



WORD  
DEED

**WORD VERSUS DEED**

RESETTING THE SCALES TO A BIBLICAL BALANCE

**DUANE LITFIN**

“Duane Litfin’s *Word versus Deed* addresses a topic of perennial importance for the church and pressing relevance for our own generation. Litfin is thoroughly convinced—on the basis of Scripture—that the gospel cannot be preached merely with deeds but must be proclaimed with words. He uses his extensive background in rhetoric and theology to explain why this is so and then employs his wisdom as a pastor to show the proper relationship between gospel words and gospel-worthy deeds in Christian life and witness.”

**Philip Ryken**, President, Wheaton College

“Duane Litfin has written a book that needs to find its way into every preacher’s briefcase or backpack—and quickly. With care and candor, he reminds us all of the Bible’s priority of verbal proclamation. Evenhanded and deeply biblical, *Word versus Deed* does indeed reset the biblical balance. I am very thankful for this book, and you will be, too.”

**Al Mohler**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Today, as powerful voices inside and outside the church are insisting that the gospel is best proclaimed by deeds rather than words, Duane Litfin provides a wholly biblical answer that establishes the full primacy of proclamation together with the role of deeds in demonstrating the gospel to a watching world. Litfin’s answer is finely wrought and judiciously reasoned as he travels the ladder of abstraction and the range of biblical revelation in respect to the preaching of the gospel. And it is utterly compelling. *Word versus Deed* is sure to be read, reread, and much discussed. This is a wise and timely book that brings biblical clarity to a life-and-death debate.”

**R. Kent Hughes**, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church,  
Wheaton, Illinois

“With interpretive skill and theological insight, Duane Litfin has given us a masterful treatment of the Bible’s teaching regarding the necessity of gospel proclamation and the importance of good works. Litfin’s thoughtful exegesis and pastoral wisdom provide helpful guidance that enables Christ followers to handle the difficult challenges associated with the themes of ‘word’ and ‘deed’ with greater responsibility. I am hopeful that this readable volume will point pastors, teachers, and church leaders toward a more informed understanding of God’s Word—resulting in faithful living *and* convictional proclamation.”

**David S. Dockery**, President, Union University

“Many people like to make us pick between word and deed as the best way to reflect our Christian call. It is choice we need not make. In a book that shows how both word and deed are important and necessary, Duane Litfin also reminds us how important having the Word is. It is a needed reminder that allows us to reflect on how to live our Christian lives in balance, both proclaiming and reflecting the truth that God is at work among us.”

**Darrell L. Bock**, Research Professor of New Testament Studies,  
Dallas Theological Seminary; author of over 30 books

“Getting the pendulum of truth to cease its drift from side to side is a perpetual challenge. For many decades in the not-too-distant past, the gospel was a proclamational priority with little emphasis on the gospel’s call to feed the hungry, care for the poor, and break the bonds of oppression. The social gospel was what those ‘liberals’ did. Many of us have now lived long enough to watch the pendulum swing to the opposite extreme with the deeds of the gospel being seemingly sufficient. Thankfully, my friend Duane Litfin has articulately and persuasively brought these issues of the gospel into balance. His fresh, intriguing treatment of key passages and his usual precision in developing an argument make a much needed contribution that leads us to empower the gospel with both word and deed.”

**Joseph M. Stowell**, President, Cornerstone University

“There must be a sharp distinction between the gospel—the message about what God has done in Jesus, supremely in his death and resurrection—and how the Christian acts as an implication of the gospel. This book is a positive, helpful articulation of the importance of maintaining the distinction between the gospel preached (word) and the gospel lived (deed).”

