A Missionary Reads the Bible – Matthew 7

Bible Studies on Mission

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Missions and Judgment, Studies of Matthew 7:1 – 28.

Mt 7:1 “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.[2] For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. [3] “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? [4] How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? [5] You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

Mt 7:6 “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

Mt 7:7 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. [8] For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. [9] “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? [10] Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? [11] If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Mt 7:12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Mt 7:13 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. [14] But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Mt 7:15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. [16] By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? [17] Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. [18] A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Mt 7:21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ [23] Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

Mt 7:24 “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. [26] 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. [27] The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Mt 7:28 When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, [29] because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

Study 1: Matthew 7:1 - 5

> Mt 7:1 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged.[2] For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. [3] "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? [4] How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? [5] You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

Matthew 7:1 is a verse we all know: "Judge not lest you be judged." Usually this verse is quoted to remind us that we shouldn't be harsh in our judgments, since we ourselves may be less than perfect. And that is a good warning to hear. Yet too often this verse is used as a good excuse to avoid making judgments about people and situations. And that is a misinterpretation. If we read all of Matthew chapter 7 we find that Jesus is telling his listeners that they must frequently make judgments about the people they meet and work with. "Don't cast pearls before swine," admonishes Jesus. "Beware of false prophets." How are we to know who the swine are, or who the false prophets are, if we don't make judgments?

Reading the whole first paragraph of this passage makes things much clearer. The issue isn't merely judging, but having the clear vision to do that judging. You need to get the log out of your own eye before you try taking the speck out of your neighbor's eye. Make sure you can see clearly before you try to correct your neighbor's vision.

For people in mission this is particularly important, because most of the time we are going to work in situations where our vision of others is hampered by our own limited experience and cultural biases. The logs in our own eyes may make it difficult, if not impossible, to remove the speck in our brother's or sister's eye.

There are several kinds of things that may blind us to the situation in which we do mission. Distractions that come from attending to our own needs are one. Many short term missionaries are less than effective because they are so busy trying to manage families, or businesses, or other things while they are on a work project. There is also a kind of tunnel vision that comes over us when our focus is so narrowly on the job at hand that we cannot take other people and their needs into account. Prejudice can also blind us, or even just not knowing how another culture works.

Beginning as early as the 17th century literacy levels in Europe began to rise, as did the use of printing presses. Pretty soon broadsheets, then newspapers, became common. By the 19th century Europeans and American were used to being presented with all kinds of printed news, propaganda, and advertisements – and expected to read them and perhaps be persuaded by them. In that situation printing gospel tracts, basically just advertisements for faith in Christ, was quite normal. Printed booklets telling people the gospel and inviting them to make a decision were an obvious and effective means of outreach. But what about elsewhere? In Malaya missionaries distributed several million tracts and portions of the New Testament in the late 19th century, more than 3 for every single person in the country. And they did almost no good. Most were used to start fires – providing useful tender in a wet climate. Why? Because missionaries didn't take into account that the Malaysians were almost all illiterate, and that even those who could read had almost no experience with "modern" news and advertising. These people simply didn't approach the printed word in way that Europeans and Americans approached it. Only when the missionaries got rid of their own cultural bias and presuppositions and began to try and clearly understand Malaysian situation and culture could they effectively offer Malaysians a clear view of the gospel in a form Malaysians could understand and accept.

For Discussion:

When have you found that your own inability to see a person or situation clearly has hampered you from helping others? What needed to be changed so that you could help others see clearly as well? As you think about the mission work you have already done, and that which you anticipate doing, what are possible forms of distraction, tunnel vision, and bias that may keep you from understanding and appreciating the people you are going to work with in another place or culture? What are some of your own prejudices about that may make it difficult to appreciate those who will go with you? What kinds of things do you need to know and understand so that you will be better prepared to see clearly and precisely the situation and people to which you are going?

As you prepare for mission, remember to work at getting the log out of your eye, so that finally you can help remove those things which blind other's to God's truth.

