

From Thought to Action

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Preacher: Christopher Anderson

[0:00] Good evening, everybody. For those of you who haven't met me, my name is Chris Anderson. I am the co-director of prayer with Ms. Meg Clark, and I am so excited to be back preaching here once again. It has been a little bit of a while. Last time I was preaching in front of all of you was at the Advent retreat. We spoke about choosing to use Advent for self-care, for finding joy when there was none to be found, and it was honestly like a bonding moment.

But I'm going to admit I have a little bit of a fear that tonight's sermon might not necessarily be as much of a bonding moment as Advent was. For some perspective, I was thinking about calling tonight's sermon, but both of our pastors are out, and that might just be a bridge too far for me. So instead, we are calling it Moving from Thoughts to Action. For those of you who know me, I am a dreamer. I literally have received feedback as a resident chaplain this year that my growing edge, the thing I'm supposed to be working on, is not using hyperbole. Does anyone not know what that means? Fantastic. Because if you didn't, you just got an example. I use it apparently way too much with everyone, mostly because I am just always this excited. I have tendencies to have big thoughts, and often I don't put them into practice, which that's going to give you the foray into what we're getting into tonight. And if I'm honest, as I was thinking about it this week, pull back the lens, I had signed up to do this eight, ten weeks ago and said to Tanetta, putting thoughts into actions, because I can preach to myself about that. And then I was thinking about it, and I was like, oh, that seems like D.C. Like all of these promises that we're going to work with on housed brothers and sisters, and then they get evicted right before the State of the Union.

Hmm. Like many of our politicians who promise things and then it doesn't come through. Or even just for myself, that promise that I'm going to put that extra wallet that I have where I can use for when somebody asks me money, that I can give them something on my way in my back pocket, and it never goes there. It's still sitting on my desk at home. Why is it that it seems like when the rubber hits the road, especially for myself, that we walk away from the promises that we make in our mind, that feel really good in the moment, but we don't always follow through with them?

It seems to me that within our souls, especially in today's culture, that there is something in us that when tragedy hits, we send thoughts and prayers, and we stand with those who are in suffering. But something can hold us back from making real change. Another example, maybe even more personal to myself, is that it took me until very recently, and please read, like, yeah, three months ago, to realize that you don't just get a calling or a dream that you're meant to do something.

[2:57] It's a lot of hard work and focus. Like if you're called to do something, you need to actually hard work and focus, which as someone with self-diagnosed ADHD, it was a bit of a slam over the head at 33. So, I want to be clear tonight. Tonight's sermon, Moving from Thoughts into Actions, is a sermon primarily where I'm preaching at myself. This is not towards anyone directly in our community or outside of our community. Table Church is first a safe space, which is one of the things I love the most about our community. So, at any point tonight, I encourage you to find that safe space the way that you need it. The bathrooms are out that door, and there is room in the back as well. So, if you need to take space for yourself, by all means. Other than that, I have no content warning or trigger warnings for tonight. So, with that, we're going to be focusing on three readings tonight, and then we're going to be asking two questions. Let's see. The three readings are Ecclesiastes 5, 1-7, Matthew 5, 33-37, and Luke 5, 18-25. Fair warning, some reason, 10 weeks ago, I heard someone say, oh, we're all doing Ecclesiastes for our sermons. That was not true. So, when I got to this, I was like,

Ecclesiastes. I studied that in grad school for like 10 minutes, and I heard from the Eminem song, oh, we're going to have a problem here, as I'm trying to go, how do I find thoughts and prayers in Ecclesiastes? Believe it or not, it's in there. So, with that, can we have the first slide?

This is from the new, actually, forgive me, go back one. Sorry, Heidi. I forgot about that part. So, two questions to keep in your mind tonight. What are some of the things that scripture tells us about thoughts and prayers? And I want to be direct going forward. This is mostly thoughts.

