

Trust and Obey

..First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

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Matthew 7:13-29 (NRSV)

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. [14] For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

[15] "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. [16] You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? [17] In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. [18] A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus you will know them by their fruits.

[21] "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.

PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH

Last week as some of you remember I preached a sermon on worry ... or more specifically why we shouldn't worry. Jesus told us not to do it.

Jesus told us that if God took care of the birds of the air and the flowers in the field then God can be trusted to take care of us. Besides that when we're talking about tomorrow it's really out of our hands. We can't add even an hour to our life by being anxious about things. Better that we do what we can for God's kingdom today and worry about tomorrow when it comes.

And then I had one of those weeks.

We had given permission for Daily Meal to serve the homeless in our fellowship hall this week since they were having plumbing problems. And then our air conditioning for the fellowship hall broke.

The guys from the air conditioning company just kept finding problem after problem and spent two days tracing down electrical problems.

I'm afraid to think about what kind of bill we might receive.

And the week just went downhill from there.

From time to time I thought about my sermon from the past Sunday. I said to myself,

“Frank, you can talk a good game, but can you really put the words of Jesus into practice? Jesus tells you not to worry, but this week is really putting you to the test. Can you really practice what you preach?”

Practicing what we preach is often quite a challenge for all of us. It's one thing to say the words of Jesus. It's quite another to actually put them into practice.

But, according to our lesson for today obeying the commands of Jesus forms the foundation of our faith.

THE NARROW ROAD

That's not easy, and Jesus warned his disciples about this time and time again. He said that the road to true faith was narrow and steep. Following him would mean taking up a cross. Following Jesus would not mean getting all the good stuff but self denial.

Once again I turn to Eugene Peterson's dynamic translation of our lesson in the Message. He translates verses 13 and 14 of our passage this way,

“Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with sure fire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God—is vigorous and requires total attention.”

Popular preachers in the modern world sometimes seem to be preaching “sure fire, easygoing formulas for a successful life.” But, life is anything but sure fire and easygoing ... especially if you are serious about obeying the commands of Jesus. There are no shortcuts. There is no superhighway to successful and faithful living.

The Bible teaches us that God's way is always a winding road in the wilderness. God's way is a struggle. One preacher with tongue in cheek entitled his sermon on this passage, “God has a plan for your life ... and it's difficult.”

We might not want to hear that message, but it's the truth. Choosing to obey Christ, seeking the kingdom first is a difficult daily decision that we have to make.

And if someone preaches an easygoing, surefire way to spiritual success ... you might want to watch out. Jesus said these religious leaders are false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing. In

Peterson's translation these false preachers "smile a lot, dripping with practiced sincerity. Chances are they are out to rip you off in some way or other. Don't be impressed with charisma; look for character."

This is a disturbing passage because it makes all of us take a hard look at ourselves. Are our actions in line with our faith? Do we practice what we preach? Do we try to obey the commands of Christ or do we just try to get our own way?

According to Jesus right beliefs are not enough. Right actions form the basis, the foundation for true faith.

OBEDIENCE SAVES LIVES

The commentator, William Barclay gave an example of the importance of obedience. He talked about a man who was punished for not obeying a command in the Royal Navy. Some thought the punishment was too severe so the local newspaper solicited opinions from their readers.

One reader, a man who had served in the Royal Navy for many years said that the punishment was not too severe, that it was necessary. He said that in the military people are required to obey orders immediately and without question for their own safety, and he cited an experience that showed why this was so important.

He was in a launch that was towing a much heavier vessel by means of a steel cable. Suddenly in the midst of the wind and the spray there came a single, insistent command from the officer in charge, "Down!"

The crew instantaneously obeyed and flung themselves down. Just at that moment the towing cable snapped, and the broken parts whipped about like a "maddened steel snake." If any of the men had not obeyed instantly, if they had stopped to argue or ask why, they would have been killed. But, because they obeyed without question, they were all saved.

Obedience saves lives in times of danger. And what better commander could a person have than Jesus? I'm reminded of that old gospel song, "trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey."

We live in a world that wants to endlessly debate the merits of this or that position. We might talk a lot about Jesus. But, we are very slow to do anything. Jesus tells us that this is like rearranging the deck furniture on the Titanic. There are more important things to do. Faith requires obedience, and obedience requires faith.

The foundation of our life should not be what we want. The foundation of our life should be what Jesus tells us to do. Just as obedience is required in the armed forces so obedience is required for those who would be disciples of Jesus.

There's a father's day ad on the radio that talks about how when you asked dear old dad why something had to be done he often replied, "Because I said so. That's why." We've all heard that line and rolled our eyes.

But, though this answer might not be good enough when it comes to parenting, I would contend that this answer is good enough when we talking about our Savior.

We might not feel like trusting. We might want to worry and fret and fume and make our own plans. But, that's not going to get us through the time of testing. When the rain is falling, the wind is blowing, and the water is rising that's when we find out the strength of our faith. It's then that we find out if our house will stand up to the challenge.

