

## You are your actions.

I want to start today with a question: “have you ever wondered if what you do really matters?” Have you ever thought that maybe what you do doesn’t make a difference? In a world of seven billion people what difference could my actions possibly make? Sometimes we tell ourselves this because we are honestly discouraged. Sometimes because we want to give ourselves permission to act in a way we know is wrong. Sometimes because we believe that faith in God’s grace means it doesn’t matter what we do. Whatever the reason, I think we all wonder sometimes if our actions make any difference at all. This is the sixth week in our series “Who God Says You Are”—the title of Klyne Snodgrass’ excellent book on which we have based this series. We have been studying nine aspects of our identity—the parts of us that together make up a unique person on a journey in Christ slowly but surely becoming who he planned for us to be. And today we have come to the sixth aspect—“you are your Actions”. I’ll admit, this topic has been a bit daunting—we have a very complicated relationship with our actions. But today as we reflect on the place of actions in our lives we will look at four things that are true of our actions: First, “Our actions are important”; second, “Our actions are born out of our identity”; third, “Our actions are the fruit of our relationship with God” and fourth; “Our actions are not perfect”.

### **1. Our actions are important**

So first: Our actions are important. We get our first glimpse of what God planned for us in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. God created man and woman in his own image and what is the first thing he did with them? He put them in a garden and told them to get to work taking care of the garden on his behalf. We were not just made to think and feel, but to act—to

get up and do something. The whole Bible reminds us that what we do is of foremost importance. The ten commandments tell us things we should do (and not do): yes, we should worship God, yes, we should honour our parents, no we should not worship idols or murder or steal or desire things that don't belong to us. The Old Testament continues with prophets regularly chastised the Israelites over hundreds of years for their failure to live up to what God was calling them to do. The Bible is clear—to belong to God is to act like you belong to God.

But there is sometimes a tendency in the church to distance ourselves from anything that feels like a works-based righteousness—and rightly so—our standing before God is NOT dependent on our actions. We will come back to the question of our standing before God in the second point, but before we go there, I want to take a quick look at what Jesus had to say about our actions in the book of Matthew. One of the most famous of Jesus' teachings is often called the "Sermon on the Mount". It contains so many teachings about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It includes the Beatitudes, where Jesus says things like "blessed are the humble for they will inherit the earth" and the Lord's Prayer, where he teaches the disciples to pray "Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...". But he ends the Sermon with a cautionary story about a wise man and a fool—maybe you know the story. The wise man built his house upon a rock—it became a Sunday School song so I can't help but think those words in a certain tune—which is odd because I didn't go to Sunday School as a kid. The wise man built his house on a rock, and when the storms of life blew and the rain fell, and the flood waters rose, the wise man's house stood secure on its solid foundation. The foolish man, on the other hand, built his house on a foundation made of sand, and when the storms came, its foundation let go and it collapsed. But can you remember what made the wise man wise and the foolish

man foolish? If you are online, type it into the chat if you know the answer... what made the wise man wise and the foolish man foolish? Anyone bold enough in the auditorium to shout it out? The answer is found in Mathew 7:24, 26 "**Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock...<sup>26</sup> But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand**". The wise person is the person who doesn't just hear what Jesus has to say, doesn't just put their faith in him, but actually does what he says.

Am I talking about trying to do enough good deeds to earn God's favour? Not at all, but I AM saying that our actions matter. Jesus himself is saying that our actions matter. There are consequences both in the moment and in eternity for the choices we make—the things we do or don't do, we say or don't say, even for the thoughts we allow to put down roots and influence who we are and who we are becoming.

## **2. Our actions are born out of our identity**

This brings us to our second point: Our actions are born out of our identity. Maybe you have been thinking, "if our actions are so important, then what about grace, and the importance of believing in Jesus? I thought faith was all we needed?" Absolutely, there is no place in the kingdom of God for any thought about being saved by our good deeds. We could never be good enough to earn the favour of God. The bible is very clear about that, BUT the bible is equally clear that IN CHRIST, God himself has chosen to take the punishment for our sins so that if we put our faith in Him now, he will forgive our sins and we need not fear Him when we meet him that day when we will meet him face to face. Our good standing that day is not going to be because of our good works, but because of his love and grace and the salvation

that Jesus bought for us on the cross. But the fact that our salvation is not dependent on our actions but on God's grace and our faith in Christ does NOT mean that our actions don't matter.

The book of James spends considerable time on the way faith and actions are tightly related, and sums it up as follows in chapter two:

**James 2:14-17** <sup>14</sup>What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? <sup>15</sup>Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, <sup>16</sup>and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? <sup>17</sup>So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

You see it right there—our beliefs and our actions are tied together. You can't separate our actions from the rest of our identity.

