

“Doing the Stuff”

Mark 12:28-34 ¹

Several years ago, a young man made a commitment to become a follower of Jesus at First Baptist Wilmington and soon became eagerly involved in the new world of church activities. After a few weeks, he asked one of the staff, “When are we going to start doing the stuff?”

The staff member responded, “What stuff?” and the young man answered, “When are we going to do the stuff that Jesus did?” That question provoked a good bit of soul searching at First Baptist Wilmington. How would you answer that question if it were posed about First Baptist Bristol? I want to think with you this morning about what it might mean to “do the stuff” today that Jesus did long ago. We’ll begin by looking briefly at what we know about what Jesus did when He lived among us.

The first thing that came to my mind in that respect was Matthew’s comment that “*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and illness*” (Matthew 9:35). Preaching, teaching, and healing were three things that Jesus did quite often.

For example, Jesus taught about anger, criticism, debts, divorce, enemies, fasting, fishing, forgiveness, fruit, the future, hypocrisy, the Kingdom of God, law, lust, money, the poor, prayer, purity, retaliation, salt, seeds, soil, temptation, treasure, vows, weeds, worry, and yeast, just to name a few things. Jesus healed people beyond number, with illnesses ranging from atrophied limbs to bleeding, blindness, lameness, leprosy, muteness, various crippling conditions, exorcism of demons, and raising of the dead.

While any interaction with Jesus was both penetrating and memorable, some conversations were so special that they merited special attention in the New Testament, including His conversations with the Centurion, Mary and Martha, Nicodemus, Peter, the Rich Young Ruler, and Zacchaeus.

Jesus called people to repent and then He called them to make the further commitment to follow Him as Lord. And Jesus sent those who followed Him out into the world to do the same kinds of things, saying, “*I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in me will do the same works (the same “stuff”) I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father*” (John 14:12).

Jesus clearly expects us to “do the stuff,” and I believe it was after that young man’s penetrating question that First Wilmington decided to take more seriously the idea of being a missional congregation. Jayne Davis, who now occupies more or less the same staff position there that my Mom did nearly seventy years ago, told us that “Our church decided that if we were going to be missional, we needed to spend time with the One whose mission we’re on. So we made a commitment to spend six months reading through the Gospels together as a congregation. We believed that if we followed Jesus through His life and ministry in Scripture, we would understand how to follow Him more intentionally in our own lives and in our life together. . . .

“Jesus did not appear to get up each morning with an extensive and detailed ‘to do’ list,” Jayne said. “Rather, the whole of Jesus’ life was focused on being at God’s disposal, ready to make God known, often in the very ordinary situations of daily life, by what He said, what He did, and how He cared for people. And that is the example we want to follow.”²

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on November 7, 2010.

² Jayne Davis, “Spiritual Formation: Along the Way with Jesus,” a talk at the *Hopeful Imagination* conference at the First Baptist Church of Wilmington, North Carolina on October 23, 2010.

And, inspired by Wilmington's example, our own staff is going to meet next week to consider whether it might be good for us, too, to spend six months studying the life of Jesus, beginning with Advent and continuing through our Spiritual Strategic Journey that will end in May. We ask for your prayer as we consider how best to lead in this season of our life together.

As we turn again to our text for the morning, here we have Jesus' familiar identification of the greatest of all God's commands about "doing the stuff": ²⁸ *One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"*

²⁹ *Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. ³⁰ **And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.**' ³¹ The second is equally important: **'Love your neighbor as yourself.'** No other commandment is greater than these."*

³² *The teacher of religious law replied, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. ³³ And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law."*

³⁴ *Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions (Mark 12:28-34).*

For starters, we do well to notice that, while Jesus affirmed that the man had given the correct answer, Jesus also told him that knowing the right answer alone was insufficient to enter the Kingdom of God. James, Jesus' brother, later wrote that even Satan and his demons know the right answers (James 2:19). The key is whether or not we "do the stuff."

And "doing the stuff" by itself is also insufficient, if it doesn't grow out of passionate love and commitment to Jesus Himself (Matthew 7:21-23; John 14:15-21). Jayne reminded us in Wilmington that "Christian spiritual formation is a journey of becoming more like Christ. We make a decision to follow Jesus, confessing that He is who He says He is—the Son of God—and then we spend the rest of our lives growing in understanding of what He taught, developing our relationship with Him, and shaping our thoughts, actions and attitudes after His. Our journey is one of intentional discipleship."

"Intentional discipleship" is another way to talk about "doing the stuff," and there are three main components of such discipleship, sometimes referred to as "knowing," "being" and "doing." We might also speak of these as having to do with "head," "heart," and "hands."³

1. KNOWING CHRIST (Head): Jesus told us that He came into the world to reveal Truth (John 18:37), and consequently we don't have to "check our brains" at the door when we come to church. Because the Great Commandment tells us to love God with "*all our minds*," God actually invites us to challenge what doesn't seem to fit together and to wrestle with faith questions that seem to have no easy solution.

