

Sermon – March 13, 2022
“The Obedience of Jesus”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Luke 13:31-35

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! Has anyone ever taken a short cut or what they thought was a short cut? I suspect there may be some really good short cut stories among us. Let's be honest, especially when we are driving, we are always looking for that short cut, a way to save a few minutes of time. These days our GPS systems evaluate short cuts effectively and give us the time savings for our “better and quicker ways.” Let me confess to you that I am one who looks for short cuts. This is where most of my tool purchases come from, finding a quicker, easier way to get a job done. Let me share one of my short cut stories.

When I was in high school in West Virginia, we moved from town to our farm. That move put my family in the next school district, but because my mom and dad were teachers in the other district I had been going to school in, that is where I went to school. We just had to provide our own transportation. The closest bus stop from that district to the farm was at Arrington's store, and if I wanted to get home early and not wait till my dad got off from work, I could ride the bus there with my friend Sam Arrington and then walk several miles to our farm, going to the top of a decent hill, along the ridge, and then back down the hill to our farm. One day I caught a ride home on the bus, hung around with Sam a while, and then started my walk home. I had not gone far when I got the idea that if I cut through a field to the woods, I could save many miles of walking by hiking up the valley and be home even sooner. So, I jumped the fence and walked across the field to the woods and started my short cut. All I will say is that there is a reason that the road went to the top of the hill and out the ridge and not through the valley. I did make it home and it was a shorter walk, but the next time I caught the bus home with Sam, I walked the road.

One of the sayings that I have learned in life is “If something is too good to be true, it is too good to be true.” I have seen this play out too frequently related to hurricane recovery. FEMA will have shown up to help and issued onetime disaster response checks. A homeowner will be looking

for a contractor to fix their roof and a pickup truck will show up with a couple of guys, offer a really low price to fix the roof, make a deal, and ask for upfront money to buy shingles. The homeowner will pay them what FEMA gave them, a seeming real bargain for a roof job, and the truck will leave to go get shingles. In reality, they drive down the road with the money and never come back. Many of the homes that UMCOR works on in hurricane relief are homes where the homeowner has paid for a service and has not gotten anything for their money, can't find the contractor who took their money, and now has no funds to repair their home.

We may have these same temptations in our lives to look for easier ways when we consider God's direction for our lives. We think following God's directions is too difficult and instead seek a different path. We find this in relationships. Rather than obeying God's laws about relationships (love one another) we focus on ourselves first and think about others much later if at all. We are not expecting to have to forgive or to sacrifice to be in a right relationship with other people. We want the benefits of a relationship without the commitments and investments of time, effort, and sacrifice to develop right relationships. God has given guidance in the commandments for how to develop right relationships, (love God and love our neighbors as ourselves) but we are tempted to try this in our own way.

We may try short cuts with our finances as well. Instead of following God's standards of integrity, we may think we know or have discovered a short cut to financial prosperity. And as with the home owner's experience with the dishonest contractor, when we take these shorter paths that sound so good to us, we experience the consequences. There is a name for our short cuts, sin.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that taking short cuts will bring us to a difficult end, not the easy path in life we are seeking. Jesus also teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that there are consequences for seeking short cuts in our lives. Jesus' teaching on short cuts has been the subject of study for over two thousand years. Notable people such as St Francis of Assisi, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. have studied Jesus' sermon and been inspired to adopt his strategy of nonviolence into their protest efforts for radical change in society. We are not going to dive deeper into Jesus' sermon this morning, but we are going to look at the parable of the two homeowners he ends his sermon with, a parable that will encourage us not just to listen to the sermon, but to act in accordance with the teaching of the sermon. This parable is found in Luke 6:46-49, but let me tell it this morning in my own words.

In this parable Jesus speaks of two houses built by two different people. The first homeowner spent time listening to people with a lot of experience living in the area where he was

going to build his house and learned that sometimes area floods occur. He decided to invest extra funds in the foundation of the house to help it survive these floods, paying extra to have the house's footers dug all the way to the bedrock, and paying to have large stones placed for the house's foundation. Our first homeowner gave up an extra bathroom and cut the size of the guest suite to pay for the expense of the foundation. Many of the neighbors commented to each other about how this house was smaller than the norm and how it was negatively impacting their home values.