Prayers, prayer is effective. I am not preaching against prayer tonight. It is effective. It is this idea of thoughts and prayers, or feeling like we're connecting, but not really taking real action. The second is, how can we better put our desire, which might be another way to say thoughts and prayers, into actual effective action? So, with that, this is from Ecclesiastes for the New International Version, and it says, guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth. Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven, and you are on earth, so let your words be few. A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it.

He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you to sin, and do not protest the temple messenger.

[5 : 54] My vow was a mistake. Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore, fear God. As someone who is a chaplain, who talks for a living, this scared me badly, because this is a whole lot of like, oh, don't talk so much, dude. So, I'm going to give you a second version from the message, which says, is similar. It says, watch your step when you enter God's house.

Enter to learn. That's far better than mindlessly offering a sacrifice, doing more harm than good. Don't shoot off your mouth or speak before you think. Don't be too quick to tell God what you think he wants to hear. God's in charge, not you. The less you speak, the better.

Overtalk shows you up as a fool. When you tell God you'll do something, do it now. God takes no pleasure in foolish drivel. Vow it, then do it. Far better not to vow in the first place than vow and not pay up. Do not let your mouth make a total sinner of you. When called to account, you won't get by with, sorry, I didn't mean it. Why risk provoking God to angry retaliation? But against all illusion and fantasy and empty talk, there is always this rock foundation. Fear God. So, it's a lot. It's kind of dark. To give you a little bit of background, the commentary from the New American Bible Revised edition for this says, further counsels on prudence and circumspection in fulfilling one's religious obligations. It is not the multitude of words, but one's sincerity that counts the judgment of God's sovereignty, especially through obedience and reverence. Okay, what does that mean? So, a commentary is essentially telling you what's going on in the lines of the text. And for this, I would encourage, let's look at the last line together. It is not the multitude of words, but one's sincerity that counts in the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty. In other words, if we really believe that God is God and we are his people, are we not only saying, but doing things that help bring his kingdom? Are we working against the systems of oppression where we see them? Are we working to eliminate racism, homophobia, and misogyny from our hearts where they have no room to belong? Next slide, please.

In his article, What the Preacher Forgot, The Rhetoric of Ecclesiastes, Doug Miller tells us that the author of Ecclesiastes likewise criticized other choices and values, such as the desire for lasting fame, work for its own sake, individualism, and improper speech before God. That would be the one we're looking at tonight. By destabilizing the system of the people he was speaking to, he prepares them for his positive admonition. That would be the writer. So the writer tells everybody all these things they shouldn't be doing, that they probably are, in order to then turn it around and give them something positive. This is important because we also see this in tradition of Jesus's preaching. Even in the midst of admonishment and ideas that are meant to make us look hard at our conscience, there's always a positive invitation and a choice that we're able to make. I ask you, remember, if nothing else from this, remember that piece for the end. So now that you've done your scripture for today, round two, even more. Let's look at Matthew 5, 33 through 37.

[9 : 38] So Jesus is speaking to the crowds, and he says, Again, you have heard it said to people long ago, Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.

But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by earth, for it's his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it's the city of the great king. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.

All you need to say is simply, yes or no. Anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Other translations mention that instead of the words from the evil one, which is like a persona of the word

that they use, it can also be, comes from evil.

So to rephrase it, all you need to say is simply, yes or no. Anything more comes from evil. Which when I read that, it was another one of those like, ah, great.

So, Jesus is admonishing us to Jesus, forgive me. What was I writing there?

[10:50] Ah. Ever get to that point in a sermon when you're writing it that you realize the sentence you wrote literally doesn't make English sense?

I want to wing this piece. Okay, so Jesus is admonishing us never to swear an oath, right? So does that mean we can't swear an oath under the law? Meaning, for instance, like, an affidavit, signing a contract, going before a judge?

No, that's not what he's talking about. What he's saying, in a deeper way, is he's inviting us to radical honesty. One of my new favorite theologians, Diane Butler-Base, who is just always willing to theologically punch people in the face, wrote this on Matt 5.

She says, on the surface, it appears that it would not be terribly hard to keep at least most of the Ten Commandments. Murder, stealing, lying, adultery. The majority of us know that if we've done these things, know if we've done any of these things, or if we've ever been tempted to.

