

**WORSHIP THE LORD**  
**14<sup>th</sup> August 2011**  
**“Taking time to know God”**

- George was an elder in the church, a warm, friendly man - until he reached home where he was known to be constantly putting his wife down as well as abusing her physically.
- Youth leader, SusyAnn, rarely missed a meeting and often led the youth Bible studies. Many knew, however, she was sleeping with her boyfriend.
- Henry clearly enjoyed worship time, judging by the way he moved and clapped as he sang the praise songs. He was particularly vocal about the unspiritual nature of many in his church who seemed so unemotional and undemonstrative during worship. However, his reputation at work was less impressive. He was often late, took long lunch breaks and was frequently seen surfing the internet during working hours.

We wonder why it is that many of us who profess to be Christians, indeed are active in our churches, don't match up when it comes to our lifestyles. And if **we** wonder, what do those outside the church think about us? Not surprising that we hear them muttering, **hypocrites** - all of them. Why are we surprised that a lot of our non-Christian friends and work colleagues are unimpressed with our Christian witness . which they see as being very **un-Christian**?

And when someone sits down with their Christian brother or sister whose life-style is raising eyebrows and challenges them, they often get back that super-spiritual, worn-out bumper sticker sentiment: **Well, you know, Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.** While this is true, for the most part it is merely an excuse for wrong, un-Christian behaviour and attitudes. We find it all too easy to rationalize our inconsistencies and our bad habits. We need to keep in mind that we as God's people are accountable, and our bad witness left unchecked will incur God's judgment. We need to practice what we preach.

The nation of Israel was often guilty of similar inconsistencies. Over and over, God sent a prophet to challenge his people. They, too, were good at the outward, worship thing but their everyday lifestyles were characterized by injustice, immorality and a lack of human kindness. They were **hypocrites** . play actors. Their worship was meaningless.

God through Isaiah, for example, asked Israel, **The multitude of your sacrifices . what are they to me?** He answers his own question. **I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. Stop bringing meaningless offerings!** Rather, **Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right. Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow** (1:11-17). His contemporary, Micah, questioned the same nation: **With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?** To which he himself replied, **He has showed you, O**

man, what **is** good. And what **does** the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (6:6-8)?

Several years on, as the nation headed the inevitable route of God's judgment, and on the brink of exile as a result, Jeremiah pleaded the Lord's case: "I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them **this** command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, and it will go well with you.+ But like their forefathers, they did not listen or pay attention; instead they followed the stubborn inclination of their evil hearts (7:22-24).

To put this into contemporary parlance: We as God's people sing our praise songs to God in church, but the moment we step out the door, we curse out our neighbour. We worship and pray on Sunday morning, but on Monday morning it's business as usual at work. We placed our tithes and offerings in the collection bag but at the same time we turn a blind eye to the needs we see all around.

It doesn't cut. It's sheer hypocrisy. There's a serious disconnect between what many of us **profess** and what we **practice**, especially in the real world of home and work. As the great Bible preacher and author, John Stott, whose death was recently announced, constantly said about the Christian faith, "There can be no sacred, secular divide.+ Authentic Christianity must be seen in the work place equally as in the worship place. As another preacher, Charles Price often says, we need to **be** the Christians we have **become**.

I think one of the failures of many Christians lies simply in their unwillingness to be obedient to what God tells them. Again, we find this theme running through the Bible. When King Saul was confronted by the prophet Samuel, after his failure to carry through God's command to destroy the sheep and cattle from the plunder of battle, he gave a feeble excuse that his soldiers had kept the best for sacrifice. Samuel's response was to the point: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? **To obey** is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams+(1 Samuel 15:22). Remember God through Jeremiah had said the same thing? "Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people.+"

