

## **The Sermon on the Mount: Is Your Life Built on Sand or Rock?**

**Matthew 7:21-29**

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This morning Jesus lands the plane. He concludes his masterful discourse on life in the Kingdom of God commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. If we were hoping for a soft, cushioned, gentle touchdown on the tarmac, we are in for a rude awakening. Jesus doesn't exactly crash the plane requiring an emergency evacuation, but he also seems wholly unconcerned that we be set down in comfort and ease. There is no one at the end of this sermon ushering us through the jet way saying, "Enjoy your stay; have a great evening; hope to see you again soon."

Instead, this is how the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon is viewed by a number of commentators: Says one, "the Sermon on the Mount ends with a terrifying question: are we known by Jesus?" (Purves) In the words of another, Jesus winds up his sermon "by a passage of heart-piercing application." (Ryle) Still another says, "these are surely the most solemn and solemnizing words ever uttered in this world, not only by any man, but even by the Son of God Himself." (Lloyd-Jones) I suggest we proceed with caution.

As you recall from last week, as Jesus began winding up his sermon he set before us a choice: will we follow him or will we not? It is a radical choice between obedience and disobedience, and calls us to an unconditional commitment of mind, heart, will and life. The way he presents that choice is to warn us of two unacceptable alternatives. The first is to have a merely verbal profession and the second is to have a merely intellectual knowledge. Neither of these, according to Jesus, can be a substitute for obedience. In fact, each of them may be a camouflage for disobedience.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (7:21)

In this first instance, the people Jesus describes are relying on creedal affirmation for their salvation, on what they "say" to or about Christ. Now, a verbal profession of Christ is essential. Paul says to the Romans (10:9-10) that "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved." Only the Holy

Spirit can empower in us a true profession of Jesus as Lord, so Jesus is clearly not criticizing verbal confession, *per se*.

And, he's not criticizing it because it's incorrect. Their confession is orthodox. It is based on right belief. They understand correctly who Jesus is, but James remind us that "even the demons believe—and shudder" so obviously that does not ensure inclusion in God's family either. Their confession is also fervent, expressing the strength and zeal of devotion. And, it is public and at times, even spectacular. These folks aren't hiding their faith under a basket. It's out in the open where everybody can see it. Three different times they stress that they have relied on Jesus' name to prophesy, cast out demons, and do mighty works.

It makes one wonder, what better Christian profession could be given? Here are people who call Jesus 'Lord' with seeming deference and enthusiasm, based on orthodox belief, and who are unashamedly public. What can be wrong with this? In and of itself, nothing. And yet everything is wrong because it is talk without truth, profession without reality. They may have a few showy moments of faith, but their daily lives do not live up to their profession, so Jesus moves on from what they are saying to him to what he will say to them. He, too, will make a solemn profession. The Greek word used in verse 23 is "homologeso" which means, "I will confess." Like theirs, Christ's confession will also be public, but unlike theirs, his will be true. He will address them with the terrible and terrifying words, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers."

The reason for his rejection is consistent with what we've heard throughout the Sermon on the Mount. Their profession concerned their lips only, and not their life. They called Jesus 'Lord, Lord,' but never submitted to his lordship or obeyed the will of his Father. You get the fuller flavor of it in Luke's version of Jesus Sermon where he says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" The vital difference is between "saying" and "doing." They may do the occasional mighty work or good deed, but their everyday behavior is not good, but evil, and the two are incompatible. In the words of Paul, "Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness."

For those of us in the church today, we, too, have made a public profession of faith in Jesus in our baptisms or confirmations, and the warning embedded in this text applies to us as well. We can appear to honor Christ by referring to him as 'Lord.' We can recite the creeds and sing hymns expressing our devotion to him. But, Jesus is not impressed by our pious and orthodox words. He still asks for our words to be made effective and living through our obedience.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 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. 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. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Whereas the contrast before was between ‘saying’ and ‘doing,’ the contrast now is between ‘hearing’ and ‘doing.’ There are two kinds of people, Jesus says. There is the person who hears these words and does them and there is the person who hears them and does not do them. He then illustrates the contrast by his well-known parable of the two builders.

