

# I am not I AM

Talk for CRPC Retreat, September 2000  
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Let's begin with prayer: Dear Father, Please guide my words this morning. May what I say be glorifying to You, and edifying to those listening. In Christ's name I ask this. Amen.

I've been asked to talk to you this morning about life's routine and decision making, with an emphasis on de-stressing our lifestyles and ordering our priorities.

The approach that I've taken is probably a bit different from what was expected, but I hope it will be helpful, nonetheless.

I'll begin with some background on the word, stress.

As you all probably know, the word has several different meanings, some quite technical.

For example, in physics, it means, among other things, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary 3<sup>rd</sup> edition*: *An applied force or system of forces that tends to strain or deform a body.*

In linguistics, stress can mean: *The relative force with which a sound or syllable is spoken.*

I don't think either of those are the "stress" I'm supposed to talk about.

Instead, what I'm supposed to talk about is stress as it relates to people.

Even here, there are different meanings.

Stress can mean *hardship, adversity, affliction, difficulty.*

Notice here that the word refers to events or circumstances.

In this sense, it has been around for quite some time. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* first citation under this meaning is from 1303.

Often today, however, when people speak of stress, they are not referring to events or circumstances, but rather to **the effect** that events or circumstances have on them personally.

In that sense, stress means something like this from the *American Heritage Dictionary*: *A mentally or emotionally ... upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences and capable of affecting physical health, usually characterized by increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, muscular tension, irritability, and depression.* Or in my particular case, I'm convinced, elevated cholesterol levels.

This is what we mean when we say things like "I'm suffering from stress", or "He's acting that way because of stress."

I was a bit surprised to learn that using "stress" in this particular way is quite recent: The OED's first citation is from 1942.

It is with this meaning that we're concerned today.

Let me give a quick demonstration to illustrate why this is so. I have here three different objects: a stick, a thick metal rod, and a metal coat hanger. I'm going to apply the same force to each of these.

[did demonstration showing how these 3 objects behaved quite differently when exposed to the same force.]

Notice how the different objects responded differently to the same amount of external force.

The same thing is true for people. Different people respond differently to the same external events.

So, if we're going to talk about de-stressing our lifestyles, we've got to concentrate on **our responses** to other people and events.

I want each of you to think a little about things that tend to cause you stress.

Let's name a few of them — please, 'though, if it is a person, give them a fake name, something like Al, or GW, will do.

[ audience called out various things ]

That's enough for now.

We've heard lots of different things.

But I believe that, at the root, when you strip away all the non-essentials, you find that all of these things reduce to one.

I have the Bible verse that gives the answer on my business card, which no one can see, I'm sure: Deuteronomy 29:29.

Here's how this verse is translated in the New King James Version: *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*

I believe that all of the things we've mentioned, and all of other stress-inducing things we've not mentioned, are able to cause us stress because we either want to know some of God's secret things, or don't want to follow God's revealed things.

This means that if you want to de-stress your life, you must remember this ...

Raise your hand if you just said to yourself, "A kiss is just a kiss".

Raise your hand if you have no clue why anyone would have said that to themselves.

Seriously, here's what we need to remember.

Repeat after me as I hold up signs with the words on it:

**I**

**am not**

**I AM.**

If I truly understand that I am not I AM, then all my stress will go away.

Because if I truly understand that I am not I AM, I will understand that the real IAM is in control of everything.

He's kept the secret things secret, because keeping them secret is what is best.

He's revealed what He's revealed, because that's what is best.

There's a neat card that I was sent for my birthday a few years ago. It provides a nice description of God's will. Here's what it says: God's will is exactly what I would choose **if I knew all the facts.**

Of course, I don't know all the facts, because I am not I AM. God does know all the facts, which means that what He does is always what is best.

For some of you, I could stop right here, and you'd be content; wanting to work out specific applications on your own.

But for others of you, probably for most of you, you'd be a bit miffed— perhaps even stressed— if I stopped without talking about specific applications.

