

Do the Hard Thing – Clothed in Christ

1. We have other subjects to deal with in this short series, “Clothed With Christ,” than putting on love...but we need to do this one more because I want to try to put a different spin on a passage we all know very well. **Matthew 7:12-14**.
2. Let’s remember who Jesus is talking to. We usually don’t do that; we usually read scripture from our vantage backward to theirs. Instead, put yourself in their place. I have heard sermons on the Sermon on the Mount all my life and 90% of the time is spent on how we apply it to our lives...not how they applied it to theirs.
3. This is important. Let’s dream about this a bit: the Jewish people are in a very confused, divided time. The temple is divided with rotating leadership by the Pharisees, Sadducees while Essenes are calling men out to the wilderness. Romans rule and some Jews accept that rule and work with them, such as tax collectors, while others, such as the Zealots, strike in the dark and consider it their duty to drive out the oppressors.
4. Added to all of this is The Promise. First made to Abraham 2100 years before (more distance from Abraham to Christ than from Christ to us!), it had been repeated by the prophets and priests.. The people believed but life was hard and religion was a mess.
5. Then they hear of Jesus, this man from Nazareth, an area that was considered full of the unlearned. Their accents were thick and people didn’t expect much from there. Still...they’ve heard a few things about this Jesus and he seems to have something to say. The Bible tells us who was gathering to hear this first, great sermon. **Matthew 4:18-25**.
6. So, we know our audience now and we certainly know our speaker. We also know our scripture...or do we? Let’s backwards engineer this passage and see how it works with the rest of the Sermon. **Matthew 7:13-14**.
7. Read this in several versions. The NIV doesn’t do a great job with it for reasons that escape me. I think the NRSV does a great job. Young’s Literal Translation says “strait the gate and compressed the

way.” I like that. It rings with what David said in Psalm 139 about God’s arm and hand on him. The Common English Bible says “Go in through the narrow gate. The gate that leads to destruction is broad and the road wide, so many people enter through it. But the gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.”

8. Okay, we have the idea. Now, how have we treated this passage? We’ve done two things with it. First, we assumed the broad and easy way was living like the wicked world and the narrow way was the Christian way which only the devout seeker will find. Almost a quest story like Lord of the Rings. Second, we have assumed that the “life” Jesus promises at the end of the road means salvation and, therefore, only a few people will be saved.
9. But...remember the crowd. They were hungry, tired, confused, but they were Jews, the chosen people, and they were looking for teaching that would get them through their life. They may have even considered the possibility that Jesus was the promised Messiah...but it is probably a bit early for that.
10. This perspective might make us look at this passage in a new light. What if the broad way is the easy way because it is laid out for you? Just follow the 600+ laws already given you, each law a brick on a wide, step by step road. Like the old footprint dancing diagrams people used to use for the Arthur Murray dance lessons or the footprints that light up in arcade dance games.
11. If THAT is the easy road...what is the hard one? I think he told us...or...them...and it was a terrifying passage. **Matthew 5:17-20**. Oh. My. Goodness. How in the world would this even be possible? Like a Master Teacher, Jesus has set up his audience for a new thing by bringing them to a precipice...and then showing them a new thing.
12. Jesus says five times that what they have heard – and he quotes scripture – is not what is required; God wants more from them. God wants the heart. THAT is how our righteousness can exceed that of the Pharisees – by not having an outer holiness but an inner love. (remember that the 10 Commandments are all about love)

13. I challenge you to read chapter 5 and see how Jesus brought them to a readiness to hear something new. It is masterful and we miss it 99% of the time because we read it with 2021 eyes.
14. Again, the master teacher gives them room to breathe by interjecting humor into the sermon. Matthew 6:1-18 tells them not to blow trumpets before they do a nice thing, don't pray aloud in the middle of a crowded street to show that you are a good person who prays, and don't put on a sad face when you are fasting so people will admire your holiness. It is really quite entertaining to read this chapter. Those of you with ready access to printed Bibles may want a Common English Bible for passages such as this but you can get it on any Bible website.
15. Look at this take: "And when you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. Then you won't look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you."
16. Jesus would have used expressions and movement to make his point and to make them laugh or think. We should put ourselves in that crowd and do the same. So...ready? What would be the easy way for them? Attendance and abstinence plus good works and prayers. Those 600+ laws were a highway: do these things.
17. Remember the rich young ruler? He kept the commandments all his life but his love was misplaced and that was what kept him from following this new teacher, this Messiah. If you follow the approved example of your denomination or peer group, you will likely be a good person but you will not have the life that Jesus wants you to have (remember – these were saved people so "life" doesn't mean salvation).
18. Do the hard thing. Outer stuff is easy. Singing, praying, attendance and abstinence – these are easy. But love is hard. Love requires you keep your eyes open and focused at all times. Love

means you have to figure out a way to apply love in every single situation that presents itself every single day. That's hard!

19. Think about it. What do churches emphasize and what do they fight about? Worship? Songs? Baptism? Which is easier: "be baptized" or "love your enemies, do good to them who persecute you"?
20. Which is easier: Give a little bit of money to the church or "lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth"?
21. Reading the Sermon on the Mount and seeing what Jesus is leading you to is an eye opening and jaw dropping experience. He isn't calling us to a form of worship, a style of church, or a well paved road we are to follow; he is calling us to a daily engagement with the Spirit of God and the possibilities of the moment.
22. Life is found in the possibilities of the moment when the person who enters that moment is determined to apply love to the situation and those in it. Not the fake, twisted "I love you so I have to point out your errors and disapprove of your decisions" but the true love of Christ.
23. Do THAT and your life will be founded on the words of Jesus. Your house will be on the rock and not the sand and we all know how that old song turns out.
24. Do the hard thing. Leave the well paved road and enter the difficult road, the road of love.