The two builders, you’ll note, have a couple of things in common: they both desire to build a house and they both apparently design a similar type of house. But, that’s where the similarities end, and the differences are significant.

To begin with, the foolish builder is obviously in a hurry. He is concerned with getting his house built quickly, even if it means taking shortcuts. He has no patience; no time to wait. Because of his impatience, a second difference is that he does not trouble himself to listen to instruction. He doesn’t pay attention to the rules that govern the construction of a building. The wise builder wants to know the right way to do things, but the foolish man ignores instruction and teaching. He will do his building project his way without regard to the counsel of others. And, then we can say that the foolish builder has no concern with having a lasting impact. He never stops to consider what the consequences of his current decisions might have in the future. The wise builder, of course, places great importance on building a house that is durable. He is willing to take the extra time needed, do his homework and make his plans according to his ultimate aim: to have a house that will stand for a long time, no matter what eventualities assault it.

Looking at it from the outside, there is nothing externally different about the two houses, nothing that could be detected by the casual observer, because the difference is in the foundations, and foundations are not seen. Only when a storm broke, battering the two structures, was the fundamental and fatal difference revealed and note this: by then, it’s too late to do anything about it. A foundation has to be laid at the beginning. It is the foundation that sets the stage for everything else—if the foundation is level, the building will be also. If the

foundation is strong, the house will be durable. But, if there are problems in the foundation, there will be problems throughout the entire structure.

It's important to remember the context in which Jesus tells this story. He is not contrasting Christians with non-Christians who make no profession of Jesus as Lord. On the contrary, what is common to the two builders is that they both "hear these words of mine." Both are members of the visible Christian community. Both read the Bible, go to church, and listen to sermons. On the surface, there appears to be no difference between them. The truth of their profession of Christ is in their foundations. In other words, the question is not whether they *hear* Christ's teaching but whether they *do* what they hear.

Why is this such a critical distinction? The real thing we need to know about any view of life is whether it will stand and withstand the trials and difficulties that come to every life. Is it going to help us and be of value to us in our hour of greatest need, when everything seems to be breaking apart and washing away? There is little value in a house, however luxurious and comfortable it may be, if when the rain comes, it suddenly collapses. That's what we call living in a "fool's paradise." The foolish person lives for and trusts in things that cannot help in the dark night of the soul. Jesus says that everything we build in this world, everything we rely upon, every preparation that we make, our whole view of life, is going to be tested and those tests will reveal the truth. What is going to stand? What is going to fall? What kind of builder are you and what are you building?

"Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."

It would be easy and it would certainly be safer to stand at a distance from the Sermon on the Mount and simply admire it: appreciate the beauty of its prose, its perfect structure, the impressive pictures, the striking illustrations and the extraordinary balance. It is a literary masterpiece. But, Jesus is not interested in that. We are never to hear the sermon's moral, ethical and spiritual teaching and simply stop. The sermon, ultimately, points us beyond all these things to the Person who spoke it.

In the final analysis what you do with the Sermon on the Mount is what you do with Jesus himself. If you have any doubt who he is, about his full humanity and divinity, about his utter uniqueness then that is obviously going to affect your view of what he said. If, though, you believe that it was God Incarnate who spoke

these words, then they have an authority and a weight that demands a response. He has come, yes, to demonstrate to us what the Kingdom of God is like and to invite us to embark on this incredible journey with him. But, more than that, he has come to make it possible. What he calls us to do, he empowers us to do through the Holy Spirit.

So what will it be, men and women? The wide gate or the narrow one? The easy road or the hard one? Words and belief that are empty or words and belief that are backed up by obedience? A life built on sand or a life built on rock?

“Choose this day whom you will serve,” Joshua said to the Israelites. The same choice is before us today.

Amen.