**Ben Peays**, Executive Director, The Gospel Coalition

*Word versus Deed: Resetting the Scales to a Biblical Balance*

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# CONTENTS

Introduction: Words or Deeds?	11
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## PART 1

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR WORDS**

1 Verbal and Nonverbal Communication	25
2 The Gospel Is Verbal	35
3 Evangelism Is Verbal	47

## PART 2

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR DEEDS**

4 Abstractions and Their Uses	63
5 Theology Applied	75
6 Gospel-Worthy Deeds	83
7 Living Wisely	101
8 Obeying the King	107
9 Serving the Kingdom	115
10 Adorning the Gospel	127
11 Stewarding the Creation	141

## PART 3

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF HANDLING SCRIPTURE WELL**

12 Rightly Dividing the Word	151
13 Three Key Passages	169

Conclusion: Putting It Together	195
Notes	207
General Index	215
Scripture Index	220



# INTRODUCTION

## WORDS OR DEEDS?

Preach the gospel at all times.  
Use words if necessary.

—Anonymous

The goal of this book is simple enough: to offer thoughtful Christians some help in thinking biblically about the enduring question of *word* versus *deed* in their Christian calling.<sup>1</sup>

The issue here, of course, is one of balance. How are Christians to think about the relative roles of *word* and *deed* in what Christ has called his people to be and do? The church has often gotten this balance wrong over the centuries, and if much of the current dialog on the subject is any measure, our own generation may be following suit. This book is about seeking a proper *biblical* balance between these two dimensions of the Christian's calling, which is to say, it's about setting the scales to a balance that is true to the Scriptures.

This sounds simple. But finding and maintaining a biblical balance on such a complex subject is anything but easy. It's like walking a tightrope. There is only one path that will keep us upright and moving forward, but there are many ways to fall to one side or the other.

Misguided claims in the historic "word versus deed" debate abound. On the surface some of them sound plausible,

and all the more so as they are often-repeated. But left unchallenged these mistaken notions, like winds aloft, jostle and buffet us, making it difficult to keep our thinking and behavior balanced. Only by measuring these notions against the Scriptures can we resist their buffeting and maintain the equilibrium the Lord intends for his church.

## MISGUIDED NOTIONS

What sort of misguided notions do we have in mind? Here's a prominent example.

It would be hard to overstate how often we hear these days, expressed with passion and hearty approval, the famous dictum attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." In this saying, the "word versus deed" question rears its head, stressing in this instance how important it is for Christians to "preach the gospel" with their actions. According to this way of thinking, deeds may trump words when it comes to communicating the gospel. Let the gospel be seen rather than spoken, it is said. Words may serve a useful backup role, to be used as needed, but our actions must take center stage if we are to make a difference in the world.

At first blush this sounds right. Except that it isn't.

First, according to those who know about such things, St. Francis never uttered this saying. The Franciscans are a religious order founded by St. Francis. They are experts on his life and teaching, and it is they who insist that, after diligent research, they can find no record of St. Francis ever expressing this maxim. It appears nowhere in his writings or even in his early biographies. No one can find any record of this saying within two centuries of Francis's death.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly, however, if we accept this dictum at face value, we open ourselves to confusion. It's simply not possible to preach the gospel without words. The gospel is



inherently a *verbal* thing, and preaching the gospel is inherently a *verbal* behavior. Thus the implication of this saying—that we are daily “preaching the gospel” with our deeds—is seriously misguided. It’s a mistake which, as we shall see, can lead to a range of unfortunate results.

## A LIGHTER TOUCH

But perhaps we should lighten up, we may say. Let’s treat this saying a bit more delicately. Let us view it merely as an *aphorism* and avoid pressing its language too literally. According to this reading, the saying is merely a rhetorical trope designed to emphasize the importance of backing up our gospel words with Christ-following lives.

This, of course, is an immensely important and thoroughly biblical idea. If this is all our maxim is affirming we should deem it very useful indeed. But, unfortunately, this is not all it’s affirming. Many seem to want to treat it much more literally, precisely because they see no difficulty in doing so. They will insist that the gospel can indeed be preached without words. Sometimes this is referred to as an “incarnational” approach to evangelism, whereby we “preach the gospel” by incarnating it in the world. You can preach the gospel with words, it is said, and you can preach the gospel with your actions. In fact, between the two our actions may be the more important because they speak louder than our words. Some even assert that without the actions to back them up, the words can have little impact.

