

Matthew 7:21-29 (NRSV)

"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. 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; go away from me, you evildoers.'

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 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. 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 rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!"

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

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Verna Dozier, in her book, "The Dream of God" tells us that from the very beginning, the early church faced the problem of what to do with the teachings of Jesus. The church knew that it should follow his teachings but they seemed so hard. So, Verna tells us, the church decided that rather than following Jesus, they would worship him instead.

Nowhere is the problem of following Jesus more pronounced than in the Sermon on the Mount. Occupying three central chapters of Matthew's Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount gives the core of Jesus' ethical teachings in a clear, distinct and indigestible lump.

Let me give you some examples. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder’ ... but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment...” “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Yikes! “Love your enemies. Pray for those that persecute you.” And as Pastor Wendy told us last week, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear.”

So, what was the church to do with this? The Great Commission – “Go and make disciples” was bad enough. The Great Instructions, the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, were even worse. Clearly no one was expected to actually *live* this way. No neat clothes, no electronic gadgets, the economy would fall apart. What would we wear? How would we microwave? How could we text each other? So the church said to itself, “Wait, I have an idea.” Clearly a fellow as righteous and as scrupulous as this Jesus must have given us these instructions not as directions on how we should live, but rather as an indictment of how sinful we are, since we **can’t** live the way he wants us to this side of heaven. So, anyone this ethically advanced must be the Son of God whom we should worship and adore as someone entirely less sinful and more holy than we are. Incidentally, this saves us from the problem of actually having to live according to what he tells us. In fact this saves us from the problem of having to do anything at all other than showing up at church on Sunday, reciting, singing and getting a bunch of germs passing the peace. Whew, that was close.

Well, today’s Gospel reading arrives saying, “Wait just a minute!” Today’s Gospel comes at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount and in it Jesus has something to say to the people who have decided to worship rather than follow him. He’s already said a few things about worship – don’t pray like the hypocrites who

stand on street corners so they can be seen by others, don't heap up empty prayers, don't make a big deal of fasting. Instead do all these things secretly – God already knows what you want and need. Now in this reading, Jesus takes on the question of beautiful worship versus beatitude living.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, lord’ will enter the kingdom, but only the one who does the will of my Father.” On the day when we are called to account for ourselves and for how we lived, we will say, ‘Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we cast out demons? Didn't we preach good sermons? Didn't we pray beautifully, chant melodiously, sing gloriously?’ And Jesus will say, “Oh, really? Sorry, I must have missed that.” Now, the New Revised Standard Version, the NRSV that we use says, “go away from me, you evildoers” but the New Living Translation we use in the 11:15 service is a little more correct – “get away from me, you who break God's laws.” Even closer would be “ministers who do not follow God's law.”

You see, at depth, Jesus doesn't offer the Sermon on the Mount simply to show us how far we are from the Kingdom. He offers us the Sermon on the Mount to bring us closer to the Kingdom. What does he say? Those who hear my words and *do them* build their house on rock. Now think about what this means for a second. The way we usually think about this is to say, those who really believe in Jesus build their house on rock and that may be true but that's not what Jesus is saying. He is saying that those who put his words into practice, those who serve the least of these, those who do as they want done to them, these are doing God's law, and these I will recognize. Those who worship extravagantly but do not have love, these I will not recognize. They build their houses on sand.

Now, does this mean that we should not worship, that we shouldn't praise God? Not at all. Remember from a couple weeks

ago. Why do we worship? Because God is worthy of worship. Six days a week God is good to us, and on Sundays we give thanks. Not in order to get God to notice us. Not in order to get on his good side. We worship because God is worthy of worship.

Does worship fulfill the law? Well, worship is consistent with the law. Remember the 10 commandments – four of them have to do with how we behave toward God. The *first* four, yes. You shall have no other gods before me, no graven images, do not take the name of the Lord in vain, remember the Sabbath. But the *next six*, a majority of the commandments, deal with how we treat our neighbor. Honor your parents, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal or lie or covet. So a right relationship with God is part of the law, but even more is a right relationship with other people.

Does this mean worship is unimportant? Not at all. But ask yourself the obvious question – how much of our religious obligation, as we understand it, is tied up in worship, and how much is tied up in how we conduct our daily lives? Put that way, the answer is obvious – most of the burden, most of the joy of an ethical life, a life that is Christ-centered and Spirit-filled is lived out outside these doors rather than inside them. But how much of our life space outside this building is taken up in discerning what God wants us to do and then doing it? It is wonderful that we can gather here to worship and be fed, but if we don't take it outside, it's like training and training for a marathon that you never intend to run.

Now, I'll be honest – this reading scared me a little. A lot of my life space is devoted to worship, to planning and preparing and executing worship that is reverent and meaningful. And I know that many of you work hard at helping to plan and prepare and execute our worship and I'm very grateful. But we need to remember that our main business is not worship – our main

business is living lives that bear witness to Christ in the world, lives of service and love.

This reading is directed not only at each of us, but also at all of us, as a congregation. How much of our congregational life is devoted to worship? To preparing bulletins, practicing hymns, writing sermons. Part of the reason that I'm excited about our trying to become a discipling congregation is that it puts the emphasis back where it belongs – on living lives as a community of believers that are worthy of our repentance, living lives as a community that are fruitful and that are worthy of Christ's sacrifice.

Remember, in the tradition of Israel, the law is not a curse, not an impossible burden. The law is God's good gift. It tells us how to live in right relation to God and to one another. To be sure the new law of the Sermon on the Mount represents a higher righteousness, because it asks us not just to reform our behavior but also to reform our thoughts and our emotions. This is the law that is written on our hearts as Jeremiah says.

We worship not to avoid the teachings of Jesus but rather because we are grateful for them, and for all of God's good gifts to us. So, the next time you think about being a religious person, take it outside.

Amen.