A FAITH THAT STANDS THE TEST

Benjamin Reeves recalled something that happened in south Florida several years ago. He wrote,

"It was the classic American dream: two happy children, barking dogs, tree-lined streets and a feeling of community. Then, in one nightmarish instant, Hurricane Andrew came to town. The dream lay in ruins. Most of the 2,000 homes in the fashionable development were demolished.

One distraught home owner pointed a finger, not at Hurricane Andrew, but at inferior materials and cheap, careless, shoddy construction. He complained, '

You can see it now, sheets of plywood with nails that missed the trusses, complete sections of roof trusses lying on the ground. They should never come loose if they are attached properly, but they weren't and we didn't know it, because it didn't show.....until the storm came."

We know about that don't we?

Several years ago hurricane Charlie ripped through Central Florida. Most of the houses in our subdivision were built by a certain contractor who attached shingles to the roof with long staples instead of nails.

When the winds and rain came, those stapled shingles were no match for the test. Shingles flew off the roof and covered our neighborhood. For days after the storm I literally shoveled up my neighbor's shingles and added them to my growing trash pile.

I would have never known the difference between a roof with staples and a roof with nails. But, after the storm, the difference was evident.

In our lesson for today Jesus tells us that the difference between the one who just uses his name to curry favor and make money and the one who sincerely tries to obey him may not be readily apparent. But, when the storm comes, then the difference becomes apparent.

The one who has made a habit of obeying Jesus will survive the storm. His home will still be standing. The one whose faith is only words deep will be blown away.

THE INSPECTION PROCESS

Building a firm foundation for a home takes time. Every step is critical if the home is to stand up to the elements.

That's why we have inspectors who come out at various points during the home building process and make sure that the right thing is being done. Without the discipline of a regulatory process, builders would take the easy way out, and home buyers would be purchasing homes that were less than they should be.

In the same way, building a life takes time as well. As Jesus put it, it's not a quick and easy process. It's a struggle. But, the struggle is worth it.

And at various points in our life's construction process it's necessary to have an inspection process. It's necessary to honestly ask ourselves, "Am I really obeying the commands of Christ or am I just fooling myself?"

Now this is where it gets tricky.

There are many people out there who claim to be following Christ and yet a careful analysis of their beliefs and actions makes it abundantly clear that they have distorted the Christian faith in some significant way.

In Sunday school this morning we talked about the so called prosperity preachers who are so popular. They have huge followings because they tell people what they want to hear.

God wants you rich. God wants to take away your problems. All you have to do is think positive and good things will come your way. The god they preach about might be described as a good therapist or a good investment instead of a good Savior.

That all sounds great until the rains come and the winds blow. How can you explain the disasters that inevitably come to everyone? A faith based upon financial success and personal health is a faith based upon a sandy foundation. When the storms come, that house tumbles down.

A HOUSE OF CARDS OR A HOUSE OF FAITH?

But, let's not get overly involved with the shortcomings of the TV preachers. They're too easy a target. And all of us are too smug and too simplistic when it comes to following the commands of Christ. All of us focus in too much on how someone else isn't following Christ and not enough on how we are falling short.

Don't misunderstand. God is gracious and saves us despite our shortcomings. But, God also loves us enough to lead us away from a way of life that is self-defeating toward an abundant life that will stand up to the storms of life.

Have you ever met someone who seemed to go from disaster to disaster? At first you feel sorry for them and try to help. But, over time you come to understand that they have a habit of making one bad decision after another. The reason for this is that they are always trying to take shortcuts. They are always trying to beat the "system" or make it the easy way.

You finally realize that your "help" is just enabling them to be more irresponsible. The only way you can really help them is to let them hit rock bottom and start a rebuilding process in their life. You can see this most dramatically in people who are addicted to gambling, alcohol or are constantly getting into trouble with the law.

All of us are like this to a certain extent. All of us have areas of our life that are not what they should be. Instead of obeying Christ we obey our own desires. Instead of seeking God's will we make our own plans and say that this is what God wants.

Sometimes it takes a disaster for us to see what has really happened. Only when our house falls can we see that we were building on a foundation of sand.

I remember reading C.S. Lewis' account of the death of his wife in his book, "A Grief Observed". Lewis was a college professor who was an atheist. But, through the witness of a fellow professor he became a Christian. He is perhaps the greatest intellectual defender of the Christian faith in the twentieth century.

But, when Lewis lost his wife, it provoked a crisis of faith. Lewis said that what he thought was a house of brick was indeed a house of cards. His faith tumbled down under the strain of the grief.

You'll be happy to know that his faith was rebuilt in a much stronger way, but if this can happen to a great theologian like Lewis, it certainly can happen to us as well. None of us have as strong faith as we would like to have and sometimes the weakness of our faith is exposed by the storms of life.

