

Couch-Potato Christianity

[Matthew 7:24-27](#); [James 1:22-25](#); [James 2:14-26](#)

Rev. Richard Kannwischer, First Presbyterian Church, San Antonio, Texas

Sunday, August 13, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Good morning, saints. Good morning, sinners. You're just like my church back home, then. I bring you greetings from the First Presbyterian Church of San Antonio. My name is Richard Kannwischer. It's kind of a strange name; not as strange as Icenogle, but a strange name. I think my parents were a little confused when they named me, for you see, Richard is a word that means "powerful ruler," and Kannwischer is a fancy German term for dishwasher.

I grew up in Waco, Texas. There's not a whole lot to do in Waco, Texas – only so many times you can go to the Dr. Pepper Museum. Only so many times you can go to a Baylor athletic event and watch them get absolutely demolished. And so for me, growing up, I spent as much time as possible on the tennis court. I played so much tennis that they actually named a tennis drill after me: the Kannwischer drill. And here's how it all started.

One day during a group lesson, I was hitting the ball in a particular way, and the coach was telling me how to correct it. This wasn't the first time that he had told me to keep my elbow closer to my body as I take the racket back; and finally, something in him just snapped. He dropped his racket and stared me down. This big bear of a man climbed over the net, came over to me, marched me over in the corner of the court, saying, "I am so tired, Kannwischer, of you hearing what I say, but failing to do what I tell you to do. So I'm going to make a deal with you. You're going to stand in this corner. You're going to make a hundred perfect swings." And he showed me how to do it right again. He said, "I'm going to continue this group lesson, and I'm going to watch you out of the corner of my eye. And if, for once, I find you doing the swing improperly, you're going back to zero, bud."

And so there it is -- my mark on human society, my contribution to culture. And when we moved back to Texas just a few short years ago from the New York City metropolitan area, at a social event, from across the room, my old coach saw me. Not distinguishing the office that I hold by saying "Reverend" or "Pastor" he said: "Hey Kannwischer! You're still famous! You know we still do that Kannwischer drill of yours? There's always kids like you, Kannwischer—kids that hear what I say but don't do what I tell them to do."

Will you pray with me? God, may this be a moment when we not only hear you, but we obey you; when we take to heart and act on the conviction of what you have planted within our souls. I ask, God, that you will anoint me with the gift of preaching and that these words might not just be my own ideas, but may this be your message; tailor-make this for us, O God. And we know that you will do this, for we pray in the strong name of Jesus, the risen Christ. And all of God's people said together, Amen.

The apostle James writes, "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in the mirror. They look at themselves, and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget, but doers who act, they will be blessed in their doing." And then James continues on this same subject when he says, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say that you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lack daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace. Keep warm. Eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But some will say, 'You have faith, then I have works. Show me your faith apart from works, and I, by my works, will show you my faith.' You believe that God is one, you do well – even the demons believe, and shudder. Do you want to be shown, O senseless person, that faith without works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? For you see that faith was active along with his works, and that faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled when it said, 'And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, and he was called a friend of God.' You see, we are justified by our works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab, the prostitute, justified by her works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them home by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so too, faith without works is also dead."

When I was in seminary, there was a particular class that was so engaging, so compelling, that I wanted to take it. The teacher was known to be a tough grader and, quite frankly, I wanted to enjoy the class but I didn't want to do the work; nor did I want to jeopardize my stellar 2.5 G.P.A. But the class did fit my schedule, and I wanted to sit in; I wanted to audit the course. During the first class, as most professors tend to do on the first day, he handed out the syllabus. The rumors of his work load and my instincts about him being tough were confirmed. Toward the end of the class, he asked if anybody wanted to audit the course, and mine was the lone hand that shot up into the sky. He looked right at me and he said, "You can't audit this course. If you want my instruction, you have to do my work."