Study 2. Matthew 7:6

> Mt 7:6 “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.

As we saw in the last study, central to these verses in Matthew 7 is the idea of judgment; the judgments that God's people must make as they engage the world with the gospel. We are all asking, seeking, knocking on the door in order that we and our neighbors might receive good things from God. (Matt. 7:7-11) We are seeking to build on a rock, so that our work endures. (7:24-27) In the midst of our seeking, and our efforts to build, we face some serious questions. Who should we work with? Which people and groups are worthy to receive what we are offering, or are worthy to be our partners? Who can we trust to guide us in our work? Can we trust ourselves? The sayings of Jesus in this chapter can give us some specific, and thought-provoking, guidance to answering these questions.

The first of these concerns what we should offer and who should we work with and for.

Jesus tells his listeners that they are not to give what is holy to dogs, or to cast pearls before the swine. (7:6) The reason he gives is very simple: dogs and pigs will abuse both what you offer, and finally you yourself. This is an all too common experience. People who do not or cannot appreciate what they are given don't have ownership of the good things they receive. And so they tend to ignore them or abuse them. What we think of as pearls may just be clam shells to them. At worst they may actually despise what we think of as good and useful work or gifts.

When I was working with groups in Eastern Europe I visited the Methodist churches in Serbia. The Methodist Church in Germany had helped build a new church and mission center in the village of Kisac. The Germans had offered to build a very efficient, high tech, gas heating system for the center. The local church members turned down this gift, insisting on something that would burn firewood and oil as well as gas. To all of us this seemed ridiculous. The gas heading system was cheaper and cleaner than those burning wood or oil. But as the pastor explained, her congregation had just been through a 10 year war nobody had imagined would happen. In the war all gas supplies, and even oil, were cut off. Her people had little appreciation for heating systems that failed when oil refineries were bombed or gas lines were cut. Indeed, her ideal was a heater that burned the millions of corn cobs everyone had left over from feeding pigs and cattle. Corn both fed the animals and could keep a building warm. High tech solutions were inappropriate.

In other words we aren’t just judging who might be a pig or a dog. We also have to judge what is holy, what is a pearl.

Of course it isn’t always that what we offer is inappropriate. There are people who simply are not the right partners in the work of the gospel. Once I was asked to speak before a group of Christian business people in a large city in Sarawak. After the dinner one of the men expressed an interest in helping with the work of our seminary in training young pastors. So we met again over lunch. But it soon became clear that his agenda didn’t fit with Christian ministry. He openly boasted of cheating the government by avoiding taxes. And he made it clear that his goal was to essentially bribe native leaders to grant him land concessions by helping their children get into seminary. His moral vision was so corrupt that he really didn’t see a problem with this. There are other examples as well. Missionary schools in Asia were hurt because of they received money that came through taxes on opium and prostitution, and were compromised because they couldn’t speak out against such social evils. Offering our services to immoral governments that abuse the gospel to keep people poor is simply casting pearls before swine. Letting corrupt business interests profit from our preaching of the gospel is giving holy things to dogs. People may offer

us good connections and lots of money, but if they do not and cannot appreciate the gospel then in the end they will abuse God’s word and God’s servants.

As you reflect on this verse ask yourself these questions: 1. In the examples above how might the missionaries involved have better discerned the way their work would be received? 2. What might they have done differently in order to reach the people that would be open to receiving what they offered? 3. When have you found that you unwittingly offered people something they either did not or could not appreciate? 4. What did you do about it? 5. What do you need to know or learn in order to make good judgments about how your mission will be received, and what might be the most appropriate thing to offer in the place you are going?

