

Our Intention to Receive and Obey Scripture

Matthew 7:24-27

My mother had a very interesting childhood. She was basically raised by a nanny in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She tells me that her mother never cooked her a meal in her life. Consequently, when my mom got married, the pendulum swung the other direction: she set out to be the world's greatest cook. She spent hours every single day cooking homemade meals and desserts from scratch.

My mom was smart enough and sensitive enough to anticipate that when her sons got married there might be a drop-off at mealtimes. It turns out that that is not an issue for me; Brenda is an amazing cook. Before I got married (29 years ago) she told me, "Steve, you eat whatever Brenda puts in front of you." I think you'll agree that it's completely appropriate for a newly-married husband to decide ahead of time, "I'm going to eat anything that my wife sets before me, whether I like it or not." That's only right in light of our relationship. After all, she's the "wife of my youth" and my companion and my "wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:14).

This morning we're going to talk about the possibility of having this same attitude toward God's Word. Consider the possibility of deciding ahead of time, "God, I will 'eat' whatever you serve up today. I will come to your Word, and (by Your grace) I will receive and put it into practice whatever You show me." We're talking about a rather bold, intentional way of approaching the Scriptures.

You may be thinking, "How can you decide *ahead of time* that you're going to receive and put into practice whatever God says?" What if He tells you to do something that you don't want to do? What if He tells you to do something that is humanly impossible? What if He tells you to do something you don't really agree with? Those are valid questions. But the alternative is to approach the Word with the attitude, "I'm going to come to the table, see what's being served up, and then decide whether I'm going to eat it or go out for supper. . ." That's totally inappropriate because we are bound by covenant to God - a covenant that was inaugurated by the blood of His one and only Son. How dare we not accept ahead of time what He puts on the table before us?!?!

Last week Brian taught from Psalm 119 about making it our intention to "engage" Scripture. The psalmist declared things like, "I will delight in your commandments," and "I will meditate on your statutes." In the same way we can and should make it our intention to engage the Scriptures. Without such intention, we probably won't pursue the vision of being transformed by Scripture.

Today we are going to continue talking about "intention" - specifically ***our intention to receive and obey Scripture***. We're going to look at a passage of Scripture that suggests that we'd be foolish NOT to make it our intention ***ahead of time*** to obey whatever God speaks to us through Scripture. We'll consider Matthew 7:24-27, the last paragraph in the Sermon on the Mount.

After teaching His disciples about life in the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells this parable:

24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. 26 "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell-- and great was its fall."

Above ground, both houses were equally strong and sound. For all we know, both houses were made of the exact same materials with the exact same type of construction. The only difference was the foundation: one was built on the rock and the other was built on the sand. When "the rains fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against" each house, the difference became obvious. The house built on the rock "did not fall," but the house built on the sand "fell – and great was its fall." One weathered the storm and the other experienced catastrophic failure. The difference was the foundation.

The choice of foundations was Jesus' criterion for pronouncing the builder wise or foolish. When you build a house, nothing else matters very much if your foundation won't withstand the storms.

It's been fun the past few weeks looking out my office window and watching the new construction. They've taken great care to lay a solid foundation. You may or may not know that the new restrooms will double as a storm shelter. If you look out the front doors and to the left you'll see re-bar sticking up out of the concrete slab; that rebar will tie the cement-block walls to the footings beneath the slab. Those walls will literally withstand whatever storms come our way because they're tied to a strong foundation.

Jesus says that when it comes to our lives, the foundational issue is whether or not we are "acting on" or "putting into practice" the things He has taught. This is an extraordinary claim to make – that putting into practice His teachings was the determining factor in whether or not we stand strong or fall. ***The strength and stability of our lives is a function of whether or not we put into practice the teachings of Jesus (and the whole of Scripture)***

There is great emphasis in the Scriptures on actually practicing or doing the truth of Scripture. A verse that has challenged me for 20+ years is Ezra 7:10 which says that the "good hand of His God was upon him" because "Ezra had set his heart to **study** the law of the Lord and to **practice** it, and to **teach** His statutes and ordinances in Israel." The great temptation is to study and teach, study and teach, study and teach. But all three (study, **practice**, and teach) are necessary.

Hebrews 5:14 tells us that "solid food is for the mature, who because of **practice** have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Maturity isn't a function of knowledge (although knowledge is certainly preferable to ignorance). Maturity is a function of practicing Scripture to the point of having our senses trained. Similarly, Jesus teaches

in Matthew 7 that strength and stability come from actually “putting into practice” what He’s taught.

The person who hears Jesus’ words and continually puts them into practice (“acts” is a present continuous active verb) is like the man who built his house on the rock. That person can walk into the future without fear and without anxiety because s/he has a solid foundation. As we all know, the storms **will** come. D.A. Carson points out, “If you live long enough you **will** suffer.” Storms are part of this life: strained/broken relationships, illness and disease, and all sorts of disappointments (I don’t think I know anybody whose life has turned out exactly how they thought it would). But we don’t have to fear the future and the storms that will come if we’ve got a solid foundation.

The person who hears but doesn’t put into practice Jesus’ teaching is like the man who built his house on the sand. That person is a disaster waiting to happen because sooner or later the storms will come and will expose the type of foundation he/she has built. That person doesn’t have the inner resources necessary to weather the storms of life. Sometimes the catastrophic failure of a person’s life will be obvious to all; other times it is hidden and disguised. Sometimes complete ruin comes in this life; other times it isn’t exposed until the next life (it’s possible to “gain the whole world and forfeit your soul”).

