

Preaching on Sand

Matthew 7:21-29 NRS "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' ²³ Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell-- and great was its fall!"

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

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When I was growing up, my family moved a lot. We never felt like we could hire someone to do that, so we always moved ourselves. Late one night, dog tired from driving the rent truck and unloading the worldly goods for a family of five for several hours, I heard my Dad say, "Ah there's the box I've been looking for!" What box is that, Dad? "The last box. I thought I'd never find it!" Similarly, today we may have found the scripture that we've been looking for – the last few verses of the Sermon on the Mount and therefore, the last sermon in this series.

The final two verses in this text say that the crowds were astonished at the teaching of Jesus. They were used to hearing the scribes and other religious authorities quoting each other, quoting details from the law, or appealing to tradition. Jesus didn't quote sources, didn't list references. There were no footnotes. Instead he spoke without relying on other sources for authority for what he taught. He blatantly ignored some literal meanings of the law, harvesting grain and healing people on the Sabbath, touching people who were unclean, associating with sinners, reprobates, and enemies. He not only broke the details of the law, he stood up with his bare face hanging out and had the nerve to say, "The law says do such and such, but I say . . ." Then he would reach deeper than belief and beyond obedience to motivation.

LORD, LORD So much of the sermon is highly challenging and the teaching on calling Jesus Lord, Lord is certainly in that category. John Wesley said that "One may be orthodox in every point, and may not only espouse right opinions, but zealously defend them against all opposers," may think correctly concerning every doctrine, "and yet 'tis possible that one may have no religion at all . . . That one may be almost as orthodox as the devil . . . and may all the while be as great a stranger as the devil to the religion of the heart."¹ The expression "almost as orthodox as the devil" is an unusual thought. James wrote in chapter two, verse 19, that even the demons believe and shudder. If you believe correctly, James says, you are right there even with the devil.

Jesus puts no warranty on calling on his name. He said, "Not everyone who says Lord, Lord." The name isn't a magical formula, an incantation to summon God or ward off bad spirits. This is also a warning against false piousness, against talking the holy talk but not walking on the way of trust and obedience. There's great temptation to turn preaching into performance. There's a great temptation to change worship into mass manipulation through stimulation of the senses. This teaching on Lord, Lord speaks to many of our temptations. We can tell ourselves that attendance at worship is the same thing as worshipping. We can tell ourselves that believing the right things is faith, but never put our trust where our mouth is. We can substitute being a watchdog for being a work dog. We can focus on evaluating the deeds of others instead of elevating our own actions.

While there are some who cry Lord, Lord to fill their own pockets or to enjoy power over the flock that hangs on their every word, this isn't just about those who strut before the pews, or thump our Bibles, or address the crowd from a pulpit. We are all a royal priesthood. (1 Peter 2:9) We are all accountable and

responsible. In Matthew 16:27, Jesus said, "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done." People are judged not on their religiousness but on what they've done - or left undone.

Paul makes a statement that is parallel to this "Lord, Lord" passage. Paul wrote, if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (1Co 13:2 NRS) But, when love fills our heart full, then we will eagerly and very naturally fulfill the law. Not only must we move from ignorance to belief, but then we must move from belief to trust, from trust to obedience, and finally, from obedience to love. You could say that we need to move beyond Lord, Lord, to love, love.

SAND AND ROCK The final teaching in these three chapters of sermon involves a simple story. It's a story we might have learned in Sunday School when we were four or five years old. The wise man built his house upon a rock. The foolish man built his house upon the sand. It is so obvious, so simple, but did you ever notice how often people ignore even the simple literal understanding of this text? People build houses on hillsides that are plagued by mudslides, houses that are on the banks of rivers that will surely flood sooner or later, and on the Gulf Coast where hurricanes come ashore every summer. If we so often ignore the plain common sense of the expression, how will we ever understand the analogy, the metaphor involved here about our spiritual life?