So, let's talk about specific applications.

Actually, I'll talk about three implications, and for each of these, I'll mention three applications.

I'll list all three implications first, and then talk about them in detail.

First, because I am not I AM, I cannot control **differences among people.**

Second, because I am not I AM, I cannot control **designations of priorities.**

Third, because I am not I AM, I cannot control **deviations from plans.**

Let's look at each of these now.

**Because I am not I AM, I cannot control differences among people.**

What does that mean?

First, it means that the Scripture teaches that people are not at all like our society wants them to be.

Egalitarianism— the idea that everyone is really the same— is as anti-Scriptural an idea as you can have.

The Scripture teaches that God has made different people different. He gives different gifts, different abilities, different interests, different personalities.

In our society today, even within the professing church, and even within the professing conservative, reformed church, most people want to deny this—if not in words, then certainly in actions.

As an aside, I think that about the only area in which egalitarianism hasn't completely taken over is sports. Most people, given the choice between having Randy Johnson pitch an important game, or having me pitch it, will choose Randy Johnson, without thinking they're being unfair to me. But even in sports, it appears that egalitarianism is beginning to take root. Some bench-warmers, for instance, seem to think they deserve as much money as super-stars.

No matter what our society thinks, the simple truth is this:

Some people are smarter than others.

Some people are more attractive than others.

Some people are able to teach, and some people are not.

Some people run fast, others do not.

Some people are fit to lead, others are not.

I could go on and on.

If we don't realize this—if we think we can do something, because other people can do it; or if we think others ought to be able to do something, because we're able to do it—then we're probably going to have a whole lot of stress in our lives.

There are several Scripture passages that show this clearly, but we'll only look at one.

If you have your Bible, turn to 1 Corinthians 12.

Verses 4 and 5 say this in the NASB: *{4} Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. {5} And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.*

There are differences, and God is responsible for them.

Let's skip down to verse 12 and continue through verse 21:

*{12} For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. {13} For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. {14} For the body is not one member, but many. {15} If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. {16} And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. {17} If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? {18} But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. {19} And if they were all one member, where would the body be? {20} But now there are many members, but one body. {21} And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."*

See, the Corinthians apparently had a problem with egalitarianism, too. They wanted to be the same, but Paul told them they weren't.

There are three specific applications of this truth to reducing stress that I'll mention this morning.

**First, do not expect others to be like you.**

It is not enough to verbally acknowledge that other people are different. You need to truly understand that they are different, and give up your expectations that they will think and act the way you do.

If you don't give up that expectation, you're almost certain to have stress.

One particular area in which this is easy to see is relationships.

How many times have you gotten upset over something someone else said because you interpret what they said according to what *your* motivation for saying it would've been?

This can be especially common between spouses.

Here's an example.

A husband comes home from work. His wife asks him, "How was work today?" He says, "Fine."

The wife thinks, "He's mad at me,"

She thinks this because if he'd asked her how her day was she would not have just said, "fine", unless she was mad at him. Nope, she would've given him an hour by hour description of all that went on during the day.

But the husband may well not be mad at all. By answering, "fine," all he meant was that work was fine.

Now, maybe this example doesn't apply to you, but I suspect you can think of some that do.

There are plenty of other areas in which it is important to not expect others to be like you, but I don't have time to talk about them.

Well, I will mention one more, and that's teaching.

I'm convinced that one of the main things that distinguishes good teachers from average teachers is the ability to instruct students who aren't like them.

For example, I'm a verbal person. I believe that a word is worth a thousand pictures.

I usually do a pretty good job teaching people who learn well verbally. It is a constant struggle for me to figure out how to teach those who are not verbal learners.

The second and third applications are closely related, so I'll mention them together: **Do not try to be like others. And Use the gifts God has given you to His glory.**

One of the really bad consequences of egalitarianism is that it tends to cause people to think they can do whatever anyone else can do.

