

Bridging the Gap: The Space Between Belief and Behavior

Rev. Vincent Lachina

Try to wrap your head around this scene if you can. A Baptist minister is having a conversation with his son who just turned 18. It should be a very upbeat conversation about college days in the future and things like that, but it shifted in an entirely different direction when the son said, “Dad, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I will never go to church again.” In a state of shock, the Baptist minister father asks, “Why?”

“Because you all are total hypocrites,” was the son’s reply.

How is that for a wake-up call? And to put that into perspective, I must confess that the Baptist minister was me, and the son was my only child. I should also tell you that now that he is 47, he has kept that commitment all his adult life. With the exception of two family funerals and a wedding, he has chosen to avoid church life. I would be less than honest if I didn’t say that his decision was hurtful on many levels, but now as I look back on more than a half century of my own life within the church, I understand how he might have come to that decision.

Every day our media outlets – whether newspaper or television or social media are filled with story after story of individuals who engage in hypocritical behavior. There is a huge gap, it seems, between what we believe and how we behave. Surprisingly, when I even say that, the first thought most of you will have is that as I talk about what we believe, it’s all about religion or faith. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but your faith beliefs are only a very small portion of what constitutes your belief structure. But it is a part of it, that’s certain. So, let’s begin there.

There are well-known evangelists and faith leaders who preach sermon after sermon on what the Scriptures say we must believe as the Word of God. Please don't tell my evangelical friends this, but within the Bible recordings of the life of Jesus, he does not once teach a single theological doctrine. Instead, Jesus talks about how to behave. "Love your neighbor," "Suffer the little children to come to me," "Blessed are the peacemakers." He focuses entirely on the peculiar way he expects his followers to behave. His teachings are admonitions to govern the way we act, not what we believe. Yet over and over we hear loud voices talking about their "Christian" beliefs and at the same time behaving in a way that is the total opposite.

In John's second epistle, he offers some sage advice about three very important aspects of living out the Christian life. His letter is addressed to the chosen lady and her children. There are two positions about who this is. The first is that it might be to a specific person or lady, and the other is that the term 'lady and her children' might refer to the church and its members, which was common language in the days of oppression. Whoever the recipient is, John is very specific in his message about how to follow the guidance that Jesus gave, or directions about how to behave as a believer.

The first lesson is about finding the joy in walking in truth. Did you see that in the first 4 verse, John uses the word 'truth' five times. Believers today must always be cautious about knowing and following 'the truth' of the Gospels. Those who use a false interpretation of the teachings of Christ or teach untruths, are called deceivers. John clearly states that the truth is not new, but it is the commandment that they have heard from the beginning that we must love one another.

The second lesson is connected to the first. As John writes, "And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments." We have had those commandments from the beginning of our belief in

Jesus and his teachings. Those who practice true Christian behavior take seriously the commandment that we “walk in obedience to his commands,” meaning that we use the teachings of Christ to govern the way we behave or live our lives. It is certainly not my job to judge others, but I do believe with all my being in what John says so clearly. “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God but the one who abides (or walks) in the teaching has both God and Christ.” We are warned that if someone comes or is present who does not follow the truth and teaching of Christ, we are not to welcome them.

But there is also a third lesson from this short letter and it is my very favorite. John encourages us to know that in this walk of truth and love and faith, we will find more joy in having whatever conversation we want face-to-face. We don’t know if John ever got to have an in-person meeting with the lady as he wanted. He told her that he had much to say but did not want to write it but to speak to her face-to-face. For me, the deeper meaning is that there is much more comfort and trust when we walk this journey of behaving in Christ together. When I look around at you and this church, I find the joy that John talks about when we are present and walking in truth, faith and joy together.

I am quite sure you have your own stories about faith groups or individuals who believe they are doing God’s work but do not follow the commandments of Christ as John tells us. We see them and hear them much too often. These are the “hypocrites” I think my son was talking about when he withdrew from the church. Is there any wonder millennials are abandoning religion by the millions or that churches are suffering significantly? People who claim to be doing the will of God, but that will is contrary to the teachings of Christ. I think this is when we want to say to people, “Practice what you preach.” That’s a phrase we don’t hear as often as we did in the past.

