

Foundation Work  
Sermon on Matthew 7:21-29 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, May 29, 2005

Many of you recall that before his recent election to the papacy, Joseph, Cardinal Ratzinger, was the Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. It was Cardinal Ratzinger's job to promote and safeguard the doctrine on the faith and morals throughout the Catholic world, and he was well known for his strict conservative views and adherence to orthodox beliefs. A joke circulated that on the same day, Ratzinger, a Catholic theologian, and an archbishop died and were met by St. Peter at the heavenly gates. After St. Peter welcomed them, he asked the three men to join him in a conference room, as there were some matters he needed to discuss with them. After four hours, the archbishop walked out, shaking his head and wondering, "How can I have been so wrong all this time?" After eight hours, the theologian came out, also shaking his head and wondering, "How can I have been so wrong all this time?" After twelve hours, St. Peter emerged, shaking his head and wondering, "How can I have been so wrong all this time?"

It is not only Cardinal Ratzinger who thinks that correct doctrine is important: The apostle Paul, writing to his younger protégé, Timothy, said, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16, NIV). Paul also instructed Titus, another of his "sons in the faith" to "teach what is consistent with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1). Correct doctrine, or orthodoxy, is important in the Church because proper instruction in the faith is vital for salvation and nourishes the faithful. Last Sunday, as you will recall, was Trinity Sunday, a celebration of the doctrine of the Trinity and the reality that God is one God in three persons. Today, we learn from Jesus that correct doctrine—in and of itself—is not sufficient to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus insists that orthodoxy, or correct doctrine, must be coupled with orthopraxy, or correct practice, right action. St. James writing in his Letter puts it this way: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. ... [F]aith, apart from works, is barren” (Jas. 2:19f.). As important as it is to have the right beliefs, beliefs that we affirm in the Apostles’ and other creeds, it is absolutely necessary to translate those beliefs into action. This is what Jesus means when he says, “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” (Mt. 7:21). This may strike us as a particularly harsh thing to say. It sounds intolerant and exclusive, hardly the kind of thing we think Jesus ought to have said. If we got to vote on this kind of statement, we might vote to strike it from the Bible. But Jesus did say it, and so it becomes important for us to understand what he meant.

Jesus says that salvation is a matter of both belief and action, of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, with emphasis on correct action. There are plenty of people who are quite happy to say they believe in God: 92 percent of Americans believe in God, according to a FOX News poll (June 18, 2004). 79 percent believe that Jesus was born of a virgin (*Newsweek*, December 5, 2004), and 78 percent of Americans believe that Jesus rose from the dead (*Newsweek*, March 28, 2005). These are the folks we consider orthodox, the people who affirm the faith of the Church as expressed in our creeds. These are the people who faithfully fill both our pews and our offering plates. It is these people who cry out, “Lord, Lord.” It is they—dare I say, It is we—who know the right words, who pray the right prayers, who employ the right formulas in worship, only to be denied entrance to the kingdom of heaven.

On that day, which we need to understand is the day of final judgment, many will stand before Christ the Judge and protest, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and cast out

demons in your name and do many deeds of power in your name?” (7:22). But Jesus stands there and says to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers” (7:23). What is shocking about this denied entry is the “specifically Christian deeds” they have performed—in Jesus’ name no less! Why would Jesus disown his followers, members of his own community, and people who were trying to be like him? Why would Jesus finally reject those people who were gifted, charismatic, and enthusiastic servants?

There are two possible and related answers: On the one hand, people can do all kinds of good deeds without doing them for the right reasons. People can even do all kinds of things we might consider Christian without doing them in love and obedience to God. In Matthew’s day there were plenty of people who had remarkable spiritual gifts: gifts of prophesy, exorcism, and even miracles. And yet many of these people operated quite independently of God’s righteousness and will or even concern for their neighbor. And so, as Robert Smith says, “Jesus writes off as utterly useless any ‘spiritual’ activities severed from ‘moral’ action.”<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, Jesus will reject even gifted, enthusiastic, and charismatic people, especially Christian leaders, who “offer an easier alternative to the narrow way of Christian discipleship.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms that “the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (7:14). It turns out that being a Christian involves more than regular church attendance and intellectual assent to the doctrines of the faith. It involves more even than professing Jesus Christ as one’s personal Lord and Savior. In fact, ‘Lord, Lord’ is “an emphatic profession of faith,” and a sincere one at that. But would-be

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989) 125.

<sup>2</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985) 147.

followers of Jesus who profess their faith only in words are deceived about the true nature of discipleship, which demands obedience to God's will and a relationship with Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The story is told of Mark Twain's encounter with a man who managed to combine the appearances of piety with a predatory career in business. "Before I die," said the hypocrite, "I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb to the top of Mount Sinai and read the Ten Commandments aloud." "I have a better idea," answered Mark Twain. "Why don't you stay right at home in Boston and *keep* them?"<sup>4</sup>

It is the keeping of the commandments that we find quite hard to do. I suppose "do not kill" and "do not steal" come easily enough. "Do not commit adultery" and "do not covet" raise the bar a little. "Love the Lord your God" and "love your neighbor" are quite difficult. Then Jesus comes along and takes commandment-keeping to a whole new level. Jesus says not only "do not kill," but "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (Mt. 5:21ff.). Jesus says not only "do not commit adultery" but "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (5:28). Jesus says not only "love your neighbor" but "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (5:44).

Indeed, commandment-keeping is very hard. But it is the only way to live, or at least it is the only way to live securely in a world continually threatened by storms. Jesus tells us that keeping his commandments, or "hear[ing] these words of [his] and act[ing] on them" (7:24) is the only way to construct a strong foundation. And we Texans know about the importance of solid foundations. Many a house has been damaged—even ruined—constructed on a poor foundation in the expansive clay soil of Dallas. And here, says Tom Long, we should take warning: "There are many houses in the human community. The house of greed washes away

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Roger L. Shinn, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Guide to Jesus' Most Famous Sermon* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1954) 89.

when the rains of economic crisis come. The house of power collapses when the political climate changes. The house of pragmatic living-for-the-moment slips off the foundation when life opens up with a mystery like birth, deep suffering, or death.”<sup>5</sup>

And so I ask you this morning, Does your foundation need work? Does your orthopraxy match your orthodoxy? Do your deeds back up your words? Are you one who hears and acts on Jesus’ words and like the wise man, builds upon the rock, or are you one who hears but does not act on Jesus’ words and like the foolish man builds on sand? The storms of life will rage and the flood of God’s judgment will rise. All that is not secured will be washed away and our foundations in the faith will be revealed. Let us, then, build on Christ, who is the Rock of our salvation, by hearing and doing his words. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 84-5.