

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *The House Built on a Strong Foundation*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Ilene Dunn  
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Scripture Reading: Luke 6:46-49 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It is so good to be with you all. It's been a long time since I've been at St. Andrews. It's been great to see....I hate to say "old", I'll say longtime friends and to meet some new ones. And also I want to thank you not only for inviting me to share worship with you, but I am bringing the thanks of four hundred or four hundred fifty people who call themselves the family of Madison Square Presbyterian Church in San Antonio. A couple of months ago we became a "More Light" church. Some of you may not know what a "More Light" church is, but it means that we now get to be like you. We are a safe place for everybody. (Applause) I know and they know that had we not had the witness, and I know that's a word that Presbyterians get a little queasy using, but if we hadn't had the witness of St. Andrew's it might have been years, if ever, before we took that step, but knowing that you did, we decided that we could too. So thank you from all of them to all of you.

The version of the scripture that I'm reading is a little different from what you have printed in your bulletin, but not much.

LUKE 6:46-49

*Why do you call me "Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Wise Teacher," and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words and acts on them. That one is like a person building a house who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood arose, the river burst against that house, but could not shake it because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell and great was the ruin of that house. Why do you call me "Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Wise Teacher" and do not do what I tell you?*

If you were to turn back a few pages, and notice to whom it is that Jesus is asking this question, what you would discover is that it is a question posed to believers. People who have recognized Christ in Jesus, who have seen in Jesus of Nazareth, sacred wisdom, exquisitely present, teaching, guiding, revealing the sacred path along which mortals may walk. Sacred wisdom knocking down all the walls that had gotten in the way, stripping away all that nonsense, the legalistic minutia, the crusty and rusty dogmatism that blinds human vision. Sacred wisdom opening eyes to see the Way; the way to be real, the way to live, real and fully alive. The question Jesus asked wasn't posed to people who had never heard of Jesus or to people who just weren't interested in the Jesus Way, probably because God had called them to a different spiritual path. The question was posed then and it is still posed today to people who are attracted to the Jesus Way; people who have met Jesus, whether literally or figuratively, or mystically, and have come to

believe mindfully, heartfully, soulfully. They have been moved by Jesus mindfully, to his way of thinking, to a wisdom that just seems to ring with Holy truth. They've been touched heartfully by him, by his charisma, by the warmth of his smile and the realness of his compassion and love, by the beauty of the way he transforms human lives. Something which is so unique that there just isn't any other name for it except holy. And so they have responded soulfully as well. The songs in their minds and their hearts about holiness have been woven together to sing from the very depth of their being, "The Word made flesh, the good news of God, the Light eternally shining, the Love forever healing, the Life that creates new life, the Answer to humanity's deepest questions and longings and yearnings, the Realness that turns hope into reality, the holy promise fulfilled, 'Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Wise Teacher!'" Believers, people who mindfully and heartfully and soulfully respond to Jesus: Doesn't it make sense to think that believers would do what Jesus tells them?

But Jesus shines this glaring spotlight on the paradox, on these two truths which would seem to be mutually exclusive but that are right there side by side together, a magnetically positive pull toward Jesus to believe in the Jesus Way and a magnetically negative pull away from Jesus into not doing what he says.

"Why do you call me Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Wise Teacher, and do not do what I tell you?" This question is asked of believers and it cuts to the quick, doesn't it? I know it does me and I'm guessing it does you too. It forces us to see the paradox, not just in them, those people, but alive and well inside of us. Forces us to look in the mirror and really see ourselves and how we are living, what we are thinking, what we're saying, what we're doing, and then to hear beneath the question of Jesus a statement, an accusatory statement. "You say you believe, but you don't act like it. On Sunday you profess your commitment to the Jesus Way of living, but by Monday morning there's a disconnect," this voice insists, "a gap, sometimes a gaping chasm between your belief and your behavior."

"Why do you call me Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Wise Teacher and do not do what I tell you?" The question forces us to remember something that many of us would prefer not to remember, that woven into Christian living there are some "shoulds," some "oughts," some "musts." Not this ridiculously long list that some Christians preach as if they are trying to outdo Moses, to live not just with ten commandments, but with ten thousands commandments. It really isn't a ridiculously long list, but they are there. There are some "shoulds" and some "oughts" and some "musts;" things that Jesus told believers to do, and yet sometimes we don't do it. In fact, we may sometimes do just the opposite. So hearing that question and the all too accurate accusation beneath it seems that sometimes in the honesty that a healthy and mature conscience demands, seems sometimes that all we can do is cry out, "Mea culpa, mea culpa, my fault, my sin, my guilt, mea culpa!"

But listen, the point is not that we should live that way all the time crying out "Oh wretch that I am, mea culpa, mea culpa". Jesus never posed questions with that as the intention--to get people to feel bad, to get us to throw ourselves into this muck and mire and quicksand of breast beating morose remorse in which all we do is wallow in constant mea culpas--we may do that sometimes, but it's not because that's what Jesus of Nazareth said we're suppose to do. Jesus' questions always had a very different intention. His questions were designed, all of them, to get people to think, to feel, and to own one's own need for change, for transformation, and then do it, move into it.

