

Overcoming 'All Talk and No Action'

Commitment Sunday

Matthew 23:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 5, 2023

Last week was Stewardship Emphasis Sunday, and today is what we call Commitment Sunday. They are really two parts of the same service. A week ago, we looked at the story in Matthew 22 where Jesus was given a Roman coin and asked if it was lawful or not to pay taxes to the emperor. It was a trick question. Jesus surprisingly teaches that since the coin bears the image of the emperor, then give back to him what belongs to him. Then Jesus reveals that **since we bear the image of God, we, in a like fashion, are to give back to God what is God's. And that's our entire selves – time, talents, and resources** – to further God's kin-dom among and within us, and to work toward fulfilling God's mission and ministry for us, as individuals and as a community of faith.

With this understanding, we come to realize there **is no real separation from the spiritual and the material, from the sacred and the secular**, a hallmark of Celtic Christianity and spirituality. We also acknowledge **our human need to give is as strong as our need to receive**. A ministry of generosity becomes a way of life. A steward, as we discussed in length last Sunday, is someone who functions as a caretaker or manager of someone else's property, to whom she/he/they is responsible and accountable. The traditional understanding of good stewardship, biblically and as Presbyterians, is that all we are and all we have is a gift from God. We give of ourselves to promote the common good out of a sense of true gratitude for that which God has blessed us.

There is profound truth in the biblical principle, found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, that **'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'** (Matt. 6:21). Jesus' instructs us that when we look at where we *first* put our treasure (as a reflection of our values and priorities), that's where our heart, our passion, our energy will follow. Not the other way around. It becomes a matter of our **commitment**. Is it not true that to those things in which we commit nothing or very little of ourselves we will find that our heart is not really there either? **The primary question turns from asking, "Where do I want to commit my treasure so that it reflects my heart – my values and priorities?" to first asking: "Where do I want my heart to be – my passion and energy?" That's where you and I need to put our treasure first.**

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew 23 expands that lesson on good stewardship, especially as it pertains to putting our money where our mouth is, to overcome the "all talk and no action" syndrome. Jesus has had one controversy after another with the Jewish religious leadership. In this passage he portrays them as bad examples. The real problem that Jesus reveals is that the Jewish **scribes and Pharisees do not practice what they teach**. Yet giving them their due, Jesus does say that they sit in the seat of religious authority – Moses' seat – and that they actually *are* faithful in

teaching the law of Moses, the Torah. But **pious words and orthodox convictions alone do not make a person faithful.**

According to Jesus, the basic problem with the scribes and the Pharisees is not with *what* they teach, it is with what they *do* or *fail to do* with that teaching. **They are not truly committed to what they expect others to commit themselves to do.** Jesus says that the religious leaders lay heavy burdens on the shoulders of others, but do not lift a finger to help (Matt. 23:4). A life of faith, as we need to keep reminding ourselves, is not about strict rules to keep and doctrines to adhere to. It's about loving God, neighbor, self, even our enemies. It's about putting our faith into action in our daily lives.

Jesus also charges the scribes and the Pharisees with being more interested in appearances than in performance. "They do all their deeds to be seen by others." Ever run across somebody who constantly tries way too hard to have everyone else think that he/she/they is super religious and somehow closer to God than anyone else? (Reminds me of certain politicians.) **Our faith shouldn't become a fashion statement, something worn on our sleeves in hopes of impressing everyone else, let alone try to impose our beliefs on others.**

Jesus then comments that the scribes and Pharisees consider themselves to be superior to others, and that they consistently pull rank. They insist on the best seats in the house at banquets and at worship, and they love to swagger through the marketplace, to be saluted and called by titles of honor. In contrast, **in committing ourselves to Jesus' teachings on faithful discipleship, we are not to be preoccupied with rank and prestige, nor with a sense of entitlement and privilege!** Instead, we are to be humble, seeking the role of a servant no matter what position we hold in our lives.

While it is true that not everyone has the same gifts or fulfills the same role/function in the community of faith, we are all children of the same God and students of the same teacher, Jesus. Everyone, including you and me, has gifts to contribute and a role to play in God's kin-dom. I can't state that emphatically enough. When all is said and done,

there's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. This common theme in the Bible is echoed in words found in the book of James, "**Faith without works is dead**" (James 2:17; 26).

That brings us back to the issue of good stewardship. **Does your stewardship of time, talent, and money reflect that to which you are committed?** Does it reflect where you want your heart to be? Does it reflect your commitment to God and to the furthering of the kin-dom of God through the ministry and mission of this community of faith? A healthy and relevant congregation does not have the luxury of sitting back and letting someone else implement the mission and ministry of the church. For the church is all of us, working together!

On this Commitment Sunday, the question we each need to ask of ourselves is this: **What can I do in a very tangible way to help keep this community of faith healthy, alive, productive, faithful, and a place where people can come to be challenged, to be safe, to be transformed, to be themselves, to be encouraged, strengthened, and empowered to live life to the fullest and to love abundantly?**

That's how we help live into God's mission and ministry for us as College Hill. That's how we overcome the "all talk and no action" syndrome. I'll conclude with the following poem about commitment, which interestingly comes from the urbandictionary.com.

Commitment is what
Transforms the promise into reality.

It is the words that speak
Boldly of your intentions.
And the actions which speak
Louder than the words.

It is making the time
When there is none.

Coming through time
After time after time,
Year after year after year.

Commitment is the stuff
Character is made of;
The power to change
The face of things.

It is the daily triumph
Of integrity over skepticism.

Thank you for your commitment!

Amen.

Resources:

Thomas Long, *Matthew*

Tim Beach-Verhey, *Feasting on the World*

Urbandictionary.com – "Commitment"