

## Being Assertive Like Jesus

I know I am not a particularly assertive person but I continue to work at it. Through studying the art of assertiveness and teaching it as part of my work my interest and fascination continues to grow and my skills improve over time.

But what does it mean to be assertive? It means that we are able to say 'no' without feeling guilty. It means we can set out our OWN priorities, choosing how we spend our time. It means we can ask for what we want; we can and are willing to take reasonable risks. And it means we can choose not to assert ourselves at times when we feel it would be better not to say anything. If we are assertive we can initiate something, change something or someone. We can address problems or things that concern us, being firm so that our rights are respected. Rules and traditions that do not make sense or do not seem fair to us can be questioned and we can share our feelings, opinions and experiences with others. Assertiveness is a channel for both positive and negative emotions.

But we must be careful. Being assertive and being aggressive are, sometimes confused as being the same. You have to be aggressive to be assertive! Aggressive people are the most assertive people! I know some aggressive words:

Shut up	Don't you ever listen	What a nerve!
Because I said so	Get on with it!	You'd better...
Come on....	I told you so	Stupid

Using these, and others like them, means we can stand up for our rights but only in a way that does not take into account the rights of others. And we ignore or dismiss the needs, wants, feelings, opinions, experiences and beliefs of other people. We express our needs, wants and opinions but in inappropriate ways.

Where is the respect and willingness to listen here? Where is the interest in others and the empathy? It is all about control, disinterest, anger, superiority, disrespect and put downs. This is definitely not being assertive.

Oh I cannot be assertive! Why?

Well, it is rude, selfish and uncaring to say what we want. As a Christian this is not right.

I do not want to upset another person or risk losing a relationship by being assertive. After all I am a Christian.

Anyway I may be embarrassed. And I have no right to change my mind, neither has anyone else.

I shouldn't have to say how I feel or what I need, people close to me should already know.

We must not forget that Jesus told us to walk the second mile or turn the other cheek so I must put up with what is happening even if I do not like it.

I shouldn't say how I am feeling or thinking because it is not fair to burden other people with my problems. I just need to tell Jesus.

I really don't mind – you decide where we are going and what we are going to do.

I just need to tell Jesus. What would he say?

Was Jesus assertive?

Like many of you, I am sure, I was brought up singing Charles Wesley's hymn: "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child". Further on, the hymn goes: "Thou art pitiful and kind, Let me have Thy loving mind, Loving Jesus, gentle Lamb, in Thy gracious hands I am". Was Jesus gentle, meek and mild?

He may have been a gentle baby but at the age of 12 Jesus demonstrates his assertiveness. He decided to stay in Jerusalem after his bar mitzvah and spend time with the teachers in the temple. It was three days later that his parents found him and said: 'Son why have you treated us this way? Behold your father and I have been anxiously looking for you. He did not reply' 'Oh I am so sorry for upsetting you.' He said to them 'Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be about my Father's business? But they didn't understand what he had said. Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2: 41-52) This was the first of many, many examples of Jesus' assertiveness. And the key to his assertiveness lies in the Cycle of Grace.

When Colonel Sanders left the army he had little money and an old car. So he took the one other thing he had – a chicken recipe – and drove all over the USA to sell his recipe. He went to restaurant after restaurant asking if they would try it, and he asked only for a percentage of the profit they made on it. Again and again he was turned down until, after visiting over 1000 food outlets he finally found one that was willing to give his recipe a go. The outcome I think we all know. I think we have all heard of KFC, Kentucky Fried Chicken that is now sold in almost every country in the world. What's the message here? Is it that you achieve if you really try hard enough and don't give up at the first hurdle? No one had heard of Colonel Sanders before. Now he is famous the world over. Sanders put a lot of work in and in the end he had something to show for it. But the message that we can all be an achiever if we make the effort is not the one I want to focus on.

