

# Avoiding the 'All Talk and No Action' Syndrome

## Commitment Sunday

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

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Last week was Stewardship Emphasis Sunday, and today is Commitment Sunday. They are really two parts of the same service. A week ago we looked at the parable of the Talents found in Matthew 25. We reflected upon how Jesus' point may have been that **to refuse to take risks, to play it safe, and to bury our time, treasure, talents, and love in the ground is not to be the mark of a follower of Jesus.** Christian discipleship, far from being a safe and easy path of life, is actually a high-risk venture.

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew 23 expands that lesson on good stewardship, especially as it pertains to (to use the slang) putting our money where our mouth is. In other words it has a lot to say about avoiding the 'all talk and no action' syndrome.

**A steward is someone who acts as a caretaker or administrator of someone else's property, to whom he or she 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 of God. We give of ourselves to promote the common good, then, out of a sense of true gratitude for what God has blessed us with. But you know all of this. Not only is it spoken every year during a church's annual stewardship campaign, but it's also something I bring up often throughout the year in different contexts.

I have read countless articles about stewardship over the years. To be honest, most have left me a bit cold. Some try to use not-to-subtle guilt to convince church members to give as much as they can, knowing that in this day and age few people give anything close to a 10% tithe of their income. I read a few years back that the average Presbyterian pledges around 2.0%-2.5 %, and that's better than some denominations. Other articles on stewardship try to persuade folks that giving and pledging to the church is important because it is not in the same category as giving to every other non-profit organization that they support.

Saying that, I do think there is 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). Notice that it's not the other way around – that where your heart is, that's where you'll put your treasure. No, Jesus' instructs us that when we look at where we put our treasure, that's where our heart, our passion, will be also. **In stewardship terms, that means that we should approach the pledging our time, talents, and financial resources to the church NOT because that's where our heart lies; but rather, when we commit**

**ourselves to the life and ministry of the church in order to further of the realm of God in our midst, that's where we will find that our passion and energy lies as well.**

**In other words, to those things in which we commit nothing of ourselves, we will find that our heart is not really there either. The primary question turns from 'Where do I want to commit my treasure?' to 'Where do I want my heart to be?'**

The passage from Matthew 23 has something to say about that as well. Jesus has had one controversy after another with the Jewish religious leadership. In this passage he portrays them as bad examples. Therefore, Jesus encourages his followers (as does the gospel writer Matthew encourage his church) to not imitate their remote and pompous leadership style. To be true to a strict, literal reading of this text, that's more a condemnation upon pastors of churches than it is about church members. So yes, this is one of those biblical passages that I keep before myself as I stare into the mirror.

Perhaps the main 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*. They are not truly committed to what they expect others to commit themselves to do.

Jesus says that they lay heavy burdens on the shoulders of others, but do not lift a finger to help (Matt. 23:4). Religious leaders were laying out a program of life that consisted of the keeping of a myriad of rules and directives. That probably included a huge laundry list of "don't to this, and don't do that." **Since it's impossible to follow nitpicking regulations, Jesus was in favor of the larger moral vision of 'love God and love your neighbor.'**

I know that some of you have come out of religious backgrounds that also sought to burden people with an impossible list of do's and don'ts. I use to impose such things upon myself, only to finally realize that **it's impossible to recognize the grace of God through such rules and regulations. One hopefully learns that committing oneself to trying to be perfect is not the same as committing oneself to furthering the ministry begun by Jesus.**

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 is uber religious and somehow closer to God than anyone else? **Our faith shouldn't become a fashion statement, something worn on our sleeves in hopes of impressing everyone else.** Faith and praise must not degenerate into flash and pomp.

Jesus also 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 committing ourselves, however, to Jesus' agenda for discipleship we are not to be preoccupied with rank and prestige. Instead, we are to seek the role of a servant.** Again, this especially applies to church leaders, and specifically to pastors.

Jesus' understanding of discipleship, and Matthew's understanding of the church, was strictly non-hierarchical. Equality before God insists that everyone take their place among God's children. Not everyone has the same gifts or fulfills the same

role/function in the community, but all are children of the same God and students of the same teacher. **Everyone has a role to play and gifts to contribute in God's kingdom.** I can't state that emphatically enough.

When all is said and done, to borrow a phrase common among our more evangelical brothers and sisters, we must walk the walk, and not merely talk the talk. Or in the immortal words of Morpheus from the awesome movie, *The Matrix*, he encourages Neo (who is still having a hard time believing that he is 'the One'), **'There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path,'** which Neo is doing. Or in yet other words, we are called to put our faith and our commitment into action. **Our deeds much match our words.** This common theme in the Bible is echoed in words found in the book of James, "Faith without works is dead."

**And that brings us back to the issue of good stewardship. Does your stewardship of time, talent and money reflect what you are committed to? Does it reflect where you want your heart to be? Does it reflect your commitment to God and to the furthering of the kingdom of God through the ministry and mission of this congregation?**

One more thing. Throughout this country, we hear a lot about being overly tired and burnt out. We also hear this in the church – among church members and clergy alike. And while there is a season for all things, like stepping back and letting others carry the weight of running the church for a while, there is also a time to jump back in to the fray and take a more active role in helping the church function as best as possible. **A vital and relevant church 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!**

**So on this Commitment Sunday, the question to ask yourself today becomes: What can I do in a very tangible way to help keep this church healthy, alive, productive, and a place where people can come to be challenged, to be safe, to be transformed, to be themselves, and to be encouraged, strengthened and empowered to live life to the fullest and to love abundantly.**

That's how we help fulfill our calling to ministry and mission? That's how we avoid the 'all talk and no action' syndrome.

Amen.

Resources:

Thomas Long, *Matthew*

Tim Beach-Verhey, *Feasting on the World*