Jesus affirms the commandments through his sermon. He doesn't replace them with new commandments. Instead, he seems to be pressing his listeners towards a deeper self-awareness of the law. You say you never murdered?

[12:05] But I ask you, where does murder really begin? You say you never committed adultery? But I ask you, what is the first step towards infidelity? You say you've never sworn falsely?

But I ask you, are you true to your word? Jesus isn't diminishing, dismissing, or showing the law to be inadequate. He enlarged and widened the commandments from external obedience, which of course is good, and you'll never find Jesus saying otherwise, but to include internal self-examination, and include the secret things that shame our hearts.

That piece there is important. In this process, he points out that we may keep the letter of the law, and yet violate the deeper spirit of compassion and healing. And those two words, when I was reading this from her, when she ends it by saying the deeper law is compassion and healing, both of those words go both ways.

That's not just an action towards other people. We can have those actions towards ourselves.

Another thing to hold on until the very end. So, having read that from her, I had to slide my chair back from my desk and go, DVD, girl, could you not?

Like, I'm trying to go to work in two hours. I said that this morning. I know for me that that stung when I first read it, because I often will do something because I should.

[13:28] That external obedience. So, in other words, there's a rule, or God says we should do it, or there's ten commandments, and so I'm going to do it. But, do I really want to do it?

No. I do it because that's the rules. But when I go deeper, my heart says something different. Is it my inability to have a dollar for folks living outside my condo as source of bad planning?

Or maybe that I just can't be bothered. Do I really care that folks in other countries are reeling from an awful natural disaster? That the unhoused were forcefully removed from their homes last week in D.C.

and that gun violence continues to have no actual answers towards safety in this country?

Sometimes I know the answer of what's really going on in my heart, and sometimes I know that that's not pretty.

In order to protect myself and my ego, I, and this is quoting her, violate the deeper spirit of compassion and healing. And how often do we notice that happening?

[14:28] I would imagine every day, whether it's on social media or in our city, or even in our personal lives, we feel this tension, maybe even discomfort.

How do we move towards that radical honesty, linking our hearts and minds with our actions?

Remember what I told you earlier? That we're always presented with a choice. Now that we've gone through the darkness of the day, some good news.

So, our final reading for today, but first, question for you. Has anybody ever been in a situation where you've met somebody who's just going through it? You know what I mean with somebody who's just going through it?

They are just having literally the worst day of their life. Like, you walk up to them and most people are like, oh, hey, how you doing? And they're like, oh, I'm okay. This person's like, no. Like, no.

So, I, so, a couple of rules with chaplaincy. So, I'm going to hide this person's gender, not use their name. I'm going to literally leave all the details out except for one small piece. So, I was doing what's called a consult.

[15:30] Any medical professionals in the room? Dang, I was hoping for one. Somebody would, oh, it's kind of halfway in the back. What's up? You know what a consult is? Dope.

Okay, so you've done them before or at least been present for them, I imagine. So, thank you for all you do. So, a consult is, hi, I got like 10 minutes. I'm going to make a friendly relationship with you. I'm going to find out what you need.

So, as a chaplain, I'm going to find out like, do you want prayer? Should I sit and hold your hand? Are you having the worst day of your life? Insert story here. And, I turn the corner to this person. Knock, knock, knock. Hi, blah, blah, I'm so and so. Oh my God, please don't leave me. Literally the first words out of their mouth. And, I go, well, in my head I go, well, consult over.

time to go to work. And, out of my mouth comes, what? And, they go, please don't leave me. Okay.

[16:25] So, I go rushing. It's about here to that chair away. But, rushing over to be next to them because they probably just need a hug. And, in that moment, I hear, yeah, okay.

I want to make sure I got to the right part of the story. Sorry. I hear, in my heart, a voice whisper, which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or pick up your mat and walk. That, is our last story for today.

Okay. So, this is from Luke. He is, Jesus is in one of the houses of the disciples. It's probably actually one of the disciples' mom's houses.