You know, the Latin term for hearing is *audeo*. This is where we get the term, to "audit" a course; if you want to audit a class, you simply want to hear it... without accountability... without commitment... without effort. And I wonder, (but don't raise your hands) I wonder if Jesus stood at the head of this class and asked us if there was anybody who wanted to audit this course that we call "Christianity." I wonder how many of us would shoot our hands up into the sky. Jesus says that there are no auditors of his class—to be a part of his church is to hear and to do the will of the Father. James says, "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

The author whom you're going to have for your All-Church Retreat, Greg Ogden, says that one of the most dangerous things in this life of faith we have is something called "sermon atrophy" – lifelong Christians, he argues, who have attended numerous worship services and have been subjected to countless numbers of sermons, but have failed to act on what they have heard. Having heard all

of these messages, God has often tugged at their hearts, and yet they have failed to do what they were called to do. And so they forget – they become comfortably numb; they're paralyzed in their faith. And Ogden says sermon atrophy always leads to couch-potato Christianity.

In other words, one of the most dangerous things that can happen to a person's soul is to continually hear God's leading and to fail to act on it. James refers to this as senseless; Jesus called it foolish: like building your house on sand. For the reality is, and you know this to be true, that God only gives us a brief window of opportunity to act on what we hear. According to the education department at the University of South Florida, people only remember about 10 percent of what they hear, but they remember up to 90 percent of what they actually do. I think this is why so many churches are failing to pass along the faith to the next generation: we think that we can make followers of Jesus Christ by talking to them. You know, yes, Jesus preached, and he taught to the crowds, but his main method of education, his main focus of discipleship (which I hear is a main emphasis in this church for the last year) was showing... and empowering... and experiencing the mission in the work of God.

You know, one of the struggles that we have as preachers is that seemingly innocuous little comment in the back of the sanctuary or in the narthex, when the service is all over and people are shaking your hands on the way out. Someone comes up to you and says, "Good sermon, pastor." I remember when I was in the New York City area, in a town called Summit, New Jersey, there were a lot of unchurched people there. On the way out, one person who was a nonbeliever and had no church background came up to me and the first thing he said was "Father." I said, "Yes, my son?" He said, "You gave a great speech today." What do we do with that? Are we supposed to try to correct it and deflect it – I mean, we believe theologically that it's not the messenger, in terms of me, but that it's God's message coming to us; that it's all by the power of the Holy Spirit. Do we try to correct it and say, "Well, to God be the glory?" Or, do we just receive it and take it in the gratitude and spirit in which it was given and we're supposed to say, just "Thank you?" But I have finally found a more excellent way. There is the best way to respond to that innocuous little preaching compliment of "Good sermon, pastor," and that is: that I look at my congregant in the eye and I say, "We'll see. We'll see."

In other words, the true test, the true mettle of a sermon, is not in the hearing, but in the doing. This is the place where all of us come to receive our assignment, and you can't audit this course. Martin Luther, the great Reformer, who wasn't a big fan of the epistle of James and calling it the "epistle of straw," knew this deep down in his heart because, at one time in his chapter of ministry, he got so frustrated at the congregation—that they were hearing him and enjoying what he had to say but they weren't acting on what he was saying—that he actually went on strike. Can you imagine a preacher going on strike, not because of better benefits or a better housing allowance, but because he wanted the people to be more faithful to the Word?

Imagine that a good friend knocks on your door. When you open the door, you see that your friend is disheveled, his clothes are torn, and he tells you that he's been in a terrible auto accident. Right away, you let him in, and you have him sit down on the couch. You clasp his hands and you tell him that you're glad that he's OK, and you say, "Let's pray that your life has been spared." And you pray for God's blessing and healing to be on him. You know that he needs medical attention; and yet, right after that prayer, you get up and you say, 'OK, time for you to go,' and you usher him to the door and close the door behind him. This is roughly the example that the author James gives for us in our scripture. How ridiculous, how disingenuous would it be, for us to receive someone whom we love... someone in great need... and to hear what they have to say and yet to fail to meet their bodily needs?

But such is the life for so many people who try to live with faith apart from works. James does even something stranger next. It's the only time in the Bible that you hear demons being lifted up as a positive role model. He says, "You believe that God is one. You're all monotheists, right?" In the letter, to whom it's written, I'm sure that the people nodded, 'Yes, we believe in one God.' James said, "Good. Even the demons believe that, and at least when they think about it, they shudder." In other words, at least when the demons hear about God, there's an impact; there's a response. At least they move. For so many people today, it seems that the Word goes out in their life... and God tugs at their heart... and yet they don't respond. James is saying, 'Just do something.'

