

Walk the Talk

Fellow children of God,

What would your final words to your children be? Deuteronomy was Moses' final sermon. By God's grace the ancient Israelites had been delivered from Egypt, spent 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai, and now were about to enter the land that had been promised to Abraham. Moses was about to hand over the reins to Joshua, but first he told the people to get their priorities straight. They were going to a land flowing with milk and honey, a place where they would prosper economically and politically. But with this prosperity would come the temptation to forget the Lord, to take credit themselves for the good things they would enjoy.

So Moses told them to make God's Word their priority. Hold on to it; teach it their children; and live by it. Don't just pretend to be God's people; as we say, Walk the Talk.

We are God's people today. And we try to follow his Word. But so often we get torn away from it. We may focus on following God's ways, maybe we pick one rule that we're going to follow, but then we get frustrated when things don't work out for us.

Imagine a mother who instills in her son Jesus' words, "Turn the other cheek." Don't strike back even when others are mean. Good counsel. But then the boy gets into third grade, and the class bully decides he's a great target—because the boy doesn't fight back. Every day the boy has to make his way past the other kids, who mock him because they see him as weak.

How do we react to situations like that? Turning the other cheek obviously isn't working out. So maybe we decide to leave that idea behind. Hit back, that's what you've got to do; hit back hard so that bully leaves you alone. And pretty soon you get the idea that God's ways, the Christian life, is fine for Sunday morning, but in the real world there's a whole nother set of rules to live by.

Or maybe we don't simply reject what God says. Instead, we try to add some laws to the rule book. In one situation you hit back; in that situation you turn the other cheek. Of course, there are a lot of different situations, so your rule book gets longer and longer. Jewish teachers tried to write down all the rules for different situations. These were collected in big books; they grew to dozens of big books; but they could never cover every situation.

Well, in Moses' day Israel fell into rejecting God's Word. Right after they were saved from Egypt, they traveled to Mt. Sinai to receive God's laws, but when Moses traveled up the mountain and was gone too long, they grew restless. Following the Lord wasn't working out as they planned. They should do like the other nations around them which seemed to be doing well, and build a statue of a calf—make it out of gold, worship it so they could be more prosperous. Now this was less than a year after they had crossed the Red Sea on dry ground. How quickly they forgot the Lord's love.

We today have so many things tempting us to forget God. In our Gospel, Jesus warned about false prophets. They come in sheep's clothing, in other words, they seem friendly; but they are actually wolves, who can tear apart your faith. Some will even claim to speak for God. But check out their "fruit"—that is, listen carefully to what they say. Is it the truth of God's Word, God's whole Word, or some man-made ideas?

In Deuteronomy, God tells us, **“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds.”** We need to keep the Bible in our hearts and minds, if we are going to Walk the Talk.

And where does the Bible point us? To Jesus. Jesus, who came to this earth and walked the talk.

Jesus, God the Son, was born into a real human family, and he grew up facing many of the same challenges we face. We don't have early stories of how he dealt with his step-sisters or step-brothers, or with the third-grade bully. But we do have many accounts of how he dealt with sinful people as an adult.

Once Jesus began his ministry, he spent his time healing people, preaching forgiveness, loving others. He didn't just check the rule book to see what he was supposed to do and then do as little as possible. Jesus helped others even when he was tired. He kept traveling from city to city to share the Good News.

It's interesting how many times people opposed him for showing such love. When he healed someone on a Sabbath Day, they attacked him for breaking the rules! Next week we'll hear about Jesus having dinner with tax collectors, and again, his enemies said he was breaking the rules. Even his own disciples got upset when people brought little children to be blessed by Jesus—they said he was too busy to deal with little ones.

Jesus was not just keeping rules for the sake of keeping rules. Jesus kept the law, because that was the loving thing to do. Jesus always focused on, What is best for others? And that determined how he acted toward each person.

Jesus healed all people, on any day, except those who rejected his love. Jesus preached forgiveness to the worst of sinners; but for those caught in self-righteousness, he preached stinging law. And there were times when Jesus got angry. Coming to God's Temple, he told the moneychangers to leave, even made a whip to drive them out, because they had turned God's house into a den of thieves. Jesus made it clear they needed to repent.

Jesus always did what was best for all the people he encountered.

That love took him to the cross. There he did not get angry; he did not strike anyone. Instead he let himself be mocked and beaten, because this was God's plan to save us—Jesus had to be the sacrifice for our sins. As we heard in our Second Lesson, Jesus paid the ransom to free us, so that we now look righteous before the holy God. Jesus walked the talk for each of us.

Now he tells us to follow him in lives of love. Moses wrote, **“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.”** In other words, get these words fixed in your mind, and then in your hand, meaning put them into practice.

Some Jews would make this a literal thing—they would take a Bible verse, put it in a little box called a phylactery, and tie it with a rope on their foreheads; then do the same around one wrist. If that would help you remember, fine; but the point is to remember God's Word, and do what it says. Faith is not just mouthing a few words hypocritically, but actually living by that Word.

We follow God's commands, not just as meaningless laws; rather we put into practice all of God's commands; and we study God's laws to see how these are actually showing love to those around us.

For instance, we don't just "turn the other cheek" so that we can say we did the right thing. And we don't pretend that is the only law of God. The focus of the law is love; and love includes defending life, even defending our own lives. There are times when we must physically defend ourselves.

But we have to watch out for the sinful urge for revenge—if I get hit, then I'm going to hit back twice as hard. That's not loving others

Instead, we ask the hard question: what's the loving thing to do? That is, what is best for other people? Sometimes I will just turn the other cheek and walk away. Sometimes I should get help. Sometimes I may need to fight back—but not out of hatred; even my fighting is to be an act of love.

We can't write down all the rules for every situation. Nor should we; God wants us to struggle. He wants us to struggle with our sinful urges and repent of them. He wants us to pray, to depend on him. He wants us to dig deeper in his Word, so we grow in our faith.

The more we know God's Word, the better prepared we are to Walk the Talk in the day-to-day situations that we face.

God also wants us to instruct others, starting with our families. **“Teach [my words] to your children, talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and your gates....”** We are all stubborn and we come up with lots of reasons not to trust God; so we need to be taught his Word again and again. How wonderful when parents can do that, as they walk on the road or drive to school; when the kids go to bed or get up.

During these covid restrictions, we have tried to send out materials parents can use, such as online videos of Bible stories and songs. We are now planning a one-day VBS in July, following current guidelines, and we will also have take home lessons for parents to teach their children.

But as you know, the best lessons we can teach are by our actions. Next Sunday is Father's Day. What makes a good father? I think we'd agree it's a man who not only lays out the right guidance, but a man who lives by that guidance himself. For parents, that includes admitting their own sins, and being strengthened with the forgiveness Jesus won for us.

As we make our pilgrimage toward our Promised home in heaven, may we follow our God's loving direction and study his Word, teach his Word, and then Walk the Talk.