Study 3. Matthew 7:7 Ask, Seek, Knock

> Mt 7:7 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. [8] For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. [9] “Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? [10] Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? [11] If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! [12] So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Of all the judgments missionaries make those of which we are least aware involve God. When Jesus tells his listeners to ask, seek, and knock he is urging that they are not to judge whether God will fulfill his promises. They should not think that God has given up on them. There is a fine line between the judgment that we have misunderstood God, and between judging that God has given up on us. Matthew 7:21 – 23 talks about a realistic judgment of ourselves, and we’ll come to that in the next study. What is important here is that Jesus reminds us to give God at least as much credit for faithfulness as we would give any decent parent! But of course we need to ask, seek, and knock. *On God's door*.

Too many Christian missions have begun their involvement in mission not by knocking on God's door, but by knocking down the door of someone they are convinced needs help. Not so many years ago a Christian businessman I know paid a visit to a country in Southeast Asia. There he saw a crying need for people to have decent work, and to learn useful skills. He didn't delay in using his resources and clout to buy an abandoned school building and equip it as an industrial training center for the factories he was convinced would soon be developed. By knocking on the doors of wealthy friends and government offices he built in a short time what might otherwise take years. And two years later it was still there. The equipment and labs were gathering dust and no students were to be seen, or for that matter teachers. It wasn't matter of poor planning. He had a plan. But something as big as a training school requires more than individual vision and hard work. There needed to be missionaries to lead and teach in his school, and there needed to be churches to support them. There needed to be students, each of whom would come with his or her own needs and difficulties. A project that big is, as they say, *A God Thing*. My friend had knocked on a lot of doors, but had not knocked on God's door first for help. When he finally did, through prayer and the prayers of God’s people, that help came in the form of all those human resources God makes available through the church.

Jesus' illustration in this regard is important. He points out that even the most hard-hearted humans will provide their children with good things rather than bad things. God will keep God's own commandment to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. God won't give someone who asks for bread a stone. That would be against the golden rule. God won't give someone who asks for fish a snake. That is equally against the basic law of doing to others as you would have them do to you. Yet the golden rule has a flip side. If, as a child, your or I asked for something foolish, dangerous, or demeaning we would be turned down by any decent parent. We would not want a parent who granted dangerous or fruitless requests. Nor do we want a God who aids us in our own folly.

The cartoon strip Calvin and Hobbs frequently featured Calvin in a state of high dudgeon because his parents (or Santa Claus, or God) wouldn't honor his requests for gifts like flame-throwers and F16’s. As a child he both needed to ask for help, and yet really didn’t have the capacity to judge what was good for both him and his neighbors.

It’s easy for persons in mission to get piqued with God because our desire to chase adventurous and even dangerous mission opportunities is met with a firm "no" from God. Vivian Grigg, who has worked for decades in difficult and sometimes dangerous places among the urban poor, once told my students that they must not only feel a call from God, they must ask for, and wait to

receive, the gifts for ministry. Only when God has provided the equipment - the strength, the safety net, the harness, and the helmet - will he say yes to our request to be sent as missionaries.

In practical terms this may mean that before God says yes to our missionary calling we'll need to link up with people more experienced than ourselves at working in a particular environment. We may need to become more physically fit, or just more spiritually mature. We may need co-workers along side us, and partners in the place to which we are going. God's “no” when we knock on the door may really be a "not yet." God is faithful, and gives us good things when we ask for them - if indeed they are good, for us and for the world we serve.

As you consider this verse ask yourself: Are there times that you or your church has failed to knock first on God’s door before launching into mission? Are there times that you asked from God things that would, in hindsight, have been foolish? How can you, and your church, both seek God’s favor before you go into a specific mission, and be alert for God’s guidance? Where have you seen God provide for you when you have asked?

Lesson 4 Matthew 7:13 – 14: The narrow and the wide

> Mt 7:13 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. [14] But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Faced with two gates, the wide and narrow, it might seem that little judgment is required. Yet the final words of this saying by Jesus indicate the real problem, "Only a few may find" the small gate that leads to eternal life.

