

Jesus finishes with the parable about the wise person building a house on rock and not sand. We are to build our lives on “hearing and doing” the words of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, the way of life that Jesus embodies and calls us to. It is the life of listening to God and doing what we hear, a daily, even moment by moment awareness of our life in God. The word obedience comes from the French, meaning “to listen.” The work of the spiritual life is to cultivate our spiritual capacity to listen. To grow in awareness of God’s presence. To grow in awareness of our own unique life and how that life can be an instrument of God’s love for the world. To listen to the teachings of Jesus and take them to heart and live them out as best we can. Building our house, our life on rock does not mean becoming legalistic or rigid. It does not mean becoming more “religious” (“Lord, Lord”). It is a paradox, really, because the “rock” upon which we build our lives is the living God and all that God wants to do in and through our lives, and the ways God calls us to follow day by day, moment by moment. Hearing and doing. Listening and responding. That is the life of faith, the life of God’s kingdom, the kind of life that is filled with vitality, newness, and hope.

June 1, 2008/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Hearing and Doing

Matthew 7:21-29

“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.”

These are the closing words of the Sermon on the Mount, the core of Jesus’ teachings, the heart of the life he embodied and to which he calls us. These teachings describe the way people live who really know God, not as an idea or doctrine, but as the creator and sustainer of life with whom one is connected at the deepest center of oneself. The Sermon on the Mount is not a list of laws and should not be reduced to moralism. This true way of life arises out of our attentiveness to our relationship with the living God. To love God is to strive to live the life Jesus speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount. And as we do so, we grow in our awareness and love of God.

Jesus ends with this teaching about self-deception. Not everyone who calls Jesus “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God or heaven does not mean life after death or in some other world than this world. It is life the way God made it to be lived. Calling Jesus “Lord” is not the same as living the life he is calling us to. In fact, calling Jesus “Lord, Lord” can distract us from his call to live the life of God’s kingdom. “Lord, Lord” is about being religious; doing the will of God, Jesus’ heavenly Father, is about living as human beings the way God made us to live.

There are other places in the gospels where Jesus is saying the same thing. His family comes looking for him at a house where he is teaching (Mark 3:31ff; also Luke 6:46ff). Someone tells him his family is at the door. Who is my family? He looks around the room: Here is my family; everyone who seeks to do the will of God is my family. A man comes up to him and prefaces his question with “Good teacher (Mark 10:17ff).” Jesus responds: Don’t call me good; no one is good but God alone. Jesus is not interested in having people worship him. He is calling people to look at themselves and their own lives and their relationships with God. He is trying to wake people up to live their lives out of that reality.

Then Jesus goes even further. Don’t think that because you cast out demons or speak prophetically or do great things in my name that you are on

the right track. I may well say to you, “I never knew you; go away from me.” We can do good things, invoking Jesus’ name, and still be very far from what the life of faith is about. We start having confidence in the good things we have done or are doing, and stop seeking the will of God in each new moment and situation. The Church of the Covenant and Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship have done some wonderful and amazing things since 1950 when the seedling of Camp Kum-Ba-Yah was planted. Jesus also says to us, “Don’t tell me all the good things you are doing in my name; I don’t even know you.” That’s pretty harsh! But it is spiritually very important. Why? Because Jesus is looking for us to be constantly touching our relationship with the living God, to always be living out of that relationship, always alert to God’s spirit and movements in our lives and in the world, and responding, following. Jesus knows how easily we rest on our laurels, live off our past accomplishments, trust in our sense of our own rightness or achievements, or how we drift into thinking ourselves somehow superior to others.

This little teaching on self-deception is saying something else, I think. Jesus says that those who call him “Lord, Lord” cannot count on entering the kingdom of heaven on the basis of their “Lord, Lord.” Those who do good things using his name—he does not even know them! Jesus is adamant about not being made the center of our worship and certainly not of a religion that often obscures what he is showing and teaching us. Jesus seeks lives that are centered in God. His mission was to awaken us to our relationship with God and the kind of life God created us to live. The kinds of persons we are and the things that we do are to arise from our daily, moment by moment relationship with the living God. Jesus knows how easily we turn him into an idol, how our making him a “religious object” becomes a distraction from living the way God calls us to live.

Here we see a different kind of Jesus than is promoted in the world of popular Christianity or even highly devotional Christianity. We see the Jesus who points away from himself and says that everyone who is working with and seeking to live out God’s will for their lives and for the world is part of the kingdom of heaven, of God. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or people who don’t consider themselves religious at all. Jesus puts it all on a very different level. As Christians we tend to think sometimes that we are the only ones really doing God’s will, really taking seriously God’s justice, compassion, peace. We have a hard time seeing that there are those who are

and have been “hearing and doing” the things Jesus taught for a long time and in astounding ways. It is not about who is religiously right; that is what creates religious violence and arrogance. It is about how we are living our lives.

During the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh, as a young monk in South Vietnam, founded the Buddhist School of Youth for Social Service. Young monks and nuns worked to stem the violence and suffering caused by the armies of North Vietnam and of the United States in its alliance with South Vietnam. They repaired villages, tended the wounded, and did many things throughout the country while the bombs were falling. They refused to take sides, and were ridiculed, tortured, and at times executed by both sides. Thich Nhat Hanh was exiled from his country while here in the U.S. trying to teach us what was really happening. He led the Buddhist delegation to the Paris peace talks. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. King, and made a deep, lasting impression on Thomas Merton. Or consider M. K. Gandhi, spiritually shaped by Hinduism, yet honoring persons of all faith traditions and finding community with them in the life of justice, peace, and compassion. Gandhi wrote that if he were deprived of the Bhagavad Gita, the central text of Hinduism, and yet had a copy of the Sermon on the Mount, he would “derive the same joy from it as I do from the Gita.” (Gandhi, MY RELIGION) Two examples among countless ones of people, regardless of religious tradition or practice, doing what Jesus was teaching. Jesus wasn’t trying to make us religious or even Christians in the “religious” sense. He was trying to awaken us to the life of God’s kingdom.

Does this mean we lessen our devotion to Jesus and the way he embodies and teaches? Not in the least. Just the opposite. To be completely and deeply devoted to the way of Jesus is to begin to see our community with all who live the kind of life he called the kingdom of God, or heaven. Jesus calls and empowers us to live the life we are made to live, to be whole and vital and living each moment in awareness of God and God’s movement in our lives. He wants us to wake up and live here and now the life of God’s kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, life as God created it to be lived. And we are to do that each day, each moment, to the best of our ability. This takes an active, regular, attentive spiritual life. It is why we emphasize the importance of daily prayer, silence, meditation, study, reflection. It is why we consider the inward journey to be critical for and the wellspring of the outward journey, for how we live our lives.