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Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Moving Mountains: Mount of Beatitudes

Matthew 7:24-29

This morning in our continued journey through the mountains of scripture, we turn to the Mount of Beatitudes; to the very last words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.
[Read Mt. 7:24-29]

Recently we had a Town Hall meeting to discuss some important issues taking place in our denomination. We invited questions and one man spoke up. He said that he had only recently returned to the church after being away for 25 years. Part of the reason he left in the first place was a spirit of legalism. He loved the grace he had experienced at Chapel Hill and was concerned that we remain a church that was all about Jesus and not about rules and religion... which was **not** the Jesus he had rediscovered.

Rules and religion... it doesn't sound very attractive, does it? My friend is right. Jesus hated legalism. His harshest words were reserved for the religious leaders of the time—the Scribes and Pharisees. One commentator translates "Scribes and Pharisees" as "Senior Pastors and Elders," just to remind us how easily religious people can fall into the trap of believing that religion is mostly about making and following the right rules.

Matthew devotes one whole chapter, chapter 23, to this topic. In it, Jesus chews out the religious leaders. He mocks their hypocrisy to the crowd: "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." He makes fun of their flamboyant religious garments and their egos. He even pronounces curses on them because they pile endless rules upon the poor people—rules about oaths and tithing and washing techniques and dietary practices. He calls them hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, snakes and murderers.

Wow! It's no wonder Jesus wasn't their favorite guy. He abhorred holier-than-thou religious zealots who defined what it meant to be God-pleasing as a long list of rules. This made Jesus furious because their rules kept broken people away from the God who loved them—the poor and sick and wretched and outcast and leper and "sinner." So if that is how we define what it means to be a Christian and to be the Church then I agree with my friend; it won't please God, either.

But here's the question I posed to him in a conversation later that week: When you say that Jesus wasn't all about rules, do you mean to say that it didn't matter to

Jesus how we behave? When you say that Jesus accepts us just as we are—which is true—do you mean to say, then, that He is content to leave us that way? Does pure faith in Jesus really mean that there are no rules by which we live? No standards to guide our sexuality, our speech, our business practices, our treatment of our spouse and children?

Jesus did welcome every person who came to Him... especially the broken, sinful rejects of society. He welcomed them, **and** He called them to change... to be different... especially in His Sermon on the Mount. Every preacher works pretty hard on the conclusion to a sermon. It is, after all, the last thing the people will hear. It should send your listeners out with conviction and determination to do what they have heard. Listen again to the conclusion of Jesus' most famous sermon:

"But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and **does not put them into practice is** what? **Foolish**. Foolish like the man who builds his house on sand. Why? Because sand is not stable. It is not strong. It shifts and wobbles. The first time strong winds come, everything built on that unstable land crashes to the ground.

Jesus is saying: "It is not enough to listen to me. You must do what I say! It is not enough to be impressed with my teaching; you must put it into practice." In other words, if we really call Jesus "Lord" it means that we must do what? Obey Him! Live the way He calls us to live. And just to underscore the point, could I take you to the very last words Jesus speaks to His disciples in Matthew 28. The Great Commission. Remember, they were probably standing on this very same mountain—the mountain where Jesus had preached His greatest sermon. Remember how Jesus sent His disciples forth:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Jesus says, "I have been given **all authority** to tell you what to do. So here it is: Go make disciples of all nations. Baptize them and teach them." **Teach them what?** "To **obey** everything I have commanded you." **Did you hear that?** He didn't say, "Teach them everything I have taught you." He didn't say, "Pass on my timeless wisdom for others to enjoy and reflect upon." He said, "I want you to teach them to **obey** my words." Why? Just because He is the boss? Just because He can tell us what to do? No, because He made us and knows us. He knows what gives us life and what steals it... what builds us up and what tears down. He gave His own life to save ours and doesn't want us to squander that second chance by

persisting in destructive life choices. Unlike the Pharisees who loved raw power and lorded it over despised, broken people, Jesus asks for obedience because He loves us and because His ways give life!

I understand the reluctance for us to be a church that is all about rules. Jesus' scary warnings to the Pharisees make it clear that He is not interested in self-righteous people pointing their bony fingers of judgment at others. But really, beloved, when you hear Jesus say, "...put my teachings in to practice;" "...**obey** all that I have commanded you," can you really claim that Jesus doesn't care how we live? That it doesn't matter to Him what kind of moral decisions we make as long as we continue to be His buddies?

