

The Case of “Successful” Sam

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Sam’s Office, Thursday 10:30 a.m.

Sam Thompson, a 35 year old sales manager, sat behind his desk lapping up compliments from his boss, Alan Simmons.

“I really appreciate you saying that, Mr. Simmons,” responded Sam.

“Well, you earned the promotion last year,” Alan returned with a smile, “and since then you’ve proved me right, Sam. You’re the best darn sales manager this company’s ever had.”

“I’m just proud to be part of the team here at Simmons Advertising.” Sam was diplomatic, but occasionally transparent when it came to false modesty.

A knock at the door interrupted the love fest and three of Sam’s young employees looked in. Surprised and intimidated to see the big cheese sitting there, one of them quickly said, “Oh...Mr. Simmons. We didn’t know you were in here. We just wanted to know if Sam still wants to have that 10:30 meeting with us.”

“Can you guys wait outside?!” Sam snapped back. “This is really important!”

“It’s all right, Sam” assured Alan in a grandfatherly tone. “Keep up the good work.”

As Alan walked out the door, the three underlings bumped into one another to clear a path. They smiled obsequiously at him; Alan ignored them.

“Have a seat,” said Sam, a bit less confrontationally. Then he was back on the attack. “So the client didn’t like the ad copy you wrote for them. Okay, give it to me straight. Did you screw up, or if this guy just playing games to get us to lower our price?”

Brad, the eldest of the group at age 27, spoke up, though somewhat tentatively. “Well, I’m not sure, sir. The ad’s not the best we’ve ever done, but it’s not *bad* either. Actually,” he nervously chuckled, “I think the copy’s pretty funny.”

Sam was incensed. “What do you mean it’s not the best we’ve ever done? What kind of attitude is that? If it’s not great work, then don’t send it to the client in the first place!”

Anne politely came to Brad’s rescue. “Well, the timetable on this, Sam, was real short—*too* short with all the other projects we’ve been working on. We did the best we could under the circumstances, and really, it’s pretty…” she gulped, “pretty competent work.”

That clearly wouldn’t do. Sam was not about to let them pin this on management. “Look,” he replied pointing at Anne, “don’t talk to me about not having enough time to do the work. If you need more time, then don’t *bolt* out of here at six o’clock. When I had your job, I *never* left at six o’clock.”

He paused to let that ink in. “Okay, where’s the ad anyway?”

Jason was on the spot with it. “It’s right here, sir. Personally, I’m with Brad. I think the humor’s good and the ad’s catchy. I don’t know what’s up with this client.”

Sam looked at the ad for about five seconds, sneered and sighed heavily. “I’ll tell you tell you what’s up with this client,” he replied barely controlling his anger. “This ad is totally stupid. When we brainstormed this thing, I specifically told you not to use the

brand name as a pun. But you did it anyway. The client didn't want that. I didn't want that. But you didn't care. You were so worried about getting home for dinner that you forgot to earn the money that *pays* for your dinner!"

Sam's lecture really got under Brad's skin. Besides that, Brad didn't think Sam had his facts straight. Firmly but respectfully Brad shot back: "Actually, sir, I don't remember anything being said about puns."

"Well maybe you should do a better job of listening next time!" Sam clearly had enough of this insubordination and incompetence. "Go back and do this right" he commanded, tossing the paper to Jason. "I don't care if it takes all night. I want a first-class ad emailed to me by 8:00 tomorrow morning."

Sam and Michelle's House, Thursday, 9:30 p.m.

Michelle stood at the bay window, staring out into the neighborhood. With each passing set of headlights, she grew a little more impatient. She wasn't worried that something had happened to Sam—thirteen-hour workdays had been the norm for years. She was just lonely and a bit frustrated with her workaholic husband. After returning her eyes to the television, she heard a car door close.

"Hi there stranger!" Michelle greeted him with a cheery grin as he walked in the door. "Want some dinner?"

"Already ate," Sam mumbled, managing a sagging smile. "But thanks anyway. I missed the kids again, didn't I?"

"Well it *is* 9:30. Ryan colored this picture for you, though. I told him you'd hang it in your office."

Admiring the multi-colored scribbles, Sam shook his head. This was the third day in a week that he hadn't seen his preschooler.

"You know he's barely seen you at all lately," Michelle reminded him. It was a longstanding conversation, and it elicited the usual silent grimace from Sam. "And little Maggie barely knows who you are anymore."