The person who built on the sand isn't evil. But he takes the easy route, is a bit lazy, and thoughtless in the sense of not giving the project much thought. He may be more concerned with style than substance. Building on a firm foundation requires long-term thinking. In building terms, this means piers and beams rather than flat slabs, putting in French drains for the heavy rains that will come sooner or later, It means turning down the dessert I want so badly for the long-term goal of better health. There's a story of a wealthy family that hired a contractor to build the finest house that he knew how to build. No expense was spared and the builder was proud of the results - until the rich family said, "The house is yours, but you must live in it." Then the builder began to see all of the shortcuts he took. In this life, we have to live in the life we build. Don't build your life on surface values, but dig deep and build on eternal values.

The strength of a house becomes apparent when there's a storm. If our actions, our life, our house, is not built on the right attitude or foundation, then all will crumble when things get tough. "The house of greed washes away when the rains of economic crisis come. The house of power collapses when the political climate changes. The house of pragmatic living-for-the-moment slips off the foundation when life opens up with a mystery like birth, deep suffering, or death."²

We can slide right over the opening phrase in this teaching, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man." Jesus doesn't say, "Everyone who hears me and believes me." Once more Jesus is calling for action. In the same passage where James talks about how the demons believe in God, he asks, "Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?" If you are building your life of faith only on belief, then your house is on sand.

CONCLUSION The Sermon on the Mount is not an easy text to accept and take seriously. The ideals are so high, the ethics so lofty, that we naturally try to find some wiggle room. Some have seen the teachings of these three chapters as a distant goal that gives us a direction in which to head, even if we expect ourselves to make very little progress in that direction. We can end up pointing toward Jesus, admiring him greatly, and imitating him seldom. But, the Sermon on the Mount isn't about believing the right things nearly so much as it is about being led to do right things as a result of our belief. The Sermon on the Mount is a summons to get up off our haunches and begin the journey of faith, to stride down the path that the early Christians called The Way, not an invitation to sit still and admire the beauty of the path that we aren't walking!

Some suggest that the whole point of the sermon is to remind us how impossible it is to be truly pious and pure, so that we are driven to despair, driven to our knees, and driven to humility. While humility is always right and proper for every one of us, God doesn't browbeat us into humility, but instead, we react with humility when we realize how gracious and generous God has been toward us.

Others have suggested that the teachings only apply to special select people that are set apart and set on pedestals and given titles such as monk, nun, priest, or saint. That's a poor excuse for not living the way

of life that Christ taught. "I thought you were calling somebody else" wasn't an excuse that my mother accepted and it's rather ignorant of us to presume God will fall for it.

One more misinterpretation of the Sermon on the Mount is that the teachings only apply during a particular period during the end times. Twelve hundred billboards declared that the world ended yesterday. If the Sermon on the Mount only applies to the end times, and if the world ended yesterday, then this excuse for not obeying these teachings no longer applies and we'd better get cracking at it!

Rather than thinking up excuses for why the Sermon on the Mount doesn't apply to us, we need to embrace this sermon. The teachings of the Sermon on the Mount describe how to be fully human, to live abundantly, fully alive, at our full potential, not just what it means to be religious. Hearing the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount without acting on them is a shame and a waste "because his words convey practical wisdom, sound advice for being human. The very work Jesus that means to get done . . . is the work of making possible a safe, strong, flourishing human community: a community 'founded on rock,' and thus well prepared to face the inevitable wind and rain" and storms of life.³

We are all people with a ministry. We're a royal priesthood. Our very lives are the sermons that each of us proclaim to the world around us. When we say nothing that would let anyone else know that we are Christians, then the sermon that is our life is thin and weak - and we are preaching on sand. When we cry Lord, Lord, but live "self, self," the sermon that is our life is full of contradictions - and we are preaching on sand. But when we cry Lord, Lord, and live out the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, when what we say and do are in mutual agreement, the sermon that is our life is built on solid rock. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) When we open our ears to hear the truth, when we seek to live a life like Jesus lived, when we live out our lives in The Way where Jesus leads us, then we are preaching on rock. Amen.

1Peter 2:9 NRS But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

James 2:18-20 NRS But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe-- and shudder. ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?

^{NRS} **Acts 9:1-2** Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

¹ Jason Byassee, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 428

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 84-85

³ Matthew Myer Boulton, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 432