

How then should we live?

In Action – Matthew 7:21-29

Sunday, 20th September 2015

Introduction

Most Wednesday evenings between 6pm and 7pm I meet with nine other blokes for a game of 5-a-side football. After the game I come home feeling exhausted and say nothing to my wife because most weeks I've lost again. However, there are rare moments when I'm on the winning team. On those occasions I come home in a very different mood often armed with a very elaborate story of how brilliant I am at football and how wonderfully well I played. But this tells Ruth nothing about my **real** football skills - which these days are diminishing minute by minute.

You see I love to be a self-professed footballer, and I can "talk" a great game but that tells you nothing about my actual footballing ability. If you couldn't physically see I'm nearly 57 and pretty decrepit I could probably talk you in to believing I play professionally for a premiership team and I belong in the top flight. But there's a difference between 'saying' and 'doing' – I can say I am good at football and (but for my appearance and age) you might even believe I play in the premiership. However, to live this out I've actually got to be doing it - playing professionally and belonging in the premiership! Well in a similar way not everyone who talks about heaven belongs to God's kingdom. Jesus is more concerned about our 'walk' than our 'talk'. He wants us to 'do' right, not just 'say' the right words.

Today we finish our sermon series "How then should we live?" based on Jesus' Sermon-on-the-mount. And our passage today provides a brilliant conclusion and confronts us with a stark choice. Do I choose to commit my life to Jesus (really commit through the way I actually live) or do I choose to go my own way. Our reading challenges us with the question. Are we really walking the talk or are we just listening and talking with no real commitment? Are we putting our faith into action? Are we responding to Jesus' call and living out our life the way he wants us to?

Ruth and I recently visited Switzerland. At the top of a mountain we discovered a cross. Here's a photo of me whilst casually placing a hand on the cross – I guess I'm trying to look cool, admire the view and with my hand on the cross kind of say... Yea, this is okay – the analogy here is one of 'take it or leave it commitment'. Now contrast this with a photo of Ruth. She's literally clinging to the cross, she's embracing it, she's totally committed to what it means and she's even doing it with a smile on her face.

So let's turn to our reading and view it in three sections.

1. Speaking in action
2. Hearing in action
3. Living in Action

1. Speaking in Action

In verses 21-23 Jesus says: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

Note how at the beginning of v21 Jesus says “Not everyone who “says”” and then in verse 22 “Many will “say”” – Jesus is concerned about those people who talk a good game but do little else! He’s exposing those people who sounded religious (in other words they said all the right things) but had no personal relationship with Him.

In v22 notice Jesus says ‘On “that day”’ (the day of judgement), it’s not words that will matter. Our acceptance of him as Saviour and therefore our obedience to him, our living out of faithful action as a natural, willing response to our relationship with Jesus – that’s what will matter. Many people think if they’re “good” people and say religious things, they’ll be rewarded with eternal life. In reality, faith in Christ is what will count at the day of judgement.

This is not, of course, to teach that the way of salvation, or the way to enter the kingdom of heaven, is by good works of obedience. Let’s not forget that the whole of the New Testament offers salvation only by the sheer grace of God through faith. But, what Jesus is stressing throughout this passage is that those who truly hear the gospel and profess faith will obey him, expressing their faith in their works. So if we really do believe, and recognise what Jesus has done for us through the cross and honestly accept and receive the amazing grace God freely offers (this undeserved favour) then we will want to express our response by growing in a relationship with Jesus, a growing obedience to live the way he wants us to and an out-pouring of genuine good works that bring glory to Him and not to us.

Look again at v21-23. A person may affirm Jesus’ Lordship. They may do amazing deeds identical to those of Jesus and his disciples. Namely prophesying, driving out demons and performing miracles but Jesus says they will never spend eternity with God if they are not living the life of a disciple as articulated by Jesus. On that day – the day of Judgement, Jesus will not recognize them as his own. Jesus’ words here are very powerful and get to the heart of His message. To be a follower of Jesus means that behaviours and actions - the manner in which we live out our daily lives - are the things, the pieces, the products of the inner life of our faith. More to the point, mere words and simple, “performance” of deeds – those things only done to impress the watching audience will not affect one’s eternal destiny. Being religious won’t help either. Our actions in obeying God show Him more love, honour, and praise than any empty words we might say to try to appear good.

Jesus wants us to live the life of a disciple converting our words into obedient action for the glory of God. And so to our second point.

2. Hearing in action

In verses 24-27 Jesus closes his Sermon on the Mount with the story of two people and the houses they have chosen to build. The image of the building to describe a life is particularly powerful. One person hears Jesus' words and acts on them, putting them into practice. The other hears Jesus' words and doesn't act on them. Two people, two responses to Jesus' message. The first person is like a house that's been built on a rock. Its foundation is strong and secure and can withstand any attack. The second is like a house built on the sand. Its foundation is weak and unstable and will eventually be destroyed by the storm.

This final story summarizes the entire Sermon on the Mount. The message is clear: discipleship occurs in the everyday practices (in other words the "Actions" of Jesus' followers). Jesus' words here balance the misunderstanding of Paul in today's Christian world that can be distorted into a gospel of grace without ethical demand. Jesus is not suggesting a new law replaces the old; rather, love for and devotion to God must be accompanied by a life that honours God. Or to put it another way, becoming a follower of Jesus is to decide to become a member of his society and is marked by a willingness to live one's life according to the values and beliefs of that society.