The second homeowner spent his time listening to these same neighbors brag about their expansive homes with large guest suites, extra bathrooms, and extravagant decorations which they included in their homes for entertaining guests. When it came time for building the house, the contractor told him how much it would all cost and included the price of a deep solid foundation. This homeowner decided that he would cut costs by not putting in such a deep foundation that was so costly and would not be needed often, and he would instead invest in the showier aspect of his new home. The neighbors all commented on how large the new house was, how well this homeowner had done with his selections, how this new home was raising their property values, and what a wonderful new neighbor they had.

Then the rains came, not just showers, but rains that had not been seen in this area for decades. And the creek rose and rose and the water began to beat against the houses. The house with the deep solid foundation held up against these rushing waters. The large stones resting on bedrock were not moved or shaken. The large beautiful house that lacked the solid deep foundation did not hold up to the waters. In fact, the water undercut the walls and then cut away the loose soil, and the walls and roof fell, allowing the house to wash away.

When Jesus told this parable to the people, he was telling those listening that the homeowner who built his house on the bedrock is like those who hear Jesus' words and go and put them into practice, living as Jesus taught. Jesus then said those who are prepared with a solid foundation, a life in Jesus Christ, will be able to endure the hardships that come in this life. Jesus also said that those who do not listen to his words and put them into practice will be like the homeowner whose beautiful house was swept away. When hardships come to them, they cannot endure.

American Christians are sometimes described as about three thousand Bible verses overweight. This doesn't mean we know three thousand Bible verses. Don't start patting ourselves on the back because we don't know that many, and don't think about starting a Bible verse fast. What this statement means is we think we know more about God than we do about what God says. American Christians tend to know about God, but do not do what God commands.

Why might this statement about too many Bible verses be true? One explanation is that Jesus is making these difficult statements about anger, lust, and our life choices to get our attention, but in the end, Jesus really didn't expect us to do these things. Another idea people believe is that these commandments, like loving our neighbor or praying for our enemies, are intentionally severe statements to help us over adjust our actions so that we end up in a more moderate, balanced place. This is like setting the clocks forward a half hour in the house of someone who is always late, so that they will arrive closer to the start of an event. But Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount with this parable to make the point that as his followers we are not to be those who study his sermon and share it with each other, but are to be those who are doing what he teaches.

Think about how Jesus lives during his ministry. He does not worry about money. He even gives the keeping of the common purse to a thief to manage their funds. Jesus trusts God to provide. When Jesus is on the cross dying, he does not seek vengeance against those who put him there, but asks God to forgive them. He prays for his enemies. How are we doing asking God to forgive Putin for the actions he has taken against the people of Ukraine? Jesus also models a life of obedience to the Father. When his disciples ask him to teach them to pray, he teaches them to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus is constantly praying to the Father and seeking to be one who is doing the Father's will, even to death on a cross.

Let's look at Hebrews 4:15. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." Jesus experienced all of the temptations that we experienced, but did not sin. He is able to be the perfect sacrifice for us. Jesus demonstrated a life lived according to the standards he preached. This is a Jesus-shaped life and it is how we as Christians, Christ followers, people being formed into Jesus' image, are to act.

A Jesus-shaped life is bound up in obedience to God's will and ways. Like the homebuilder who built on the bedrock, obedience is the bedrock for a life in Christ and keeps us from being overcome by the storms of life. A life lived in obedience to God keeps us from deep regret over our actions and opens us to God's power. How do we live such a life? Let's look at a verse from Matthew; turn to Matthew 5:20: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." When Jesus was among the Pharisees and made this statement, they had developed 613 commandments which they followed to insure their obedience to the Law. Jesus' statement that our righteousness has to surpass that of the Pharisees to get into the kingdom of heaven once made me wonder what I

