

From the Inside Out
Matthew 7:13-14, 21-29
First Presbyterian Church
October 17, 2021

Gospel Reading

¹³“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. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow, and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

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. ²²On 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?’ ²³Then 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. ²⁵The 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. ²⁶And 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. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” ²⁸Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Sermon

At the upper end of Sixth Street... just up the street from here, there is a house with some very impressive Halloween decorations. One of which is a tall, purple, inflatable, goblin that my three-year-old granddaughter, Harper, appropriately named “Scary Guy.” We never miss a chance to ride by and see Scary Guy. Now, Christians may disagree over what constitutes the scariest passage in the Bible, but most would agree that Jesus’s final words in the Sermon on the Mount rank near the top. Because at the end of his instruction... and for us, just in time for Halloween... we hear Jesus say: Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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 mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

Just let that sink in for a moment. These are not, mind you, the words of some fulminating, Bible-thumping, big-tent evangelist... but those of Jesus himself... who says that some folks (maybe some of us) THINK they are good with God... THINK that they’re on Jesus’ team... and are absolutely sure Jesus knows them because they have believed all the right things... and have done all the right things in Jesus’ name... and then they come to find out that none of it is true.

So, I really don't mean to be trite... only to get your attention. Here at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus becomes sort of a "scary guy." Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

I'll go ahead and tell you – this is going to be one of those three-point sermons so let's get to it. **Point One:** It's all about walking our talk... or better yet, walking Jesus' talk. Before his first class on "greater righteousness" is finished, Jesus warns his listeners that we must not just listen to his words and then forget them... or listen and say what lovely ideas they are... we must put Jesus' words into action... we must hear AND do.¹

Let's just remember what some of those words were. You are the salt of the earth... you are the light of the world. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at another with lust has already committed adultery." Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... do not judge, so that you may not be judged... in everything do unto others as you would have them do unto you.... the gate is narrow, and the road is hard that leads to life – enter through the narrow gate. After teaching all this and much more, Jesus says it's not only about hearing, it's about DOING.

Which leads to Point Two: It's all about doing the Father's will... and when it comes to doing the Father's will, the Sermon on the Mount is our "primary source." It's our "go to" text. You see, the truth is there was no lack of "doing" among the religious leaders of Jesus' day.... Remember the scribes and the Pharisees were hyper-vigilant about giving alms and offering prayers and fasting regularly. So, the issue is not that they didn't try hard enough – or that they didn't DO enough. The issue is that these dedicated religious leaders didn't have Jesus understanding of the Father's will. It turns out that sometimes we clergy get it all wrong.

And that's unfortunate because THIS is the very heart of the matter... this is the core teaching of the Sermon – that there is a "greater righteousness" expected of the followers of Jesus... a righteousness that exceeds that of the others... and that this greater righteousness – this "deeper obedience" – comes from the inside out.² Jesus wants his people to live from the inside out.

We all know how early on most children obey rules and behave themselves because they fear being punished. Yet, our hope as parents is they will outgrow that external motivation and begin to internalize good behavior... that they would begin to live from the inside out. The Apostle Paul understood this... he wrote to the Corinthians: So, if anyone is in Christ; there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!³

¹ Thomas G. Long, Westminster Bible Companion (WJK, 1997), p. 84.

² Bonnie Bowman Thurston, in an article on the Sermon on the Mount titled "The Freedom of Obedience," published by the Center for Christian Ethics of Baylor University, 2008, p. 19.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17

And what Jesus is teaching us is that his followers are new creations whose hearts have been transformed. The scribes and Pharisees were very busy, yet they focused on external behaviors... religious acts that could be seen and heard and yes, praised. In other words, on the outside they looked very holy and pious, while on the inside they were a mess. Doing the Father's will requires a changed heart... it comes from the inside out.

And finally, Point Three: It's all about being known. One of the scariest parts of this scary passage is recorded in verse 23 when Jesus says, "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?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you...'"

Throughout most of my life, I have totally misread this last verse. I've always thought Jesus said, "Depart from me, because *you* never knew *me*." But that's not what Jesus says, is it? What Jesus says is, "*I* never knew *you*." And that's a very different message.

