

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
October 23, 2011

“Pursuing Justice: Sermon on the Mount”

Matthew 6:25 – 7:29, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=186729652>

(Introduction) Too often people think that there is some grand mystery involved in understanding what the bible teaches, some secret knowledge that is only given to ministers who have studied at seminary. A big part of this misperception is due to the fact that people don't regularly read the bible for themselves, and when they come to church, they only hear a small portion of scripture each week. That is why in this worship service, we have been intentionally reading through Jesus' entire Sermon on the Mount. And as we continue to do so, I want you to hear it in all its simple directness, and take it to heart, as God's word preached to give you hope and life and joy, for such is the intent of Jesus' sermon from long ago.

As we read these verses, recognize that Jesus is emphasizing two things over and over again: that our faith is built upon a foundation, a foundation of a loving God, and our faith involves choices, choices that are either life-giving or life-denying. Listen and find peace in Christ's sermon.

[Heather] Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you – you of little faith?

[Patrice] Therefore do not worry, saying ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

[Randy] Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’, while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

[Heather] Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.

Okay, I have to interrupt. That last verse seems to disrupt the flow of what has just been said. "Do not judge lest you be judged" followed by "do not give what is holy to dogs and swine." In Jesus time and in our time, there are people who actively oppose the Christian message by word and deed. (They're likely opposing the Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu message at the same time, but that's for another sermon.) Jesus names the simple fact that not everyone is interested in hearing the gospel; not everyone is open to being handed communion bread or receiving the water of baptism. However, hear this verse in light of what comes before it and right after it. Be careful of judging who those people are, the old "log" in our eye and "speck" in our neighbor's eye. And persevere in trying to find ways to reach the supposedly unreachable: "ask and it will be given you," search and knock and see whether or not a locked door will one day be opened.

[Patrice] Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

[Randy] *Hear now these next few verses as the perfect combination of the universal and the particular. In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. 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. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life and there are few who find it.*

One verse contains the Golden Rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you, a sentiment held in common by all major world religions. But next to that verse comes the reminder that following the Golden Rule is not automatic or easy. It takes effort to treat others as we wish to be treated, to not privilege our needs over others, to not judge every situation in terms of whether we are comfortable, we are cared for, we are happy and content. That perspective is the dominant one: the wide road, the paved highway. To truly care for others as Christ describes is a narrower choice, a path of discipline and dedication that few, if any, walk with ease. But Jesus sets it before us because he himself will walk that path, and by his grace, we can follow where he leads. That's his solemn promise. In light of that, listen to the practical advice that comes next.

[Heather] Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

[Patrice] 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 do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'

[Randy] *Throughout this entire sermon, Jesus has set up simple and direct comparisons so that his listeners (including us) can see the ways that lead to life. Consider your own worried, frenzied existence and then think on the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Consider the log in your own eye before you go to remove the speck from your neighbor's. Will you give a child bread or a stone, fish or a snake? Will you strive to be a tree that gives forth good fruit or one that bears bad fruit? Throughout this sermon, Jesus focused on two things. There is a foundation for all of life, a foundation built upon faith and trust in God, who is worthy of our faith and trust in all situations; and the reminder that life involves daily choices: good or evil, life-sustaining or life-destroying, bread or stones.*

It is not complicated. Its simplicity, though, is part of its vulnerability, because we are tempted to tell ourselves that scripture must always be opaque and complicated, and living a life of faith must be more demanding than it seems from a straight-forward reading of the gospel message. But Jesus' Sermon on the Mount went to great lengths to keep it simple – to make it plain – to write it on our hearts so that every day we would be reminded to love God with our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, so that every word and every deed show the truth of those two fundamental convictions. That is why Jesus ends the sermon with one more analogy, one more comparative example, so that we will choose to build our lives on a foundation that will last. It's as simple and as loving as that. Listen:

"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. Thanks be to God.