

## WORKING THE WORDS

Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-28, (29-31)

Matthew 7:21-29

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TEXT: Matthew 7:24 “Everyone then who heard these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to accept the gift of God’s grace by which we become able to live the life Jesus gave us to live.

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When my children were younger, I spent a few fascinating years as an adult leader in the Boy Scout Troop my church sponsored. That troop had a character named “Dufus McDuff” who stopped in to troop meetings every once in a while to show Tenderfoot Scouts how *not* to do things. Dufus would pack a cast iron skillet in his backpack. He would only bring book matches, and not wrap them in plastic, so, of course, the matches were useless if the camp got wet, which it always did. He would pack lots of magazines and forget his sleeping bag. And, he would, shall we say, make poor choices as far as choosing a site for his tent. All this was good fun, but the leaders also sincerely hoped that it made a point that our young Scouts would take to heart when it came time to get ready for an outing.

I don’t recall the exact location, but I do recall a weekend backpacking trip on which a few Tenderfoot Scouts set up their tents in what appeared, when the skies were blue and the ground was dry, to be a nice flat site at the base of a hill. Night came, and we all piled into our tents, and then, a rather intense storm blew through. It turned out that the boys had set up their tent in the exact spot where the water flowing down the hill pooled. In the morning, and I am not exaggerating, their sleeping bags were floating in about two inches of water. Next troop backpacking preparation event, *they* could play the part of Dufus McDuff.

The Dufus point is the same point as the parable Jesus used to close his Sermon on the Mount: If you hear the words, but don’t put the words into practice, what good is that?

I suppose every one of us could confess our own Dufus event, when we did not work the words we’d heard. I was a Scout once myself. Some years after I left Scouting, I decided it would be fun to hitchhike and backpack through the Adirondacks, right around this time of year. Yes, I did pack a cast iron skillet, and cans of food, which gave my pack the weight of the world. No, I didn’t pack bug repellent, nor did I do any research on where I would be traveling, two instructions Scouting urged even way back in my Scouting days. How about it? I landed in the northern woods in the height of biting insect season. I recall waking up the first morning and being attacked by a swarm

of biting flies—not our current black fly friends, but a larger and more fiendish beast that sent me back into the protection of my tent begging for mercy. Sitting inside while my adversaries waited beyond the netting, I reviewed all the camping lessons I’d heard but had not practiced as I’d headed out on that hapless trip.

This Wednesday’s “Dear Abby” column included a letter from a “concerned daughter” who had worn herself out telling her parents, who both have chronic illnesses, to eat healthier and try a bit of exercise. But Mom loves her cookies and Dad can’t get away from those deep fried foods. The title of Abby’s column was, “You can lead a horse to salad, but . . .” How many people have heard warnings about diet and exercise, but haven’t worked those words into their life?

Our country, and, in an even more urgent way, our world, is struggling under the weight of a collection of complicated crises that makes it more and more difficult for households to make ends meet. The right advice for resolving these daunting issues is right under our noses— support local farming rather than global agribusiness, cut down on our dependence on the almighty car, and avoid the temptation to buy cool stuff with “no payments until 2009”. We hear the words, but how easy it is not to put the words to work, to think that someone else is going to fix it so we can keep messing up our world the way we have been these past fifty years.

It’s the same thing in the realm of faith, although the stakes are far higher. We can read our Bibles, even attend Bible study programs. We can come to church, listen to sermons and sing hymns. But if we don’t work the words we hear into our lives, we are a homebuilder siting our house on a hurricane coast, a diabetes patient munching on brownies, a backpacker wearing shorts and a tee shirt in black fly season.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 - 7), immediately after he set out the Golden Rule, Jesus urged putting his words to work in the strongest of terms. “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.” (Matthew 7:21) The words he wants his followers to put to work are more likely to be disregarded than a diabetic’s diet. Here’s a few of them. Be poor in spirit rather than rich in things. When someone hits you, don’t retaliate, rather, turn your other cheek. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (In the days of al Qaeda, would he be asking us to pray for those who *terrorize* us?) As Jean pointed out so eloquently in her message last Sunday, avoid worry, trust in God, be like the sparrows and the lilies of the field. Rather than calling attention to a speck in your neighbor’s eye, work on removing the log that’s stuck in your own eye. And finally, capturing the whole teaching in one great rule: Do to others exactly what you would want others to do to you. No matter what.

