



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Building Well”

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Matthew 7:24-29

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A trickle of sweat ran down my spine. My pulse quickened, my hands grew clammy. Suddenly, it felt as though everything was closing in on me: the walls, the ceiling, the clock whose ticking was suddenly so loud (why had I never noticed how loud that clock was before?!), even the flag above the door loomed like a patriotic barricade blocking my exit. The desk in which I sat constricted my breathing – or was that just my breathing? It was Friday afternoon in my eighth-grade Ohio History class. There was a quiz today, and I had forgotten to study.

I have always been powerfully motivated by a fear of failure. Nowhere was that more profoundly felt than in the classroom. Quizzes and tests meant “go-time” for me, either inducing panic if I felt under-prepared or providing opportunities to demonstrate my worth if I had studied adequately. On some level, I knew it wasn’t about the test but about the learning. But it wasn’t until years later in graduate school that I came to understand the value of learning to grow and increase in knowledge and skill, taking notes in class then reviewing them daily to internalize the material. No, for most of my academic life I had fallen into the trap of chasing grades, conditioned by an educational system built on the myth of achievement and competition, where grades are the most important and oftentimes the *only* distinguishing indicator of success and potential.

My wife, whose master’s degree is in music education with a specialization in assessment, would be quick to point out that the role of classroom assessment like tests and quizzes is to measure the *effectiveness of the teaching*, not the capacity of the students. Unfortunately, few of us who have ever been to school – especially during our teenage years – saw it that way. It was all about getting a good grade to maintain or advance our position in the pecking order. Or at least staving off panic until the next test.

In today’s scripture lesson, we come to the conclusion of Jesus’ teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, the subject of our current sermon series, *Best. Sermon. Ever.* This is the second series on that passage spanning 14 installments covering chapters five through seven of the Gospel of Matthew. After Jesus finishes speaking, Matthew writes that the crowds were “amazed at his teaching.” Other translations describe them as “astonished.” The Greek word is *exoplēssonto*, which connotes not only amazement but also an element of *panic*. Did the crowds experience something like my trepidation in that classroom 35 years ago?

To be sure, Jesus made it clear that a test was coming, and it was a comprehensive exam. He said that those who heard his words and put them into practice were wise and those who did not were foolish. Wise in this context does not mean those with superior knowledge or intellect, but those who didn’t wait for the night before the test to start cramming (or not).

“The Wise and Foolish Builders” is the first of many parables of Jesus, and it is a memorable one. Many of us who grew up around church learned the song, “The Wise Man Built His House Upon a Rock,” complete with hand motions. It was a staple of every summer camp and Vacation Bible School session I attended during my childhood, and I can still sing it today (and remember all the motions). I’m guessing that some of you can, too.

In the parable, there are two builders: one who builds on rock and another who builds on sand. What differentiates the two is not the construction of the house, but the building site upon which the foundation is laid. In Palestine where Jesus lived and taught, the terrain is rocky and mostly arid. During the dry season, many areas are sandy and dusty, easy places to build because the land is flat and the soil is soft for digging. But when the rainy season comes, water rushes down from surrounding mountains and fills the dry riverbeds called *wadis*, flooding them and washing away soil and anything else that happens to be there. People hearing Jesus’s teaching would have known that only a fool would build a house on a wadi. Even in our setting, we know that it’s much easier to lay a foundation in soft, loamy soil, but denser soil makes for a more lasting foundation, even though it is harder to excavate and makes for a more expensive building project...at least initially.

“The rain fell and the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against the house.” In the parable, storms came to both houses, regardless of where they were built or who built them; everyone experiences storms. Our minds are

drawn to Jesus's words earlier in Matthew 5:45, that God "sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous." Being faithful does not make us immune to trouble. But it does *help* us when trouble comes. Isaiah 28:16 says:

(T)hus says the Lord God,
See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:
"One who trusts will not panic." (NRSV)

Predictably, the house built on rock did not fall, but the other did, "and great was its fall."

Jesus said that the one who built on rock is like those who hear his words and act on them. *This is a test*. But it isn't a cause for panic, at least not for the faithful. It is a chance to assess what we've learned and grow where we have fallen short. The aim is not judgment, but correction.

