

## **Go Away From Me, You Evildoers**

***June 1, 2008 | Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Third Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 4) Year A***

### **Lectionary citations**

Gen 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19 and Ps 46

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

Matt 7:21-29

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "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?" Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

To me, this is one of the most terrifying passages in scripture. I pray and pray that it does not apply to me, but there is always just a hint of doubt. Will Jesus welcome me as an old friend, or will he coldly address me as a stranger? How can someone who worships Jesus as God, saying, "Lord, Lord," and even performing miracles by his name, not be an authentic follower of Jesus? Well, the longer I thought about it, the easier it seemed that it could happen. Before I start, let me say that I am not saying who is and who is not going to heaven. I will leave that to God. What I am considering are the stumbling blocks that prevent us from doing the best we can in living out our call to be Jesus' disciples. Let me speak about four of these stumbling blocks, first, doing "church" rather than living in the Body of Christ, second, praising the Lord, but never letting him "get under your skin," and third, loving Jesus, but not following his commandments. I can think of several other stumbling blocks, but they will have to wait for another day.

First, doing "church" rather than living in the Body of Christ. You can have lots of "organized religion," but not much Jesus. To me, this stumbling block is especially a danger for pastors, but lay people can also trip over it. Pastors can begin to see their

vocation as simply a profession and their church as an organization, not much different from a social club or a business. Many pastors once felt a call to serve and love Christ in their hearts, but the years of education, compromise, and political infighting have pretty much extinguished that flame. They are impressive in the pulpit, effective in staff meetings, and friendly at the coffee hour, but a closer look at their lives shows a pervasive spiritual shallowness. When they are not on the job, they rarely pray, read the Bible, or practice spiritual disciplines. Many of them have completely lost their faith in God. Instead, they believe in themselves as professionals and in the church as a beneficial social institution. If they are conservatives, the church is a worthy institution because it protects family values. If they are liberals, the church is a convenient cover for a fundamentally secular movement for social progress and liberation of the oppressed. These pastors fit Jesus' description of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." After a few years, their churches may be little more than "whitewashed tombs" as well. Under this kind of leadership, a congregation or even an entire denomination can separate itself from the Body of Christ. When the time comes, Christ may not recognize them as his disciples.

The second stumbling block is praising the Lord, but never letting him get "under your skin." I am deeply indebted to our visitor from Trinity Lutheran, who (along with her husband) is attending our Wednesday night Luke study, for introducing me to the phrase, "happy clappy churches." This phrase is sometimes used to refer to charismatic

churches, churches that emphasize noisy displays of the Holy Spirit during worship such as speaking in tongues, clapping, and dancing. However, the real growth in “feel good” worship has not been traditional charismatic worship, but in the praise services with their guitars, projector screens, and simple repetitive songs. It has become a mechanical formula—bits of scripture projected on screens, heartfelt vocal solos, sermons spiced up with video clips—that gives worship a deadening sameness, regardless of the denomination and the region of the country. Church becomes a hybrid of a soft rock concert and the Oprah show. However, the real problem is not with the format, but with the way that it promotes worship as an uplifting experience that recharges your spiritual batteries. Church becomes something you “do” because it is good for you, just like going on your exercise walk, and eating your vegetables.

Praising God is a good thing, but not because it feels good. By praising God, we recognize his beauty, power, and majesty, and thank him for all the blessings he has showered on us. However, if praise is the full extent of our worship, it has become a stumbling block. To deepen our worship, we have to let God, “get under our skin.” We may need to stop singing, dancing, and being entertained and wait quietly for the gift of grace. We need to catch what C. S. Lewis calls the “good infection” of grace. When we do that, we may start to itch. When we start to scratch that itch, we may find that we are painfully shedding our old skin to be reborn as a new person in Christ. Complete worship requires sacrifice. Paul puts it well in Romans 12, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve

what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” If all we do is praise God, and do not let God transform our persons and our lives, praising God is not enough to make us true disciples of Christ. As it says in James 3, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

Third, saying that you love Jesus, but not following his commandments, means the Bible has become a stumbling block. Some folks love Jesus, but they just don't want that “mean” old Bible! Some believe that once they are saved, it does not matter if they “backslide” and do wrong—they are still going to heaven. Others see Jesus as so sweet and loving that he will always forgive them, no matter how badly they behave. Finally, rather than changing their lives and values in obedience to Christ, some create a Jesus in the image of their own value system. Somehow, Jesus ends up being a free market Republican for some folks, while he is a feminist socialist for others. These people make their own Jesus, so that he endorses whatever they already planned to do! I am afraid that Jesus may not recognize any of these would-be disciples.

Jesus puts it very simply in John 14, “If you love me, keep my commands.” What are these commandments? In Mathew 2, a Pharisee asks Jesus, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Jesus says, in Mathew 5, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the

smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

The Law, the Old Testament, with its Ten Commandments, needs to be taken seriously by Jesus’ disciples. Following the Law is not the way we *earn* the Kingdom. That is *given* to us by grace because we have faith in Jesus. Nevertheless, this does not mean we can ignore the Law. Paul puts it well in Romans 3, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.” Moreover, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.” Finally, “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.”

Christ calls us to worship God in Spirit and Truth. Christ’s commandments, both the Law and the Prophets, and the Gospel of the New Testament are not a set of rules, or a roadmap to heaven, or “life’s instruction manual,” or a collection of magic formulas. They are the Truth. They are not easy to understand, they sometimes seem contradictory and mysterious, and they require careful study and interpretation. Nevertheless, they are the Truth. If we want to follow Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we need to live by the Truth. As Jesus said in John 8, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Today’s Gospel ends with the Parable of “The Wise and Foolish Builders.” For the wise disciple, the stumbling blocks we have discussed become foundation stones. A solid Christian life is built on belonging to a church that is part of the living Body of

Christ, on a heart that it open to sacrifice and transformation, and on a will that strives to live by the Truth of the Bible, the living Word of God. Notice that the rain falls on both the righteous and the unrighteous. The storm comes for both the true and false disciples. However, the false disciples, who rely on human strength, will ultimately come up against a test they cannot pass, no matter how strong they build, they will be broken. The true disciple admits that they have no strength against the storm. They dig and dig, breaking through their sin and weakness, until they find the strong rock of the cornerstone, “the stone that the builders rejected.” Their house that is built on God is already part of God’s Kingdom. Amen.

Bible quotations are from Today's New International Version (TNIV) © Copyright 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society, accessed via [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)