It is a reasonably large house, but there is an entire village. So, imagine, like, imagine a DC condo, two-story DC condo, and you're trying to fit 400 people in it.

So, not possible, right? So, imagine that, and those people circled around it, because you've brought all of your friends, all of your cousins, anyone you can get. And, in the midst of that, some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat, and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus.

[17:36] This point in the story, Jesus has performed enough miracles that people kind of know what's going on. When they could not find a way to do so because of the crowd, they went up on the roof, and lowered the mat through the tiles in the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said, friend, your sins are forgiven. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, who is this fellow that speaks blasphemy?

Who could forgive sins but God alone? Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, why are you thinking these things in your heart? Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or get up and walk?

But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. So, he said to the paralyzed man, I tell you, get up, take up your mat, and go home. Immediately, he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on, and went home, praising God.

So, when I started my residency this year, I had been pushed to understand my own theory of why I was doing this job in the first place. It's not something they usually ask interns, because you're only there once a week, and that would probably cause half of us to have a panic attack.

[18:41] But in residency, you're there every day, and they sort of expect you to start working on this stuff. And for a long time, I wasn't fully satisfied with my own answer. Until the encounter with this patient, I sat there, holding their hand, being the caring human being to them, and I realized two incredible truths that Matt, Matt, I'm sorry, that is the wrong, that this gospel from Luke wants to show us.

One, we are not God. Thank heavens, because if I was God, there'd be some problems. And we don't have to be. The second is, we are called to be the guys on the stretcher.

So, realize that when we're honest about who God made us to be, then we don't have to overdo it. We don't have to go back to these big dreams.

Instead, we can start small, exactly where we are. I couldn't fix that patient's problem, but I could be a fellow human being who used his God-given gifts to help them know they weren't alone, we may not be able to fix homelessness or disasters or falling out family members or broken hearts on our own, but you can do something small right now to help be part of the solution.

There's one more piece I want to share tonight before leaving you with two questions to consider and an encouragement to go with it. I wasn't sure that I was going to share this, but it dawned on

me as I left the room that night, and this is part of my theory, that in the mercy that God showed me in that moment, that the metaphor begs a second question.

[20 : 18] You have everyone holding the stretcher, but who's on it? Who's the person we lower through the roof? Sometimes that's external. Sometimes you look at it and it's, there is a problem to be fixed or something to be addressed.

But sometimes, and I realize this myself, that often, it's me. I'm the one in the middle of the stretcher who needs to be held up by myself and by others.

My own self-care and love plays into this calling as much as anything else. Even for us who struggle every day with things we don't like, our confidence, our social relationships, even addiction, again, we cannot fix these things ourselves, but we can carry the stretcher that brings us to God's love and mercy.

We can turn the parts of ourselves that maybe we don't like and say, it's okay, we'll get there. And whether it's us on the stretcher or someone else, we can ask God to do the rest.

Slide. And so tonight, I leave you with two questions to ponder. What is my stretcher? What in my heart do I feel like I am being called to do that maybe I haven't started yet?

[21 : 27] And the second is, who am I carrying? What love do I need to show that person or myself? And how can I do that in some small way every day? I encourage you to take these with you tonight as we go through communion and then the rest of the evening and through the week as maybe some way to bring our thoughts and our prayers into continued action.

I've talked a lot tonight and this was a piece that I wasn't sure I was going to share, but many of us saw Pastor Anthony's update on Table Church's finances, which has been sent out by email this week.

He announced that many of our extra services, including extra support for Table Kids on the weekends, are being suspended until funds are met to be able to keep these programs sustainable. If you're able to, I humbly ask you to consider taking to prayer this week if supporting financially is something you can do. Not one of us is going to fix this issue on our own.

And many of us can only do a small piece if that. But, if there are many of us who can do a small piece on a regular basis to make this church a home for many that wouldn't have somewhere else otherwise.

[22 : 37] Table Church has changed many lives, including mine. And I feel called to ask you to consider the next generation of those who might walk through these doors. Thank you for giving me space tonight.

It's been wonderful to see you all.