I have never gone through the Sermon on the Mount, either in personal study or exploring it with a group, where it has not been dreadfully obvious how far short I fall with regard to working its wonderful words. If anyone is toying with the thought that you are doing a passable job at living the life Jesus laid out for us to live, one dose of devotional reading of this sermon is more than enough to serve as a cure for that illusion. We might cringe at Paul's sweeping indictment, that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," but Jesus' sermon will assure us that Paul was on the mark. Fortunately, it is Paul's inspired insight regarding God's grace that gets us out of the mess that reading the sermon gets us into. Listen to the whole sentence from his letter to the Romans: (3:22-25) "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."

This is more than a mouthful of theology. Here's what I take it to mean: we all inevitably fall short. If it's only up to us, we will never succeed at perfectly practicing the teachings of Jesus. But that's where God's grace, made real in Jesus, comes into play. Not our effort, but God's effort, is what works the words of Jesus into our lives. We don't achieve the life laid out in the Sermon on the Mount. We receive that life as a gift, and faith is the means by which we receive it. Faith doesn't exempt us from working the words; faith makes it possible for us to work the words, mostly because faith conforms us to the life of Christ, who perfectly lived everything that he taught.

I attended a retreat many years ago at which another of the retreatants was an Episcopalian priest who got this truth in a most effective way. He told a story of an older woman in his parish who was painfully compulsive about her personal righteousness. Which, if you've ever known someone like this, you will know that it made her politely but nonetheless exceedingly judgmental with regard to anyone who was any less intently righteous than she, which meant all but the named saints. One day, this woman and the minister were both participating in some sort of meeting or study group. The woman came out with one of her typical insinuations that God reserves divine favor only for those who meet God's standards for righteousness. Something cracked inside the priest, and he chose that moment to make his move. "Mary," he said. (I forget the woman's name, but I'll call her Mary for the purpose of this story.) "Mary, do you know what happens when we disappoint God?" The woman cringed at the very idea. "Do you know what happens when we fall short of what God expects of us, when we backslide or falter in our devotion or downright disregard God's law?" His voice was the voice of a prosecutor, charging her with an unthinkable crime.

“I don’t rightly know,” Mary timidly responded. “I’m not sure exactly what happens.” *Damnation* was probably on her mind, but she didn’t dare say it, because it was a cuss word, and God didn’t approve of cussing. “*Jesus Christ* happens, Mary,” the priest said. When we fall short, when we don’t follow the instructions, when we sin, Jesus Christ happens.”

You bet we need to be working the words of Jesus into our lives. We avoid putting his teachings into practice to our peril. As Eugene Peterson rendered the teaching from Matthew, “These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on.” But we set ourselves up for spiritual disaster if we presume to achieve righteousness apart from God’s gift of grace. We risk becoming like Mary, scared to death of failing, and not allowing Jesus Christ to *happen* for us. The Jesus who gave the Sermon on the Mount is not merely a wise teacher dispensing good advice for living. He is, as the crowds first hearing the sermon realized, the authority. He is Sovereign and Savior— not merely the One who teaches the way, but the One who is the Way, the One who makes it possible for us to live the Way. Contrary to what Mary thought, working his words into our life is not the way we earn God’s favor. Rather, receiving God’s favor is what makes us willing and able to work the words.

Right here before us is the sign of that grace: the bread that is his body broken for us, the cup that holds his life. We do not deserve what is represented in this sacrament, and yet, Christ himself welcomes all who desire to share his life to receive the grace made visible in this simple meal. Eating the bread and drinking the cup literally works his life into our life. But that is only the beginning of the sacrament’s effect. Rising from the meal, we continue to share the life of Christ as we let his words be the way we live. Receiving mercy, we share it. Being released from judgement, we cease to judge others. Experiencing the power of forgiveness, we are eager to forgive. Knowing the satisfying of our deepest hunger and thirst, we are freed from the illusion that fulfillment is found in the things of this world. This table is the rock on which we may build our house. Let this be your foundation, and see how our life is swallowed up in the life of Christ, how his words become the work that is our perfect joy.