

15 - PERSONAL INTEGRITY

The third section of “the Sermon on the Plain” (6:43-46) presents some striking instances of personal integrity related to both speech and action. The simple truth is that one’s actions define the trustworthiness of one’s words.

Two proverbs drawn from nature make the point abundantly plain: Only good trees or plants produce good fruit. Both the quality of the fruit and its type depend entirely on the quality and type of plant on which each grows. This truth is then applied to a person’s conduct and the quality of one’s heart. One’s conduct *is* the message one conveys. Actions must be congruent to the words one speaks. The person who speaks but doesn’t act in accord with his/her words is quickly recognized as a fraud.

The next part of this section brings the issue of integrity directly to those who choose to follow Jesus. There could not be a more direct question put to any disciple than this: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?”

From the time of Moses, the sacred name of Israel’s God was *YHWH* (English = *Lord*) The name was never pronounced. Instead the Israelites substituted the foreign word *Adonai*. The Greek OT used *kurios* to translate *YHWH* and NT authors followed this practice. In Jesus’ time, *kurios* was used as the title for the Roman emperor also considered as divine. In Christian worship, a Latin liturgical phrase, *Kyrie Eleison*, (*Eng*, = “*Lord, have mercy.*”) dates from possibly as early as the 2nd century CE.

The English word “Lord” had a more mundane origin. It comes from the Anglo-Saxon words *hlaf weard*, meaning “the keeper of the bread.” That person was regarded as the most trustworthy in the community. His or her task was the guard the grain reserved from the harvest for seeding a new crop in the spring. It was not to be consumed even the case of famine, lest the next year’s crop also be a failure. From this came the system of social, economic and political status of the class structure developed in mediaeval feudalism and still extant today.

The parable of the two men who built houses on rock and on sand is virtually self-explanatory. This is one of those passages Luke shared with Matthew (cf. Matt. 7:24-27). Obviously both knew the same oral tradition directly from one of the first apostles.

Ringe concluded her analysis of the parable with this statement: “What is needed to ground a person in Jesus’ teachings is to move from learning as an intellectual or emotional achievement to learning embodied in action.” (97) That emphasizes the true meaning of discipleship as a life of continuous learning. The crucial issue, of course, for people of all ages, is living up to the standard it set.

Ringe went on to note that all four sections of “the Sermon on the Plain” formed the training program that the apostles were receiving. (It) “begins with hard lessons about personal interactions and accountability in their daily life.... The purpose of the Gospel as ‘good news’ depends on the coherence and integrity of the lives of those who bear its words of justice and liberation.”