As I said, this is the fourteenth sermon installment this year on chapters five through seven of Matthew's Gospel, the block of teaching we know as the Sermon on the Mount. Why have we spent so much time on this particular section of the New Testament? We have called this second installment *Best. Sermon. Ever.* because many, including myself, consider it to be the most important block of Jesus's teaching to be found in all of scripture. Augustine called it "a perfect standard of the Christian life."¹ It formed the framework both for Aquinas's understanding of Christian morals and Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel movement. It provided inspiration for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's courageous stand against the evils of the Nazi empire and for Dr. King's Civil Rights work. Given its weight of importance, we should study this passage more than any other. Jesus said that we are to *hear* these words and *act* on them. In that spirit, let's take a moment to review the outline of Jesus's teaching in "the sermon."

He began with the Beatitudes, a complete reversal of the world's values in favor of God's values: *blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for Christ's sake*. He told us we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth, meant to bring life and preserve it. He said that being faithful followers meant that we must follow not only God's laws but God's *will*, and that we must be more faithful than religious experts.

Then he taught about the kind of relationships we are to have as Christians. Don't act in anger or even harbor anger in your heart. Don't treat people as objects to use and discard, whether in romantic relationships or business. Be honest and truthful. Don't retaliate when people mistreat you but state your case with clarity, calm, and confidence. Love your enemies and pray for those who hurt you. Be perfect – be complete – in your relationships.

He told us not to use our faith to make ourselves look good in front of others, but to quietly practice our faith and let our life be its own witness. He taught us to be less concerned about our prosperity and *financial* legacy and to be more concerned about our *faith* legacy, that if we put God's priorities first in our lives, we would have all that we need. He told us not to judge other people, but to focus on our own faithfulness. He advised us not to waste the life and the gifts we have been given, but to devote ourselves to God's will and way.

And he told us that living the way he taught would be difficult, but that it would lead to life, warning us not to fall for people who tell us otherwise. In the end, what we *say* matters less than what we *do*. And what we *do* should be guided by *God's will*, not by what we think or want. What Jesus asks of us is not to be *right*, but to be *faithful* in following him.

These days, there is a great deal of division within the Christian faith, as there seems to be in just about every other facet of life. While those differences are neither simple nor monolithic, one of the most heated arguments between the so-called "right" and "left" is around *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*. Those who focus on *orthodoxy* or having "right belief" emphasize doctrines and creeds, the traditions of the Church, reading the right translation of the Bible, listening to the right teaching and reading the right books, and they tend to gravitate to a straight and narrow image. Those who focus on *orthopraxis* or "right practice" emphasize social justice, acts of mercy and compassion, advocacy, and community engagement, and tend to be less concerned with polish, maybe even with a preference for people with a little "edge" to them. Recognize that's an oversimplification, though it is part of our dynamic in the realm of Christian communities. But we miss the point if we get caught up in the false dichotomy between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Having the right beliefs without acting on them keeps us distant and aloof from the world into which Jesus called us to

¹ Augustine of Hippo. *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*. Chapter 1. *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*. Online: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.v.ii.i.html> (accessed July 17, 2020).

be salt and light. Taking action without a thorough grounding in the teachings of Jesus lacks staying power and makes us vulnerable to our own hubris and self-righteousness. Only when we put the two together can we discover God's will, the hope that God has for creation and all who live in it. We will *never* live into the world Jesus imagined unless we root ourselves in his teaching and go into the world to bear fruit worthy of the kingdom of God.

Having heard what Jesus has to say, what do we make of him? The crowds that day in Galilee were amazed because he didn't teach like the other religious experts. He didn't rely on other sources to give him credibility or validation but spoke with authority that comes directly from God. That authority surprised them and maybe even induced a little panic as they saw the gap between his teaching and the way they lived.

When you read the Sermon on the Mount, what do you feel? Are you encouraged? Convicted? Inspired? Maybe all of the above? Do you see them as an impossible standard or as a roadmap for faithful living? What would it look like to live the way Jesus taught?

What will we do with what we have learned? Will we study for the test? Will we forget to prepare and risk being caught off-guard? Or will we study our notes, taking each day as a chance to hear Christ's words and act on them, building a solid foundation? The choice is ours.