What should we make of this claim? Can we or can we not “preach the gospel” with our actions? Who’s right, and does it really matter?

As it happens, it matters a great deal. The stakes are surprisingly high in how we decide this question. So we need to be careful to test our answer against the Scriptures.

## IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

If you believe the gospel can be preached without words, this book is for you. I hope to challenge your thinking and lay out a more fully biblical way of thinking about the issue. On the other hand, if you believe the gospel cannot be preached without words, this book is also for you. My goal is to support you in that conviction and explore with you the implications of your claim.

This effort will take us into some interesting and important territory. What after all is the gospel, and what is evangelism? What is the role of our deeds in fulfilling Christ's calling? How is Scripture being used and misused in this discussion, and how do these mistakes wind up distorting our understanding of the relevant issues, not to mention our behavior? These are the sorts of questions this book attempts to address.

As I have said, the stakes in this discussion are higher than one might guess. This is not some esoteric debate reserved for theologians or technical Bible scholars. Faithful obedience to Jesus Christ is what we're after, and that applies to all who call him Lord. Such obedience must by definition begin with clear thinking about what Jesus is calling us to be and do, for if we do not understand our calling, what are the chances we will fulfill it? This is what's on the line in our discussion.

## THINKING BIBLICALLY

Our goal in this book is to think biblically about the issues of "word versus deed" in the Christian's calling. But even as I write this sentence I'm aware that not all will consider this a worthy or even achievable goal.

First, there are those who, to put it mildly, demonstrate little confidence in the Scriptures. In his *Letters from the Earth*, Mark Twain said of the Bible, "It is full of interest. It has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched

history; and some good morals; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies.” From today’s popular atheists one can hear similar sentiments. We would not expect such critics to be much interested in thinking *biblically*.

There are others who will cite the Bible when it says something of which they approve but who are also not the least inclined to treat it as an authoritative word from God. They quote the Bible the way we might quote Shakespeare, because they find something there particularly apt and well put. But they do not come to the Scriptures for divine direction.

Then there are those who view the Bible as a loose collection of religious writings produced by scores of authors and editors over hundreds of years. As such, the biblical writings lack coherence. Hence the notion of something being “biblical,” in any sense that requires a Bible that speaks with a unified voice, is misguided. The Bible manifests no such unified voice, they will argue. It speaks with many voices and says a variety of different, often contradictory things. There is therefore no such thing as a coherent “biblical” viewpoint to discover.

Still others wish to view the Scriptures in a more positive light, but they nonetheless do not look to the Bible for the sort of direction we have in mind in this book—or, at least, they are disinclined to discover that direction by searching out the details of the biblical text. Their strategy is less exegetical than theological, or even philosophical. They prefer to extrapolate the Bible’s relevance from its grand, mountaintop themes: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Exploring the full range of what the Bible actually says about a question such as ours appears to hold little interest for these thinkers. They may even dismiss such efforts as an exercise in proof-texting.

## **OUR WORKING ASSUMPTION**

So let it be said at the outset that our working assumption in this book is the historic claim that the Bible, in its entirety, is

God's inscripturated Word. It is therefore unified, consistent, and authoritative. Through all its manifest variety of voices, topics, and types of literature, it evinces an underlying coher-

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Scripture is the fundamental source for one's speaking with a Christian voice and acting out of Christian conviction.

—Nicholas Wolterstorff

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ence attributable to its ultimate source—it is *God's* Word. Its writings (the *graphe*) were “out-breathed” by God and are therefore profitable “for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,” with a view to equipping us thoroughly “for every good work” (2 Tim.

3:16–17 NIV). With generations of Christians who have gone before, we therefore look to the Bible as our “only rule of faith and practice.” It speaks to us reliably not only of the grand mountaintop themes of the Christian *faith*—a point on which I not only concur but will insist—but also of more specific issues of our Christian *practice*. It thus provides us “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), including counsel toward a balanced understanding of the church's calling.

