

Jesus Is Preaching Sermon Series  
A Sure Foundation - Matthew 7:15-29  
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Today, we're looking at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' most famous discourse in the gospels. We're not done with the series yet. Next week, Steph will preach on what Jesus had to say about worrying. Don't worry, she'll be awesome! But today, I want to look at how Jesus wraps up his sermon, right before the crowd sang a hymn and the deacons passed the offering trays.

Remember, the overarching point of this whole sermon has been what it's like to live for the kingdom of God first. Jesus is contrasting a life lived for God with a life lived for what the world values. That's why he tells us that it's the poor and the meek who are blessed, and that where we spend our money is where we can find our hearts. As he concludes this sermon, he draws a sharper contrast between those who profess God with their lips and those who follow God with their lives.

He starts this section by calling out the false prophets, the wolves in sheep's clothing who seek to lead Christ's followers astray. That would have been a big problem in the early church. There were a lot of competing understandings about who Jesus was and what he taught. Jesus says, "You want to know who's really following me? Don't listen to their words. Watch their actions. Look at the fruit they bear." When I think about that line, I think about the fruit of the Spirit Paul talks about in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There are a LOT of people out there calling on the name of Jesus, claiming to know the heart and will of God. But they are bearing some bad fruit, rotten apples and sour grapes. You want to know if someone is really following Jesus? Are they kind? Joyful? Gentle? Peaceful? If they are not producing those fruits, or are actively working against producing them, you're looking at a wolf.

Jesus takes this condemnation a step further. He says people are going to say his name, "Lord, Lord," and they're even going to do some amazing things like prophesy and cast out demons and do wonderful works. But Jesus says that's not enough. Hmm. That's a tough one. Have you done good things in Jesus' name? I don't know that I've ever prophesied. I have cast out a few demons from my girls when they were toddlers using a popsicles and episodes of "Blue's Clues." I tried to do good works, I know you do, too. But is Jesus saying that's not enough?

It makes me think about Ben, a youth I worked with in the church I served in Illinois. Ben was a bit of a handful and not really into church, so when it came time for the Pastor's Class, I was surprised he wanted to do it. He went through the class and was baptized and went on being Ben. When the next year's class rolled around, Ben asked me if he could take it again. I asked why and he said, "Based on my behavior, I'm not sure my baptism worked the first time." He thought going through the motions would make him a better person. But being baptized or putting a fish magnet on your car doesn't make you a follower of Christ.

Well, what does? How can we ensure that we're truly following Christ and not just play-acting at being a Christian? Jesus' last illustration about building houses drives home this point for us. Jesus tells us about two men who build houses. Notice, he doesn't

say anything about the houses themselves. They could have been shacks or mansions. One may have had a car port and the other a man cave. We don't know. What we do know is that they were built on different foundations: one on rock, the other on sand. When the storms come, one house washes away, while the other one stands firm.

What does it mean to stand firm in Jesus? It feels like the right answer is to pray to Jesus, to read our Bible, to go to church, to do all the things we've been taught to do to be a good Christian. And that's all good, Jesus says. "Everyone who hears these words of mine," he says. So, we have to listen to Jesus – through prayer, through the Bible, through worship. But the second half of that sentence is the real kick in the pants – "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them." That's the wise person. The foolish person is the one who hears the words and doesn't act on them.

I was seeing a physical therapist once about some knee pain I was having. She showed me some exercises I needed to do that would help. She said, "Do these three times a day, then come and see me in a week." I went to see her in a week, and she asked, "How's your knee?" "It still hurts." "Did you do the exercises I showed you?" "No, I didn't have time." "Well, that wasn't very smart, was it?" "No." "So, what do you think will make your knee feel better?" "Probably doing the exercises." She said, "You're smarter than you look." That memory is so vivid is like I can still hear her voice. I heard her words, but I didn't act on them. Foolish.

What words of Jesus should we act on? Well, remember this parable comes at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, so that's probably a good place to start. Jesus says blessed are the poor, blessed are the peacemakers. Jesus talks about loving your enemies and turning the other cheek. Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer and says, "Wherever your treasure is, there your heart will be, also." He tells us, "Judge not, unless you want to be judged" and gives us the Golden Rule to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. "Anyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them is wise." How are we doing in acting out these words, in loving our enemies, in counting the poor among God's blessed, in treating others as we would want to be treated? Are we producing good fruit or bad fruit? Are we wise or foolish?

I believe Jesus closes the sermon this way because he know our propensity to focus on ourselves, and when we do that, we focus on the storms in our lives, which makes them seem bigger and bigger. When I was first dealing with my knee pain, I remember thinking, "What if I can never run again? What if it has to be replaced? What if they have to amputate from the waist down?" It's easy to lose sight of God's kingdom in the midst of our challenges.

Something happens when we take that inward focus and turn it in a different direction, focus it on serving God instead of worrying about ourselves. If we spend time serving others, working with others, seeing God in others, then our lives, our storms are put into perspective. My knee pain carries a different meaning after I've served lunch to a man in a wheelchair. The struggle I'm feeling pales in comparison to earthquake victims in Syria. When we focus on the needs and value of others, we build a foundation of humility, of justice, of serving the least of these which gives us spiritual security in the midst of our own storms. We need a foundation that can bear the weight of life's burdens, because there are always going to be storms, and the world only offers us plots of shifting sand. But Psalm 62 reminds us, "On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God."

After Hurricane Katrina, I took a youth group to New Orleans to do flood relief work. We spent a whole week gutting a house that hadn't been touched since the hurricane. As I worked at the house on Majestic Oaks, carrying out wedding albums and nice clothes and exercise equipment to be hauled away to a landfill, I tried to put myself in the place of the homeowner, a lady named Iris DiCrispino. Iris raised seven kids in that house. She had lived there for decades, and yet didn't even have time to take her most precious possessions with her as she fled from the rising waters. The storms had taken it all away.

A few months after we got back, I got a card from Iris. She was living in another part of Louisiana and was waiting to find out what was going to happen to her house. I expected the tone of the letter to be one of anger or despair, but instead it was nothing but gratitude and grace – for the work we had done, for her own safety, for a house that had served her well. She was obviously a woman of faith, and her words were anchored in the rock hope that comes from faith in Christ. That following April, I got an Easter card from her, telling me she would never be able to return to her home, and then praising God for the gift of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. I thought I was doing Iris a favor by working on her house, but I learned that it was she who was helping me gain perspective on my own storms.

It's important to pray. It's important to read the Bible. It's important to come to worship. But if you end there, you're missing the point, because our faith is not for ourselves. We strengthen our faith when we give it away, using our gifts and resources to serve others. We are not meant to be believers who know things. We are called to be followers who do things, who bear good fruit for God's kingdom.

I want to close with this quote from one of the Old Testament prophets, who channels God's voice to help the Israelites understand what God truly wants from them. Does God want worship? Does God want sacrifice? Does God want someone who knows all the right things to say, someone who goes through the motions of faith? Here's what God says in Micah: "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"