BE A WISE BUILDER

Matthew 7:13–29

Key Verse: 7:24

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”

For the past five weeks we’ve been studying Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew’s account Jesus gives this sermon right at the beginning of his ministry, which tells us how important it is. In the history of Christianity there have been countless sermons, but Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount far surpasses them all. It has attracted all kinds of people with the power of its words and with its moral, ethical and spiritual genius. The famous nineteenth century Russian novelist and social commentator Leo Tolstoy was fascinated by this sermon, but despaired that he and most so-called Christians couldn’t live up to its teachings.

The Sermon on the Mount has been called “the constitution of the kingdom of heaven.” It teaches us how to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven during our lives on earth. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes, some of the most beautiful and profound poetry ever uttered. In these words, he shows us how to repent and become more and more kingdom-oriented. He shows us how to keep the spirit of God’s laws, not just the letter. He shows us how to live a devout religious life, not before the eyes of people, but only for the eyes of God. He challenges us to pursue treasures in heaven, not treasures on earth, and not to worry about our needs, but to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Finally, he challenges us not to judge others but to pray, and to treat others as we would like to be treated. His words are so powerful, it’s good to start by memorizing them.

Now in this final part of his sermon Jesus makes four contrasts. They’re all allegories of what following his teachings is like. In all these contrasts, he warns us of the final judgment. He’s also telling us that following his teachings is much harder than we may think. But if we take the easier way, in the end we’ll find that it leads us into disaster. We human beings are so forgetful that we have the saying, “In one ear and out the other.” Jesus is well-aware of this. As we read his words today they are full of urgency. He doesn’t want us to hear but then forget what he says. He’s challenging us to put his words into practice. When we do, he says it’s like building a rock solid spiritual foundation for our lives. What’s your life foundation like? Are you even aware of it? Through this study, we have the chance to reflect on this soberly. May God grant you a new decision to put even one of Jesus’ teachings into practice in your personal life.

Read verses 13,14. Here Jesus is saying that following his teachings is like entering through a narrow gate. Honestly, most people would prefer to go through the wide gate and travel on the broad road. It’s more comfortable and convenient. It’s also popular—it’s where most people are going. We human beings like to think that we’re independent and original, but in fact we all just tend to follow the crowd. It’s not easy even to find the narrow gate, it’s so small. And to travel on the narrow road is lonely. Likewise, Jesus’ teachings are radically different from how most people are thinking or living. To follow his words we have to choose to be different. Once we set our life direction in his way, we feel lonely. But he warns us that the easier, more popular way leads to destruction. It’s like the tragic scene of a large herd of sheep running off a cliff.

On the other hand, Jesus is saying that the harder, lonelier way of following his words is the only way that leads to life. The wide gate and broad road is a metaphor for a lifestyle of indulging in our sinful nature (Eph2:2,3). Many people do it because it feels good in the moment, and because they don’t get caught. In contrast, the narrow gate can refer to Jesus himself (Jn10:9; 14:6). It also describes a life of following him. It’s the way of self-denial and the way of the cross, a life of suffering to do God’s will (16:24). Jesus could see the ultimate destiny of all people in this fallen world. Out of his great compassion he’s telling each of us, “Enter through the narrow gate.”

As we know, most people don’t like to listen to hard teachings. We all like to surround ourselves with people who say what our own itching ears want to hear (2Ti4:3). We see this disturbing trend in our society. People watch 24-hour news that interprets all current events through the lens of their own world-view. So we get expressions like “alternative facts” instead of just saying “lies.” The Oxford Dictionary declared that the word of the year for 2016 was “post-truth.” It means people like appeals to emotion and personal belief, not objective facts. Jesus calls those who mislead people from the truth “false prophets.” Read verse 15. Here Jesus said that false prophets come in sheep’s clothing. They seem so sweet and nice. But inwardly they’re ferocious wolves, meaning they’re out to devour us. Basically, they’re deceptive. They’re just using us for their own purposes. They’re not just fanatic religious figures or creepy political figures. Even friends can be false prophets. A party life of drugs and alcohol is a false prophet. Living to enjoy the world is a false prophet. Anything or anyone that leads us away from following the teachings of Jesus is a false prophet. Today’s most popular life philosophy of living for yourself and following your feelings is the most spiritually dangerous false prophet.

Jesus says, “Watch out for false prophets” (15a). Then he tells us twice how to recognize them (16a,20). Look at verses 16–20. Jesus says we can recognize them by their fruit. He’s not talking about produce vendors, but about **life** fruit. To distinguish good fruit from bad fruit takes time. A tree doesn’t produce fruit right away—we have to wait and see. Even when the fruit comes, we can’t always tell if it’s good or bad—we have to test it. Jesus is telling us not to follow just anything or anyone that seems good at the moment, but to look at the life fruit that results. James 2:13 says, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” What is good life fruit? Galatians 5:22,23 says that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” It’s the fruit of a Christ-like character. People and lifestyles that lead us to such inner fruit are good. People and lifestyles that lead us away from such inner fruit are bad. We should be paying careful attention to people and lifestyles that help us have good inner fruit.