With this assumption in place, we want to inquire about what the Bible has to say on the important subject of word versus deed. We will explore the full range of this biblical counsel, yet we will also work to avoid the pitfalls of claiming the Bible's authority for what it does not, in fact, teach. Faithful students of Scripture must do no less.

## HANDLING THE TEXT

It is not uncommon, unfortunately, to find the Bible handled rather loosely in the “word versus deed” discussion, even by those who consider themselves its friends. Wishing to enlist its authority for their cause, they seem unconcerned about bending its unwary texts to their own purposes.

Such cavalier treatments of Scripture are puzzling. If we

do not consider the Bible to be normative and authoritative, why cite it at all? Leave it out of the discussion. But if we do consider it to be God's authoritative Word, it would seem we should place the highest premium on handling its texts with integrity, making every effort, to the best of our ability as fallible interpreters, to understand and represent them aright. The alternative, we were long ago warned, bears serious consequences:

Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD. Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, declares the LORD. (Jer. 23:28–31)

In this book we draw upon the entire Bible—Law, Prophets, Wisdom, Gospels (both the Synoptics and John), Epistles (both Pauline and general), even apocalyptic. We will range widely throughout the Scriptures, assuming we will find there a complex and multidimensional but also coherent and, in the end, unified witness on our important topic. This also means, of course, that we will incur a special obligation to avoid “proof-texting” in our discussion; that is, we must avoid decontextualizing passages of the Bible in such a way as to distort or misrepresent their meaning.

Context is always a critical issue in the study of Scripture. Any fair use of a passage of the Bible must give due consideration to the natural habitat from which it is drawn. Without that, the biblical text can easily be put to purposes its divine and human authors never envisioned. This, in turn, is a sure-fire way to lose the balance between word and deed that Christ desires for his church. In the latter chapters of this book we

will explore some key biblical passages that are especially ill-treated in this discussion, ill-treated precisely by failing to give their context its due.

## **A DIFFICULT BALANCE**

The unhappy truth is that Christians have often found the “word versus deed” balance difficult to set and maintain, especially over the last two centuries of American history.

Prior to the Civil War many American Christians had achieved a certain even-handedness in their understanding of “word versus deed.” They were actively spreading the gospel across the expanding nation (word), but they were also committed to the social dimensions of their calling (deed). They spent themselves and their resources in the building of hospitals and orphanages; they embraced the burgeoning Sunday school movement as a way of ministering to poor and disenfranchised children; strong abolitionist convictions and efforts flourished among them.

But as the nineteenth century unfolded, another trend was also developing. The growing encroachments of liberal theology continued to leach the theological substance from the gospel. As the authority and reliability of the Bible came under fire, core teachings of historic Christianity began to melt away. The supernatural claims of the gospel were repudiated or reinterpreted, leaving behind not much more than a social ethic. Hence the rise of the so-called social gospel in the mainline churches. The gospel, according to this line of revisionist thinking, was not about abstract theological affirmations or distant questions of history, much less pie-in-the-sky visions of the future. It was about demonstrating mercy and justice to one’s fellow man in the here and now. Thus did the pendulum swing away from word to deed.

Reacting to this trend in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the rising fundamentalist movement set itself to

champion the theological core of the Christian faith. These forebears of modern evangelicals stressed what they believed were the historic fundamentals of that faith, such things as the authority and trustworthiness of the Scriptures, the virgin birth of Jesus, his substitutionary atonement on the cross, his bodily resurrection from the grave, and his imminent return. At the center of it all they stressed the crucial importance of a personal response of faith to the verbal witness of the good news of the gospel.

Unfortunately, along with their faithfulness to the preached Word, many of these early fundamentalists made the mistake of deserting the social dimensions of the church's mission, not entirely, but to a degree that distinguished them from their theological forbears. Many of them simply abdicated social concerns to those they believed had forfeited the theological core of the gospel. In contrast to the

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Their task, as they saw it, was to rescue from this dying world as many souls as possible through the promulgation of the good news about Jesus.