So, while sometimes the confessed mea culpa is appropriate, that time of confession is really an opportunity for self examination, in this case, to ask ourselves, why do we persist in this paradoxical behavior? Why don't we do what Jesus said to do? Why do we structure our houses, our life houses, not on what Jesus taught, not on Christ, the rock, but on much lesser foundations that really aren't foundations at all? Just dirt, subject to erosion, leaving us our life houses vulnerable to the storm? Why do we do

that? The answer that I think most people say first, and certainly the answer that I most often hear as a pastor, and it's the answer I most often give when I'm looking in the mirror, has to do with the difficulty of building on that foundation. The difficulty, how hard it is to construct your life house to fit that foundation. How difficult to build that house so that every plank, every joist is fashioned of real love. A house designed for people to live in it in love, loving everybody. That's just too hard we say.

Sometimes I wonder though if there isn't a deeper answer to that question, not just that building a life house founded on that foundation is difficult. Maybe what we really think if we let ourselves do it at the deepest level, what we really think isn't that it's just difficult, but that it's impossible. Maybe we profoundly doubt the viability, the possibility of building a life founded on and in Christ. "Why do you call me Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Wise Teacher and do not do what I tell you?" Maybe our most honest answer would go something like this:

"Look, Jesus, we live in the real world, and what you tell us looks beautiful on paper and maybe it's possible for you, up where you live up in heaven and all, but we live down here in the real world in mortal reality and it's a dog-eat-dog world, Jesus. See if we were to do what you tell us to do, to be gentle all the time and never aggressive and always turn the other cheek, we would be turned into dog food, Jesus. Loving others as we love ourselves.....Uh, we have to do unto others before they have a chance to do unto us something that sure isn't love. And about turning our focus on others to be other-centered rather than self-centered, that doesn't work. Take for example, if we stopped seeking to tend our own financial needs and instead focused on those in sorry circumstances and gave generously to them, pretty soon our own circumstances would be as sorry as theirs. And what you said about loving our enemies, that definitely doesn't work in our world down here. You have to hate the people who hate you. You have to use the fuel of hatred to fight them and to win the battle because in the real world, it's not about losing; it's about winning every battle, everything from national wars to squabbles at home, at work, at school, and even at church."

"And what you said about forgiving people who hurt you, just exercising mercy, compassion, and letting it go, that doesn't work for sure. If you just forgive, you'll be labeled weak and down here in our world, it's about strength."

"In the real world what you do when somebody hurts you, you sue them. Or you try to get them punished in some other way, or at the very least you talk about them behind their backs to try to get other people to despise them like you do. Jesus, listen, it's still an eye for an eye definition of justice down here. It doesn't work in the real world to define justice as equality, morality, common good. That just gets you labeled a communist or a socialist or worse, a liberal."

"Why don't I do what you tell me to do? It's because your way won't work in the real world and I have to live in the real world by the world's norms and standards and mores. The way of businesses that ooze with the slime of greed, the way of politicians who totter on the edge of honesty as 'spinmeisters', the way of battles and military might, the way of hierarchy, social ladders, privilege and prejudice, the way of what's pragmatic and fast, the way of hedonism coupled with hypocrisy, the way of slippery ethics coupled with undeveloped moral character. That's just the way the real world turns, Jesus. So, even though I really want to do what you tell me, I can't. In the real world it isn't possible. To build a life house founded on extravagant love, on unlimited compassion and forgiveness, on lavish generosity. If I tried to live that way, your way, I'd get laughed off the planet. I'd be labeled a fool, crazy, definitely considered too weird for association with others. Really, Jesus, it's impossible to live your way in the real world."

But what if it isn't impossible? What if it IS possible to live the Jesus Way right here in the real world? Impossible to live it perfectly of course, but possible to live it beautifully nonetheless? What if we just throw in the towel way too quickly to see the Jesus Way as completely impossible when really the only part that's impossible is living it completely perfectly? Apparently Jesus saw it as possible for us. Surely he wouldn't have asked people why they don't do what's impossible to do. We can hear it in the question that Jesus asked that it's possible for us to build our life house on a strong foundation by the grace of the one who is love.

“Why do you call me Holy One, Holy Wisdom, Wise Teacher, and do not do what I tell you?” The question does include an accusatory statement. But see, really it's designed to get us to think. It's a question full of grace, full of abundant encouragement to discover what it is that makes life abundant.

Go now and don't forget how much you are loved. Don't forget that it's not just a little pinch. Remember you are loved this much (spreads arms) all the time, and when you don't love you, when for whatever reason you are telling you that you're not lovable, don't believe yourself. Know that you are loved all the time as you are and be glad. Go in grace, peace, extravagant love, now and always.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

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We are an affiliate of The Center for Progressive Christianity. ([www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org))

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
  - believers and agnostics,
  - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
  - women and men,
  - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
  - those of all races and cultures,
  - those of all classes and abilities,
  - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,

- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
  - striving for peace and justice among all people,
  - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
  - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

*(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)*



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