So, what can we do? How can we make sure that our foundation is strong? How can we make sure that we are building a house of faith instead of a house of cards?

BUILDING ON DOING THE RIGHT THING

There's a home repair specialist on TV who has a motto, "Make it right." In other words, don't take shortcuts when you're building a home. Spend the extra money to get quality materials. You won't regret it in the long run.

I think that the same applies when it comes to building a house of faith. Make it right. Spend the time and effort necessary to build a proper foundation. I am amazed that we spend so much time

and effort on what we eat and what we wear and where we live and so little time on what we believe. When we do that over time our life becomes shallow, and we lose our moral compass.

I would like to believe that it's just a matter of studying the Bible more. Make sure you make it for Sunday school and church each Sunday, and you're house will have a sound foundation.

Certainly that wouldn't hurt.

But, this passage warns us that an outwardly religious person can be spiritually shallow. That was the problem with the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They were very public in their proclamation of the faith. But, their actions often harmed the poor and vulnerable in society.

Their theology was right, but their ethics were wrong.

And given the choice between right theology and right ethics Jesus choose right ethics every time. Jesus said that it is more important for us to do the right thing than to say the right thing. Later in Matthew's gospel (21:28-32) Jesus told a story about two sons who asked by their father to go work in the vineyard.

One son said, "Sorry dad. I'm too busy today."

The second son seemed more anxious to please. He replied,

"Sure, I'll go." But, then he stayed inside to play video games.

In the meantime the first son thought about his rash decision not to help his father and decided to go out into the vineyard to work.

Jesus asked an obvious question of the religious leaders, "Which one of these sons did the will of the father?" The religious leaders replied that the first son did the right thing. And then Jesus hit them with the hard truth. He said in effect,

"You talk a good game, but you don't do what is right. Even the worst sinners will go into heaven before you."

Doing the right thing, obeying Jesus is never easy.

COURAGE

First, it requires courage. Quite often the biblical commands to care for the stranger and the downtrodden and even to love our enemies can get us into trouble. It got Jesus into trouble, and it will get us into trouble.

Society wants scapegoats. Society wants to say that this group or that group is responsible for our problems. Jesus tells us that the foundation for a strong, spiritual life begins when we quit

blaming others and start looking at ourselves first. Instead of trying to remove the speck in our neighbor's eye we need to remove the log in our own eye! (Matthew 7:5)

People don't want to hear that. They don't want to think that part of the problem begins with their own actions. But, it's true.

A firm spiritual foundation is built when we have the courage to point the finger of responsibility at ourselves instead of others. That's a hard thing to do. That's a narrow path to follow. But, that's where we must begin.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Second, obeying Jesus requires that we do the hard work of Christian ethics. Jesus said that a good guideline is the so called golden rule. We should treat others like we ourselves would like to be treated. (Matthew 7:12) According to Jesus this is a good summary of the law and the prophets.

But, this is only a summary. How do we make specific decisions? In Bible study this past week someone rightly pointed out that many of our modern problems were not even conceived of in Jesus' time. How can we follow Jesus when we only have general guidelines?

I would say that we have to be respectful of others and very careful when we get into areas that are not covered by what Jesus said or what is found in the Bible. I have seen some very cruel and un-Christian things done because someone has said that the Bible or Jesus plainly teaches that we should do "so and so" when the Bible did no such thing. We should allow room for disagreement.

But, more than just being a bit less judgmental, we should also do our homework. Christian ethics requires that we apply what the Bible might have to say about a problem and learn all that we can about what the world can teach us about a problem.

What are the facts about this problem? Where are the areas of agreement? Where are the areas of disagreement? This requires us to diligently study. Christianity is not a faith for the lazy. We are continually building on a foundation that requires hard work.

And only after this hard study can we begin to say to ourselves, "I believe that obedience to Christ requires me to do thus and so."

THE CROSS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

One of the reasons that the voice of Christianity has been distorted or muted in our country is that we have failed to do the hard work of Christian ethics.

Instead of struggling to determine what God would have us do, we have simply labeled others as being the problem. Those right wing conservatives are the problem. Those liberals are the problem. Those evangelicals are the problem. Those terrorists are the problem.

Jesus tells us that we don't have any control over those other people. But, we do have control over what we do. And in order to be a faithful follower, we need to begin laying a firm foundation. Today is a good day to start obeying the commands of Christ. We will not regret it when the storms of life hit.

There is a connection between the foundation laid by Christ and what we are to do today. Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him they needed to deny themselves, take up a cross and follow him. (Matthew 16:24)

In other words there is always a cost when it comes to following Jesus. And that cost is denying what we want for the sake of doing what God in Christ wants. That is a narrow and difficult way, but in the end it is the way that leads to eternal life.

Today as we talk about body broken and blood shed during communion, I want you to think about what God in Christ is calling you to do.

In what way are you being called to deny yourself? In what area of your life is Jesus calling you to obedience and faith? The words of the hymn have it right. "Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey."

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)