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liberal social gospel, theirs became what some have called a "lifeboat theology." Their task, as they saw it, was to rescue from this dying world as many souls as possible through the promulgation of the good news about Jesus. Thus did these early fundamentalists, in their neglect of the important social dimensions of the church's calling, shift the pendulum to the other extreme—away from deed to word.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the pendulum began to swing back toward a more biblical balance. By 1947 Carl F. H. Henry's book *The Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism* signaled a new day, at least for evangelicals. In this book Henry chided his fellow fundamentalists/evangelicals (the terms were in many ways interchangeable at the time) for their blind spots and failures in

the realm of social engagement, yet without denigrating the central role of the verbal witness. Other important voices chimed in, and as the twentieth century waxed and then began to wane, evangelical social (not to mention political) engagement developed anew. By the end of the twentieth century the old lifeboat theology had almost disappeared among evangelicals. They were showing promise of having rediscovered something of the balance between word and deed called for in Bible.

But even as the twentieth century was ending and a new century dawning, indications that the pendulum might be

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The gospel is inherently a *verbal* thing, and preaching the gospel is inherently a *verbal* behavior. If the gospel is to be preached at all, it must be put into words.

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swinging again in the opposite direction began to appear. New voices and new trends emerged to emphasize the church's social responsibilities, often at the expense of its verbal witness. With the rise of so-called post-modernity, the cultural environment was shifting. A confidence in language came to be viewed

as an outmoded feature of modernity. *Logocentric* (that is, being too word centered) became a derogatory term. Increasingly experience, actions, and images were valorized, while the verbal dimensions of the church's calling were played down or even disparaged. Rising generations of young Christians seemed to think that the verbal expression of the gospel could almost be dispensed with. They grew increasingly passionate about the mercy and justice dimensions of the church's calling, but they seemed ever more relaxed about, oblivious to, suspicious of, or even hostile toward the church's verbal witness. "Deeds, not creeds" became a familiar slogan.



## TODAY'S ENVIRONMENT

Such a quick survey of necessity fails the complex trends just described, but perhaps it can be allowed to serve our present point: it has been difficult through the years for the church to find and maintain its balance on the respective roles of word and deed in its mission. Over time the pendulum has sometimes swung too far in one direction or the other. It may be doing so again in our generation.

Ours is an environment highly susceptible to the mistaken notion that the church's verbal witness may be optional. The temptations of our day are seductive. Verbal behavior in general has fallen on hard postmodern times. The world will often applaud our feeding the hungry and healing the sick, but it will not applaud the word of the cross. The gospel of Jesus Christ represents a line in the sand. Jesus is the "stone of stumbling," the "rock of offense" who scandalizes the world (1 Pet. 2:6–8).

The sensibilities of our cultural moment thus combine with our natural inclination to avoid the stigma and rejection associated with Jesus. Together they conspire to shuttle us toward good deeds at the expense of gospel words. The result is inevitable: our verbal witness begins to suffer a benign neglect. We come to find comfort in the notion that our deeds matter more than our words; indeed, that our deeds can *substitute* for our words. Not to worry, we seem to say, we're preaching the gospel every day. We're just doing it with our actions.

This may be a comforting notion but it's also dangerously misleading. However important our actions may be (and, as we shall see, they are very important indeed), and whatever else they may be doing (which subject we will also explore), those actions are not "preaching the gospel." Despite the fact that so many today seem to think otherwise, one simply cannot preach the gospel without words. Let us say it again: the

## INTRODUCTION

gospel is inherently a *verbal* thing, and preaching the gospel is inherently a *verbal* behavior. If the gospel is to be preached at all, it must be put into words.

These are strong claims. They fly in the face of a good deal of current popular thinking. Can such claims stand the light of examination? We shall see, for an examination of these claims is precisely what follows.





## CHAPTER 5

# THEOLOGY APPLIED

The faithful do not only make claims with their lips,  
but prove their service of God in concrete acts.