Personally I don't like crowds, and I'm suspicious of those who jump on one bandwagon or another just because everyone is doing it. And that has often served me well. But simply being a contrarian isn't the same as finding the narrow gate. I well remember getting stuck in a massive traffic jam on an Austrian highway. The highway had become a huge parking lot due to some accident up ahead. Now unlike most highways in the U.S. this highway, perhaps because of the precipitous terrain, had no access roads. There were only exits. And when I saw my fellow travelers come to a halt as I quickly took the first exit I saw. It was smooth sailing off the highway and the words of Jesus danced through my mind. The wide path might not lead to destruction, but in my view it at least led to a big waste of time. I alone was smart enough to get off on the narrow road.

And it was narrow, a two lane farm road winding into the mountains. But how hard could it be to get to my destination? Map-less, I kept an eye on the sun and turned whenever I seemed to be going to far off course. Only once did I have a glimmer of unease - when it appeared that I had passed under the highway. And then the sun went down.

Let's just say that fortunately Austria is a small country. If you get very lost you either come to a border crossing or back to a village you've seen before. I did both before a helpful farmer directed me back to the highway, which I entered at exactly the same place I'd left it, four hours later. At least the traffic jam was clear.

The judgment about which road to take in mission isn't about what is popular vs. what is obscure. It’s about finding the right road, the place that God wants us to be, the path that leads to what God desires. After hurricanes Katrina and Rita mission teams flooded down into southern Louisiana and southeast Texas by the thousands. And I knew teams that intentionally stayed away, wanting to be pioneers in a new place instead of following the crowd. Yet in this case the devastation was so overwhelming, and the work so vast, that really only thousands of teams working together could make a dent. Finding the right road didn't mean avoiding the crowd. It did mean listening to a call from God that many others had also heard.

And sometimes the narrow road really does take some finding. In the year 2001 I was organizing a youth work project in Serbia. We knew of a church in desperate need of renovation, and began planning to spend a week working on it. Our plans were almost complete before we began seriously discussing the project with local church leaders, and discovered that they had quite a different agenda in mind. They couldn't imagine that teenagers either should, or could, do dirty and difficult work on an old building. They preferred that we come for a kind of exposure trip to visit different churches and projects. In the end it took several months of discussion, exploration, negotiation and mutual prayer before the whole trip was planned. My youth did most of the basic preparation for renovation that they had planned, and impressed our hosts with their tenaciousness and willingness to get dirty. Yet we also visited children's camps run by local churches, saw the devastation of the Balkans war in the 1990's, and worshipped along side our hosts in different village churches. It was a complex itinerary, difficult to coordinate, and yet in the end it was the right road. For out of that trip came not only follow up trips by other groups to

complete the church renovation, but also to support the children's camps and initiate a partnership in working to establish new congregations.

It is tempting sometimes to let others plan our missions for us, to buy package deals that lead us down the same road as dozens of other work teams. And it can be easy to choose the simple way in mission – a straight forward week of work on a single project chosen by someone else. And we may end up doing good work, but not great work. Sometimes the crowd is going down God’s path, but there are times when the narrow path of God's will involves listening to the stories of others, seeing and sharing in their lives, and doing complex work that involves more than just hammers, nails, and cement mixers. It means becoming involved with people, and worshipping with them the God who in Christ has joined us on the road to salvation.

As you consider your own experience in mission, and those of others, can you identify times when the easy path was not the right path? Are there times when going into mission the easy way also meant doing something less effective? Can you see some upcoming mission projects where doing some hard work in preparation, finding some complex and narrow paths to cooperation, might lead you and your fellow missionaries to a closer encounter with God’s spirit at work in the world? How do you judge which path to take in mission?

Study 5. Matthew 7:15 – 20: False Prophets

> Mt 7:15 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. [16] By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? [17] Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. [18] A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

In this passage Jesus poses one of the most difficult problems for missionary judgment – how do we judge whose leadership we should follow. We may like to think of ourselves as leaders, but almost inevitably when we consider moving into new cultures and situations we have to rely on others. Often mission projects begin when someone we meet tells us of a need and asks us to help fill it, or tells us of an institution that could use our support. It would be nice if we could always trust these apparently sincere people, but the truth is that we cannot. There are many charlatans, or just well-intentioned but incompetent Christians, making money off of Volunteers in Mission. How can we tell the difference?

