



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Fourth Sunday After Trinity July 1st, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

Today's gospel reading is actually a portion of St. Luke's account of "The sermon on the mount," or as Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it, "That mount of a sermon." It is not accidental that it follows the calling of the twelve. Jesus gathered his Church together with the twelve at his side, and began to teach them the principles of his kingdom.

Now this is not a prescription for a happy and just society, nor is it a self-help recipe for a self-help salvation. What Jesus is showing is what it means to call him Lord. The message to the unbelieving world is repent and believe; to the Church it's summed up in the words of the Apostle Peter in his second epistle, "*Be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure.*" That is what Jesus is doing here. What he is saying, in effect, is that you know a tree from the fruit it bears. You do not expect grapes from a bramble bush nor apples from thorns.

There are those, who "imagine they have faith," as John Calvin puts it, but "whose lives reveal their faithlessness." In the words of the great reformer, "...men of no faith do at times distinguish themselves with commendable works, and in fact lead an excellent life, with no hint of ill-doing: so works... may be unrelated to faith." What is nevertheless unquestionable is that faith "without the testimony of good works is useless."

What we have in this sermon on the mount are some of the marks of authentic faith, which is what makes it so convicting. Jesus, you see, had a great following. There were many who were swept up on the wave of enthusiasm that surrounded His ministry. It's like seasons of revival in the subsequent history of the Christian Church. Following every awakening there was what historians call a great falling away. We see evidence of it over and over again.

When the Spirit of God is moving in power people are affected in many different ways. There are those who are impacted by the sheer force of it. They have a kind of emotional response to it, but there's no depth, and soon they fall away. There were those who followed Jesus for the miracles; some because He was a better teacher than any of the scribes and Pharisees. Still others because there was a lot to like in Jesus. But the question was whether the life of God was in them. What kind of change had faith made?

Faith is not easy-believism. It's an affectionate response of a renewed heart to a set of truth-claims which are believed on in such a manner that the whole of life is affected by them. We need to examine ourselves to be sure we are building our lives upon truth, and not religious sentiment! The Gospel, my friends, affects us in the depths of our personalities and transforms us in such a manner that we look at the world and everything in it completely different from the way we did before.

You see the importance of this when you hear of people committing murder and acts of terrorism in the name of Christ, blowing up abortion clinics, or else parading themselves outside churches during the funeral of a gay man, which happens all too often. The devil knows his Bible. *You believe God is one?* asks St. James; *you do well*, so do the demons.

There are marks of the new life which need to be seen. They will not be evident to the same degree in everyone, but like the fruit of the Spirit we read about in the letter to the Galatians their absence is a sign of counterfeit.

The mark of a life of true, authentic faith focused on in today's gospel, concerns our whole approach to

our brothers and sisters in Christ. Now, these are difficult verses in some respects and they have been misunderstood. Some have used verses like these to imply that we have no right to hold anyone accountable for anything. In fact, these verses get pulled out whenever someone is being held to any kind of standard. We are never to judge, we are told. In fact, this is the text for the antinomian, the person who believes that there are no rules to break and no laws to keep.

That is not what Jesus is saying. In fact, he's saying the exact opposite. The whole point of the parable in verse 39 is to show **how** to hold each other accountable. We have that funny image that begins in verse 41 where a man with a huge log sticking out of his eye is trying to clear away a tiny speck from his brother's eye. Jesus doesn't say the speck is unimportant. If it's left there he could go blind. What he does is tell the fellow to take care of the log in his own eye so that he can see clearly and remove the speck from his brother's eye. In other words, he is not rebuked for trying to improve his brother's vision, but for doing so with his own vision impaired.

How we are to understand the words, *do not judge; do not condemn*, and so on. Let me suggest a few answers. The first is the danger of holding people accountable for things God does not address in his word. I'm thinking of that form of fundamentalism that forbids things God does not forbid. You may have come across this. The terrible twelve, as we used to call them. No drinking, no dancing, no going to the movies, or smoking. And, of course, depending on the culture there may be other things on the list too, such as the way a person does their hair, or the clothes they wear to Church. This attitude is entirely wrong because when we judge people for things like that we are actually usurping the rule of God. We are putting ourselves in the place of God.

The second thing is this, there is the danger of holding people accountable for things God forbids, but in a censorious and arrogant way. The question then is one of attitude. We may be right in confronting a person. We don't do that enough, in fact, but we can do so in a manner that leaves the person humiliated. I get very nervous when I hear things like, "I don't believe in sugar-coating it. I say it like it is." Often those same people have a terrible time taking what they are happy to dish out.

The third thing is hypocrisy. It's like someone stamping their feet and rebuking everyone for having temper-tantrums. There's this enormous log in your eye. Get rid of it first. The key is in verses 37 and

38. When we hold each other accountable the motive is always to restore, and if we find something wrong with a Christian we had better be ready to do whatever it takes to help them overcome it.

This is the character of the new life that we are called to live. It's the fruit we bear when we abide in the vine. The Christian life is the blessed life. It's a life built upon the solid and immovable rock of the Word of Christ and the Law of love. The alternative is a life built on sand. What a terrible thought. We see it too often. It is one of the severest trials of ministry, when someone appears to come to faith in Jesus Christ, and begins to build what looks like a solid Christian profession, but then the winds of adversity blow, they confront some unanswered prayer, some personal tragedy, some disappointment and the whole thing collapses.

You build on sand when you build on experiences or emotions or feelings. The life that is truly blessed, and the life that will persevere through storms and adversities is the life built on the rock of Jesus Christ in obedience to His Word. May it not be said of any of us, *Great was the ruin of that house*. But rather may each of us be able to say at the end of our journey,

I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith, I have finished the course. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.