

Lessons Along the Way: Motion vs. Action

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 7:21-29
on March 26, 2023, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

On the first day of his film photography class at the University of Florida, professor Jerry Uelsmann decided to do a semester-long experiment. He divided his class into two groups – those on this side of the room were the “quantity group,” and their assessment would come purely on the number of photos submitted by each student. 100 photos would get an A, 90 a B, and so on. Then those on the other side of the room became the “quality group,” whose grade came purely on the excellence of their work. Their assignment? Only one photo all semester, but in order to get an A, it had to be an image, as Mary Poppins might say, that was ‘practically perfect in every way.’

As the semester ended, Dr. Uelsmann was surprised to discover that actually the very best photos from his students came from the quantity group, those who were playing with light and shadows, honing their skills of composition and exposure, testing their learning and learning from their mistakes. And what of the quality group? Well they’d spent their time hemming and hawing over what makes for the very best image, “speculating about perfection,” he said. Their final project at the end of the semester was a whole bunch of theories, and lots of thoughts about photography, along with one fairly mediocre photo.¹

II.

Author James Clear tells this story in his wildly successful book called *Atomic Habits*, a story meant to illustrate the difference between being in motion and taking action. Similar ideas, he names, but different impact.

¹ As quoted by James Clear in *Atomic Habits*, p142-143.

Motion is in the preparation: planning, and strategizing, and learning, and studying. Action produces an outcome.

Motion in the hands of a writer, James Clear says, is outlining 20 new ideas for articles. Action is actually sitting and writing them. Motion in the eyes of one wanting to get physically stronger is searching for a good exercise plan, and designing the workout space at your house, and reading some books on strength training, and even meeting with a personal trainer. Action is actually working out.

Perhaps you can fill in the examples in your own life here. As I read this part of *Atomic Habits*, I couldn't help but to think of what I did when the website Pinterest first came out. Pretty positive I wiled away an embarrassing number of hours of my winter Saturdays pinning all manner of home design ideas – this color palette, that DIY plan – a feeling of home renovation exhilaration that took over my planning mind, only to realize: wait, now I have to actually DO these things!

James Clear is clear: motion matters. Planning and preparation are essential for so many moves we make in this life. But if we're being honest, sometimes we spend more time in motion because it "allows us to feel like we're making progress without running the risk of failure. Motion makes you feel like you're getting things done," Clear says, "but really you're just *preparing* to get something done. When preparation becomes a form of procrastination, you need to change something. If you want to master a habit, the key is to start with repetition, not perfection. You don't need to map out every feature of a new habit. You just need to practice it."²

III.

² James Clear, *Atomic Habits*, p142-143.

Our eight week-long journey with Jesus through the Sermon on the Mount comes to a close today, and I have to say, this has been such a meaningful experience to walk through such an important piece of Jesus' teachings with you, piece by piece, week by week. We've learned so much about Jesus' priorities in these weeks – care for the poor, the mourning, the meek, concern for the angry and those in strained relationships, love not just for neighbors but for enemies (!), attention toward how we pray and give and prioritize and see, compassion for the worrying and correction for the judgmental, putting forth of the narrow path and the good fruit as witness to what matters most, that is God's coming kingdom of heaven. And here, at the Sermon's end, we find Jesus talking about motion and action.

“Not everyone who **says** to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus declares, “but only the one who **does** the will of my Father. For everyone who hears these words and acts on them becomes like the wise man who built his house on a rock, ensuring the strongest foundation for his life when the storms inevitably come. But everyone who hears these words and doesn't act on them becomes like the foolish man whose house was built on sand, such that the rains and winds and floods of life washed it right away.”

I don't think it's a coincidence that Jesus ends his Sermon here. Like scholar Tom Long says, it's as if he's reminding his hearers that “they must not just listen to Jesus' words and then forget them, or even listen to Jesus' words and merely cherish them as lovely ideas, but they must put Jesus' words into action.”³ Jesus is telling his hearers, don't just hear! He's telling his disciples, don't just study! He's telling his believers, don't just believe! All important and necessary, of course, but incomplete. It's like what the Letter

³ Tom Long, Westminster Bible Companion, *Matthew*, p84.

of James will later reinforce: “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers only.” Or what Bonhoeffer says on the front of our worship guide, “Jesus doesn’t mean that the Sermon is to be discussed as an ideal, he really means us to get on with it.”⁴ It’s no wonder that the reaction of the crowds after all they’d heard and experienced was to be astonished, “for he taught them as one having authority.”

IV.

Several of our Bible Study classes have been reading Cheri Mills’ *Lent of Liberation* this Lenten season, doing the work, as the subtitle says, of confronting the legacy of American slavery. Just a few days ago, we read about the story of George Lewis, an enslaved man who without any seminary education or theological training captured the spirit of Christianity in his words. “They worshiped a good deal like the Methodists,” he described the home church of the man who kept him in bondage, continuing, “and allowed their members to swear heartily for slavery.”⁵

“Not everyone who says, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus warns, “but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” George Lewis understood Jesus, who said that at the heart of Christianity is practice. Not only the words we say, not only the truth we believe, not only the prayers we pray, but rather the things we do! The obedience we practice! The commandments we keep!

