

Promises and Performance
Matthew 21:(23-27) 28-32
Sunday, September 20, 2020
Beargrass Christian Church

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Today we conclude a long series from the Gospel of Matthew.
 1. We began in June and have focused on the middle of Matthew.
 2. We have learned about the demands and delights of discipleship.
- B. Today's text is no exception—and the context is critical.
 1. The story is set in the calm before the storm—during Holy Week—between Palm Sunday and Good Friday.
 2. Despite the testing and taunting, Jesus keeps teaching.
 3. And he's rollin' out some of his best stuff in these final days.
 4. Religious leaders try to shut him up—but he shuts them down.
 5. They question his authority—but don't play "Jeopardy" with Jesus—he responds with another question and they are clueless.
 6. Jesus has already literally turned over the temple tables.
 7. Now he turns over the theological tables and they are dumbfounded.
 8. Then he pounds home his point with another pointed parable.

II. AND JESUS GETS OUR ATTENTION AGAIN.

- A. Like last week's perplexing parable, this story gets played out in a variety of situations and circumstances in our own lives.
 1. Do we know someone at work who lacks motivation?
 2. Do we have friends who say "Yes!" but never deliver?
 3. Have we heard unfulfilled promises from politicians?
 4. Do family members put off tasks and procrastinate?
 5. I have done that with Ellen—"When I retire, honey."
 6. But I have only used that excuse for four or five...years.
- B. Our frustrations are often expressed in memorable one-liners.
 1. "Actions speak louder than words."
 2. "I would rather see a sermon than hear one."
 3. "The great end of life is not knowledge—but action."
 4. C. S. Lewis quipped: "People cannot remain just 'good eggs' forever—they either have to hatch or rot!"
- C. A cartoon I read regularly is "Dustin" and there have been two of them recently that seem to have been penned for this parable.
 1. Dustin is a young man who can't hold on to a job, so he frequently visits his employment counselor to get some help.
 2. In a reference, she didn't want to lie so she wrote: "If you can get Dustin to work for you, you will be very fortunate."
 3. Last week he asked: "The data firm fired me? They liked me."
 4. She said: "They did. They told me you do your work with a smile. They need someone to do their work with a computer."
- D. Anyway, Jesus hooks us when he moves from talking about religious leaders and hookers to this focus on the family.
 1. Dad asks his sons to go to work.

2. One says, "No way!" but eventually gets around to it.
 3. The other says, "Sure, Dad, I'd love to!"
 4. But several hours later Dad finds him on the couch.
 5. He's playing Minecraft, sippin' sodas, and chompin' on Cheetos.
 6. Jesus wonders which one pleased the parent more?
 7. Having dealt with my own children in similar situations years ago, I'd say neither—one is disrespectful and the other one lies!
 8. This is really "The Story of the Better of Two Bad Sons."
- E. This piercing parable offers two responses to the Good News.
1. We can say, "No!" change our minds and say, "Yes!"
 2. Or we can say, "Yes!" but never repent or respond.

III. CAN WE HAVE FAITH WITHOUT ACTION?

- A. Is the Word without action the Word at all?
- B. At times we get caught up in over-evaluation, which leads to vacillation and procrastination and hesitation.
1. Jesus says, "Follow me!" but what do you really mean?
 2. Jesus says, "Follow me!" but if we really live out your words faithfully we could lose friends or cause division.
 3. He says, "Follow me!" but Jesus, it is not really convenient.
 4. Jesus says, "Follow me!" but what will it cost me?
- C. The Barna Group, a Christian research firm, conducted a study called "Temptations and America's Favorite Sins."
1. Some thought sex, drugs, and rock and roll would be #1!
 2. But the survey found that the top three are procrastination, overeating, and spending too much time on media.
 3. Most felt they were wasting their time and not doing enough.
- D. Martin Copenhaver says: "We may reach the point where we are willing to give the Christian faith a bit of a try.
1. "We'll attend a few services, read a book, try a prayer."
 2. "That is, we might try it like we try out fishing or oil painting for a few weekends to see if it appeals to us."
 3. "We want a taste before we decide to make a full meal of it."
 4. "But if we get satisfied with tentative steps, the larger satisfactions of the Christian faith may continue to escape us."
- E. Do you agree—have you found that to be true?
1. Are there important things in life which we cannot know—really know—except by jumping in and doing them?
 2. Can we really know the exhilaration of the dance, just by listening to a lecture—even a very good lecture—on dancing?
 3. Can we really know the game, the rush of adrenaline, just by watching it or hearing even the most gifted sports announcer describe it?
 4. Can we really know love, the satisfaction of sharing our life with someone else, by reading about it in a book?
- F. There was an interesting story in the paper.
1. A woman's sister died—funeral preparations were made.
 2. Her brother-in-law gave her a gift box, in which was a gorgeous silk and lace nightgown that had never been worn.

