

Walk the Talk

Matthew 21:23-32

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

I noticed this week in the news that the Pac 12 has reversed an earlier decision to not play fall sports until after the first of the year, and instead has decided to start playing football in November. College football has certainly been in disarray this year due to the pandemic. Games have been scheduled but cancelled due to cases of the virus on different teams. Notre Dame recently had a game rescheduled.

One of the more successful and famous head coaches of Notre Dame Football is Lou Holtz, who later became a broadcaster. Before becoming the head coach of Notre Dame, Holtz was the head coach of the University of Minnesota for one year, the 1984-85 season. I had the occasion to hear him speak at a church event that year. Lou Holtz is a wonderful motivational speaker. I still remember one of the lines from his speech. "Success is when preparation meets opportunity." You can't always anticipate the opportunities that will come, but you can prepare yourself, so you are ready to seize the moment when they do.

In 2014 Lou Holtz gave a speech in a corporate setting on leadership. Early in the speech on YouTube he said, "There's a lot of things in this world I don't understand. I don't understand how a black cow eats green grass and produces white milk and yellow cheese. I don't understand why they sell hot dogs in packages of ten and hot dog buns in packages of eight. I don't understand why a sick person has to go all the way to the back of the store to the pharmacy to get medicine and the healthy person can buy cigarettes at the door. But what I really don't understand is how so many people born with so much can achieve so little, and so many people born with so little can achieve so much. I don't understand how some people can see an obstacle and look on it as an opportunity and somebody else sees an obstacle and immediately gets discouraged."

To build a winning, successful football team, you have to have grit, determination, and teamwork. It's less about what you're born with and much more about what you do with what you have. Success is 99% perspiration and only 1% inspiration. Some people just decide to turn on the

switch inside of them and do what it takes to become a success – on the football field and in life.

Lou Holtz had a way of building successful football teams. This week, I read the parable of the two sons. One says the right things but doesn't follow through, doesn't walk the talk, and the other who blows off his father, challenging his authority, but then decides to go to the vineyard and work. I thought of the difference between those with so much who achieve so little and those with so little who achieve so much.

A football team cannot succeed unless the coach has authority. You can't have the team huddle on the field with each player arguing about what the next play should be. Authority is key.

My good friend's father played football for the University of Minnesota during two seasons when they won back-to-back national championships in 1940 and 1941. The following year he enlisted in the Navy to serve the country during World War II. After completing basic training, Howie Straiton received his orders. He was to play football for Navy. Disappointed, he went to see the commanding officer. "Sir, I've played football. I didn't join the Navy to play football but to serve my country during this war and I ask for a change of orders," he said. The Admiral looked across the desk and said, "Son, you didn't join the Navy to come in here and tell me what you're going to do. You have your orders, now get the hell out of my office." "Sir, yes sir!" said Howie as he saluted and turned on his heel and headed for the door. End of discussion. Authority! You know it when you see it. "You don't talk to me, I talk to you!"

In this exchange with the authorities, Jesus is asked "By what authority are you doing these things?" In other words, we have not authorized you to teach these things! Jesus, in the story had recently entered Jerusalem and turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple. He was creating a disturbance in the city and was quite popular with the people. The authorities were growing increasingly concerned. Was this another uprising? Was this Jesus an agitator come to disturb the fragile peace?

We know how fragile peace can be this year, don't we? We've watched the reactions of crowds in the streets to the Breonna Taylor verdicts in just the past few days. We've seen images of peaceful protestors but also images of anarchists and looters destroying businesses and communities. We know how fragile peace can be! And we're anxious about this election for leadership of the country. What additional unrest is in our future?

So, you can't really blame the authorities for confronting Jesus. The situation was intensifying. What ensued was a battle of wits. In typical rabbinic fashion, you answer a question with another question. So, Jesus asks them to comment upon the authority of John the Baptist's movement. Was this of God or was it purely of human origin? Their duplicity was exposed and they fell silent. The authorities couldn't denigrate such a popular movement as John the Baptist's without offending the crowds. But since it directly challenged and even circumvented their authority, they pleaded the fifth. They didn't answer so as not to incriminate themselves but the discussion doesn't end there.

The parable of the two sons illustrates two different approaches to the commandments of God. One son says the right things but does the opposite while the other son says the wrong things, challenging the authority of the father, but eventually comes around to obedience. These actions represent the followers of John the Baptist, who were survivors in the culture without much regard for religious matters. They had figured out how to survive, collecting taxes for the Romans, sleeping with the enemy, providing for themselves and their families but with no real concern for what God might expect of them. Their moral compass was broken. And yet they were responding to the ministry of John the Baptist and now that of Jesus, being cleansed of their past in the waters of baptism and setting their sights on a different future – one of righteousness and justice – working in the vineyard of the Lord.

Contrast that with the religious authorities who were saying all the right things but more interested in their retirement benefits than in real service in the kingdom of heaven; more interested in their titles, their careers, than achieving anything real and substantive for God.

Working at Princeton Seminary for many years, I saw plenty of remarkably talented people come through the various degree programs. I sat on the admissions committee, trying to choose those people who would excel not only as students but then serve in ministry. I remember thinking at one point that there were too many students with remarkable engines but no transmission in life. They excelled at education. They had the whole school thing down. They knew how to get the grades but had no idea what to do with the education. They were preparing to work in the church but when it came down to it, they weren't at all sure they wanted to make the sacrifice. They had the best education money could buy and not a clue what they were going to do with it. All engine and no transmission.

Lou Holtz again, "But what I really don't understand is how so many people born with so much can achieve so little, and so many people born with so little can achieve so much. I don't understand how some people can see an obstacle and look on it as an opportunity and somebody else sees an obstacle and immediately gets discouraged."

Sometimes you have to take action. We've been sitting in our homes for seven months watching what is happening in the world around us. Maybe it's time to do something! Let's not be the ones who say all the right things but still "don't walk the talk." If Jesus is really the authority in our lives, let's see the obstacles before us as opportunities, rather than just getting more discouraged. On a zoom gathering this week, I heard from one of our members about just how isolated some of our other members are, and how discouraged they felt. In our little part of the vineyard, why not call someone on the phone you haven't seen or talked to since you last saw them in church or in the courtyard? Write a letter to someone and tell them how much you appreciate them. The Breeze directory is available for you online and can be accessed through the app. Look up someone in the church and reach out to them.

I recently received a letter from a member of the Point Loma Presbyterian Church where I served in the 1980's. It brought me to tears it was so heartfelt and encouraging. I've received many notes and card and emails from you over the past several weeks. Thank you!

Don't stop! Write others in the church. You can be that person who brings encouragement and kindness to someone else. The Lord is asking every one of us to get to work in this vineyard. Let's not simply talk the talk, let's walk the walk. Obedience follows belief. There's a new member class coming up. Maybe it's time for you to take the next step and join the church. Contact Rev. Jessica Vaughan Lower. Let's not leave our transmissions in neutral because we have to curtail our usual activities. Find ways to be faithful and get to work in the vineyard. Care for those within it and those outside the church.

Authority! Matthew is building a case for the authority of Jesus. In the very last chapter of the gospel, Jesus will say to the disciples the very words that I say at the beginning of the sacrament of baptism, "Hear the words of our Lord who said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth have been given to me, go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the father, and the son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" The Great commission – we in the church have a job to do. And before the authority of Jesus the Christ, it's high time we say, "Sir, yes sir!" And turn on our heel and get to work.

We may be limited geographically during this pandemic, but we are not entirely limited. We don't have to remain passive. Find a gear and get moving. Reach out and touch someone. Walk the talk! And may the Lord be with you! Amen

