

“Do As You’re Told!”

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Text: Matthew 7:21-29

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As of next month I will have been your pastor for six years. Now I figure that’s about 300 sermons – give or take a handful. Since I normally preach about 15 minutes, that’s 75 hours of sermons. That’s like listening to me talk non-stop for three days and nights – can you imagine? I wonder how many of those 75 hours Dale Lackey was awake.

After listening restlessly to a long and tedious sermon, a six year old boy asked his father what the preacher did the rest of the week. “Oh, he’s a very busy man,” the father replied. “He takes care of church business, visits the sick, ministers to the poor . . . and then he has to have time to rest up. Talking in public isn’t an easy job you know.” The boy quickly responded, “Well, listening ain’t easy, either.”

Jesus had something to say about talking and listening. Our scripture lesson picks up Matthew’s story of Jesus at the end of chapter seven. For three chapters, Matthew relates all that Jesus has been teaching in His Sermon on the Mount. Then Matthew tells us that Jesus wraps up His sermon by telling the crowd: Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 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. The wise man was a prudent builder who built his house on solid rock so that it would stand against the sudden floodwaters produced by the spring rains. The foolish man built his house on the pleasant sandy soil and when the floodwaters swirled around its base, the house collapsed.

Friends, this parable is not about good and bad construction practices in the life of a Christian, although one could certainly address that topic using other scriptures. This parable is not about the foundation of our faith, even though we hear elsewhere in scripture that Christ Jesus is our chief cornerstone. It is not even about facing the storms of life, although a strong faith foundation will help us do just that. No, this parable is about wise and foolish choices. Very simply, Jesus makes the comparison between those who hear His words and in wisdom, choose to act on those words, and those who hear the words of Jesus and out of foolishness or stupidity refuse to act upon those words.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has just told the crowd to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to remain faithful in marriage, to walk the way of love, to be a light to the world, the salt of the earth. Now they are to take those words and make them part of their lives.

When Jesus instructs us to turn the other cheek when struck on one cheek, to forgive others, to love our enemies, that all sounds difficult, heroic, even impossible. Yet Jesus ends His sermon by claiming that to obey Him, in these demands – to walk in His way – to walk the talk – is to be truly wise. We have to practice what we preach. We have to put into action the words of Jesus. Perhaps that’s how we determine the effectiveness of a sermon – does the sermon not only present the words of Jesus – the gospel message – but does it call us to put those words into action? And then do we proceed to act on those words? Putting words into action is difficult for most of us, especially when that action demands we change the way we operate.

How many of us, when we hear constantly that we should eat better, or get more exercise, or lose weight – how many of us do something about it? Well, some of us are better at it than others. Although too often we make a change only when the pleasure or the comfort of the old behavior is outweighed by the pain or the consequences of continuing that behavior.

We hear, but do we act? What about when we were kids – did we do what we were told? I read an article this past week by a woman who teaches parenting seminars – she addressed the question of why should children do as they’re told.

In our grandparents’ generation, this question would never have been asked. Way back then. It was taken for granted that a parent was entitled to expect compliance to a reasonable request and that a child did as asked simply because a parent asked them to. This generation of parents (and children) are not so easily satisfied with, “because I said so.” They expect – not unreasonably – a rational and carefully thought through explanation. . . .

Today when parents think about compliance, often the first reason that they come up with are safety reasons. . . . So “for our child’s safety” is a valid reason to teach our children to do as they are told. But it is by no means the only one.

Reason Two – It saves a lot of parental time and energy. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if they did what we asked them to the first time? Of even without being asked? How many times, from six months to six years, do you think you will have asked your children to let you dress them or to go and get dressed? How many times from six to sixteen do you imagine you will be saying “Go and do your homework”? Wouldn’t it be great if our children did as they were told? Think of the time and energy we would save.

Reason Three – Children need to tolerate the ordinary frustrations of life. In order for our children to be compliant, they have to tolerate the frustration of doing something they would rather not do. . . . By becoming obedient to simple parental requests, they are not only on the path to becoming self-disciplined, they are also on the pathway to becoming emotionally mature. It is the mark of an emotionally mature person that they can make themselves do the things that they would rather not do but know are necessary.

After I read that article, I got to thinking about the parallel between Christ and us. Perhaps Christ wants us to do what He says for our own spiritual safety – didn’t He say: “Judge not, that you be not judged.” “Beware of false prophets.” “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Perhaps Jesus was just looking out for our eternal safety.

What about the second reason – that doing what a parent says saves a lot of time and energy? Well, I don’t know about God’s time and energy, but doing what Christ says would no doubt save us from agonizing over making poor choices, or guilt over causing others pain, or regret that we didn’t help when we could have.

And what about the third reason that children should do what they’re told – because they need to tolerate the ordinary frustrations of life and then develop into mature adults? Doesn’t that fit for us with the words of Christ? If we hear and act upon the words of Jesus, our actions help us develop spiritual discipline – being a doer of the word allows us to do those things which we might rather not do but which we know are necessary and faithful and right. Psychologists tell us that if we really want to know someone – I mean really know someone – we need to look beyond what they say and observe what they do. Jesus says if we want to be wise – really wise – we must go beyond what we hear from Him and do what He tells us to do. The emphasis becomes not “What Would Jesus Do” but what did Jesus say I must do?

Apparently there were and are followers of Jesus who had heard Jesus’ words over and over again, but they refused to make those words the rule of life. As a result, their reputation as faithful followers is built on nothing more than shifting sand. Jesus even says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” On the other hand, there are humble Christians who can claim no special gifts but who listen intently to Jesus’ words and strive to live by them. They are the wise ones.

So friends, the choice is ours. There is the way of life and the way to death. There is the way to salvation and the way to disaster and ruin – the way of the wise and the way of the foolish. We are wise when we practice what we hear preached. Someone said, “If some people preached what they practiced, it would have to be censored.” The time for us – today – this morning is time to change that. Someone also said, “Every Christian occupies some kind of a pulpit and preaches some kind of a sermon everyday.” What are we practicing? And what are we preaching?

Do we really want to act on Jesus’ words? Then let’s do what Jesus tells us. Don’t worry about your life – what you will eat, what you will drink, what you will wear. For God knows you need these things – seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be given to you. Do you want to be a doer of Jesus’ words? Then just do what Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Do you want to be a doer of the word? Then do the two commandments Jesus gave us – love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Do we want to act on Jesus’ word? Then let’s not judge our Christian brothers and sisters. Jesus said, “Judge not, lest you be

judged.” Do you want to be wise? Do what Jesus tells us to do. Reach out – share the good news with someone. Invite someone to church. Go visit someone. Hammer nails at a Home for Humanity house. Give some food to the food bank. Pray for your pastors. Pray for each other. Study the scriptures. Sing in the choir. Help with the youth group and children’s ministry and Vacation Bible School. Serve on a community board. Sing praise to God. Use your gifts. Trust God. Give your tithes and offerings. We must hear what Jesus is calling us to do and do what Jesus is calling us to do. Jesus doesn’t ask us, “Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?” What he’s asking is: “Will you obey me now? Will you obey me now?”

Lord, we know we are prone to give second rate obedience instead of whole-hearted discipleship. Too often we’re a little lazy when it comes to studying and learning what followers of Jesus Christ should know and practice in their lives. Help us hear – and empower us to do. Amen.