Or to use Paul's analogy, it makes feet think they can be eyes, or ears think they can be hands.

If you want to reduce your stress, don't let this happen to you, or if it has already happened, stop it.

Learn what your gifts are, and use them.

Don't try to be someone else, because if you try to be someone else, it won't do you any good, and it won't do anyone else any good either.

To summarize, to help reduce your stress, don't expect others to be like you, don't try to be like others, and use your gifts to God's glory.

Any questions or comments, before I move on?

Let's now consider briefly a second implication: **Because I am not I AM, I cannot control designations of priorities.**

Who is it that establishes what our priorities ought to be?

That's right, it is God.

Priorities are among the revealed things, not the secret things.

Consider, Matthew 6:33: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.*

This tells us what our first priority should be.

When we try to set priorities apart from God's revealed will, we almost certainly are going to be under stress.

So, two applications are these: **Do not set your own priorities apart from Scriptural principles.** And the converse: **Set your priorities according to Scripture principles.**

I don't want to take time this morning to go into any more detail about this, but I will suggest some common ways in which Christians often get their priorities mixed up:

Putting work ahead of your spiritual condition.

Putting others spiritual condition ahead of your family's spiritual condition.

Putting public worship ahead of personal righteousness.

Putting reforming society ahead of reforming yourself.

There are more, of course, but that should be enough to give you something to think about.

There's one more application of the fact that God alone controls priorities that I want to mention: **Do not try to do too much.**

I could easily spend 45 minutes talking about this alone; instead I'll just make two points.

First, one of the ways you can tell that you're doing too much is if you're not getting enough sleep.

Although there is variation among people, the average adult needs about 8 hours of sleep a night. Almost everyone falls within the range of needing somewhere from 6-10 hours of sleep. That is, only a very, very few adults need less than 6 hours, and only a very, very few need more than 10. Most need about 8.

Here's the most important part.

Studies conducted on pilots show that for every hour needed sleep a person loses, that person loses about 1 IQ point.

And the effect is cumulative.

So, for example, let's suppose that you get 2 hours less sleep than you need for 2 weeks.

How many IQ points have you probably lost?

That's 2 times 14 hours of sleep debt, and those of you not suffering from sleep debt, can compute that as 28 IQ points.

*Some* people can afford to loss 28 IQ points, but most people really can't.

You're not doing yourself any good, nor are you doing the Kingdom of God any good, if you're doing so much that you're not sleeping enough to do what you're doing well.

One bit of good news: although the effect of sleep debt is cumulative, it is not permanent. That is, if you make up the sleep debt, you can get the IQ points back.

Now, for the second point.

Please listen to this carefully, because if you don't, you may well misunderstand it.

If you are a believer, and if you are daily seeking to honor God, and if you are consistently repenting from your sins as you recognize them, **then**, I believe that whenever you're asked to do something, if you **can** say no, you **should** say no.

I'll repeat that.

**If** you are a believer, and **if** you are daily seeking to honor God, and **if** you are consistently repenting from your sins as you recognize them, **then**, whenever you're asked to do something, if you **can** say no, you **should** say no.

This may sound radical to many of you, but it isn't really.

If you are daily seeking to honor God, and repenting from your sins, then God will, by His grace, cause you to be unable to say no to those things you ought to do.

How He does this may be different for different people, or for different circumstances, but I'm confident that He'll do it.

Consider this passage from Jeremiah: *Then I said, "I will not make mention of Him, Nor speak anymore in His name." But His word was in my heart like a burning fire Shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not.*

That's chapter 20, verse 9.

Jeremiah was so discouraged that he decided to stop delivering God's word to the people.

That's what he decided, but he was not able to follow through on that decision. God would not let him.

There's no reason to believe the same thing isn't true for us today.

Of course, if you're not striving daily to honor God, and if you're not repenting from your sins, then what I've said doesn't apply.

In fact, your saying no may be another sin from which you've not repented.

We've got one more area to cover, but before we do that, are there any questions?