When I was a pastor I got many requests for help from churches in Africa, and some of those requests even came from the family and friends of my church members. We soon discovered, however, that some of the people who were asking for help were actually incapable of using the money we gave them. They wanted to do good, but simply didn't have the skills necessary to carry through. One group asked us for money to buy a P.A. system for their church. But when a member of my church visited them while on holiday he discovered that they had no access to electricity or a dry place to store a P.A. Nor was the congregation big enough to need one. However, since he was there he was able to work with the congregational leaders to find more effective ways that we could support their ministry. Judgment in this case didn't mean judging someone else, it simply meant being partners in finding solutions instead of going wherever the wind seemed to blow.

A bigger problem are those whom Jesus calls "false prophets." They are people who simply want to make money or gain power by playing on the generosity of Christian people. They are wolves in sheep's clothing. You've encountered these folks in the form of emails promising millions of dollars to support Christian work, or asking for donations to orphanages in India or Africa. But they are not the only ones. I know personally of so-called missionaries who received tens of thousand of dollars from U.S. churches but whose work consisted of little more than living well and leading one or two bible studies a week. One "missionary" couple I met spent nearly six months a year at a tropical resort supposedly writing contextual Christian literature, but in fact copying books they bought from the U.S. and republishing them. I never found a church or agency that actually used their books. Lots of people are presenting themselves as missionaries and mission groups that really just want to rip us off.

All these people have good stories, so how can we tell which stories are true? It is especially difficult to make sound judgments about people from a different culture, or working in a place far away. A person who comes across as diffident and even insecure to Americans may be acting in a perfectly normal way for a leader in his or her own culture. Similarly someone who appears to us to be brash and even arrogant may simply be behaving in the way expected of a leader in that culture. The logical compliment of the wolf in sheep's clothing is the sheep who looks to us like a wolf. How can we tell?

Jesus makes a simple observation from nature – good trees bear good fruit. You don't expect good fruit from bad trees, and thus when you find bad fruit you know the tree is bad. You can tell a false prophet by the fruit of his or her life and so-called ministry. Of course this can be a problem if the fruit we are to recognize isn't familiar to us. I lived long enough in the tropics to

know how hard it is for a Westerner to judge a really good mango, or papaya – or even to appreciate a fruit like the durian, which many people think smells like rotten onions but which is really delicious.

Fortunately when Jesus talks about bearing fruit he's talking about fruit that anyone can recognize is good. It isn't fruit from the West, and it isn't fruit from Asia or Africa. It is the fruit of the Kingdom of God. Earlier in this passage he reminded his hearers of how you know that fruit when he told them to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. "That is the sum of the law and the prophets." The visible fruit of God's Kingdom is love of neighbor and love of God – in the very specific form of people treating one another as they themselves would hope to be treated. Beyond all the things which are shaped by culture there are things that clearly belong to the Kingdom of God. If people are being healed, fed, set free, comforted, and given sight then something or someone is bearing fruit. If all you find is a lot of talk, a lot of empty claims, a lot of sweet words or bitter accusations then whatever fruit it might appear to be, it isn't fruit from God.

Practically speaking this means that we must investigate every claim by everyone who comes to us offering opportunities to participate in or support mission work. If a person says that they are associated with a particular church or agency we have to check on that. If a person says that they have built a certain number of churches, or started a certain number of congregations, or distributed so many bottles of medicine then we need to find an independent way of seeing if they are really bearing fruit.

And this is why it is so important to have local partners in mission. There is almost no place in the world where there are not reputable and fair Christian denominations and agencies at work. I'm a United Methodist. Before I even consider supporting mission outreach in a particular area I check with local Methodist leaders and ask about their experience with the person leading the work. But I could as easily check with other local church leaders, or with people I know who travel regularly to the region. Mission fairs and other similar events provide a chance to network and see what is actually happening in a particular ministry. Discernment really isn't hard if we realize that glossy brochures and glib promises don't necessarily tell the whole story.

