

James 1:22-25

Matthew 7:13-29

July 25, 2021

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT BE DOERS OF THE WORD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Living near the coast, we certainly know the challenges of building on the shifting sands on barrier islands. According to one construction company's website, coastal homes need deeply anchored pile foundations. They cannot be built on traditional inland foundations, including crawlspaces, basements, and slabs. The company does not recommend constructing coastal buildings on solid wall foundations because a storm surge and flood could destroy all or part of the foundation wall.¹ We also know about the large scale beach nourishment projects that are used to maintain natural barriers and protect coastal homes. However, the replenishment of sand doesn't do anything about the wind and the rain and the storm surges. According to the Topsail Beach website article about beach nourishment, it "can protect coastal structures for as long as the sand lasts, but after a certain period of time, the beach will have to be renourished."²

Because of where we live, Jesus' parable about building on rock and building on sand is one image we can really relate to. The crowds who were listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount understood what he was talking about. They knew he wasn't literally talking about how to build houses. And we also know he wasn't talking about best practices for coastal construction. Jesus was teaching about best practices for life in God's kingdom.

It is often said that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is his ministry's "inaugural address." In his "speech," Jesus lays out a broad vision of the kingdom of God. He then proceeds to teach the people (and us) how to live as God's people in God's kingdom, right here on earth. All good speeches have some common elements and typically follow this outline: tell the people what you're going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you told them. That's what Jesus does in his Sermon on the Mount. He talks about what it means for us to be children of God as his followers. Then he tells us how to be children of God as his followers. Then he summarizes what he has taught us about being children of God as his followers.

An article about "5 Great Ways to End a Speech" identifies different techniques, at least three of which Jesus uses as he concludes his sermon. Technique #1 is "Direct Call to Action" — "A speech or presentation without a clear call to action is a speech or presentation that probably isn't worth giving." Well, Jesus certainly gives us a direct call to action — "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock." Actually, throughout his sermon, Jesus gives us many direct calls to action. He sums it all up very nicely by telling us not only to hear his words, but to do his words. Technique #2 is a "(Very) Short Story or Anecdote" —

“Show, don’t tell. Use a brief story or anecdote to drive a message.” So, Jesus tells about two men who built two houses. All of the circumstances of the two men are the same, except for the foundations of the houses. This leads to Technique #4, “Contrast” — “This one is even more effective when tied directly to the closing call to action.” To use the example in the article and apply it to Jesus’ parable, “We can have ROCK, or we can have SAND. The choice is ours, and is based entirely on the decision we each individually make today. ROCK or SAND. I know I’m choosing ROCK.”³

*On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.*

Building our Christian lives on Christ, the solid Rock, involves more than just hearing Jesus’ words. As one writer has put it so well, “It is not enough for us to hear these words of Jesus; to study them; to be inspired by them; to have hopes/aspirations/dreams based on them. We must ACT on them; practice them; live them in our everyday lives.” We already know that’s true, because we say things such as “Practice what you preach” and “Walk the talk.”

Mark Twain is often quoted, “Actions speak louder than words but not nearly as often.” But Jesus’ “direct call to action” at the end of his Sermon on the Mount challenges us, calls us, expects us to let our actions speak louder than our words, **all the time**. We are called to live in a way that is inconsistent with our words and our beliefs and, especially, with Jesus’ words. The scriptures are full of this teaching:

* 1 John 4:20-21: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

* James 1:22: “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves . . . But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.”

* Matthew 5:16: “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

* Ephesians 2:8-10: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

* James 2:14-17: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

In the comic strip “Peanuts,” Charles Schulz often expressed theological and biblical ideas through the exploits of Charlie Brown and the gang. One of my favorite Pea-

nuts cartoons shows poor Snoopy shivering in the cold snow. At a distance, Charlie Brown says to Linus (both of whom are warm in their winter coats and hats), “Snoopy looks kind of cold, doesn’t he?” To which Linus replies, “I’ll say he does. Maybe we’d better go over, and comfort him.” Linus looks at shivering Snoopy and says, “Be of good cheer, Snoopy . . .” and Charlie Brown adds, “Yes, be of good cheer . . .” As they walk off, warm in their winter coats and hats, Snoopy is still shivering in the snow, with a big question mark over his head. If Charlie Brown and Linus heard Jesus’ words and the teachings of the New Testament, they certainly didn’t do them, did they?