There is a great scene in C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, in which young Edmund is describing his experiences with the great lion and Christ figure, Aslan. Edmund's cousin, Eustace (who has never met Aslan), asks him, "But who is Aslan? Do you know him?" To which Edmund responds, "Well—he knows me. . . He is the great Lion, the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea, who saved me and saved Narnia." Did Edmund know Aslan? Of course, he did. But he also knew that even more important was that Aslan knew HIM... that Aslan had loved him and had given himself for him on the Stone Table, while he was still a traitor. He knew Aslan, yes; but only because Aslan first knew him. So, it is with us and Christ. Do we know him? Of course, we do. But entry into the kingdom of heaven is not ultimately a question of whether we know him (as important as that is), but of whether he knows us. Does he know *you*? On the last day – whenever that is – are you the kind of person Jesus is going to meet as a faithful friend? I ask because I at least imagine there are going to be people like that. People whom Jesus is going to look at and say, "Hello, John. It's good to finally meet you face to face. I've always treasured our conversations – and how you shared your joys, your struggles, your questions with me. I know you went through a lot in your life... and a lot for my sake. I know you did your best to be faithful with the gifts I gave you... and you weren't ashamed of me. I want you to know I'm not ashamed of you either. Well done, good and faithful servant. Welcome home."

Well, the Lord ends his sermon with a simple image - two houses. In Jesus' metaphorical world, building a house is like building a life. The two builders represent people... their houses represent the lives they construct. For all we know, they could be identical houses – both undergo the same troubles: rain, flood, and wind. Apparently, all who follow Jesus should expect rains and floods and wind. But there are two things that distinguish the houses – one builder is wise, while the other is foolish. The wise builder constructs on a foundation of rock, the foolish one upon sand. The house founded upon rock will stand strong through the rain and flood and wind... the house founded upon sand will collapse in on itself. Jesus invites us to examine which builder we are... and what kind of life are we building. And he gives us three criteria by which we can know.

First, are we just hearing what Jesus says... or are we DOING what Jesus says? Are we walking Jesus' talk? Second, where does our "doing" (our obedience) come from? Does it come from fear of punishment... or just habit? Are we just going through the motions? Or does it flow from the inside out... from a "Jesus-changed heart" into a "Jesus-transformed" life? And third, on that last day (when we appear before him) will he know us? Not will we be perfect – we won't! Not will he forgive us – he will! Not even do we know Jesus – we do! But will he know us?

Some Christians live in terror of the last day – to them, Jesus really is a "scary guy." Not me. I don't think we have to be afraid of the final day, because for those known by Jesus, the final day won't be some huge disruption. It'll simply be a heightened continuation of the relationship we already enjoy with him now, by faith. So, I don't think we need to fear the last day, but I do think we should be preparing for it. We're all builders... we're all constructing our life. And today Jesus tells how to do that wisely. After all, he was a carpenter!

Charge

As we complete this series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, I want to leave you with two quotes. First, from Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said: Most people are willing to take the Sermon on the Mount as a flag to sail under, but few will use it as a rudder by which to steer. And then, Martin Luther said that the Sermon on the Mount was a "counsel of despair," meaning it was a list of instructions that no one could follow. So, if "doing Jesus' words" is as Holmes says, HARD... and if doing Jesus' words, as Luther says, is IMPOSSIBLE... then why would Jesus' teach them? Is he demanding of us that which he knows we are incapable of, just to make us feel bad about ourselves? I don't think so... because as Amy-Jill Levine tells us: Jewish tradition does not dwell on how broken, how sinful, how bad we are. Instead, it teaches that we are created in the image and likeness of God. And I believe that Jesus, in this teaching... is painting a picture of what God's image and likeness looks like in a real-life like yours and mine. The Sermon on the Mount doesn't tell us how horrible we are but assures us that we are wondrous creatures with unlimited potential to live into the kingdom of heaven. The Sermon on the Mount is not a counsel of despair, it's more like a "pep talk" in which Jesus is trying to inspire us to be wise builders of this life we have been given.