On the one hand Jesus’ teaching is sobering because He is saying that we are responsible to put into practice what we’ve heard. Nobody else is going to do it for us. On the other hand His teaching should also give us great hope because it means that strength and stability are accessible to us in the Kingdom of God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus wasn’t laying down a set of burdensome laws that will choke the life out of us; He was teaching what is actually possible if God reigns in your life.

This means that your strength and stability is not dependent upon your intelligence, your competence, your income, or your circumstances. The stability of your life is dependent upon whether or not you are putting into practice the teachings of Jesus (and the Scriptures in general). That is something you can do by the grace of God (He gives the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, angels, etc.).

Day after day every single one of us is building a house. And we are each building our house on the sand or on the rock; we are either hearing and putting into practice what Jesus teaches or we are ignoring what Jesus teaches. ***The strength and stability of our lives is a function of whether or not we put into practice the truths of Scripture.***

In light of this reality, we would be foolish NOT to decide ahead of time, “By the grace of God, I will receive and put into practice what God speaks to me through His Word.” This has actually been the intention of believers in both the Old and New Testaments.

For example, last week we saw from Psalm 119 that instead of waking up each day and thinking, “Maybe I’ll meditate on Your Word and maybe I won’t. . .” the psalmist

declared, “I will meditate on Your statutes.” The psalmist also declared that he would obey what he found in God’s word. For example, in verses 105 and 106, we read:

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.
106 I have sworn and I will confirm it,
That I will keep Your righteous ordinances.

The psalmist is declaring to God his intention to obey what God has shown Him. This may sound presumptuous until we consider the converse: “Even though Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path, God, I may or may not take Your advice.” In verse 112 he says this:

112 I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes
Forever, *even* to the end.

The psalmist had the settled intention of practicing what he found in the Scriptures. This is the perspective that each of us should have concerning the Scriptures. We should not only make it our intention to engage the Scriptures; we should also make it our intention ahead of time to receive and obey whatever we find there.

Some of you here this morning are ready to engage your will and make it your intention to receive and obey the Scriptures. Everything I’ve said this morning makes sense, God has been preparing your heart, and you’re thinking, “Of course I should intend to obey the Scriptures. . . I don’t want to build my house on the sand. . .” But others of you may honestly not be at that place **for a variety of reasons**. Before you can make it your intention to obey whatever you find in Scripture, you need to address some deeper issues.

I want to spend a few minutes answering the question, “***What might keep us from being intentional about obeying God’s Word?***” There could be any number of things, but these are some things that seem most prominent to me.

Fear. There’s a reason why “fear not” is the 2nd most frequent command in the Bible - second only to “praise the Lord.” We are naturally full of many different fears - some valid and some unfounded. When it comes to spiritual things and to God, we often have fears.

Maybe you were following the Reading Guide this past week. . . and you came across the statement in Matthew 5, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Maybe that simple statement caught your attention and God brought to mind a situation in which you might be a peacemaker (two friends who are in conflict with each other). But the idea of getting involved as a peacemaker fills you with fear. Perhaps you’ve tried to be a peacemaker in the past and it’s blown up in your face. It’s easier to be passive or to take sides.

This is the type of fear we sometimes have concerning the Scriptures. It's safer to pick and choose what we'll hear from Scripture and what we'll obey. I completely understand that mindset; sometimes I **have** that mindset. But don't you ever get tired of playing it safe? Don't you every get bored of doing only those things you think you can pull off in your own strength? Why not step out into the wild, uncharted, dangerous realms of the Kingdom of God?

Maybe you need to address some of your fears before you can make it your intention to practice whatever God shows you in Scripture. Or maybe you simply need to entrust your fears to God, believing that He'll address them in time. "God, as you know I'm a bundle of fears and insecurities, but I want to live the life I see in Scripture."

Busyness. Hearing the voice of God through Scripture and then responding in obedience will take time. I find that it takes unhurried time - which isn't measured only in minutes. If you're not in the habit of spending unhurried time with God through the Scriptures, you might almost panic at the thought of the time demands of "deciding ahead of time" that you're going to receive and obey Scripture.

Almost everybody I know is busy (with **good** things!): work, school, raising kids, chores, cooking, cleaning, ministry, etc. Perhaps you could make the case your schedule is too full to add anything else, including unhurried time with Scripture.

But in light of the Scriptures we've been studying in this series, I'd like to gently but forcefully confront that line of thinking. If a person "does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," maybe it would be *better to skip a meal than skip time in the Scriptures*. And I'd be the last person to suggest that there's no place in the Christian's life for reading the newspaper or exercise or walking the dog or doing woodworking or gardening; those things can all be done to the glory of God. But if those things crowd out your time in the Scriptures, it's probably time for you to make some hard decisions.

Each of us has 168 hours a week. We need to make it our intention to spend **some** of those hours receiving and putting into practice the truth of Scripture.

Laziness. R.C. Sproul, in his book *Knowing Scripture*, raises this possibility.

We fail in our duty to study God's Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy. (p. 17)

He said it – I didn't! But maybe he's right. Maybe it's not that the Word is so incredibly complex that we can't understand it. Maybe it's not that we're just so busy that we cannot find 15 minutes of uninterrupted silence. Maybe the truth is that we have great energy when it comes to soaking in sports and politics and current events, but that when it comes to Scripture we're just plain lazy. If that is the case, we should admit as

much to God. We should confess our laziness and purpose in our hearts to engage Scripture and obey what we find there.

Are there good reasons for not making it your intention to receive and put into practice the truths of Scripture? If so, why not bring them to God so that He can deal with them. If you don't have any good reasons, why not by faith make it your intention that by the grace of God you will not only engage the Scriptures but you will receive and put into practice what you find there?