One of the foundational principles of how we govern ourselves in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), dating back to 1788, is “Truth and Goodness.” In other words, what we say we believe about God and Jesus Christ must necessarily be shown in what we do and how we live. This is how that foundational principle is expressed in our church’s *Book of Order* (F-3.0104): “That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior’s rule, ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ . . . We are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.”

Or, to put it in terms of Jesus’ closing parable, when we separate the connection between faith and practice, between truth and duty, between what we say we believe and what we actually do, we may as well build our house on the shifting sands. But, when we hear Jesus’ words — all of his words, all of his teachings, in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout the gospels — and act on Jesus’ words — every day in every way, then we will build our house on the solid rock.

One writer has said, “To be a follower of Jesus means that behaviors and actions — the manner in which we live out our daily lives — are the artifacts of the inner life of faith. Discipleship occurs in the everyday practices of Jesus’ followers. 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. One becomes part of the people of God.”⁴

On Thursday, January 1, 1981, Nancy and I were sitting in the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans. The Georgia Bulldogs were playing the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame. Although we had pretty good seats around the 40 yard line, I found myself looking at the Jumbotron screen hanging from the ceiling instead of watching the action on the field. The players were so far away it was easier to see what was happening by looking at the screen. At one point, I leaned over to Nancy and said, “We drove all the way to New Orleans from Atlanta to watch the Sugar Bowl on TV!” The Louisiana Superdome is HUGE!

Shortly after the Superdome opened in August 1975, my brother David, who lives in New Orleans, sort of “tongue-in-cheek” wondered about the safety of the massive building. He told me, “I can just imagine 70,000 fans jumping up and down, stomping their feet, and hollering, and all of a sudden, the entire Superdome slowly sinks into the ground and disappears.”

The vice-president of a New Orleans engineering firm was quoted, “A lot of people said you could not build skyscrapers in New Orleans because there’s no bedrock.” The foundation soil in New Orleans has been described as “having basically the consistency of a frozen daiquiri.” An LSU researcher described the challenge of building tall, big buildings on “the unstable, gelatinous problem.” The Superdome is supported on 2,100 pre-stressed concrete pilings that were driven 165 feet down, below the layers of soft clays and sand.⁵

Friends, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us what are the values and beliefs of God’s kingdom. In his life and death, Jesus shows us what are the values and beliefs of God’s kingdom. In his ministry and message, Jesus calls us to demonstrate every day the values and beliefs of God’s kingdom. We have to drill down deep through the unstable, gelatinous, ever-changing nature of this life and build our lives on the solid bedrock of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says, “Let anyone with ears listen!” Jesus also says, “Let anyone who hears do.” May it be so. Amen.

Let us pray: Holy God, may we honor your name, not by paying it lip service, but by trusting your promise and seeking your kingdom and righteousness. May we honor your name by following your way, hearing your Word, and, by doing your Word in our actions, showing whom we have been chosen to follow, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹“8 Tips for Construction on the Coast,” at www.kebrazasconstruction.com

²“Beach Nourishment,” at www.topsailbeach.org

³QDT Editor, “5 Great Ways to End a Speech,” January 2, 2014, at www.quickanddirtytips.com

⁴Richard Beaton, “Commentary on Matthew 7:21-29,” June 1, 2008 at www.workingpreacher.org

⁵The information about the Superdome and construction in New Orleans is taken from the following sources:

Thor L. Anderson and Melvin C. Williams, “The Superdome Foundations,” at www.cedb.asce.org

Taylor Echols, “Louisiana Superdome: A look back,” at www.vianolavie.org

Dave Walker, “‘Strip the City,’ from Discovery Science, visits New Orleans at www.nola.com