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Two Houses in a Storm (Matthew 7.24–29)

JERRY TAYLOR

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount by using a parable that confronts us with two choices. Once we hear the words of Jesus we can either choose to put them into practice, thus being like a wise builder who builds his house upon a rock, or we can choose not to put them into practice, thus being like a foolish builder who builds his house upon sand.

Each choice will be thoroughly tested. According to the parable both houses will face harsh weather conditions. How well each construction holds up during severe weather will be determined by the strength or weakness of its foundation. It is during severe crisis when the strength or weakness of a foundation is fully revealed.

Therefore a life constructed on the words of Jesus will withstand the full blast of a Category 5 storm. But a life constructed on the words and opinions of humans will face total ruin in the midst of the same storm. For this reason the words of Jesus are more essential than all other words spoken in the world.

WORDS

The world is filled with words. It is filled with graceful words that make peace and with angry words that make war. Words are boxcars in the train of thought, often carrying toxic energy into the public square.

The words of Jesus, if communicated correctly, have the capacity to move the world towards a healthy humanity. On the other hand, words that do not belong to Jesus are often used as weapons of mass deceit that covertly coerce people into practices that conflict with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The Genesis account of creation shows that God is the first communicator. However, just as God speaks creative words, Satan follows by speaking words contaminated with evil intent. It is satanic speechmaking that disrupts the harmony of society in the Garden of Eden. Since Satan's first speech to Adam and Eve, his public speaking career has soared to the heights of smashing success. Not only does Satan display the ability to use his own words to undermine the words of God, he also demonstrates the artistic ability of a ventriloquist.

In Genesis Satan makes his first speech through the mouth of a snake. Since then, Satan has upgraded his tactic from speaking through a single serpent to speaking through an entire den of serpents. Satan pulls the strings that move the mouths of public serpents. He is the chief speechwriter, putting his lying words into speeches that mislead unsuspecting loyalists to support brutal activities that ruthlessly strike against the cheek of the Sermon on the Mount.

In the Old Testament these public serpents were called false prophets. False prophets spoke false words that led to what Walter Brueggemann calls a "false consciousness."¹ Deceptive and misleading words spoken by false prophets are the greatest threat to the public safety and social harmony of any society. Samuel Johnson quotes Sir Thomas Brown who once said, "The devils do not tell lies to one another, for truth is necessary to all societies: nor can the society of hell subsist without it."²

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Augsburg: Fortress, 2001), xiii.

2. Samuel Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (1846), 366.

Albert Camus says, "We have a right to think that truth with a capital letter is relative. But facts are facts. And whoever says that the sky is blue when it is gray is prostituting words and preparing the way for tyranny."³

As a Christian I believe that the truthful words of Jesus activated in the lives of Christians are essential to the peaceful longevity of stability in any society. In the broader literary context of Matthew 7, Jesus makes it clear that false prophets are the greatest threat to people hearing and putting his words into practice.

FALSE PROPHETS

Jesus says in Matthew 7.15 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them." False prophets have a peaceful exterior but their inner nature is a swirling chaos of violence moving about like a tornado looking for a place to touch down. They are grievous wolves that spare not the flock. They are greedy for power, gain and self-promotion by any means necessary.

False prophets seek to convince the disciples of Jesus that the Sermon on the Mount is impractical in the real world. However, false prophets do see some value in the words of Jesus. They see his words as a valuable commodity to be sold for profit in the marketplace of religious consumerism. Jesus knew that false prophets would always be in popular demand. False prophets have a market that will never suffer a slowdown or recession, because religious consumers tirelessly shop for doctrines of easy-ism. They go from church to church, like going from yard sale to yard sale, eagerly looking for smooth words that are for sale.