Several summers ago, we read through and I preached through Dorothy Bass’s book, *Practicing our Faith*. In it, she says that “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world in Christ

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p332-333.

⁵ Cheri L. Mills, *Lent of Liberation: Confronting the Legacy of American Slavery*, p74.

Jesus.”⁶ You know these practices that she names. They’re the ordinary stuff of everyday life: honoring the body, hospitality, sharing meals and resources, keeping Sabbath, testimony, discernment, living in community, forgiveness, healing, dying well, singing our lives. But as she reminds the reader, each of these practices emerge from our experience with the presence of God, and when woven together, these practices “suggest the patterns of a faithful Christian way of life for our time.”⁷

These practices we do – those daily actions that move us beyond motion, and put the way of Jesus into our hands, our lips, our texts, our relationships – that’s what builds the foundation of our lives. Those are the moments that prepare the footings, and pour the concrete, and level it up. Those are the moments that help us “get on with it,” as Bonhoeffer says.

V.

Yet “getting on with it” isn’t always that easy, right? Despite our best efforts at the practices of our faith, we know all the reasons why we stay in motion, rather than moving into action. As the old adage goes, “The best becomes the enemy of the good.”

When asked to give, we know our narrative: *I’m behind on my savings goals, we say, and really need to get aggressive about my retirement account right now. Since I can’t give a full 10% of my income to our church or other organizations whose mission I believe in, I better just wait until I can before I give anything at all.*

When asked to serve, we know our story: *I wouldn’t know what to do with a bunch of 2nd graders in East Winston, we say, or the guy on the street who asks for money, so I probably shouldn’t start responding to all these invitations to volunteer until I’ve figured that out.*

⁶ Dorothy Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, p5

⁷ Bass, p5.

When asked to trust, we know our excuses: *don't you remember what happened last time?!*, we say, *and how hurt I got? I'm still mad about it! No no, not doing that again, no matter what I lose by saying no.*

When asked to confront, we know what we hide behind: *looking squarely at the failings of my country, or my race, or my gender, or my family, or my denomination, or my life are just too painful*, we say. *Can't I just read another book, or listen to another podcast, or believe these things in my heart without saying something out loud about them?*

When asked to love, we know what we protect: *I'm just too scared at the possibility of all that could happen*, we say. *I can't bear the thought of failing, or losing, or limits, or missing out, being confronted, or being wrong, or being seen, or being abandoned. What if I give my life over to this all-consuming kind of love and lose everything?*

Yet despite the stories we tell ourselves, no manner of motion over action will prevent the storms of our lives from descending. No manner of avoidance will keep the rains from falling. No manner of delay will keep the winds from blowing. No manner of faith will keep the storms from settling into your life.

Oswald Chambers once said, “build up your character bit by bit by attention to [Jesus'] words, then when the supreme crisis comes, you will stand like a rock. The crisis does not come always, but when it does come, it is all up in about two seconds; there is no possibility of pretense, you are unearthed immediately.”⁸

For when we build our houses atop the expectation of security, or when we frame our structures atop the promise of power, or when we construct a

⁸ Oswald Chambers, *Following the Call: Living the Sermon on the Mount Together*, p326.

life of pragmatism atop the expectation of predictability, or when we assemble all the pieces of our lives atop the fruitless wish that just being a good person and hoping for the best will be all we need, we shouldn't be surprised when our earth shatters with birth or death, with loss or grief, with dreams deferred or hopes denied or relationships unraveled or worlds unearthed. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For those who don't stop at the motions – plans, and prayers, and nerves, and worries, and yearnings, and imagination, and admiration of Jesus, all beautiful and good in their own right – but actually move into action – following in the way of Jesus, building upon the dream of God in this world, practicing their faith through daily habits and experiences – well theirs will be the firm foundation upon which to truly live.

VI.

I bet you've heard the story before of the old carpenter ready to retire. He'd been at it a very long time, and was ready to hang up his hammer and nails. So he told his boss of his plans, of his dreams for leisurely breakfasts on his back porch, travel with his wife, time to play in the yard with his grandkids. Yes, he'd miss the paycheck, but it was time.

Well the carpenter's boss understood, but was awfully sorry to see his best worker go. He asked the carpenter, "could you build just one more house as a personal favor to me?"

The carpenter grumbled inwardly as he thought to himself, "did you hear about breakfast on the porch?" but agreed to do it. He didn't put his heart into it though – cutting corners where he could to shorten the job, using cheaper materials he could get faster, just going through the motions

trying to get it done and settle into the life he dreamed. For anyone who knew him, it was a sad way to end a meaningful, hard-working career.

When the carpenter finished the work and barely eked through the building inspection, his boss showed up and – you know what happens next – handed over the key to the front door. “This is your house,” he said. “My gift to you.”⁹

VII.

This is the word of the Lord, we say. This is my kingdom, God says. This is the Way of Life, Jesus says. This is the church, the Spirit says. Divine gifts to you and you and you. Will you receive them? Amen.

⁹ Source unknown, cited from <https://thepastorsworkshop.com/sermon-illustrations-on-foundations/>.