It's important that our cognitive understanding of God keeps up with what we know in other areas of our lives. Sometimes study brings new depth of understanding. Sometimes study suggests the direction in which understanding may lie. And sometimes the best we can do is to acknowledge that at this point, we just don't know the answers to some things. But we do need to be continually asking ourselves, "**Am I growing in my understanding of who God is and of what God is up to in the world?**" "Do I have a deeper understanding of Jesus as He is portrayed in the Gospels?"

³ These three points come from Jayne's presentation also.

“Can I intelligently explain the basic beliefs of Christians?” “Can I discern and apply God’s Word to my own life?”

2. BEING IN CHRIST (Heart): After asking, “Am I growing in understanding?” the next central question to ask about “doing the stuff” is **“Am I loving God more?”** Do you remember what Jesus asked Peter beside the Sea of Galilee after His Resurrection? Jesus knew that Peter had denied Him—indeed, He had foretold it—and afterward He asked Peter, “*Simon son of John, do you love me?*” Jesus actually asked Peter that question three times, and after each of Peter’s responses, Jesus told him, “*then take care of my sheep*” (John 21:15-23).

Jesus had asked Peter the “head” question a long time before when He asked, “*Who do people say I am?*” (Mark 8:27). Now He talked about “heart” and “hands”: “*Do you love me? . . . then take care of my sheep.*”

Being “in Christ” has to do with having Jesus’ life and power flowing through our lives and into the world through us. “*Remain in me,*” Jesus said, “*and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:4-5).

Some of the most important ways we “do the stuff” in the “heart” area have to do with worship, both corporate and private. When was the last time you sang in your heart, as the choir sang this morning, “You are worthy, Father, Creator! You are worthy, Savior, Sustainer! You are worthy, worthy and wonderful! Worthy of worship and praise!”⁴ When was the last time your heart overflowed or tears came as you worshiped Jesus from the depths of your spirit? Are you really loving God more?

3. DOING LIKE CHRIST (Hands): If you and I are “doing the stuff” of growing in understanding of God and growing more deeply in love with Jesus, then those changes have very natural consequences in our behavior. The question that goes with this third area is **“Am I loving others more?”** Is there any observable evidence in my behavior that God is making me more like Jesus?

In his old age, the apostle John wrote, “*If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?*” (1 John 4:20). John’s encouragement apparently accomplished its task, because about sixty years later, the Athenian philosopher Aristides described “the Christians” to the Roman Emperor Hadrian this way:

- They do not commit adultery or fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs.
- They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. . . .
- And their oppressors they appease (lit: comfort) and make them their friends; they do good to their enemies
- Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly.
- And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.

⁴ Terry York and Mark Blankenship, “Worthy of Worship” (McKinney Music, 1988).

- And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God. . . .
- And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food. . . .
- And they do not proclaim in the ears of the multitude the kind deeds they do, but are careful that no one should notice them; and they conceal their giving just as he who finds a treasure and conceals it. . . .
- *And verily, this is a new people, and there is something divine in the midst of them.*⁵

Those early Christians were clearly “doing the stuff,” and Jayne told us that many of the ministries First Wilmington is doing these days are things they could not have imagined doing even five years ago. But these things are making such a difference in Wilmington that the whole city knows about it—and the Kingdom has arrived there just a bit more as it is in heaven.

So what sort of “stuff” might Jesus be wanting us to do here at First Bristol? I’m sure I don’t know all that God is up to, but I’m pretty sure God still intends for us to get the Ministry Mall going. I’m pretty sure God wants us to do a better job of caring for senior adults and of loving our youth and engaging our young families. I’m pretty sure God wants us to keep trying to encourage college students at King and at VI. And I’m becoming convinced that God intends for us to play a significant role in the development of the Interfaith Hospitality Network here in Bristol, a ministry for homeless families with children.

One of the things we heard a lot in Wilmington was “Keep on keeping on! Don’t give up! Love people! Do the right thing! Keep going!” The folks in Wilmington told us that it took years and years of plowing and planting seeds before anything began sprouting from the ground . . . but when things sprouted, they really began to grow!

Another metaphor we heard and saw a lot in Wilmington had to do with poker chips, of all things. The church had prepared thousands of poker chips that said “Hopeful Imagination” on one side and “The Best is Yet to Be” on the other.



The idea behind the chips was to be willing to take risks as we “do the stuff” of following Jesus. While the phrase, “when the chips are down,” does come from the game of poker, the conference used the chips to symbolize that moment when you and I follow God’s Spirit’s call to “put down all our chips,” making a complete and unreserved commitment to follow God’s purposes for our lives.

“Many things you try won’t work,” the folks in Wilmington told us. “There will be many failures. Be willing to keep experimenting until you get it right! And then, when God’s time for a new ministry has fully come, ‘put all your chips on the table’ to take Big Risks for God. It will be worth it. **The Best is Yet to Be!**”

⁵Excerpts from sections XV and XVI of *The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher, A.D. 125*, translated from the Syriac version by D. M. Kay.