. He or she does or says things they would not have done or said before. And the best proofs are the selfless things they don't even realize they do.

Where do I start?

If selfless love is the key to being an effective witness, and if even Jesus said His actions would speak louder than His words, then how do I learn to love selflessly? As we've seen, it's not something I, as a human, can simply choose to do whenever I want. So where do I start?



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I start by recognizing I'm not the source of love; God is. When Jesus answered His critics He didn't point to His love for them, He pointed to His submission to the Father. Listen to His answer again carefully, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I do nothing from Myself" (v28). Of course Jesus went to the cross because He loved us (Jn 15:13), but when addressing His critics, when asking them to believe His words, He didn't say He was the source. He said He was the messenger. He faithfully pointed to someone else's love. This too is a key to witnessing. If we focus on submitting to God rather than trying to love people, we will find ourselves loving people. When we obey Him, He constantly leads us to put the needs of others ahead of our own, and a pattern of selflessness emerges naturally. Notice: We do not find the kind of love for others that we need inside ourselves. However, by our obedience a miracle is released. In time, selfless choices surprisingly produce genuine selflessness. As we continue to do for others that which is loving, our selfishness is melted by the warmth of God's love being poured out through us. Then as that melting continues, what we once did only by obedience, we now do because we also love. What began as an outward obedience becomes our inward reality. He's making us like Jesus.

What if

We might think more people would believe in Jesus if we had more power, and by power we mean more signs and wonders. Or if we had better arguments to refute atheism and false religions. Or if we were more culturally relevant. Or if we were better organized. Or.. And these are all good things, but I think the world is waiting for something else. I think they're waiting for people who aren't selfish; people who actually love others selflessly; people who, by the pattern of their choices, prove that God can set humans free from selfishness. Believe it or not, being selfish is miserable. We end up angry and alone. And many people can sense those things happening to them, and they want the selfishness to stop and probably have tried to stop it but have discovered they can't. Sadly, in the midst of the struggle they may have watched Christians to see if we had the answer but saw no difference. What they saw were people with religious beliefs yet whose hearts were just as selfish as theirs. We provided no hope for relief; nothing about us demonstrated that God can change the human heart.

But there are such Christians with changed hearts, and always have been, just not enough of them. So the challenge Jesus places before us today is will we, if we have not already, join that number? What if we chose to fully submit to the Father (and our Lord Jesus)? What if we chose, out of obedience, to do that which is loving, even if we didn't feel loving yet? What if we decided to put other people's needs ahead of our own, and what if we kept on doing that for a long time? What might happen? I think there would be many people who would begin to believe that what we say about Jesus is true.

Questions

- 1) Name one area where you put someone else's needs ahead of your own. Why do you do that?
- 2) Have you ever stepped out and done something loving for someone else even though you didn't feel that love yet? How did that experience change you? Tell us what happened.
- 3) The apostle John wrote, "We love because He first loved us" (1Jn 4:19). What did He mean by that?