

This year's advent devotionals feature readings from publications by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary faculty members. Today's reading comes from the book *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination*, written by Dale Allison, Errett M. Grable Professor of New Testament Exegesis and Early Christianity. It is published by Herder and Herder. For information on ordering the book, visit Cokesbury.com.

The reading is found on page 37:

The Sermon on the Mount ends with an ominous parable (cf. Luke 6:47-49). It envisages a flooded wadi overcoming a house built on sand while a house founded on rock endures. The import is much the same as 7:13-14. The person who hears Jesus' words and does them, who is like a house on rock, is the same as the one who enters through the narrow gate and takes the hard road to life. The person who hears Jesus' words and does not do them, who is like a house built upon sand, is the same as the one who goes through the wide gate and takes the easy road that leads to destruction.

“Whoever hears these words of mine and acts (*poiei*) on them” takes up the key verb (*poieo*) of our section. It appears nine times and is translated by the NRSV as “hear(s)” in vv. 17 – 18, as “do(es)” in vv. 21-22 and “acts” in vv. 24-27. The fundamental meaning is “do.” Its repetition indicates the goal of the discourse – the Sermon is a call to action – as well as the fact that the goal is easily missed. Throughout this section we are confronted with the problem of all moral and religious discourse: it is only discourse. Instruction and exhortation are not ends in themselves but means to an end, that being proper life in the world (cf. John 13:17; Rom. 2:13; Jas. 1:22). As Luther wrote, “the doctrine is good and a precious thing, but it is not being preached for the sake of being heard but for the sake of action and its application to life” (*Sermon on the Mount*, 281). Sadly, however, it is easy enough, indeed altogether natural, to hear the Sermon on the Mount, to interpret it, and even to memorize it, and still not live it.

Prayer

In this season of Advent, O God, we do not always take seriously your coming into our lives. Help us to act uprightly, to love you and our neighbors and ourselves, to bend our swords into plowshares. Help us to walk in your light once again, living out your message of love and hope to a world in need. Amen.