But with actions, we need to be very careful about our motivations. We live in a world where most of the time we do what we do in order to accomplish something. We go to work so that we can support ourselves and our families. We exercise so that our bodies can be healthy—especially after a long Covid winter of sitting at home on the computer all day with a can of coke in one hand and a bag of chips in the other. We save up our money so that one day we will be able to retire. We take vacations so that we can rest and recover our strength. We read and study so that we can learn and get good grades. So many things we do “so that” something else will happen.

But in God's Kingdom the opposite is true. We do not obey God *so that* he will approve of us or *so that* he will be impressed with our actions or *so that* we can earn our salvation. We already have his approval, and no matter how hard we try, it is going to be difficult to impress the God who spun the entire universe into existence and made us in the first

place. But this does NOT mean our actions don't matter, it means that they must be **because of who we are** and **because of what God has done**, not **so that** anything. Our actions are born out of our Identity. But do you really know who you are? Do you know how God thinks of you? If you choose to accept it, you are a beloved son or daughter of God. You are beloved by God not because of what you do, but because he is Love and you are his child. You were so important to God that Jesus, his eternal son, left the glory of heaven to be born as a baby in a common family, grow up the son of a furniture maker, live as an itinerant preacher and ultimately to be whipped, beaten and killed on a cross. For you and for me he chose the road of suffering so that we might have life. In him you have forgiveness of sins and the guarantee that when this life is over you will see him and he will open his arms and welcome you with a heart overflowing with love. That is who you are because that is who God is, and that is who he has made you to be. None of that depends on you, or on some accounting of how many sins or good deeds you commit between now and when you meet Jesus. If you have been feeling like you need to earn God's love or forgiveness, just stop—you already have them. We do not need to earn God's love or forgiveness. Why not? Why don't we need to earn God's love or forgiveness. Because of Jesus. Let's say it together to remind ourselves, and those of you online—type it into the chat window. Why not? Because of Jesus.

BUT let me ask you another question: what kind of actions would you expect from a person who has experienced that kind of love and grace, who has such a hope for the future? Just because we don't need to earn the love of our Father doesn't mean our actions don't matter. If anything, it means they matter more—it's just that we need to reverse our motivation. Paul, who was a champion of what we have come to call "salvation by faith alone"

spent huge chunks of his books telling us *how to act*—usually after first describing the love and grace of God. So, for example, he writes to the Colossians:

Col 3:12 <sup>12</sup>Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Who are we? Chosen by God. How should we act? with “tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience”

And similarly, to the Ephesians

Eph 2:8-10 <sup>8</sup>God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. **9** Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. **10** For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, **so we can do the good things** he planned for us long ago.

Who are we? Saved by the gracious gift of God. How should we act? We should act out the good things God planned for us long ago. God's love and grace don't mean that our actions are not important, they mean that we must reverse our normal thinking about cause and effect: we act because of who we are—the beloved recipients of God's love and grace. Our actions are born out of our identity.

### 3. Our actions are the fruit of our relationship with God

But it gets better, not only are our actions born out of our identity in Christ, they are also the fruit of our relationship with God. This is our third point: **our actions are the fruit of our relationship with God**. God does not ask us to live a life that reflects the reality of who we are and who he is calling us to be—in our own strength. In fact, it is clear throughout the New Testament that it is only as our relationship with him grows that our actions will truly be able to reflect our identity in Christ. In John's gospel, Jesus says that he is like a vine, and we are like

branches—we cannot bear fruit unless we remain attached to the vine (John 15:1-8). Paul writes that Christian characteristics like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control are not things that we somehow will into existence but the fruit of the Holy Spirit who works in us to produce these fruits. Our job is to stay connected to him, and the fruit will follow automatically.

But how exactly does this work? How does the Spirit of God work in us so that our actions look more and more like the actions of someone who is living out their identity as a beloved son or daughter of Christ? I want to use a relational picture to give us some idea of how God works in us. Think for a moment about a parent and a child. It is common enough in church circles to talk about Christ living “in us” or of conversion being represented by Jesus coming to live in our hearts—and this is true. The Bible talks of Jesus being in us. But it can sometimes lead us to an incomplete picture, because the Bible talks far more about *us* living “*in Christ*”. Word pictures are powerful things, so let me make a suggestion. While it is 100% true that should we ask him, Jesus will live in us and move in us, that picture can subtly make us unconsciously think that somehow we carry Jesus around with us—as though he is a little one inch Jesus that resides in our hearts. But he is neither so small that he can fit inside us nor so weak that he needs us to carry him around—on the contrary, I would suggest an alternative picture. Think of a child who is riding on the shoulders of a parent. I remember when our girls were young, they would put their arms up and say “up up” and we would pick them up and carry them around on our shoulders. They would ride tall and proud, looking down on the world, laughing, and resting their weary legs. I would suggest to you that our relationship with Christ is more like that—he carries us around. When we are too tired to go on, he gives us

strength. When we are confused, he gives us wisdom. We ride around on his shoulders—and he never forgets to duck when he gets on the subway and never smacks our head into a doorframe. We need him.