Another good life fruit is outward: the influence we have on others. James 5:20 says, “…remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” Helping people turn from sin and turn to God is good life fruit. Influencing people to become followers of Jesus is good life fruit. We shouldn’t be impressed by people’s appearance or how well they talk; we should be paying attention to those who have good life fruit. We may not see it right away. Sometimes, it’s confusing. People can be active in ministry and seeming to teach others, but over the long run, there’s no good, lasting fruit of really transformed lives. 1 Corinthians 4:5 says, “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time: wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.”

Jesus goes on to challenge us all not to be false but true disciples. Read verse 21. What’s he talking about here? He’s saying there are plenty of people who can talk the talk, but not many who walk the walk. They’re known as “lip service” Christians. They honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him (Mt15:8; cf. Isa29:13). Their hearts are into the world, into money, into themselves. Those who say, “Lord, Lord,” sing and pray fervently on Sundays, but are really living for themselves the rest of the week. Their crying out to God is fundamentally *for themselves*. According to verse 22, some of these people seem to be involved in ministry—prophesying, driving out demons and performing miracles. But it’s deceptive because it’s really for themselves and their own glory. They don’t really have a personal relationship with Jesus; in fact, he calls them “evildoers” (23). They’re just as deceptive as false prophets.

Basically, in describing those who say “Lord, Lord,” Jesus is referring to those trying to make use of God. When we cry out to God, it should be for him to help *us* to do *his* will, not to force *him* to do *mine*. When he was struggling in the garden of Gethsemane just before his arrest, Jesus prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Mt26: 39). He prayed this out of his genuine love for the Father. He taught us to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (6:9,10). To do the Father’s will, we need to pray out of a real love for him. In fact, it should be our deepest heart’s desire, just like our Lord Jesus, to do the will of God (Heb10:7,9; cf. Ps40:7,8). To be genuinely interested in doing his will requires that we love God more than we love ourselves. It means patiently learning to listen to God and to obey him. Doing his will is not about doing some superficial Christian activities; it encompasses the entirety of life: where I live, what career path I take, what ministry I’m in, even the person I marry. To do his will, sometimes we have to deny our own thoughts and feelings. Doing his will also affects our relationships. Jesus said, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt12:48). Like Jesus, we need to be most committed not to human family or friends or to those most like us, but to those who are actually doing the Father’s will. They should be our kindred spirits.

Read verse 24. Jesus begins here with the word, “Therefore.” It’s his conclusion. He’s challenging us to be **doers**, not hearers only. It was a problem then just as it is now. It’s described in another place in the Bible, in James 1:22–25: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.”

So how can we be doers of the word? Jesus tells us of a wise builder. Read verses 24,25. He’s saying that life is like house building. It’s an investment of time, energy and resources. And there are definite outcomes. But the key question is, what’s our foundation? Is it superficial things, like money, or status, or even education? Or is it deeper, more spiritual things? In Jesus’ allegory here, what is the “rock”? It’s Jesus himself. 1 Corinthians 3:11 says, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.” The Bible calls Jesus the “cornerstone,” the only way of salvation (Ac4:11,12). Ephesians 2:19–22 reads, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

But the question is, how can we build our lives on Jesus the rock? It’s like digging down deep enough until we hit bedrock. How far down is this rock? In a few places, where the soil is shallow, the rock is just underneath the surface. In other places it can be as far down as 500 feet deep. But when we hit rock, we know it. The wise builder doesn’t settle for less than this rock. He keeps digging until he hits it, and then and only then, builds his house on it. Often it takes a lot of time and wholehearted effort to get there. But in the long run, it’s worth all the struggle, Jesus says, because the house built on the rock can survive the storms. Life is just like that. When we’re rooted and grounded in Jesus, we can weather any storm of life, no matter how violent or upsetting. But it’s not easy to be truly rooted and grounded in Jesus. How can we get there? Jesus says we have to put his words into practice. To do that, first we have to be listening to his words. We need to be holding onto his words. His words need to become a part of our everyday life. Romans 6:17 says, “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.” As we face life’s choices and struggles, we need to remember his words and obey them wholeheartedly. Each time we choose to obey Jesus’ word, it’s like we’re digging another shovel full of dirt and getting closer to the rock.

Jesus warns us of the temptation to take an easier way. Read verses 26,27. This foolish builder was lazy; he just wanted the finished house, quick and easy. He wasn’t worried about the foundation. But without the proper foundation, the house couldn’t survive a storm. All the money put into building the house became a total loss without the proper foundation. Like the foolish builder, we can be spiritually lazy. We can grow tired of listening to his words and struggling to put them into practice. We can settle for just listening, and it can seem good enough. But just listening to his words is never good enough. As James says, it’s self-deception (Jas1:22). It’s true not just for our personal lives, but also for ministry. We can be tempted to just gather people and hold them, but not help them to study the Bible deeply and apply it. We try to hold people by giving them human or financial benefit through the church. It doesn’t give them a spiritual foundation. Building a ministry on the foundation of Jesus the rock means painstakingly teaching people to obey his word. This, Paul says, is building by using gold, silver or costly stones. It’s slow and steady, but gold, silver and costly stones survive a fire. Building a ministry by other easier means, just as a good music ministry, good feelings and cultural activities, is like building with wood, hay or straw, which are rapidly burned up by the fire of testing (1Co3:12,13).

Let’s read verse 24 again. May God help us to remember Jesus’ words and practice them wholeheartedly, so that we can build a rock-solid spiritual foundation in him.