But it was Jesus who stated the point most clearly. Over and over in John chapters 14 and 15, he told his followers . in as many words: "If you **love** me, you will **obey** me.+ Listen to some of his exact words: "If you love me, you will do what I command+(14:15). Again, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me,+ and "if anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching+(vs. 21 and 23). Then he put it as a negative, "He who does **not** love me will **not** obey my teaching+(vs. 24). Finally, in 15:10, he stated, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love.+"

I remember an old country song sung by, among others, Skeeter Davis, back in the 60s. It went, "To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him" and I do, I do I do.+ It reminds me of many Christians. They come to church, saying that they "**know Jesus.**" They will tell you they have a **personal relationship** with him, that he is their **Saviour**

and their **Lord** and their **Friend**. So they come to church to tell him in their songs and their prayers that to ~~know~~, know, know him, + is to ~~love~~, love, love him + ~~love~~ you, Lord, and I lift my voice, + they sing. Or, ~~Oh~~, how I love Jesus ~~because~~ he first loved me. + And for many, it ~~is~~ true. But I sometimes wish Skeeter Davis had added another line to that song . like this: ~~to~~ love, love, love him is to obey, obey, obey him. + Of course, in our modern world, singing about your boyfriend like that would not be politically correct! But in the life of the Christian who truly means that he . or she - **loves** Jesus, **that** would be the real test of their love. Listen to the way the apostle John states it in his first letter, chapter 2 verses 3 to 5: ~~We~~ know that we have come to know him **if we obey his commandments**. The man who says, ~~I~~ know him, but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone **obeys** his word, God ~~love~~ love is truly made complete in him. +

You see, love is not first and foremost a **feeling**. It ~~is~~ about **doing**. It is about doing what God asks us. In obeying his instructions for our lives. To **know** him is to **love** him, and to love him is to **obey** him.

We often hear preachers talking about how to get victory over sin. I sometimes wonder if God is less interested in us getting victory than in obeying him in the first place!

Those we know and love are those we want to please. It ~~is~~ the same with Jesus. And as with human relationships, we need to cultivate ours with him. This takes time, commitment and discipline. A lot of Christians don ~~t~~ like the sound of those words! But we need to spend **time** in God ~~s~~ presence, talking to him, listening to him. It takes time to know God. We need to be **committed** to his Word . reading it, studying it, listening to those who teach it well. Incidentally, I am puzzled as to why so few United Church members appear to take advantage of the quality preaching offered at the annual Cayman Keswick in January! And we need the **discipline** to walk away from compromising situations, to switch off the TV or computer, to refuse to close our eyes to the needs of our neighbours and the world around us, to ensure we are in church even when we want a sleep in. There ~~is~~ a lot more, too.

This all sounds very serious . very difficult. It is. But the best news is that God does not expect us to achieve this on our own. What makes Christians different from all others who are well intentioned in trying to live good lives is that we have God in the person of the Holy Spirit living in us. What is impossible in our own strength becomes possible with God ~~s~~. It is as we live in dependence on him, as we trust him, we will find that it **is** possible to obey him. And when we obey him, we discover that life takes on a new dimension. We sense his presence and peace and purpose. As the little well-known chorus puts it, ~~Trust~~ and obey, for there ~~is~~ no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. +

That ~~is~~ it, isn ~~t~~ it? Let ~~s~~ be real Christians - those whose lives match our profession of faith. Let ~~s~~ practice what we preach. Let ~~s~~ be those determined, with the help of the indwelling Spirit, to be obedient to the clear teaching of Scripture. Let ~~s~~ be those whose

witness others see as authentic . imperfect, yes . but those without guile or pretence, and whose obedient lives bring honour to the Jesus we claim to both know and love.

*Lord, forgive us that we often pretend – we are sometimes hypocritical in that our profession and our practice do not match. We want to be consistent, authentic Christians, twenty-four/seven. May we desire to know you to such an extent that our love for you will grow. And as it grows, Lord, teach us and help us by the indwelling Spirit, to obey you in every area of our lives, for your honour and glory. Amen.*

Michael Bowerman