The third, and final, implication of the fact that I am not I AM that I want to talk about is this: **Because I am not I AM, I cannot control deviations from plans.**

Turn in your Bibles to James, chapter 4, verses 13-15.

*{13} Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." {14} Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. {15} Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we*

*shall live and also do this or that."*

I met the woman who is now my wife during my third year at the University of Virginia; it was her second year.

Not too long after we met, she told me that her favorite Bible verse was James 4:14.

When she quoted the verse to me, my first thought, and my second and third thoughts, too, was something along the lines of, "What a weird woman!"

But as I thought about it more, this changed to "What a wise woman!"

We really don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, and the better we realize this, the less stress we're going to have.

Because you can't control deviations from plans, **don't think everything will go according to your plans or desires.**

Some times things happen that we don't understand.

Let me give you an historical example.

In May of 1945, the allied forces finally succeeded in defeating Nazi Germany. They had come a very long way since the very dark days of 5 years earlier, when Great Britain stood alone against a Germany that seemed poised to conquer all of Europe.

Of all the people who had helped prevent German victory then, and lead the allied to victories later, no one played a greater role than Winston Churchill.

Yet, a few months after the allied victory over Germany, Winston Churchill was voted out of office by the English people. This was certainly something that didn't make much sense.

Shortly after his election defeat, Churchill's wife, Clementine, suggested to him that the defeat might be a blessing in disguise. Sir Winston replied, "At the moment it seems quite effectively disguised."

Though few of us will ever be in the position of losing an election after saving western civilization from tyranny, all of us have had, and will continue to have, times when God's blessings seem quite effectively disguised.

In those times, we should rest comfortably in the knowledge that God is in control, and we're not.

Our plans will not always come to fruition, but God's will.

Now, some of you might be tempted to think that this knowledge implies that we don't need to, or perhaps even ought not to, make plans.

To counter such false thinking, the second application I'll mention is this: **don't fail to make plans.**

Notice verse 15 of the passage we read earlier, *{15} Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that."*

"We shall live and also do this or that" suggests making plans.

The problem isn't with plans; the problem comes when we don't recognize that our plans are subject to God's will.

Now, how much you ought to plan is largely a function of your personality and gifts.

I plan nearly everything, and keep my planner with me almost everywhere I go.

Some of you probably should do the same thing.

Others of you certainly should not.

This is something you have to work out for yourself.

Whatever you decide to do, remember this final application: **do what is right no matter what happens around you.**

Turn to Daniel 3, verses 14-18: *{14} Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? {15} "Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you will not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?" {16} Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. {17} "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. {18} "But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."*

I'm fairly sure that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego didn't have written in their planners for this day, "Get thrown into furnace of blazing fire."

But, when their plans for the day were changed, they continued to do what was right.

And they did what was right without knowing what the consequences would be.

They knew that God was **able** to rescue them, but they did not know if he **would** rescue them, yet they still did what was right. We need to be just like them.

If you're like me, then some of your stress probably comes from failing to do what is right, especially when things don't work out like you planned.

Before I wrap up, are there any questions or comments?

To conclude, let me summarize what we've talked about.

Deuteronomy 29:29 provides the key to de-stressing our lives.

This key is to recognize that I am not I AM.

Because I am not I AM, I cannot control differences among people. Thus, I must not expect others to be like me. I must not try to be like others. And I must use the gifts God has given me to His glory.

Because I am not I AM, I cannot control designations of priorities. Therefore, I must not set my own priorities apart from Scriptural principles. Instead, I must base my priorities on Scriptural principles. And, I must not try to do too much.

Finally, because I am not I AM, I cannot control deviations from plans. Thus, I must not think everything will go according to my plans or desires. But I must not fail to make plans. And I must do what is right no matter what happens around me.

If you truly understand and apply these things, then I think you will greatly reduce the stress in your life.

Certainly, as I've begun to understand and apply these things, I've reduced my stress.

Thanks for listening this morning.