—John Calvin

We have said that while the gospel can only be preached verbally, there is undeniably also a nonverbal dimension to our gospel obligations. God calls his people to demonstrate the gospel at the concrete levels of life; that is, in the way we live. The mission of Christ's church is thus both word *and* deed. Those deeds may not be able to *proclaim* the gospel, but they are the primary means by which we *enact* the gospel before a watching world. With the previous chapter's discussion in hand we are now in a position to explore this nonverbal dimension of our calling.

### THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

All of the Bible can be arrayed, so to speak, up and down the ladder of abstraction. The substance of the Bible's message is theology (abstract) applied to life (concrete). There is not much in the Scriptures that cannot be located somewhere on this continuum.

It's important to recognize that the Bible is not first and foremost about us. The Bible is *theocentric* (God-centered), not *anthropocentric* (us-centered). It is first about God's person, his nature, his ways, his actions, his will, his design, his

## THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR DEEDS

purposes, his view of things—and only secondarily and derivatively about us and what our response to him should be. It is in this sense that we can say that the Bible is “theology applied.” *This is what is true of him*, the Bible keeps telling us, in one form or another, *and so this is what should be true of us*.

Consider the apostle Paul’s reference to “oxen” in his appeal to the Corinthians:

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (1 Cor. 9:7–11)

The concrete application to oxen in Deuteronomy 25 was the outworking, Paul says, of a broader, more abstract principle that included not only work animals but soldiers, vine dressers, shepherds, plowmen, threshers, and Christian workers. It is essentially the same principle Jesus applied to his disciples when he sent them out two by two: “The laborer deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). This abstract principle reflects an important element of justice in God’s design for

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[Jesus’s] words and deeds belonged to each other, the words interpreting the deeds and the deeds embodying the words. He did not only announce the good news of the kingdom; he performed visible “signs of the kingdom.”

—John Stott

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human society. It is this broader insight, Paul says, that is at work in the law's concrete reference to oxen, on the one hand, and speaks to his own situation in Corinth, on the other. Paul's entire argument is arrayed up and down the ladder of abstraction.

The stories of the Bible are another case in point. They do not merely report the details of what happened. They do that well enough, but if that's all we receive from them, we will have missed their primary intent. The Bible's stories are recounted for a reason. They are not usually there to supply us broad moralistic examples; they are designed to show us what we need to know of God—his person, his nature, his ways, his actions, his will, his design, his plan, his purposes, his view of things—and then through that, in the end, what we need to know about ourselves and our responses. And these theological insights are typically well up the ladder from the concrete details of the stories themselves (see 1 Cor. 10:1–13).

The opposite is also true. The high-order abstract truths in the Bible (e.g., “God is holy,” Ps. 99:9) are not designed to be retained in the abstract. They bear with them “entailments.”<sup>1</sup> Their implications are to be worked out in the details of our lives (“Be holy, for I am holy,” Lev. 11:44–45; 1 Pet. 1:16). The broad promises of the Bible (“I will never leave you nor forsake you,” Heb. 13:5) are to be trusted and acted upon. God's general commands (“Love your neighbor as yourself,” e.g., Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19) are intended to be lived out in the detail of our daily existence. All of the Bible is arrayed up and down the ladder of abstraction.

This is why we can say that the Bible is “theology applied.” Not every passage explicitly exhibits the ladder's full range, but some such range is implicit everywhere. The details can only be made sense of in light of the larger, more abstract truths, while those abstract truths always bear implications for

## THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR DEEDS

the details of our lives. The Bible is constantly, either explicitly or implicitly, dealing with the relationship between the two.

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### TRUTH AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

What are the consequences of deciding the following generalization is true?

*General*

If: *There is no such thing as resurrection of the dead.*



Then: *Christ has not been raised.  
Your faith is futile.  
You are still in your sins.  
Those who have died in Christ are lost.  
I am a liar.  
We are of all people most to be pitied.*

*Specific*

1 Cor. 15:12–20

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None of this should surprise us. God designed us to live on this ladder. We are embodied persons making our way in the physical and social world God has made; all of us experience a variety of concrete needs and inclinations. But we are also thinking, feeling, spiritual creatures. We are made in God's image and share aspects of his nature. Unlike the lesser creatures, we crave the meaning, significance, and purpose that only the larger truths can provide. We live our lives on the abstraction ladder, from top to bottom.