Now, if you were listening carefully, and if you've grown up as a Protestant Christian, there's a part of you, as we read this text this morning, that felt like the fingernails on the chalkboard of life. There's a part of you, as you were listening to this sermon, that thought that this sermon tasted about as good as the first bite of cereal after the milk has already gone bad. For one of the hallmarks of our Reformed faith is that we are justified by our faith. You heard James say, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." But we also know that the apostle Paul says, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works." Anybody have any questions, or can I move on to the next point?

So which is it, faith or works? Let me see if I can give you the short answer. What we believe is that you are saved by grace, judged by your works, and justified by faith. And what James is saying here is that the kind of thing that you call faith isn't really faith. Hearing is not enough. Professing to believe is not enough. Believing the right things is not enough. You have to act. Works are the evidence of a genuine faith. Works activate our faith. Works complete our faith. The scriptures are clear on this – you can't obtain your salvation, you must receive and respond to it. Author Dallas Willard writes, "Grace is not opposed to your effort. It is opposed to your earning." That's an important word, so I'm going to say that again: grace is not opposed to your effort; it's opposed to your earning.

My good friend and pastor Vic Pentz, the pastor at Peachtree Presbyterian Church, I think says it best. He says, "Imagine your ticket to heaven perforated right down the middle. On the one side it says 'Faith;' on the other side it says 'Works;' and across the top, it says 'Void if Detached.'"

Several years ago I was working in junior-high ministry. Tony Campolo says that the old Roman Catholic theology is right; there really is a place called Purgatory: it's called junior high. We were on a mission trip with about a hundred junior-high students in a really poor part of Mexico. We built five houses in five days. It was the last night, we were all in small groups; we were processing, and our goal as leaders was to try to understand where the kids were in their faith, and to have them talk about what was going on in their hearts and in their lives. You could divide my group right down the middle – there were the boys and there were the girls. The girls in the small group were crying and saying, "This has been the best week of my life," and "I'm forever changed," and "I

understand God now." And the boys were like, "Are we done yet?" begging me to let them out of there.

After that night was over, I lamented to one of the other leaders; I was like, "You know, I think the girls get it in my small group, but I think the guys don't. I wish there was a way to get through." The next day we went to the houses one last time. We were dedicating the houses; we presented the families with their Bibles. We prayed for each family and blessed their house, that it might become a home. I was standing at the door of the bus. I was counting heads to make sure we had everybody on the way back. I saw the four guys from my small group coming towards the bus and they didn't have their shirts on; they didn't have shoes on. I stopped them, and I was like, "Whoa, fellas. You're not that cute yet. The girls are not going to be all that impressed. Why don't you put your clothes on, and then you can get on the bus?" And they didn't even answer me; they just pointed over their shoulder to a group of kids who were standing next to their home—a group of kids from Mexico who had grown up in abject poverty, all of them but one of them wearing a brand-new American cool T-shirt. One of the junior-high kids pulled my ear down to his and said, "You know, I think that kid would look good in your shirt."

So I walked over and I gave them my shirt and I got back on the bus--no air conditioning, windows open, and hot; and most of us were half-naked Presbyterians. And I realized: Yeah, they get it. They really do.

Friends in Christ, many of us have been auditing this class that we call Christianity for way too long. Many of us have felt God tug at our hearts and we have neglected to do what he's called us to do: a letter of forgiveness; a kind word to your spouse; more time at home with your child; a line in the sand at work; or maybe even the shirt off of your back. Fortunately, what we believe is that it's never too late for you to register for this course, under the tutelage of Jesus, the Christ. For the God we worship did not just hear the cry of his people in bondage, but delivered them out of slavery. For the God we serve did not forget his children lost in the wilderness, but led them into a promised land. The God we love did not, and does not, leave us alone in our sin, but actively pursues us, even right now. For God does not merely hear and speak, but is active. Bottom line is: we have a faith that works because we have a God who works. And maybe what you need today is for God to stop this big group lesson that we call 'church' and for him to climb over the net, over to where you are, for him to lovingly and sternly pull you aside and say, "I am so tired of you hearing what I have to say but failing to do what I'm calling you to do. Let me show you. Let's practice it again."

Your story might not be all that dramatic. There's no limit to what God might do through a head bowed, or a heart surrendered, and a body coiled to spring to life. And so may your ticket not be torn down the middle. May your faith and works go hand-in-hand. And in the end, we'll see. We'll see if this sermon was any good at all. Amen.