

## *Trust and Obey*

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 31, 2003

### Sermon Background Study

#### *Scripture Passage*

Matthew 7:13-14, 24-29 (NRSV)

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

<sup>24</sup>“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

<sup>28</sup>Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, <sup>29</sup>for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

*This is the last in a five-week series on the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we consider Jesus' teachings on obedience.*

#### *Clearing the deck*

This week's study is fraught with peril for me, so please read carefully. Jesus' teachings about obedience of God's law, God's instruction, are easily misunderstood by Christians!

Gallup and other groups often poll Americans about their religious beliefs. One consistent finding is that well over half of all Americans, a lot of whom have to be Christian<sup>1</sup>, believe that if we do enough good things in our lifetime we can earn our way into heaven. But this is not the Christian proclamation! We have to be very clear about this before we start talking about obedience. Here goes . . . there is nothing that you or I or anyone can do that will make God love us more or make God love us less. We can't pile up enough good deeds to earn our way into God's presence nor can we commit enough horrible acts to place ourselves outside God's redeeming love. God desires that we be in a loving relationship with him and we are put into this right relationship with God through Jesus' death on the cross, when he took upon himself the sins of us all. All God asks of us is that we trust him, that we place our faith in Jesus Christ and what he did for us. . . Whew! There are many ways to say what I just said; but that is basically it. It is by God's grace<sup>2</sup>, his amazing grace, that we are made right with him.

When the apostle Paul crisscrossed the eastern Mediterranean proclaiming this message of God's grace, the reaction of many went something like this – “Wow! You mean that I'm made right with God by faith, not by what I do . . . alright! I've got faith, now let's go party!!” You may think I'm

#### Faith and Trust

Sometimes the simplest words, like “faith,” can be turned into church words that we recite all the time, but never really think about. Ask yourself – what do we mean when we say we have faith in God or faith in Jesus? If you have trouble coming up with a simple answer, try using the word “trust.” When we have faith in Jesus, it means that we trust him – completely. Even when we say we believe in Jesus, it is a statement about our faith, our trust. In the New Testament, the word we translate “believe” is simply the verb form of the noun “faith”!

There are many questions about God and life that I cannot answer. But I trust God. I trust that he will always be good and just and wise. I trust that he will always love me. I trust that I can tell him anything – that, in truth, he knows me better than I know myself.

<sup>1</sup>About 76% of Americans identify themselves as Christian. This is falling about one point each year!

<sup>2</sup>To use a traditional definition, “grace” is “unmerited favor.” If you've earned or deserve it – it isn't grace! 81% of Americans thinks the Bible says: “God helps those who help themselves.” It doesn't. The whole point of grace is that God helps those who can't help themselves – which is all humankind!

exaggerating, but I'm not. Some people even suggested to Paul that since grace overcomes sin, then we should sin more so that there can be more grace (Romans 6:1)! Hardly. But of course, obedience does matter. Not because we can earn our way into God's presence. Not because we like the comfort of having some rules to follow. Obedience matters because we desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ and trust that God knows, better than we, a way of life that reflects the kingdom of God. Like all apprentices, we desire to be like our master and teacher. We desire to be Christ-like. It is God who shows us how. It is God who shows us the way to a joyful life. It is God who shows us the way to a life that can be the light to the world. Obedience is the path to that life.

#### A Curriculum for Christlikeness

Several years ago, Dallas Willard published *The Divine Conspiracy*. In his book (which I recommend), Dr. Willard lays out a practical approach to discipleship. Much of his book is devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. Surely, he writes, Jesus wouldn't urge his disciples to hear Jesus' words and act on them unless they could actually do so. In other words, surely the sermon is not an impossible ideal.

Dr. Willard suggests that we ought to have two primary objectives as we strive to be authentic disciples, those who hear and do. First, we must learn "to dearly love and constantly delight in the heavenly Father made real to earth in Jesus . . . certain that there is no 'catch'." Second, we have to remove our automatic responses against the kingdom of God – as in "what do you mean, love my enemies. That's impossible!"

We will find delight in the Lord when we learn to let our minds and hearts dwell upon his love and goodness. Robert is going to preach a sermon series in September on "Finding Joy." We find joy in God. A psalmist wrote: "I keep the Lord always before me . . . In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:8-11).