Alfred Korzybski was right. The healthiest people are those who can range nimbly up and down this ladder, allowing the more general truths to shape and inform the specifics of their lives, even while requiring and embracing those specifics as a way of anchoring, enlivening, and enacting the



general. The Bible is designed to instruct us in every part of this process, from large to small.

Some entire books of the Bible reflect this pattern. For instance, the six chapters of Ephesians divide elegantly into two halves. The first three explore in broad strokes what God is doing in the world through Christ. Such ideas are necessarily high and large and abstract. God's purpose, he says, was:

To bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord. (3:9–11)

The next three chapters, however, deal with the equally concrete details of life. They include such specific instructions as these:

Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. (5:3–4)

How are the two halves of Ephesians, the abstract and the concrete, related? The bridge is found in 4:1: "I . . . urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." The abstract truths of

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Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

—1 John 3:18

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chapters 1–3 constitute the "calling" of the church, a calling which bears concrete implications for how God's people are to live. Our behavior receives its shape and meaning from the abstract truths of which it is an expression. Neither can stand

## THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR DEEDS

alone: *Truth-informed behavior* and *behavior-enacted truth* are two sides of the same coin.

The large ideas of God's Word, then, always bear implications for how we are to live. Sometimes those ideas are focused on *who God is*: "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8). Or they focus on *what God has done*: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us. . . . Let us. . . . Let us. . . ." (Heb. 10:19–25). Or perhaps they tell us about *what God will yet do*: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?" (2 Pet. 3:10–11).

One way or another, God's truth always bears implications for our living. Hence Paul's prayer that the Colossians might "be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Why? "So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work" (Col. 1:9–10). There it is in a nutshell—*theology applied*.

## FAITH AND WORKS

So strong is the connection between the general and the specific, abstract truth and its concrete expression, in the Christian life that defaulting on either may call into question the whole. The all-encompassing abstract proposition, "Jesus is Lord," for example, is the very hallmark of the believer. No one can sincerely affirm it, says the apostle Paul, except by the

Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). In fact, the failure to do so is the surest sign of a lack of genuineness (2 John 7–11), whatever our behavior. But the opposite is also true. The book of James famously connects the abstract with the concrete in its discussion of faith and works: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (2:14).

What does James mean here by “that faith,” the kind that cannot save? It is the faith, he says, of the demons: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (v. 19). The faith that cannot save is a faith that perches high up the ladder and never comes down. It consists of little more than mental assent to Israel’s ancient *Sh’ma*: “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). But this minimalist monotheistic acknowledgment, understood all too well in the demonic realm, is not a faith that saves. The faith that saves takes in the next verse in Deuteronomy as well: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (v. 5).<sup>2</sup> While genuine saving faith certainly includes elements of mental assent, it also includes more. It involves personally entrusting ourselves to God and obeying his Word in gospel-worthy deeds—something the demons will never do.

Note that this kind of faith, the faith that saves, does not disdain or repudiate the abstract. On the contrary, it stands in full agreement with the demons on the great abstract affirmation of the *Sh’ma*: *our God is one*. Genuine faith, in fact, hungers for *more* abstract knowledge about God. Who is he? What are his attributes? What is he like? What are his ways? The difference is that saving faith does not *settle* for the abstract. It wants to know not only *about* God; it seeks to know him personally and to serve him faithfully. It wants to honor him and worship him and fellowship with him. It

## THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR DEEDS

seeks to understand his will and obey it. It aspires to live a life “worthy of his calling” (2 Thess. 1:11) in every possible way. This is what distinguishes biblical faith from mere mental assent. The real thing is lived all up and down the ladder of abstraction. Anything short of this, the Bible warns, may not be genuine faith at all.



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