Religious consumers are shopping for words with smooth edges that will calmly caress their feelings of guilt that arise when they intentionally choose not to put into practice the words of Jesus. They bargain hunt for words that give them permission to seek the destruction of not only their actual persecutors but also the destruction of anyone who could potentially propose a threat of persecuting them in the future. They want modern prophets who will tell them that they don't have to endure persecution like the prophets of old, that they never have to suffer insult by others who spread false propaganda about them saying all kinds of evil against them for Jesus' sake.

RELIGIOUS CONSUMERS

Religious consumers want theologians to serve as Augustinian apologists to prove that Jesus endorses using an earthly government to protect Christians from any potential threat of religious persecution. Religious consumers want to buy the services of the theologically trained that can prove by human logic that good cannot overcome evil and that Satan actually can cast out Satan by the mutual exercise of evil on both sides.

Christian consumers seek to purchase the intellectual services of academic soothsayers who give them ethical sanction to desire leaders who refuse to let their "yes" be yes and their "no" be no, leaders who are willing to lie, deceive, mislead and distort the truth when it is believed to be done to protect and preserve the interest of our group, be it race, religion, corporation or nation.

Religious consumers are scouting for the skilled wordsmith that gives them moral permission to store up treasures on earth in barns that grow bigger in each economic growth cycle, while they, with apathetic indifference, watch a bleeding and hungry Lazarus on their security cameras begging for mercy at the entrance to their beautifully adorned security gates.

Christian consumers continue to worship at the altar of mammon as they watch and listen to televised preachers standing on the prosperity platform teaching Christians that it is possible to serve both God and money. They shop for rainy words that water down the message of the Sermon on the Mount with such saturation that it causes moral mudslides in the lives of Christians, leaving them unprepared to respond nonviolently to the presence of evil in our world today.

3. Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 168.

CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY

Cultural Christianity has subliminally conditioned Christians to be willing to hate and to kill their enemies without mercy when it is deemed necessary. In this very critical hour in human history, I am afraid that many Christians have exchanged their "kingdom consciousness" for a "cultural consciousness." Their foundation is no longer the words of Jesus but the words of men. However, the truth remains that whatever the foundation is, it is going to be thoroughly tested.

The final judgment is not the only time when the foundations of our well constructed lives will be tested. The foundations of our lives will also be tested during historical periods of intense human conflict, social strife, civil unrest and international power struggles that unfold across the aging face of this tired planet. Unless Christians remain radically committed to living the Sermon on the Mount in this nation, we will have no way of stormproofing our society against the social storm clouds that are gathering on yonder horizon.

Hearing and witnessing the televised violent and bloody clashes between warring factions in third world countries ought to help us see all the more clearly the need for Christians to sincerely embody and live out Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount within the context of our own nation. If the hour should ever return in this nation when civil struggle turns overtly violent, I pray there will be enough Christians left in this country that still believe in Jesus' message of nonviolence. I pray that Christians will be prepared to serve as stabilizing salt and loving light in the midst of a nation that is growing tired and weary of words that express superficial politeness in the pretentious guise of political correctness.

If you have watched television or listened to the radio during the present political season you will have seen evidence that our nation is possibly sliding in the dangerous direction of social conflict.

The airwaves of this nation are being filled not with the words of Jesus but with the toxic words of anger. More and more people in this country are being recruited to build their lives upon the unreliable quicksand of anger, rage, hostility, bitterness and vindictive retaliation. Angry preachers and angry radio personalities use their public platform as a long-handled spoon to stir vigorously into the raw emotions of human anger. Their angry words are turning the American melting pot into the American boiling pot. Many Christians are substituting the voice of the chief shepherd with the voices of the mad prophets of the airwaves who are driven by a spirit of anger.

Many radio and television personalities have become the dominant pulpits in our society. They are boldly preaching a message that is not inspired by the Holy Spirit and does not embrace the nonviolent values of Jesus Christ. While these pulpits of the airwaves are sounding their message with great volume, many of our church pulpits have become shamefully timid or strangely silent in proclaiming the gospel of peace and reconciliation in regards to race, gender, politics and religion.