But more than just needing him, we need to spend time with him. In many ways, our kids pick up our habits—sometimes to our delight and sometimes to our horror. But the point is, as we spend time together, we can't help but affect each other. It's true also of friends, of husbands and wives. This is kind of what it means to be branches who are connected to the vine. As we spend time with Jesus—as we listen to the voice of his Spirit and read the Bible—his story that he left to be our tutor—we won't be able to prevent ourselves from becoming more like him. Slowly but surely, our actions will look more and more like actions inspired by the love and grace of Christ, actions that truly are the fruit of the Holy Spirit moving through us.

#### **4. Our actions are not perfect.**

Finally, though, we need to acknowledge that our actions are not perfect. This is our last point. **Our actions are not perfect.** Not matter how hard we try, not matter how long we live in Christ and seek to allow the Holy Spirit to shape our hearts and minds, we will always be human—limited in our strength, in our wisdom, by our sinfulness, by our histories and the consequences of our past mistakes. The sad truth is, sometimes we even choose to act out of parts of our Identity that Jesus hasn't finished with yet—the habits of our past, our sinful tendencies, or wrong ideas that we are constantly hearing from the world. So what do we do when that happens? Again and again and again, we need the Grace and Love of God to move in and through us—to shape our identity and inform our actions. And it is in the Grace and Love

of God that we rest, knowing that when our actions fail to meet the standards to which God has called us, that he will forgive us. Why? Because of Jesus.

I want to remind us of one last story that Jesus told—the very familiar story often called the Prodigal Son. Found in Luke chapter 15, this is the story of a young man who asks his father to pay out his inheritance so he can go and make his own way in the world. The father grants his wish and the son goes off and parties his way through his inheritance until he wakes up one day far from home—penniless, friendless, and starving to death. With nowhere to turn, he heads home to submit to his father as a servant, no longer worthy to be called a son given the way he has taken and squandered his inheritance. But what does the father do? He receives him with arms wide open and throws a party in his honour. So it will be for us when our actions don't quite meet God's expectations. When that word slips out of our mouth that hurts our neighbour or reflects poorly on God. When we fail to say that thing which would breath life into someone else's discouragement. When we do something we know is wrong. When we fail to do something that would show the love of God to our neighbour, our co-worker or our family member.

I think sometimes this habit we have of trying to separate our beliefs from our actions comes from a mistaken attempt to hide from the ugliness of some our actions. But it won't do to try and hide: pretending that somehow it doesn't matter that we disappoint God or hurt or neglect our neighbours will not make the truth any less real. We need to be honest with ourselves about our actions—they are not perfect. But we do not condemn ourselves and neither does God because we know that no matter what we have done, we can come back to our father and fall into his arms once again, trusting in his grace and love to forgive us. Why?

Because of Jesus. Because that is who he is. And that is who we are—beloved, forgiven children of a loving heavenly father.

Do our actions matter? You bet they do. As we close out today, I want to challenge you to take action ☺ Perhaps as I have been talking, the Holy Spirit has been prompting you about something. Maybe there is something you need to do but have been putting off? Maybe there is something you need to stop doing? Maybe you need to spend more time with Jesus—in prayer or reading his word. If that is you, please don't let the opportunity slide by—make a commitment today and follow up on it in the days to come. Or maybe you don't really have any idea where to begin. Can I make a suggestion? Here are two prayers you can start to pray regularly—maybe set aside a moment at the beginning or end of the day, or perhaps take a break in the middle of the day. I'll call them fill in the blank prayers. I'll give you the first few words, you just fill in the rest each day as life rolls on. The first one starts “thank you” or perhaps, if you are comfortable, “thank you father...”. Take a moment to think about at least one thing, or even a list of things, that you can say thank you to God for. As we give thanks to God, it will remind us of everything that he has done, but it will also remind us of who we are—his beloved children. And so we will more and more live out of that identity. Why don't we take a moment now in the quite of this place and quietly or silently if you are shy: give thanks to God for something. If you are online, type it in the chat: thank you father for your grace. For my family. For my job. For the breath that fills these lungs. For Jesus. The second is a bit harder. It starts “I'm sorry” or “I'm sorry father”. We don't need to say it out loud or type it in the chat, but in the quiet moments of this week, we need to get real about our actions—God

sees them anyways, but as we get into the practice of asking for forgiveness, we will grow in the confident knowledge of the love and forgiveness that is there for us. Why? Because of Jesus.