Sam said nothing. Better that, he figured, than saying something he'd regret. Instead, he peeked in on Maggie and then stepped into Ryan's room. "You're gettin' so big, kiddo," Sam lamented, adjusting his blanket.

"Can I at least fix you a snack?" offered Michelle as Sam came back.

"Thanks, but I am totally beat." He kissed his wife on the top of the head.

"Besides, I've got to catch a plane at 7 a.m. I think I'm just gonna turn in."

The Business Trip, Friday

At 30,000 feet the next day, Sam sat comparing the life he was living with the life he really wanted. A chasm separated those two things. But as usual, thoughts about work soon crowded out his personal reflections. Taking out his PDA, he outlined the day: the meetings, the objectives he'd like to accomplish, his big presentation to the prospective client. Sam was good at his job—*very* good—which is why he was driving a Beemer and moving rapidly up the corporate ladder. So as always, Sam spent the plane trip planning and prepping. He'd be sharp on this trip and he'd be successful.

As the flight attendant leaned over to serve Sam his drink, he caught himself casually looking down her blouse. Something similar happened earlier with the airline reservation agent. Sam looked at other women a lot these days and he wanted to stop. He

rationalized that a lackluster marriage sent him down this dubious path, but deep down, he knew that was no excuse.

Neither was there an excuse for the way he interacted with his employees. When it came to clients, Sam was smooth—gracious, considerate, patient, the model human being. But inside Simmons Advertising, Sam had developed a reputation for being brusque with people, for being condescending, and for belittling their ideas, very much like Mr. Simmons. In fairness, Sam’s ideas were usually better than those of his colleagues, and top management recognized and rewarded that, but Sam was a lousy team player and, increasingly, a heavy-handed boss, prone to steamrolling people to get his own way. Sadly, his persona was not much different with Michelle.

Sam’s mind drifted from one problem to the next: “Wish I was home more ... I miss the kids ... Michelle deserves better ... got to be a better husband ... got to be a better father ... gotta stop looking at other women ... I shouldn’t snap so much at work ... work ... work ... I’ve got to work on my presentation.”

And just like that, Sam’s introspection ended. Work issues again bullied everything else away. Sam grabbed his laptop.

The Worship Service, Sunday, 11:00

Two days later, Sam, put the kids in the church nursery and attended the service with Michelle. Same pew as always.

Then it happened. Their pastor was pretty good, but years of pulpit messages never really clicked with Sam...until today. Vulnerable from his intermittent reflections over the past two days, Sam heard a few things that went directly from God’s Word through

the pastor's mouth to Sam's heart:

“Knowing” and “doing” are surely different things. So many of us Christians who try to be like Jesus understand this. We know what God wants us to do, but so often we still don't do it.

And we're not alone. Among those who have struggled with this “knowing-doing gap” are some of the giants of the Bible. Phillip Yancey notes this in one of his fine books when he asks: “Why did King Solomon show such wisdom in writing the proverbs and then spend the latter part of his life breaking those proverbs?” We, too, could ask similar questions from other parts of Scripture. Why did King David, a man who knew God's law as well as anyone of his day, sleep with Bathsheba anyway? Why did Peter, having recently confessed Jesus as the Christ, later deny three times that he even knew the man? And why did Paul, after planting churches and preaching the Good News of the gospel for years, say late in his ministry that he still couldn't stop himself from doing what is wrong? Paul says in Romans 7: “I don't understand what I do, for what I want to do, I don't do, but what I hate, I do anyway... Oh, what a wretched man am I!”

Sam shifted uncomfortably and lifted his chin slightly, hoping that would keep a welling tear from escaping his eye. But the pastor's next words made that quite impossible:

My friends, we're no different from Paul. No different from Peter. No different from

David or Solomon. We stand in the unfortunate human tradition of being unwilling to always submit to God's will. We know that God wants us to make our spouses a priority, but we don't. We know He wants us to love and serve the people around us at work, but we don't. We know that he wants us to control our thought lives, taking every thought captive to Christ, but we don't. And when we finally get around to reflecting on all this, we, like Paul, feel the overwhelming shame of it all, and cry out: "Oh, what a wretched man am I!"

Sam was never so happy to have an aisle seat near the door. Not wanting Michelle to see his distress, he discreetly slipped out, making eye contact with no one.

Now, minutes later, Sam sits alone in his car, convicted and trying to talk to God: "I don't know what to do, God," he whispers, eyes still watering. "I mean, I *do* know what to do, but I don't know how to *do* it. I mean...forget it."

Broken, Sam has come to a place where he genuinely wants to change. What should he do?