

"ALL TALK AND NO ACTION"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 12, 1993

"ALL TALK AND NO ACTION"

INTRODUCTION

I read somewhere recently about a construction crew that was laying a drain pipe as part of a new building and while excavating, the workers uncovered a power cable directly in the path of their work. The excavation was quickly halted as they called in an electrician. He examined the cable and told the workers that it was a dead cable. "Go ahead and cut it out of the way" he told the workers. The foreman asked, "Are you sure there's no danger?" "Absolutely" said the electrician. Then the foreman asked "Well, then....will you cut it for us?" The electrician hesitated for a moment and then quietly remarked, "I'm not that sure..." All talk and no action.

Coming closer to home, a survey was handed out during a worship service one Sunday morning in September. Among the questions was this one, "Do you think there should be an evening Bible study?"

The young pastor was overwhelmed at the response. Fifty persons indicated that there should be an evening Bible study. And so this elated young pastor began making plans. Materials were ordered. A time was set. A couple of days later a wise and experienced lay leader dropped by for a visit with the pastor. He gently advised the young man that he had asked the wrong question. Instead of asking, "Do you think there should be a Bible study?" he should have asked, "Would you be willing to attend an evening Bible study?" And so a second questionnaire was issued. And this time the question was, "Are you willing to attend an evening Bible study?" The results were somewhat different from the preceding week. This time only eight people indicated that they would be willing to attend. Actions always speak louder than words.

DEVELOPMENT

Let's set the Parable of Jesus read for today's scripture in its proper context. First-off, remember that there was tension in the air that day that Jesus entered the Temple. Some of the religious officials were plotting against Him. They saw Him as a threat. His teachings were running counter to their cherished traditions. They felt they had to do something to silence Him. They decided among themselves to try to incriminate Him and so they asked Him a two-part question:

"By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" (Matthew 21: 23)

It was tricky, an obvious trap. No matter how Jesus answered, He would be in trouble. Knowing it was a bit of a trap, He countered with a question of His own and He asked,

"Did the baptism of John come from Heaven, or was it of human origin?" (Matthew 21: 25)

This question caught the religious leaders by surprise. They didn't know just how to answer and they began arguing and murmuring among themselves...

"If we say, 'From Heaven', He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?'"

On the other hand, if they answered that John's authority came from human

origin that might cause a riot because many in the crowd undoubtedly thought that John was a prophet sent by God. They were caught in a "no-win" situation. You see...no matter how they answered, they would be in trouble. Finally they said, "We d@ not know...." And with that, Jesus told them that neither would He answer their question. Several points to lift up in connection with this text.

SOMETIMES WE ARE BLIND TO WHAT GOD IS DOING IN OUR MIDST

Sometimes we are blind to what God is doing in our midst. This was certainly true of these officials. Here Jesus was standing in front of them and they failed to recognize Him. That can happen.

John Powell, a Professor of Christian Theology at Loyola University in Chicago, recently shared a story that Maxie Dunnam of Memphis has passed on to his readers in one of his workbooks. Maxie Dunnam's stories are always worth sharing. This one has to do with a former student of John Powell's who rather begrudgingly took one of Powell's courses in Theology. It soon became apparent to Powell that this student really didn't want to be in his class room, but it was a required course. Near the end of the semester, the student whose name was Tommy said to Professor Powell, "Professor....do you think I will ever find God?" Father Powell knew all too well that Tommy was not only cynical about God, but that he also felt he was the "self-appointed Atheist-in-residence". Professor Powell thought for a moment and honestly replied,

"No, I don't, I don't think you will ever find God, but Tommy.. I am absolutely certain that God will one day find you...."

With that Tommy left the classroom without saying another word. They did not see each other for some time. Then one day, out of the blue, Tommy walked into Father Powell's office. There was something different about Tommy. He told his former professor that he had a terminal illness and did not have long to live. His once youthful body had already started to deteriorate, but his eyes were bright and his face was aglow. Tommy said,

"What I really came to see you about was what you said to me on the last day of the class. When the doctors removed the lump and told me it was malignant, well....I got real serious about locating God. I really began banging bloody fists on the doors of heaven. But God did not come out. Nothing seemed to happen....."

Tommy went on to tell Father Powell that he never really had a good relationship with his father. Tommy did not want to die, however, without ever expressing his love for his dad. So he went home. "Dad was reading the newspaper" said Tommy. It was awkward, but Tommy finally said the words, "Dad...I love you....that's all. I just wanted you to know that."

The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Tommy went on to say,

"Then my father did two things I could never remember him doing before. He cried and he hugged me. One day I turned around and God was there. He didn't come to me when I pleaded with Him, but the important thing is that He found me."

Sometimes we are blind to God's presence in our lives. That's the 1st point.

AND SOMETIMES OUR ACTIONS DO NOT MATCH OUR WORDS

Sometimes you and I are
blind to God's activity

in our midst. And then, too, sometimes our actions simply fail to match our words. Put this down as the second point of this message.

Back to Jesus. He told the religious officials who gathered around Him that day a parable. It was about a farmer who had two sons. The father went to his first son and said, "Son...go out and work in the vineyard today". The son was rebellious. He replied for whatever reason "I will not". The father was disappointed, but said nothing more to him.

The farmer then asked his second son if he would help out in the vineyard. "I go, sir" he said to his father. Now any parent would be proud of such a child, such a son! "I go, sir!" And with the assurance that this second son would go out and help in the vineyard, the father-farmer went to work in another section of the vineyard.