Christianity **shouldn't** be about a bunch of rules made up by religious leaders. But if Jesus has some rules for us—if Jesus has a list of things that we ought to do to live our lives His way—isn't that different? Isn't that worth paying attention to? So what were those life-principles—those "rules", if you will—that Jesus thought were worth obeying? Well, how about a quick review of the Sermon on the Mount? Did you know that Ghandi established a community built upon the Sermon on the Mount? He wasn't a Christian but he knew wise living when he saw it. What were Jesus' rules for wise living in his Sermon on the Mount?

Well, He said that you should control your anger and make peace with your brother quickly. He said that not only should you remain faithful to your wife... you shouldn't even lust after another woman. He spoke of the sanctity of marriage between a man and woman and said that divorce was a sin. He said that you should keep all your promises. He said that you should resist the temptation to seek revenge; in fact, that you should **love** your enemy. He said to give money away generously and anonymously; He said to pray secretly and fervently; He said to fast privately.

He said that people who were stupid enough to put their trust in stored up wealth would discover that it had rotted away...along with their hearts that trusted money more than God. He said that it was a sin to worry, and that it was a sin to be judgmental. But He also said that we ought to exercise judgment—which is different than being judgmental—so that we can discern false prophets from true ones. And He said something that does not sound very inclusive—in fact, it sounds very **exclusive**. He said that the way to God was narrow, not wide and that lots of people who thought they would get to God would be shocked to discover that they did not. Even those who called Him "Lord" and did impressive miracles might not make it into heaven because they didn't really love God; they were just using Him for their own selfish purposes.

After all these teachings, then Jesus says... if you hear these words and put them into practice, you will be like a wise man who built his house—his life—upon rock. But if you don't obey my words, you will be like the man whose house—whose life—is built on sand; it will come crashing down upon you.

So I ask again, can you listen to the Sermon on the Mount and come away with the idea that it doesn't matter to Jesus how we live? That as long as we have good feelings about Jesus and consider Him our buddy, we are fine?

We do not want to be a church full of Pharisees with long lists of rules that keep people out of God's grace and make ourselves feel morally superior. If we do that, we will be exactly like the Pharisees to which Jesus said, "Woe unto you!" which was another way of saying, "**What you are doing is going to kill you!**"

But if we claim to be followers of Jesus it must mean, surely, that when the Lord tells us to do something—to live a certain way, to behave in a certain manner—**surely** it must mean that we obey Him, right? Otherwise, isn't our claim of "Lordship" a mockery?

[Invite a student forward]

_____, you are about to embark on a great adventure. You will go away to college, and you will have the opportunity, for the first time, to begin to build your own house. Up until now, you have lived in the house of your family. Perhaps it was your parents who brought you to church... your parents who took you to Sunday School... your parents who taught you about Jesus and His rules for living the abundant life. But now, you get a chance to build your own house. **The question is... upon what will you build it?**

You will hear many voices in college. Voices from professors and from fellow students. Voices that tell you to ignore your upbringing—to jettison the narrow, exclusive teachings of Jesus. Voices saying there is no such thing as universal truth: that truth is relative, that behavior does not matter, that the real definition of love is tolerance... tolerance of any and all behavior. That is not what you've learned here. It is not what you have been taught in your community. And most importantly—get this—it is not what Jesus said. You will have the choice to throw away everything you have learned and to swallow this new teaching, hook line and sinker. If you do—if you choose to build your house upon that moral foundation—do you know what that foundation will look like? [Pour sand]

Or you can believe what your parents have taught you. You can believe what your church has taught you. You can believe what Jesus has taught you because you know He loves you, gave His life for you and wants **your** life to be full and good! You can believe that the things Jesus teaches are not just killjoy rules to be followed but actually life-giving principles. The more you obey them, the fewer your regrets, the lesser your guilt, and the richer your life. And if you choose to believe and obey Jesus' words, this is what you will build your new house on. [Rock]

[To all] Jesus doesn't want Chapel Hill to be a church of rules. But He does want us to be His followers—to obey Him because we really believe that His way, and not the world's ways, is the way of life. May God bless us with that delicate balance of grace and truth.

[**For commissioning of graduates**, parents or others pour sand and rock into their hand as these words are pronounced: “You are embarked upon the next great chapter of life. You are beginning to build your own house. As you lay the foundation of that house, may the false wisdom of this world slip through your fingers, leaving only the solid rock of Jesus and His way upon which you will build your life.”]

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don’t teach! Listen and reflect on God’s word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. In what way was Jesus “anti” “rules and religion?” Is there any way in which “rules and religion” could be viewed positively?

2. What biblical evidence do we have that Jesus cared about the way we chose to live our lives?

3. How can a church find the balance between calling people to a holy lifestyle and not becoming Pharisaical?