In becoming God's people Jesus invites us to an encounter with God and a different way of living life. This life provides strength in the present to withstand the storms through to an eternity with God, to and for whom we have lived a life of devotion.

Look at v 24: Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. To reiterate - the house Jesus talks about here represents our lives and it will withstand the storms of life only if we 'put into practice' what is right instead of just 'hearing and talking' about it. What we 'do' cannot be separated from what we 'believe'.

To build "on the rock" is more than just a hearing, it's about being a responding disciple, not a false, superficial one. Practicing obedience becomes the solid foundation to weather the storms of life. By contrast like a house of cards, the fool's life crumbles. Of course most people don't deliberately seek to build on a false or inferior foundation; instead, they just don't think about their life's purpose. Part of our responsibility as believers is to help others stop and think about where their lives are headed and to point out the consequences of ignoring Christ's message.

Jesus wants us to live the life of a disciple converting our hearing into obedient action for the glory of God. And so to our third and final point:

3. Living in Action

As we think about this entire Sermon on the Mount let's remember the person who preached it is "Jesus Christ". He is fully human and fully God – God in human flesh. Look at what it says in verses 28 to 29: When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

The teachers of the law (the religious scholars) often cited traditions and quoted authorities to support their arguments and interpretations. But Jesus spoke with a new authority – his own. He didn't need to quote anyone because he was and is the original Word. He is the one who in V21 of our reading can confidently call God "my Father". He is the one who in V.22 can tell us what will stand in the day of Judgement. He is the rock...and any 'house' of someone's life built on Him will stand. Any house built on anything else will crash in ruins. We can either build on Him and His teaching, which we will find is as solid as rock; or else we can build on any other religion or philosophy in the world, and we will find that it's sand, and in the last day it will spell ruin.

But how as Christians we can justify this exclusivism, which seems too many to be so arrogant. This isn't trying to say Christianity is better than everything else. I work for the Church of England and believe me sometimes it is so sloppy. Sometimes what we see as Christianity doesn't compare well with the character of what is best in other faiths. But it is not "***the religion***" of Christianity that disciples are concerned to justify. Religion, if created as a human attempt to become acceptable to God by some form of belief and practice, is doomed to fail and it won't save us. What Jesus offers is totally different. It begins not from our reaching up, but from God's reaching down. It is not religion at all, but a revelation and a rescue. Jesus is the revelation of what God is like; never has there been such a true likeness. The King has come to bring in the kingdom. He is no less than God's rescue for men and women lost in self-centredness and sin. In Jesus God has provided for sinners (you and me) a way back to himself. 'But what about those who have never heard the gospel? Well – let us leave those who have never heard to God who came to rescue those who had never heard. They can safely be entrusted to his justice and his love. The Judge of all the earth will do right. Jesus - the one who loved them and us enough to come and die for them (and us) will not wrong them. Of that we can be sure.

But we have a responsibility in this when at the end of Matthew's gospel we hear the good news of Jesus and His kingdom as He commands us in Chapter 28:19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

And also at the end of Jesus sermon on the mount we are reminded of the of the other thing we can do if we really care. We can make sure we personally are wholeheartedly committed to Christ. Until we are sure where we stand ourselves, we'll be no good at helping others. And so - the question is not only 'Have we entered in?' and 'Is there real change?' but 'How do we build?'

We must build on the Rock. We must proclaim, hear ***and obey***. Not just proclaim and hear, but also obey. So what's that look like in action? How then should we live? That's Jesus' challenge and call throughout the whole of his sermon on the mount.

What will thrill the heart of God and help others recognise the gospel is true is...

- practical generous obedience that transforms our characters
- that affects our influence
- that shows itself in practical righteousness
- that touches our devotional life
- that radically alters our ambitions
- that transforms our relationships
- and...marks us out as totally wholehearted servants of the King.

That is what Jesus is looking for. That is the mark of the disciples he calls.

Conclusion

So what sort of 'houses' are we building today, in our own lives and here at Christ Church? Are we actually 'doing' Jesus' words, or only speaking them, hearing them, and thinking how fine they are?

Do we just stand, pose and pretend to look good with the cross of Christ or do we embrace Jesus, cling to his cross and cheerfully respond to his love, grace and mercy – living out our lives in loving obedience as his committed disciples?

But let's also be realistic – as fallen human beings can we honestly live a life that is dedicated to and pleasing to God, free from hypocrisy, full of love, grace, wisdom and discernment. As we think about the Sermon on the Mount, our reaction may be "I can't do this!" But God says, "You're right, but my grace is sufficient for you." He calls us to rely totally on him. In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

This incredible life God calls us to can sometimes seem like an enormous burden, yet Jesus says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Why? Because we serve the God of grace and mercy who enables his people to be what he has called them to be. What he asks from us is our loyalty, our lives, our submission to his lordship, and as we go together on this journey remember we are **"work in progress"** and we will get things wrong but as we open ourselves up more and more to His Lordship, we will find incredible excitement and adventure, and rest and peace in Him. Let's also not beat ourselves up too much. In Colossians 1:22 Paul says: He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

No-one is good enough to save him or herself. If we want to live eternally with Christ, we must depend totally on God's grace. So cling to that cross, embrace Jesus and be his disciple in action.