The pulpits in the churches of Jesus Christ must not be intimidated by the influence that angry media personalities possess over the people who sit in the pews on Sunday. Preachers must not be afraid to loudly proclaim from the rooftops that the church of Jesus Christ is built upon the solid foundation of a nonviolent Christ who is the prince of peace. The words of Jesus are so important that they must be spread throughout our nation and world by those whose beautiful feet are shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. Our nation and our world cannot afford to go long without hearing the words of Jesus preached. For how shall they hear these words without a preacher? And how shall we preach the words of Jesus with love, unless we encounter the God of peace and become intuitively one with his feelings and passions for a wounded and fragmented humanity?

THE NONVIOLENT CHRIST

As preachers of the nonviolent Christ we will lift our voices even if we have to sing a solo of a new song in the face of an angry chorus of voices that insist on singing the same tired old song of racial, religious and political division. As preachers of the words of Jesus we will no longer practice the violence of silence while watching hatemongers spread their venomous malice all over this land and country. We must not be silent

while the “war of words” escalates into a “world of war.” As preachers of the words of Jesus we will speak words of truth on behalf of all God’s offspring who are suffering in this country and around the world. With humble truth we will peacefully confront those who seek to ride the surfboard of greed upon the massive wave of global wealth that is being pushed inland by the high tide of cheap labor.

As preachers of the words of Jesus we will encourage all Christians to untangle allegiance from institutions that demand the surrender of soul and integrity for the preservation of any kingdom that is of this world. As preachers of the words of Jesus we will not fight for the right to bear arms, but we will fight for the right of all races and political persuasions to lock arms in peace, therefore together in Christ becoming artisans of peace. While others arm themselves with the weapons of self-defense, we will arm ourselves with the nonviolent weapon—the sword of the Spirit, the word of God.

CONCLUSION

The words in the Sermon on the Mount are meant to be put into practice. Jesus’ words are not tennis rackets used to volley theological ideas back and forth on the court of scholarly discussion. Too often we have become prisoners of words and endlessly trapped in meaningless vocabulary. The words of Jesus call us to action. When Jesus calls us, his words do not invite us to take a seat; they invite us to take a stand on the rock of ages.

Jesus said, “Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16.18). As we stand on the rock of truth, we stand on the solid fact that Jesus Christ is the protector and defender of his followers. We do not look to Constantine for security; we look to Christ as our only savior. We stand on Jesus’ words by putting them into practice.

Because his divine nature is in us, by the power of his Holy Spirit we are empowered to put the words of Jesus into practice come hail or high water! Putting the words of Jesus into practice is the only way we as Christians will be able to follow the nonviolent Christ in the midst of a world that is in social crisis. Putting the words of Jesus into practice is the only way that we will be empowered to safely wade through the rising waters of social unrest when the floodgates of social conflict are opened. Putting the words of Jesus into practice is the only sure way to weatherize cold hearts and to stormproof our society against the inclement weather that is in the social forecast of hatemongers.

We will stand on the solid rock when mean-spirited words of false prophets form a severe emotional weather system that moves across this country and world, endangering all expression of spiritual life. We will stand on the solid rock when hateful words from our enemies fall around us like raindrops from a pregnant storm cloud. We will stand on the solid rock when the meteor-sized hail of bitter retaliation leaves huge dents in our desire to forgive those who have trespassed against us. We will stand on the solid rock when the waters of persecutions are rising and Katrina-like winds of rage are blowing against us.

We refuse to stand on the sand of old grudges. We refuse to stand on the sand of rotting wealth. We refuse to stand on the sand of undying anger. We refuse to stand on the shifting and inconstant sand of human popularity that comes from group loyalty. Instead we have decided to follow Jesus. We will stand on faith, hope and love, even when our legs are tired and our feet are weary. We will stand on prayer, even when we don’t feel like praying for those who spitefully use us and say all manner of evil about us because of Jesus. We will stand on forgiveness because we know how much he has forgiven us. Let us stand together, children, to the glory of our Father.

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