Colonel Sanders was a 'nobody' until he achieved success. In the high-achieving USA it was only his achievement that made him acceptable as a worthwhile type of person. Achievement of success brought him acceptance. Being accepted he could feel a significant person. He had achieved something that was recognised and now had a personal significance in US society. There is the cycle:

ACHIEVEMENT - ACCEPTANCE - SIGNIFICANCE

But the Cycle of Grace turns this completely upside down. Jesus showed that the grace and love of God does not depend on what we have achieved, or how much we are accepted in society, or how significant we are viewed by others, or we view ourselves to be. If we know that we are loved and accepted for who we are, and we are significant in God's eyes, then that should give us the confidence to go on and achieve things.

ACCEPTANCE – SIGNIFICANCE – ACHIEVEMENT

Matthew's Gospel (Chapter 3 v 17) tells us that Jesus was accepted by His Father. At his baptism a from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased." God confirmed Jesus as his Son.

And the growing relationship between Jesus and his Father is seen through John's Gospel:

John: 14:11 I am the Father and the Father is in me  
John 10:30 I and the Father are one  
John 15:9 As the Father has loved me so I have loved you

Jesus is called:

John 10:13 I am the Son of God  
John 6:51 I am the living bread  
John 7:37 I am the water of life  
John 3: 19 I am the light of the world  
John 6:35 I am the bread of life  
John 10:11 I am the Good Shepherd  
John 11:25 I am the resurrection and the life  
John 14:6 I am the way, the truth and the life  
John 15:1 I am the true vine

To complete the cycle John tells us (13:3) that "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God". His assertiveness in what he was called to do and in the way he went about doing it was founded in this Cycle of Grace. He believed, and he wants us to believe too, that we are accepted by God for who we are now and we can build a relationship with God as the person we are now. Then we can have the assertiveness to do his work and achieve amazing things in his name, for his glory. If you start with God's Grace, the fact that God loved you before you were you, then you (and I) have the foundation for anything in God's name. And we have no excuse not to be assertive in his name.

Jesus didn't shout loudly; he wasn't aggressive. Nor was he submissive. He showed real assertiveness. He was able to set out his own priorities, choosing how he spent his time. He took risks, even revolutionary risks, that brought him into direct conflict with the authorities of his day. He initiated change. He addressed things that concerned him. He was firm in respecting everyone's rights; traditions and customs that he did not believe were fair or made sense, he questioned. Think of the times when he became angry, when he was sad and disappointed, when he openly wept and when he showed his pleasure and warmth. These were the times when he assertively showed his real feelings.

We have ignored something I referred to earlier.

Matthew 5:41 "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles."  
Matthew 5:39 "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."

How can we possibly show assertiveness when we are walking the second mile or turning the other cheek?

In the first century Roman occupying soldiers could commandeer local inhabitants to carry their heavy packs. This practice was hated by the Jews and caused a lot of unrest and so the legal amount of forced labour was imposed for just one mile. The soldier could be punished for demanding more. Roman roads were marked out for every mile so it would be simple to know when you had passed the milepost. Jesus says to go walking for another mile! The Roman soldier is now in trouble. He will be punished if you don't stop walking. You have taken control and he will have to ask you to stop and put down your pack, asking for his pack back. You have gained your dignity by exercising your power to choose your own response and refusing to behave like a victim.

And so why does he say turn the left cheek too? Why does Jesus refer specifically to the right cheek? In Jesus' day a slave master would use the back of his right hand to strike a slave on the right cheek. This was specific as a gesture used by people with power to humiliate someone with less power. Romans would do it to Jews, husbands to wives, parents to children and owners to slaves. The message was 'Remember I am in control over you'. Jesus says if this happens to you offer the left cheek to be hit as well. This time your abuser is in a fix. He has to use his right hand only because the left hand was only used for unclean tasks. He can no longer backhand you and if he hits you he has to use his fist. This gesture was only used between equals. By turning your other cheek you have reclaimed your dignity and communicated that you refuse to be humiliated.

Jesus continues to encourage us to show confidence in doing God's work, confident in the knowledge that we are accepted as we are, significant in God's eyes and called to do his work in our lives. All we have to do to complete the cycle of Grace is to be assertive enough to go out and do it.