That's our faith beliefs. What else is there? Let's take a minute to look at some social beliefs. Let's start with "family." We all have our own idea about what the word 'family' means, because for good or bad, we all have one of those. We didn't get to choose that, because if we had, I would have been a Gates or Bezos or another monied family. Instead, I got a poor Italian immigrant family from Mississippi. All my life, I heard people say, "family is everything." It was the mantra that we all learned from our mothers, like my own. My four siblings and their 12 offspring were bound by that concept, too, I thought. You would have thought it was the end of the world when my parents divorced after 35 years, but the family stayed connected because "family is everything." When my life took some very different turns, my family didn't quite behave like they believed Christ commandment to love others. They used what they believed as fundamentalist Christians to behave in the opposite walk of love. Even now, there is a large gap between my siblings and me. It's just one example of how some strong beliefs dictate behavior that seems so contrary to the teachings of Christ. It's not just my family. Perhaps your family has its own unique story.

If we choose to walk in truth, love and faith, how does that carry over into our everyday life? Let's begin with the church. If we, as a family of believers are walking in the truth and following the commandments that Jesus gave us, how does that affect our behavior? Do we practice what we preach? I believe we do. When we are faithful to donate to causes that aid the poor, the homeless, or people in need, like when we donate to the food bank, then we are behaving like Christ taught us. When we are a caring family who prays for and supports each other, isn't that behaving like John tells us is the joy of walking in love? When we gather here in this sacred place and worship and pray together – face-to-face – aren't we living and behaving in a way to honor God? I believe with all my heart that we here in this church family are truly behaving and practicing our beliefs. We walk the truth.

John tells us that the way to express the love Christ asks of us is to “walk in obedience to His commands.” How do we do that with each other or with other people? Can people look at the way we behave and know that we are practicing the truth of our beliefs? We are studying the book of James in our Adult Forum and focusing on the concept of faith requiring good works. The lessons we learn from this letter James wrote to the church are bound up into a powerful statement, “Faith without works/deed is dead.” So how does that relate to this message about the gap between beliefs and behavior? Simply this, when one accepts Christ as Savior and becomes a follower of the teaching He gave us, we will be known by the deeds we do as well as by our confession of faith.

Here's an example that comes to mind. Former President Jimmy Carter has always professed that he is a Christian, and was by the way, a former Southern Baptist but left that denomination because of its doctrinal changes to more fundamentalist beliefs. Here is a man who, even though he was elected Governor of Georgia and President of the US, still taught Sunday School in a small church in Plains, Georgia until his early 90's. He and his wife has been strong advocates and active workers in Habitat for Humanity, building houses for those in need. Do his beliefs and his deeds show a beautiful combination of believing and behaving as a follower of Christ? I firmly believe that Jimmy Carter practiced what he preached.

All of us if we are paying attention to media news are well aware that there are many examples of people claiming to be Christian but are doing or behaving in ways that do not mirror the teachings of Christ. There were many Christian Nationalists who participated in the attack on the US Capitol on January 6th. There are so-called Christians who have advocated the banning of books in schools and libraries. There are many Christians who want to convert our democracy to a theocracy in which the US become only a Christian nation and would exclude other faith traditions. There are Christians who oppose tent camps for homeless even though that is

the opposite view of “Love thy neighbor.” I could go on and on with examples of clear evidence of some whose beliefs do not match their behavior, but I think you see what I’m talking about.

Behaving as a true Christian is really hard. We all know that. But we must understand that behavior is a learned discipline. Just as you and I have learned so much as we have moved along a spiritual journey so that we want to be good Christians, little by little it is a learning process. People learn to behave, and we also learn that misbehaving can lead to trouble. When I was a child, if I misbehaved or broke one of my parents’ rules, I was told to go outside, pick a switch and bring it in for a spanking. There were always consequences for misbehaving.

Because we are people of free will, each of us can decide for ourselves what we want to do. We have willingly chosen to be a follower of Christ and to be a part of a church where we can grow in faith. We also make our own choices about how we want to behave as a Christian. What some of those who choose not to follow the teachings of Christ do not think about is that each of their choices has a consequence. At some point or place in time, there will be a need to answer and defend their choices. What I hope for you and me is that we make the right choices to trust and obey Jesus, to do his will, and to be people who practice what we preach. Now as my mother used to say thousands of times, “Now go behave!”