

The Real Thing Week Two: “What is a Follower?”

Scripture Passage Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV)

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Weekly Reading Passage

“The *first* service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them. God’s love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives us God’s Word, but also lends us God’s ear. We do God’s work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them. So often Christians, especially preachers, think that their only service is always to have to “offer” something when they are together with other people. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people seek a sympathetic ear and do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking even when they should be listening. But Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either; they will always be talking even in the presence of God. The death of the spiritual life starts here, and in the end there is nothing left but empty spiritual chatter and clerical condescension which chokes on pious words. Those who cannot listen long and patiently will always be talking past others, and finally no longer will even notice it. Those who think their time is too precious to spend listening will never really have time for God and others, but only for themselves and for their own words and plans.

“For Christians, pastoral care differs essentially from preaching in that here the task of listening is joined to the task of speaking the Word. There is also a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. This impatient, inattentive listening really despises the other Christian and finally is only waiting to get a chance to speak and thus to get rid of the other. This sort of listening is no fulfillment of our task. And it is certain that here, too, in our attitude toward other Christians we simply see reflected our own relationship to God. It should be no surprise that we are no longer able to perform the greatest service of listening that God has entrusted to us – hearing the confession of another Christian – if we refuse to lend our ear to another person on lesser subjects. The pagan world today knows something about persons who often can be helped only by having someone who will seriously listen to them. On this insight it has built its own secular form of pastoral care, which has become popular with many people, including Christians. But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been entrusted to them by the one who is indeed the great listener and in whose work they are to participate. We should listen with the ears of God, so that we can speak the Word of God.

“The *other* service one should perform for another person in a Christian community is active helpfulness. To begin with, we have in mind simple assistance in minor, external matters. There are many such things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the lowest service. Those who worry about the loss of time entailed by such small, external acts of helpfulness are usually taking their own work too seriously. We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God, who will thwart our plans and frustrate our ways time and again, even daily, by sending people across our path with their demands and requests. We can, then, pass them by, preoccupied with our more important daily tasks, just as the priest – perhaps reading the Bible – passed by the man who had fallen among robbers. When we do that, we pass by the visible sign of the cross raised in our lives to show us that God’s way, and not our own, is what counts. It is a strange fact that, of all people, Christians and theologians often consider their work so important and urgent that they do

not want to let anything interrupt it. They think they are doing God a favor, but actually they are despising God's "crooked yet straight path" (Gottfried Arnold). They want to know nothing about how human plans are thwarted. But it is part of the school of humility that we must not spare our hand where it can perform a service. We do not manage our time ourselves but allow it to be occupied by God. In the monastery, the monk's vow of obedience to the abbot takes away his right to do what he likes with his time. In Protestant community life, voluntary service to one another takes the place of the vow. One can joyfully and authentically proclaim the Word of God's love and mercy with one's mouth only where one's hands are not considered too good for deeds of love and mercy in everyday helpfulness.

"Third, we speak of the service involved in supporting one another. "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Thus the law of Christ is a law of forbearance. Forbearance means enduring and suffering. The other person is a burden to the Christian, in fact for the Christian most of all. The other person never becomes a burden at all for the *pagans*. They simply stay clear of every burden the other person may create for them. However, Christians must bear the burden of one another. They must suffer and endure one another. Only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled. The burden of human beings was even for God so heavy that God had to go to the cross suffering under it. God truly suffered and endured human beings in the body of Jesus Christ. But in so doing, God bore them as a mother carries her child, as a shepherd the lost lamb. God took on human nature. Then, human beings crushed God to the ground. But God stayed with them and they with God. In suffering and enduring human beings, God maintained community with them. It is the law of Christ that was fulfilled in the cross. Christians share in this law. They are obliged to bear with and suffer one another; but what is more important, now by virtue of the law of Christ having been fulfilled, they are also able to bear one another.

"It is remarkable that the Scriptures talk so often about "forbearance." They are capable of expressing the whole work of Jesus Christ in this one word. "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases... upon him was the punishment that made us whole" (Isa. 53). Therefore, the Bible can characterize the whole life of the Christian as carrying the cross. It is the community of the body of Christ that is here realized, the community of the cross in which one must experience the burden of the other. If one were not to experience this, it would not be a Christian community. One who refuses to bear that burden would deny the law of Christ."

– From Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: Reader's Edition*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015, pgs. 75-78. Used by permission from the publisher.

Weekly Questions

1. What are the three services "one owes to others in the community"? Which of these comes easiest for you? Which is most difficult?
2. How does Bonhoeffer describe the way Christians should listen? Have you ever spoken to someone who listened in the way Bonhoeffer describes? What was your experience?
3. How did you respond to the idea, "The other person is a burden to the Christian, in fact for the Christian most of all"? What does Bonhoeffer mean by this, and do you agree?