The irony here is that we do not become authentic and obedient disciples of Jesus Christ by first striving to be obedient! Invariably, humans reduce such an effort to an exercise in rule-keeping. The path of discipleship – the narrow gate, the hard road, the house built on rock – begins with learning to love God and neighbor and discovering that habits of goodness begin to replace habits of selfishness. In this, we are comforted by the knowledge that we are not on our own, but that God's Spirit dwells in each of us, helping us to be whole and complete, to be the very shining and brilliant image of God.

#### *The two ways*

In v. 13 & 14 of today's passage from Matthew, Jesus calls upon an old Jewish tradition that contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked; i.e., those who follow God's instructions with those who do not. Jesus knows that the path of discipleship is not always an easy one. Taking up a cross never is. He knows that the world will be calling his disciples away from their master. We shouldn't read these verses as they too often are – as some ratio of the "saved" (the few) to the "unsaved" (the many). Jesus is not talking about doctrinal correctness, he is talking about obedience, an obedience that flows out of our trust in God. Remember, the entire Sermon on the Mount is like a "training session" for his disciples. Jesus reminds them that without obedience, his teachings become no more than an impossible ideal.

#### *Foundations of rock and sand*

After setting out the "two ways" in v. 13 & 14, Jesus then talks about those who will try to pull his disciples off the path of righteousness – those wolves in sheep's clothing. He goes on to remind them that empty words, even words like "Lord, Lord" don't cut it. It is about the doing. We are to understand God's will and do it . . . *just do it!*

Finally, in closing, Jesus tells a parable about a wise man and a fool. Jesus and his disciples live in an arid region that didn't get a lot of rain. There were many large *wadis* (when I lived in Phoenix we called them washes) that would be dry most of the time, but would become rivers of fast-flowing water when torrential rains came. As compared with some of Jesus' parables, there is nothing unclear or ambiguous about this one. The wise man is the one who hears Jesus' words and "acts on them." He has built his house in the *wadi* on a foundation of rock. His house stands when the storms come. The fool is the man who hears Jesus' words and "does not act on them." He has built a house in a *wadi* and placed it on a foundation of sand. Little wonder that the fool is washed away in the first storm! On what foundation will we build?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 4:23 – 7:28 The entire Sermon on the Mount. Please read it in one sitting. We'll do this once a week during this series!</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 7:12-28 The extended passage from Matthew on obedience and those who would lead us down the wrong path.</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 6:20-49 Jesus' "Great Sermon" from Luke; see esp. v. 46-49 on obedience.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 John 2:1-11 John writes about obedience to Jesus</p>
<p>Day 5 James 1 James, Jesus' half-brother, writes about practical discipleship – love as action and obedience to the word.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### *Bible Academy registration is now available on-line!*

Bible Academy classes begin the week of September 15. You can pick up information about the classes and a registration form at the information counter in the Narthex. This will also be mailed out in the newsletter you'll receive in early September.

To register and for info go to [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org) or [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org)

### Scott Engle's 9:30 class is meeting in Wesley Hall (the "old sanctuary")!!

We've begun a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class is led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies, and is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is plenty of time for questions and answers.

**Please join us next week!**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Obedience . . . this is a tough subject for many Christians. Begin by making a list of your own thoughts about obedience. What words come to mind? Do you find yourself wanting to start making a list of rules? Many people want to make the Bible into just that . . . but it is not a book of rules or a book of right behavior. Knowing which moral choices God would wish us to make is often not straightforward. Even the Sermon on the Mount is not a list of do's and don'ts. Instead, Jesus points us toward what Dallas Willard calls the "habits of goodness." Jesus is training us in the curriculum of Christlikeness. What do you think Willard means by habits of goodness? What are some examples of such habits? How do we develop such habits?
2. Some people don't begin making rule lists when they hear the word "obedience," instead they want to talk about they must be obedient to be saved. The simple answer is no . . . but the larger truth is that the people of God strive to be obedient. Not because they "have to" but because they wish to! Salvation is both instantaneous and a process – a process of learning to be obedient, to walk in God's way, to develop the mind of Christ. What do you think this process is like? Where can we turn for help?