As you consider your own work in mission ask yourself when you have met wolves in sheep's clothing? How did you find out? What ultimately allowed you to judge between genuine partners in mission and people who just talk a good game? What are the fruits that you expect to see in order to judge the tree? And have you ever been surprised when great fruit came from a tree you didn't even recognize?

Study 6, Matthew 7:21 – 23

> Mt 7:21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' [23] Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

In this passage Jesus takes on the issue of identifying good fruit and turns it into a question not just about judging others, but about judging ourselves as well. The scene implied by these verses is of people coming before a king for judgment on their loyalty. It is almost exactly like the scene Jesus paints much more fully in Matthew 25:31 when the king separates the sheep from the goats. In this passage people come before the king and address him respectfully. "Lord, Lord" they say, and then proceed to tell him all the things they have done that flatter him. They have prophesied in his name, not to mention driving out demons and performing miracles. And of course the king is supposed to be flattered by these sycophants who constantly call him Lord and use his name in everything that they do. But the king cannot so easily be fooled. He isn't looking for words or claims of great deeds. He wants to know what kind of fruit results from their work. He wants to know, as in verse 24, if they put his words into action.

That can be tough on us, because it demands that we move from beyond the world of worship and praise of God to actually implementing God's desire for others to know Jesus Christ and the fullness of life in God. I was once having a conversation with a friend of mine who is getting on in years. I was interested in some political issues in his home church, as well at the national church. But he demurred. He told me this, "When I come before God I don't think he'll ask me about who should have been ordained, or about the proper meaning of complex doctrines. What he'll ask me is whether *out of his commands that I actually understood I obeyed any of them*."

This isn't to say that we should be simple minded, only that we realize that our own pious words and claims need to be backed up by action. One day a friend of mine and I were driving back to school from a weekend visiting another university. On the back roads of East Texas we passed a woman, clearly pregnant, hitchhiking. When my friend asked if we should pick her up all I could think about was the fact that I was tired, it was already late, and we had no idea where she wanted to go. So I gave him an easy excuse, "We can't pick up every hitchhiker on the road. And anyway we shouldn't encourage a dangerous practice." To which he replied, "She obviously doesn't need our encouragement, and we don't have to pick up every hitchhiker. *Just this one.*" So we did, and in the end it wasn't that big a deal, but it did mean that she got to a medical clinic in Austin before it closed.

I use this illustration because all too often we avoid *doing* God's will by *talking* about God's will. In some cases we overanalyze, spending so much time wondering if good deeds will have some kind of bad consequences that we end up doing nothing. We don't want to make people dependent on charity so we just don't give anything. We believe that medical care and social services should come through structural changes in third world countries, so we don't provide them ourselves. We don't want to encourage hitchhiking so we don't pick up people who clearly need a ride. And sometimes this takes the form of spiritualizing every problem. Alcohol becomes a demon to be cast out by prayer instead of a disease to be treated. Medical problems send us to our knees in Jesus name instead of to the medicine cabinet.

Once I worked for a summer camp for impoverished children. On the first day of camp a doctor checked all the children, and warned us if they had any conditions that might make some activity dangerous. One boy came with a benign tumor on his spine that had already been diagnosed, but never treated because an operation would have been expensive and the condition wasn't considered life threatening. The doctor told us that he shouldn't swim, since when he got excited

he might have spasms. And he did have such spasms, which kept him from really participating in some of the most fun activities. Finally, after about three days, the camp director called us all together and for several hours late at night we prayed for the boy. His condition didn't change. And in a way I'm not surprised. We wanted to pray our way out of a problem that required about $5,000 dollars and a willing surgeon. And given the resources of that church, and us as counselors, neither the money nor the surgeon should have been hard to find.

