

“HEARING AND DOING”

Matthew 7:12-29
September 3, 2017
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I've never been a huge fan of the Golden Rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." In fact I had intended to pass over it without comment. Imagine my disappointment when my favorite commentary on Matthew claimed that it was a summary of the whole of Jesus' ethical teaching in this sermon. I'm not sure I agree with that, but I do heartily endorse Dr. Hare's caution to read the rule in the context of the sermon. So for example, we are not to judge because we wouldn't want to be judged; we are not to retaliate because we wouldn't want others to strike back at us; we are to be generous because we would like others to be generous toward us. These things make sense, but as Dr. Hare reminds us, to treat a person from another culture the way we would like to be treated may in fact be offensive. Or to "throw wild parties for others because we like to go to wild parties" seems not to be in the spirit of the rule.

We need to understand the golden rule in light of Jesus' urging us to love our enemies, to be merciful, to let go of anger and greed. The golden rule ought to remind us to be genuine instead of arrogant, to prefer heavenly treasures to earthly. It should draw us into the kingdom of God, not into a den of thieves. The problem with an indiscriminate use of the golden rule is that if your desires are not in accord with the kingdom of God, the action may not get you there. That's why Jesus has a few more things to say and that's where I want to focus our attention this morning.

You could think about this last part of the sermon as a series of disclaimers or qualifiers. The first describes an easy road and a narrow gate. Jesus knows that the path he describes in this sermon is not easy. It's easy to refrain from murder, not so easy to let go of hate. It's hard to give up the idols that have shaped our lives, hard to let go of the love of money. Hard to give up worry, to stop judging, to stop comparing ourselves to others. It's hard to rely on God instead of depending on our own resources. The gate is narrow. If you've really been listening to what Jesus is saying, you will understand that following is not easy.

The second caution Jesus offers is that not everyone has your best interests at heart. There are people who will mislead you. There are the prosperity gospel preachers who believe that God wants you to have wealth. Nothing wrong with money, of course, but these preachers lead you to believe that it's the sure mark of the faithful. The narrow gate says you can't serve both God and money.

There are the judgment preachers who like to talk about the moral decay of America. They like to condemn gays and lesbians, or to characterize "pro-choicers" as abortionists. It's so easy to tear someone down, but the narrow gate asks us to go easy on judgment, to be more mindful of our own sins rather than the sins of others.

There are other, not necessarily religious, leaders who are calling us to chase after money, power, prestige, and self-indulgence. Don't worry about these things, Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom... enter by the narrow gate."

A third caution warns against having a foot in both worlds: there are those who claim to have worked for Jesus, and yet are unknown to Jesus. These are folk who have sort of heard what Jesus is saying, but whose heart is not in it. They can see the narrow gate, but hope that the broad path that they are on will eventually lead around to it.

Maybe you're on one of these broad roads but would like to find the narrow gate. Jesus has a suggestion. Build your house on rock. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock." It's simply a matter of hearing and doing.

Of course there's nothing simple about it. Jesus said early in the sermon, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder.'" We've all heard this and we know that community cannot function where this rule is routinely violated. But Jesus goes on to tell us that anger is a form of murder, that insults are a form of murder, and that hatred is a form of murder.

We've all heard that adultery is wrong, but even lusting after another person can harm your soul. The Sermon on the Mount is a lesson in hearing. Jesus wants us to sharpen this sense so that we can more fully understand what God wants us to do. In this appendix to the sermon, Jesus is offering a way for processing the sermon. He wants us to begin by addressing the question of what we are hearing and to finish with some kind of resolution.

He begins with murder and asks us to listen more closely, to consider where we may have violated the spirit of this law. He pushes us beyond murder to hate and then he asks us to deal with that hate, to reconcile with those we have harmed. He asks us to do something about those impure desires of the heart, even to the point of plucking out the eyes. He asks us to get beyond the simple law of retribution (an eye for an eye) to a new ethic modeled on generosity. He asks us to go beyond loving our neighbor to loving even our enemy.

What are you hearing? This is half of the Christian life, half of what it means to follow Jesus. Prayer is as much about listening to God as it is speaking to God. Reading scripture is not so much about seeing words on a page as it is about the impact of those words on the human heart. What are you hearing?

As you look into the world around you, do you hear the same things that God hears? Do you hear the cries of people displaced from their homes by war, the cries of people who have lost homes in the floods? Do you hear the angry sounds of racism. So much of our response, of our calling, depends on what we are hearing.

This listening is two-fold. It begins with listening to the world and challenging ourselves to hear the world as God hears the world. This is not all pain and sorrow. Certainly God hears the victims of violence, and the sounds of brokenness; but God also attends to the beauty of the lilies and song of the sparrow. God hears the devastation wrought by warring peoples, but also delights in the voice of the peacemaker. God hears the groans of the earth as people ravage it for its resources, but God also delights the sounds of the waterfall, the majesty of mountains, and the fruitfulness of the fields.

As we begin to hear the earth, both its cries and its jubilation, as God hears the earth; then we start to hear God speaking. The Sermon on the Mount offers us insight into what God thinks about our world.

It tells us that God grieves over the broken relationships to give rise to murder and adultery. God sees the ill-effects of arrogance and greed for human community. God understands the harm brought about by anxiety and fear. But it also tells us that God rejoices over healing, endorses mercy and generosity, and celebrates the goodness of creation.

When we hear the world as God hears the world, we begin to hear God... and when we hear God, we begin to understand what a God wants us to do. Each little piece of this sermon moves from hearing to doing: from understanding the hate that underlies brokenness to the act of reconciliation, from perceiving the evil desires that cause unfaithfulness to making a plan to curb those desires, from the self-righteous hypocrisy of showy religion to nurturing the spirit of one's heart; from insight into effects of greed to acts of generosity. Every step through the sermon, Jesus moves us from hearing to doing.

In the end it really is quite simple, though not easy. Go back through the sermon on your own. Read it again. Ask yourself: "What am I hearing?" Then ask yourself: "What am I going to do about it?" And then, as you go through the day, do the same. What am I hearing in my world and what am I going to do in response to what I hear?

May God grant us ears to hear and hearts to do this, that our lives might reflect the purpose and goodness of God. Amen