

Ask Yourself If You Should Ask Him Again

Matthew 7:21-29

June 1, 2008

Today's Gospel is conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which is one of the great discourses of Jesus in the Book of Matthew. It takes up three chapters, and probably has been studied and analyzed by scholars and theologians as much as any part of the New Testament.

And disagreements exist about its meaning because of the very difficult standards Jesus set in this teaching. For example, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that we should love our enemies, and if someone takes our tunic we should give up our cloak as well. This is where we are told that if our eye offends us, we should pluck it out, and that if our hand offends us we should cut it off. It is where we are commanded to turn the other cheek.

Because these teachings of the Sermon seem so strict, some people say they only apply to biblical times, and do not guide us now. Others say that because Jesus was speaking to the disciples, his statements do not apply to ordinary people. Still others claim that because the requirements in the Sermon are impossible to achieve anyway, they serve as standards to demonstrate how far short we fall rather than standards to be actually obeyed.

And sermons have been preached on all these theories, some good and some bad. This reminds of the story of old preacher who was cleaning out the dresser when he found four eggs and two thousand dollars in his wife's things. He asked her about it and she said she saved one egg for every bad sermon he had given. He thought, "Four eggs in all those years. That's not too bad. But what's the money for?" "Well," she said, "Every time I got a dozen eggs, I sold them."

Hopefully, this sermon will not lay an egg, which might be possible because as we get into today's reading we will be faced with yet another difficult teaching. It has been said that today's reading is like a tough piece of meat that we have to tenderize before we can digest it. Or perhaps it is something like concentrated orange juice that we have to dilute with water before we can get it into our systems.

II.

Well, we might wish we could tenderize or dilute today's Gospel, but we really can't do that. Let's look at what Jesus told the disciples as he was preparing them for their ministry.

This Gospel has two parts. One is where Jesus said not everyone who professes belief in his teachings will enter the kingdom of heaven. There will be people who appear to be doing his work and proclaiming his name, but they will not be sincere. They will have deceived themselves about their faith, and on that final day he will tell them that he never knew them, and they must depart from him.

The second part is the parable about those who build their houses on rock, and those who build on sand. The houses might look the same and might serve equally well in good weather, he said, but when the winds, and rains, and floods come the houses build on sand will fall. Those builders will not have relied on strong foundations.

So, what do these two parts mean? As with teachings elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, today's reading has been understood in different ways. One of the questions is whether these two parts of the Gospel are independent narratives with their own separate meanings, or whether they are part of a single larger picture and the parable of the builders just naturally flows from the story about those whose faith was not sincere.

Examples might be helpful. Some say the first part about the kingdom of heaven describes final judgment, and the consequences of an insincere faith in the next world. Then they say the second part about building to withstand winds, rains, and floods symbolically speaks to the trials and tribulations of this world. They believe Jesus set forth two teachings about two things; one in the hereafter and one in the here and now.

Then others say that the first part about only appearing to do Jesus' work applies to us as individuals, whereas the second part about building houses on rock or sand applies to the church. They say that in the second part Jesus was reaching beyond his immediate audience, and was speaking to the church he would leave behind. Again they are separate teachings.

Finally, there are people like me who would say we should not make it more complicated than necessary. In this view, Jesus simply made a point about people with an insincere faith, and used the parable of the builders as an example of that point.

This means that building on sand signifies a weak and inadequate faith, and building on rock demonstrates a strong and enduring faith. We are asked to not only listen and hear, but also to act and build on rock. We not only must believe Jesus' teachings, but also must put his teachings into action and do what he told us. We basically must practice what he preaches.

III.

But does that idea raise some questions in our minds? Are we now to believe that both faith and works are necessary for salvation when all these years we have been told that we are saved by faith alone? What about Christ and the cross?

And what about our reading today from Romans where Paul proclaimed that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, apart from good works in the world (3:28)?

Matthew in this famous sermon did not intend to diminish faith or the cross. On at least nine occasions he described how Jesus associated faith with his miracles. In First Corinthians Paul spoke of strong foundations and said that "fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what they build survives, they will receive their rewards. If it is burned up, they will suffer loss; they themselves will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (3:13-15).

IV.

You probably have heard me mention the old saying about how if it looks like a duck, and acts like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it must be a duck. Can we say the same thing about Christians? If people look like Christians, and act like Christians, and sound like Christians, does it mean they are Christians?

The answer, according to today's Gospel, appears to be "maybe not." Just going through the motions is not sufficient. Merely thinking we have faith does not automatically mean that we do. And even though I don't suggest that anyone here today should worry about their salvation, this Gospel might affect some people we know.

Most of us probably have friends or neighbors who are dear people, but we're not sure where they stand in their spiritual lives. And perhaps there are people with whom we work, or members of our own families, who we fear might be on the outside looking on that final day.

So let me speak generally. As Christians we believe we are saved by faith. But how do we know if the faith we think we have is the faith we really need? Today's Gospel says that what people do, in addition to what they believe, can be evidence of their faith. It tells us that if people don't act in the way Jesus calls them to act, then perhaps their professions of faith are not real or sincere. There are elements of both belief and action in this reading.

But this does not mean that our salvation is based on both faith and works. Rather, it goes to the nature of the faith that leads to salvation. We are called to build our faith on rock, not sand. And I should make two points here.

First, people can come to church, and believe a lot of good Christian doctrines. But if they don't truly accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior then this reading from Matthew would say they don't have the faith Jesus calls them to have. They would have built on sand.

For example, people can believe Jesus is God. They can believe he was born of the Virgin Mary in a manger. And they can believe most of the things they repeat in the Nicene Creed about God the Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

But they also are called to accept on faith the essential parts of the Creed, which are that "for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven," "for our sake he was crucified," and "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." If people do not trust in those essential elements of faith, then the faith they think they have is in danger. It is in danger of causing Jesus to say to them, as he said in today's Gospel, "I never knew you, go away from me."

"I never knew you." Think about that for a minute. We hear a lot of preaching and teaching that tells us we are supposed to know Jesus. But today's reading proclaims that we cannot really know him, we cannot really have a relationship with him, unless he knows us. People can believe some of the right doctrines, but live the wrong life.

The second point is that if we do accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, then we just naturally will be led to do the things that reflect a Christian life. This is faith built on rock; faith that includes a relationship with our Lord, not just a knowledge of him. This is how the things we do demonstrate the faith we proclaim.

Many years ago there was a book and a movie called "God is my Co-pilot." It was a moving story about faith during World War II. A few people criticized it because they thought it portrayed the Japanese too harshly. Be that as it may, there might be another reason to think twice about the title. I saw it on a bumper sticker, and I know that I mentioned bumper stickers last week, but I can't pass this up. The bumper sticker said, "If God is Your Co-pilot, Change Seats!"

And perhaps that describes how Jesus can know us as we try to know him. Put him in the driver's seat. Don't just take him along for the ride. Let him show us where to go. Don't try to take him where we want to go. It is his agenda, not ours, that counts.

V.

Last Easter Day I knew there were some people in church who don't attend on a regular basis. And so toward the end of my sermon I urged everyone to ask Jesus Christ to come into their lives. And I said even if they have done it before, do it again. We might know Jesus already, but he always calls us to deepen that relationship. It is not a one time thing but a way of life.

Today's reading brings us back to that idea. Perhaps we should ask ourselves if we should ask him again. And what about our friends and family who yet might not have come to the faith we celebrate during our Eucharist? On that inevitable day when we all must account for the content of our lives there will be some questions to answer. And one of them will not be, "were we successful," but "were we faithful?" Today's Gospel tells us that whether we are found faithful then will depend on how we live now. *Amen.*