needed to do to be more righteous than this group. I wondered, “How could I do that? Which laws did I need to follow? Should I keep the food laws? How could I be obedient enough to get into the kingdom of God?” Those hearing Jesus make this comment about the Pharisees must have also wondered what they needed to add to the Pharisees’ list of laws to get into the kingdom of God. But Jesus is not talking about rule keeping. That is not God’s requirement. What God is looking for is heart holiness, not external compliance with Law. Look at what Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount. He moves our sin from external to internal. If we get angry with our brother, it is the same as committing murder even though we have not done anything external. Our hearts are the issue. Jesus doesn’t just move the bar for sin up, he moves our concept of sin to the source of sin, our hearts. Jesus is asking us to seek holiness of heart rather than trying to keep a list of laws and judging each other’s performance by their adherence to that list. Christlikeness does not come through rule-keeping. We don’t grow closer to Jesus by behavior modification. We are to be transformed. Rule-keeping leads to legalism. Legalism is us trying to grow into holiness by keeping rules, an approach that fails because it does not deal with the underlying cause of our unrighteousness, our hearts.

Ever try to get rid of an unwanted gum tree? These trees come up in our orchard under the apple trees frequently. I think the birds eat something off of a gum tree and then sit on a limb of an apple tree and deposit a seed. That seed becomes a new gum tree. I cut the sprouts off, but unless I take time to dig them out by their roots, those gum trees keep coming back and each time the roots get bigger. It is easy to cut the new growth off, but they just keep growing and growing, sending out new roots. Anyone ever try to dig out a gum tree by the roots? It is the only tree I know of that what you see above the ground is what is below the ground. If it is a 4-foot-tall tree, then there is a four-foot-deep root system and if you leave any of it, up come new sprouts.

We can try to follow Jesus and modify our behavior, but we will always fail. Only the Holy Spirit can transform our hearts and get at the root of the issue, transforming our heart hardened to Jesus and bent to sin into a heart softened to Jesus and hardened to sin. To be successful, we have to live lives where our hearts are open to the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit, and when we hear him speak, we reply with a “Yes, Lord” and do what we are asked. This is how we begin to live into the image of Jesus. This is how we can be transformed and our righteousness exceed that of the law-keeping Pharisees. Our transformation comes not from some new self-help book or some new law we need to keep. It comes from our learning to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and doing what the Spirit says.

Those who experience a sin that will not go away are not encountering a new experience. Past generations called this type of sin a besetting sin or a stronghold. These are sins we cannot seem to escape. They are deeply rooted in our hearts. Their source is often from a legitimate unmet need in our lives, a need we are seeking to meet in our strength. It is through repentance, prayer, and obedience to the Spirit that freedom comes from these sins. When we find ourselves in a besetting sin, our approach is to declare ourselves done with this sin, renounce the sin, and then by an act of our will say, "I am done with doing what I want instead of what God wants." We are trusting God to meet our unmet need and not meet it ourselves. We also ask the Holy Spirit to fill us and seek, as Paul states in Galatians to 5:16, to "walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

Finally, remember that the Holy Spirit will also point out needed places of repentance and change in our lives. If we will listen to the Spirit and seek to cooperate with him when we head off in the wrong direction, we will be prompted to return to following Jesus. Am I the only one who talks to their GPS? When I make a wrong turn or leave the path that I am supposed to follow, my GPS begins to talk to me, telling me to, "make an immediate U-turn at the next intersection." And when I ignore that one, I get the same message for the next intersection. I will sometimes tell the GPS that I know where I am going and not listen. This is usually followed by my having to stop, figure out where I am, and use the GPS to get headed in the correct direction. This is what the Holy Spirit will do if we will listen. The Holy Spirit will not yell at us or take the wheel and steer, but will continue to tell us the way back to Jesus. Turn to 1 John 2:1-2, where John tells us, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." Jesus is our advocate with the Father. He atoned for our sins on the cross and has been resurrected from the dead. Jesus atoned for not just my sin, or ours, but for the sin of the world. We have an advocate with the Father who will transform us from within so that our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and we will be welcomed through Christ into the kingdom of God.

Pray with me: Father, we have tried and tried to find freedom from the sin that clings to our lives. Jesus, we confess that we need an advocate with the Father and ask that you would hear our cries and open our hearts to the guidance and transformation of the Holy Spirit that we might be made new in your image. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.