3. He explained to her that her sister had bought the nightgown many years ago and was saving it for a special occasion.
 4. But the special occasion never seemed to come.
 5. He looked at her and said, "Never save anything for a special occasion, because everything is a special occasion."
- G. There is a sense in which the Christian faith is like that.
1. We need to open it, try it on, wear it, use it.
 2. Some people ask: "What do you Christians believe?"
 3. The implication is that Christianity—or any religion for that matter—is only a matter of believing.
 4. But we do not want to reduce any religion into some set of intellectual propositions or some type of philosophy of life.
 5. Jesus was a teacher, whose life taught what he preached.
 6. We love and serve him not simply because of what he said, but because of the way he lived, died, and was resurrected.
 7. He takes us on a journey toward the truth, toward a realm we could not have entered without his invitation.

IV. IS THE STORY ABOUT JUDGEMENT OR GRACE?

- A. Is the parable more about faith or works?
- B. When we wrestle with stories of faith and works and judgment and grace, we have to deal with paradoxical tensions.
1. We are not saved by works—but faith without works is dead.
 2. All of our words in worship, all the words we say and hear and sing—important as they may be—are not enough.
 3. We have heard: "When worship ends, our service begins."
 4. Surely, words are to be transformed into deeds of love.
 5. Can we make progress for what is just and kind from our comfortable couches—or do we have to hit the streets like so many are doing right now?
 6. Hearers must become actors in God's great Drama.
 7. Faith affirmed must become faith performed.
 8. We are called to leave the land of "Almost," remembering the love of Jesus, who did not "almost" go to the cross for us.
 9. When we do, we will experience—together—the joy of being involved in the plans and purposes of God.
- C. Robert Capon's perspective about this parable is helpful too.
1. "It is easy to expand upon the parable, but it is primarily an application to the life of the Church in all ages."
 - a. "Because no matter how much we give lip service to the notion of free grace and dying love, we do not like it!"
 - b. "It is just too...indiscriminate; it lets rotten children and crooked tax farmers and common tarts into the kingdom."
 - c. "And it thumbs its nose at some really good people."
 - d. "And it does that, gallingly, for no more reason than the Gospel's exaltation of simple trust over worthy works."
 - e. "Such nonsense, we mutter in our hearts; such heartless, immoral folly...we'll teach God, we say."
 2. "Oh, we will continue to sing "Amazing Grace!"

- a. "But we will jolly well be judicious when it comes to explaining to the riffraff what it actually means."
- b. "We will assure them, of course, that God loves them."
- c. "But we will make it clear that we expect them to clean up their act before we clasp them seriously to our bosom."
- d. "We do not want prostitutes and chisellers and sinners thinking that they can just barge in here and hang out."
- e. "After all, WE never did such things!"
- 3. "Are we able to see...is it possible...to really see now?"
- 4. "We are second sons and daughters, elder brothers and sisters, respectable folks, the twelve-hour-all-day laborers..."
 - a. "But we are those whose moral efforts have been trampled on by the Feet Beautiful upon the Mountain."
 - b. "We are resentful about the divine joke of grace that says nothing matters except plain, old, de facto—Jesus faith.
 - c. "And when we institutionalize that resentment by giving the impression that the Church is not for sinners, we become a bushel of works hiding the Light of the World."
- 5. "God's will for us is that we believe in Jesus."
- 6. "God has already forgiven us, reconciled us, raised us up, and made us sit together in heavenly places with him."
- 7. "The last shall be first...just for believing."
- D. So, is the story about faith, works, judgment or grace?
 - 1. I am not positive...but I think the answer is "Yes!"
 - 2. And God's last word...for all of us...is grace.