But, things did not quite work out the way the father had been expecting. First-off, the first son who had answered, "No way, dad...I will not" changed his mind and spent the entire day out under the hot sun working in his father's vineyard. And the second son, the one who had said, "I'm going, dad...I'm on my way" also had a change of mind. Maybe some of his friends came by and had more exciting things to do. We don't know. All we know is that this second son, the one who had promised to help his father, did not go.

Jesus then asked the chief priest and the Temple Elders, "Which of the two did the will of his father". "The first" they all answered. The parable was a source of puzzlement to them. They never dreamed it was about them selves.

It's like this. Best selling author, Stephen Covey, writes about the time he was a faculty member of the Marriot School of Management and one of the young executives asked him how he was doing in class. As they talked for a while, Stephen Covey confronted him directly with these words,

"Now...you didn't really come in to find out how you're doing in class. You came in to find out how I think you are doing. You know how you are doing far better than I do....don't you?"

The young executive answered that he knew how he was doing in class. He owned up and admitted that he was just trying to get by...little honest effort apparently. He gave a list of reasons and excuses for cramming and taking the short cuts. And the young man had really come in to see if it was working. And Covey....reflecting on this incident....writes,

"If people play roles and pretend long enough, giving in to their vanity and pride, they'll gradually deceive them selves."

Such was the case of these religious officials. They had been using all the right words and going through all the right ceremonies. You could say they had God on their lips, but not in their hearts. They had said "yes" to God, but He was not real to them. Sometimes our actions do not match our words. And one final thought to lift up and reflect on and that is that yes - the Spirit sometimes breaks through to us and touches us and moves us...inspite of ourselves.

SOMETIMES THE SPIRIT BREAKS THROUGH

Yes, sometimes God's spirit does break through and makes a difference.

Jesus went and told the Chief Priest and the Temple Elders,

"Truly, I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you"

(Matthew 21: 31)

What Jesus told them was unthinkable. Remember that these men to whom He was speaking were the "best people" in the land and yet Jesus here was saying that the tax collectors and the prostitutes were going into the Kingdom ahead of them. You see, these officials had used their religion to insulate themselves against God. Yes, they had their traditions. They had their rules. They really had no need for God. But the folks at the bottom of society, on the other hand, had nothing - except God. True - they may have said "no" to God sometime in their past, but if they said "yes" now, it was not too late for them. On the other hand, the officials had once said "yes", but they had never really let God into their lives.

Jesus reminded them of the preaching of John the Baptist.

"Tax collectors and the prostitutes believed John and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

Change was possible even for these men, but they were too blind to see. They failed to see and to realize that the message of repentance was for them, too.

A minister in one of our Methodist churches out in San Diego shares this incident. It seems that he was called by the church custodian into the church sanctuary one morning where the custodian wanted him to see a strange offering that had been left on the altar. In a bit of a heap on the altar were a pair of brown corduroy pants, a belt, a white T-shirt, a pair of tan suede boots and a note. He noticed blood stains on the shirt as well as on the note. The note consisted of only three words, "Please listen, God". It was signed and included a phone number.

The pastor decided to phone the number. A 19 year old male answered and told his story. He had run away from home and had been wandering in a wasteland of drug^s drifting from one place to another, getting into all kinds of trouble and involved in all kinds of sordid behavior. The night before he had hit rock bottom. There had been a fight and a near-fatal beating. After making sure the victim of the assault would be all right in the Emergency Room of a nearby hospital, this young man came to the church, found an unlocked door and found his way into the sanctuary. He stayed there all night...crying and praying. He asked God to forgive him and to show him the way to go. All at once God's presence, he said, became very real to him. He knew God was there. He felt His forgiveness. A wonderful peace came over him and he knelt down in front of the altar and committed his life to Christ. He was really determined to make right the things he had so wonderfully messed up.

The young man felt fresh and clean - like a new person. And to symbolize his new life and his new commitment, he had put on some new clothes he happened to have with him in his bedroom and left his old clothes on the altar as a kind

of offering....giving God his old life. He walked out the door a new person filled with a new hope and a new direction that would lead to a new life. And like the first son in this parable Jesus was telling, this young man at one time in his life and said, "I will not!" But things happen...the spirit does break through and a life is changed.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

You know, one can't help but wonder if those religious officials to whom Jesus was talking ever did get the point of this parable.

One also wonders if you and I get the point...for the message of repentance is meant for us as well....that's what it is - a message of repentance. Yes, we can be so blind to the action of God in life. Yes, sometimes we, too, are "all talk and no action". Saying our little "yesses" and never really following through. And yes, sometimes in spite of our refusals God can break into our lives and help us to make a fresh start. Perhaps there is someone in our congregation this morning who like the first son, changed his mind...repented, if you will....and went out to work in His father's vineyard. We would hope so and together let us pray that it may be so!

PRAYER

Let us be still and remember Jesus as He was then...powerful to help and to heal, to speak and to save. And let us think of Him as He is now....powerful as the Spirit of God at work among us....to lift us up out of the low place and to set our feet once again on the high road of life.

As we prep are to begin a new season in this place, wrestle with us in the shadowy and hidden corners of our lives and bring us out into the openness of your life and light and love. And draw us, O God, to Him who is the perfect incarnation of Yourself, that our power may more and more be tamed by the power of His love. In His name we pray. Amen.

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation....a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer,
believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched :
Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall
strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of
the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good
with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.
They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run
and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that who-
soever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting
life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:
who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy
diseases!".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on
Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News:
We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for
others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with
healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. _____ | 2. _____ | 3. _____ |
| 4. _____ | 5. _____ | 6. _____ |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and
the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to _____ who in recent
days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of
us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our
hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray....
For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught
us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy
Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in
heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not
into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the
Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"