

"Just Do It!"

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Texts: Psalm 1 and Matthew 7: 13-29

For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matt. 7:14)

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 7: 19)

Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." (Matt. 7: 23)

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. (Matt 7:26)

Taken out of context, these scriptures all sound rather judgmental. And the truth is, that is how many Christians have used them over the years – usually in judgment of someone else. It sounds, at first glance, like there will be many evildoers that Jesus never knew, who didn't find the narrow gate, and who, then, are thrown into the pits of hell. And out of context, you could make that argument. However, these scriptures are found at the culmination of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a selection of scripture beginning in Matthew 5 that we have been studying for many weeks

now. Remember how it begins? Blessed are those... Blessed are you when you... The sermon then continues with "you are the light of the world" and "you are the salt of the earth." It even includes the section we did last week telling us "be not anxious". Well, if you only read the scriptures I opened with, and didn't know the speaker or the context, I think you would be foolish not to be a bit anxious.

And yet, these scriptures are in the context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. In Brian McLaren's book *We Make the Road by Walking*, we are in chapter 31 "The Choice is Yours." Sounds ominous. Again, if taken out of context. A choice between what and what? Is it a real choice, or one of those false choices? Is this scripture as judgmental as it seems?

In a word, no. In fact, what it is most about is doing. I don't know Greek, but according to New Testament scholar Douglas R.A. Hare (Matthew: Interpretation Commentary), in Greek, we would seek the word ποιεῖν which means "do" or "make", and it occurs nine times in this short story. The intention, says Hare, "is practical, not dogmatic". Oh, if we Christians could take a break from everything being about dogma, and instead work on the practice of

Christianity, what a difference we would make in the world! Hare goes on to say, "it would be a mistake to insist that we are here taught that God has destined most people for hell." In fact, get this, and I wish more Christians would take note, "It is not for us to know who is damned or saved. What is essential is that we take with utter seriousness our responsibility to do what is right." There is that word again, do.

And in my favorite quote from Hare, "Those who strive to do what is right, instead of adhering to lowest-common-denominator morality, must not expect to receive popular acclaim." Just because it's popular, and it has the word Christian in it, doesn't necessarily mean it is in keeping with Jesus' teaching. Most of all, Jesus taught and modeled practical, hands-on ministry and often left the moralizing and demonizing to the Scribes and Pharisees. Those that the Scribes and Pharisees judged and rejected; Jesus called "models" of faithfulness. Go figure.

It is true (according to Douglas R.A. Hare) that Matthew's Jesus is concerned with behavior. "In this concluding passage of the Sermon on the Mount, attention is focused steadily on the

behavior of the rank-and-file members of the church. False prophets are introduced only because their conduct provides a bad model for ordinary Christians." This whole sermon is much more about proper living than correct belief. So much of Christianity seems to have that backward. It's not that belief doesn't matter, but belief without loving conduct is almost useless. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "If I have all knowledge as to move mountains, but have not love, then I am nothing."

My last quote from Douglas R.A. Hare is this, "[Many] boast of their relationship with Jesus, but in truth deny him with their conduct."

So okay, I've hit you with a lot and really gone after this scripture, and by extension, many Christians. I think it's because my passion is so much for the church that I believe Jesus created in which kindness, compassion, truth-telling, faithfulness,...well...in a word, love, run the show. I have experienced many congregations and pastors not on that page, but on the page of "or else". Everything many Christians share with the world comes with an "or else" and usually is based on proper belief alone. The only problem

is Jesus didn't do that. If you do look at the "woes", for example, in our scripture, you might be surprised to whom the "woe" is directed. If you look for judgment, again, you might be surprised who receives Jesus' most scathing judgments. But if you look at the Sermon on the Mount, you might instead see, "blessed are you, when". It turns Christian discipleship away from obligation and duty to privilege and opportunity. The privilege to act with love. The privilege to practice mercy. The opportunity to practice grace. I invite you to re-read the Sermon on the Mount, beginning to end, yourself, and see if these last scriptures take on a different meaning than when you just read them in isolation. And then, end with, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

In case you'd rather not do that, Brian McLaren has done an excellent summary of that Sermon and I share it with you here:

Be among the lowly in spirit, remain sensitive to pain and loss, live in the power of gentleness, hunger and thirst for true righteousness, show mercy to everyone rather than harshness, don't hide hypocrisy or duplicity in your heart, work for peace, be willing to joyfully suffer persecution and insult for doing what is right.

Dare to be a nonconformist by being boldly different, like salt and light in the world. Demonstrate your differentness through works of generosity and beauty.

Reject both mindless conformity to tradition and rebellious rejection of it. Instead, discern the true intent of tradition and pursue that intent into new territory.

Never hate, hold grudges, or indulge in anger, but instead, aim to be the first to reach out a hand in reconciliation.

Do not nurture secret fantasies to be sexually unfaithful to your spouse. Insure fidelity by monitoring your desires – the way you see (symbolized by the eye) and grasp (symbolized by the hand) for pleasure. And do not settle for maintaining appearance of legality and propriety; aspire to true fidelity in your heart.

Avoid “word inflation” when making vows. Instead, practice clear, straight speech, so simple words like yes and no retain their full value.

Reject revenge. Instead, pursue creative and nonviolent ways to overcome wrongs done to you.

Love your enemies as well as your friends, and so imitate God’s big, generous heart for all creatures.

Cultivate a hidden life of goodness by giving to the poor, praying, and fasting secretly.

Pray in secret through four movements of your heart. First, orient yourself toward a caring yet mysterious God. Second, align your desires with God’s great desire for a just and compassionate world. Third, bring to God your needs and concerns – both physical and spiritual. Finally, prepare to reenter the public world of temptation and oppression, trusting God to guide you and strengthen you.

Remember that God isn’t setting up a forgiveness market but is building a whole forgiveness economy.

Don’t let greed cloud your outlook on life, but store up true wealth by investing in a growing portfolio of generosity and kindness.

Be especially vigilant about money becoming your slave master.

Don't let anxiety run and ruin your life, but instead trust yourself to God's gracious and parental care, and seek first and foremost to build the just and generous society that would fulfill God's best dreams for humanity.

Don't develop a sharp eye for the faults and failures of others, but instead first work on your own blindness to your own faults and failures.

Don't push on people treasures they aren't ready for or can't yet be appreciative of.

Go to God with all your needs, and don't be discouraged if you face long delays. Remember that God loves you as a faithful, caring parent and will come through in due time.

Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

Realize that aliveness includes tough choices, and that thriving includes suffering.

Don't be misled by religious talk; what counts is actually living by Jesus' teaching.

...Based on what Jesus has told us [in this sermon], God is gracious and compassionate and does not need to be appeased through sacrifice. God's love is freely given and does not have to be earned.

Instead of worrying about whether your beliefs are correct, whichever one of these statements is the hardest for you to live, work on that. Continue to strive first for the Commonwealth, kin-dom, Kingdom of God...whatever you need to call it, "and all things will be given to you as well."

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