And in the end I suspect that we will be judged. We will be judged because we did not use good judgment about when it is time to pray and call on God, and when it is time to obey God and get to work doing what is in our power to feed, heal, and set people free.

As you consider the mission work you have done, or plan doing, ask yourself whether you are making excuses to avoid obeying God's command, and whether you need to supplement your prayers with action. It is sometimes better to be an answer to prayer, than to pray.

Study 7: Matthew 7:24 - 27

> Mt 7:24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. [25] The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. [26] 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. [27] The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Jesus' words here seem pretty obvious. The foundation on which you build makes a big difference in whether your house can withstand a storm. And often we've heard people say that this means making Jesus the foundation of mission that will endure. But notice that it isn't Jesus who is the foundation here. *It is putting the words of Jesus into action that makes the foundation of an enduring house*. The rock isn't Jesus. *The rock is obeying Jesus' command*.

Too many Christians are like a relative of mine. His house, if you ever visited it, was a complete mess. It looked like his interior design came from Goodwill and that he cleaned only under duress. And yet on his coffee table, if you could find it, were a whole array of home improvement magazines. Southern Living, Architecture Digest, Better Homes and Gardens, even Mother Earth. He just loved to read about doing things that he never actually did. He had never gotten beyond the first step of a dozen twelve step programs for fixing up and beautifying his home. On the other hand I'll say this for my relative, at least he was reading good stuff.

This passage really calls for two kinds of judgment: judgment about when we should quit listening and start to act, and judgment about *whose* words to put into action. Concerning the first we've already seen how Jesus steers us away from false prophets, and even our own hypocrisy. So putting words into action is the more serious problem we need overcome.

That can mean simply taking the first step and committing to work on a short term mission trip, in whatever capacity. When I took the work group to Serbia there was a woman whose family came from that region. She was over 80 years old, but wanted to come along. A lot of us wondered what good she could do. Certainly she wasn't going to be heavy lifting or construction. Yet when we got to the work site one of the first things we found was a box of old letters, books and church records – all in German. Our 80 year old friend immediately had a job to do going through, sorting out, and throwing things away. While the rest of us worked on the physical building she built a foundation of knowledge about and appreciation for the founders of the church and their struggle though the years. Her commitment to action became foundational to the whole work of rebuilding that church.

And Jesus isn't just talking to individuals here. Churches need to be doers of his words, not just hearers. We live in a time when many churches are being blown down by the winds of change in our society. Sports for youth and children pull kids and families away from church on Sunday morning. Young people have lost interest in traditional worship and community life. Older people find themselves uncomfortable with changing communities and styles of fellowship. For every growing mega-church there are dozens of small churches that have shuttered their windows and locked the doors. All too often the problem is precisely that these churches quite building on a foundation of obedient works of love for others and became chaplaincies using their resources to care for themselves and their own members.

I well remember, as a youth director, a conversation in one church executive board meeting concerning missions. The youth were anxious to get involved in some kind of mission on the borderlands of the U.S. and Mexico. It would be a costly venture, and involve a lot of fund raising. As a result some executive board members resisted. If the youth wanted to work, they

said, let them work on a long needed cleaning of the education building, rebuilding the pre-school playground, and caring for the church lawn.

Of course these were all good projects, but even a 13 year old could see that they were a way that the church served itself. Not surprisingly the youth felt bullied into projects that did little to help them grow spiritually. There was no happy ending. The most committed youth drifted away to participate in mission projects with other churches. The church nearly lost a generation.

In situations like these it is easy to critique young people for wanting the excitement of travel and work in exotic places over the very necessary tasks of caring for their own home church. But there is more to it than that. The firm foundation for a church is putting Jesus words into action, and this includes at the very least missional outreach and the service of people beyond the doors of the church. Without that mission the church, no matter how sturdily built and well maintained, is sitting on sand, and will be washed away in the end.

Where in the life of your own congregation is there a need for more active involvement in mission, and thus an opportunity to build on rock instead of sand?