

Scripture Readings

Matthew 7:24-27

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. ²⁵The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against; house, and it fell with a great crash."

Message

The Good & Beautiful Life

For some of us, this may have been the first time we heard these words of Jesus which exhort us to be doers rather than hearers. For others, this may be a familiar teaching; perhaps too familiar to feel the earnest intensity of Jesus plea, that true faith in him and his teachings will be seen in whether or not we **do** what He has taught us to do. The intensity of Jesus plea, which links faith and action, is echoed again by scripture in the letter of James:

James 1:22-25

²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately

forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

Often, I have preached about our identity as the children of God, and also about how often we forget that we are the children of God. It is in this passage from James that we hear why that happens; it is because we so often fail to **do** what children of God do. We know what we should be doing if we've been raised in the Christian faith and have heard God's word. But as James writes, we forget who we are when we are not living as Jesus instructed us to live.

Later in James, Jesus' plea to recognize the connection between hearing and doing is furthered:

James 2:20-22

²⁰You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

So the question arises, "What is it that we are to do, so that we remember who we are, and so that our faith is a true faith which is an essential ingredient for us to experience God's salvation?"

What is it that the apostle James is pointing us to **do**? What is it that Jesus calls us, in today's Scripture reading, to **do**?

It is said, and rightfully so, that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount teaching is an essential text one must study if one want to know how we are supposed to live life here on earth. And yet it is more than that when you study it in the context of Jesus 'day, and especially in light of its final words; our text for today. For here Jesus is saying that

what he has just taught, which runs very counter to what many religious leaders had been teaching in his day, must be chosen if one wants to be saved from the destructive forces that comes upon us all as we live our lives. In other words, **Jesus is calling his listeners to choose**; he is saying if you do what I tell you to do you will weather the storms of life. But, if you continue to build your life upon the sandy foundation being offered to you right now, you will not survive the instability of this life.

In this teaching Jesus was doing what he often did, he took some simple realities of life to explain God's truth. Around the Sea of Galilee was a very sandy soil. It was very hard packed sand, and often gave the illusion of the kind of firmness necessary for building a house. But if you did build on the sand, one day there would come a storm whose rain and winds would erode the foundation of the house and ultimately destroy the house.

What Jesus was pointing to was the need for people to do the hard work of digging below the compacted sand about 2 feet, and there discovering rock. If they took the time to do that, and to build their house upon a rock rather than sand, there would be no destruction even if the sand around their home washed away.

What Jesus is describing here is common sense for most people. We would not spend hundreds of thousands of dollars building a house without a solid foundation. And yet, how many of us build our lives without first taking the time and effort to dig deep to find the rock upon which we will build our character; our very lives?

This is why I am beginning today a summer series of sermons which I believe will describe the foundation, the rock which Jesus offers to us in his Sermon on the Mount, upon which one builds a life that is good and beautiful and eternal. And it is my sincere prayer that for all of us, myself included, that Jesus' teachings over the next two months, will not only fill our minds with knowledge of how life should be lived, but through obedience to Jesus words we will change how we do life. For some of us those changes would be dramatic, for others the changes may be subtle. But either

way, this summer we will affirm the reality that we as a family of faith live; that through our relationship with God and the power of his Word and Spirit, we are constantly being transformed as we live in obedience to our Lord.

As we go through this summer together I encourage you to ask Matt for a CD of any messages you may miss because of vacation, for it is my intention to challenge us each week to exercise obedience to Jesus teachings. Because that is what Jesus does in his Sermon on the Mount. He asks people to **repent**, to change direction, so that instead of being obedient to the world, which offers us countless incomplete and often times downright false pathways to "life", we instead trust that Jesus is not only "the way", but also the shepherd who shows us the way to Life; a good and beautiful life....

Jesus said;

John 10:10b

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Jesus wants us to experience a good and beautiful life here and now. And so it is my promise to you if you listen to Jesus' words and **do** what he tells you to do, you will discover a life that the world only promises but can never deliver; a life that God wants for you to experience.

You see, one of the often forgotten truths proclaimed in the gospel is that not only do we experience God's salvation in heaven, but that we can have a foretaste of that as we live today in the Kingdom of God. Many people; many Christians, have isolated the Kingdom of God to that which we will experience once we have left our lives here on Earth. But Scripture is very clear that when Jesus came to earth, the Kingdom of God came, intruding into the brokenness of this world. Remember, **the Kingdom of God is the rule of God in the hearts and minds of the children of God**. When Jesus came, unlike anyone before him, he chose to live fully for his Father in heaven. Fully devoted. Fully obedient.

When God created mankind, Adam and Eve had opportunity to live in full obedience to their Creator. But rather than honoring God and His will, they chose disobedience. And from that moment on, as described in the first chapters of the Bible, Scripture tells the story of a humanity living apart from God. It tells the story of God reaching out to people, and in some cases experiencing some success in their devotion and obedience to him. As we read in James, Abraham demonstrated obedience to God, even to his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Here and through other acts described in the Scriptures we see glimmers of the Kingdom of God.

And yet all who preceded Jesus at some point or another, even Moses and King David who both obviously modeled great obedience to God, also demonstrated humanity's bent towards sin. But **when Jesus came, the Kingdom of God came with force, and continues to grow as followers of Jesus live their lives in obedience to our Heavenly Father.**

Today we are invited to experience what Jesus spoke more about than anything else, the Kingdom of God ("Heaven" in Matthew). We will encounter that Kingdom language many times this summer as we look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It is also present in Jesus' prayer that he taught his disciples to pray, and his parables which are full of references to the Kingdom of God/Heaven.

The Kingdom of God is central to Jesus' life and teaching, and His message is that today we can experience "the good and beautiful life" that is waiting for us in heaven, though it will be experienced amid the chaotic rain and winds of this temporary existence. If we do what Jesus teaches us to do right now, the lives we build here on Earth will not crumble or wash away like the campsites did so tragically in Arkansas early Saturday morning.

Are you willing to give it a try? Maybe you've tried in the past but eventually chose the easier road to take. Maybe you have heard Jesus' teachings but have never tried your best to be obedient to him.

- Can we covenant with one another this summer to encourage one another to walk in the ways of Jesus?
- Can we sincerely try to do what Jesus tells us to do?

Before we begin a summertime challenge to do what Jesus teaches us, so that we might experience the life he wants us to have, this morning I want to make two quick observations about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

1. Everyone is invited to experience a good and beautiful life.

Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" teaching begins in Matthew 5 with what we refer to as the Beatitudes. Let me quickly read them for you:

Matthew 5:1-12

¹Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ²and he began to teach them saying:

*³"Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*⁴Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

*⁵Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

*⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

*⁷Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

*⁸Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers,

for they will be called sons of God.

*¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*¹¹"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds
of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your
reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were
before you.*

While the Beatitudes are worthy of weeks if not months of study and discussion, what I want you to notice as we take on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is that what Jesus is declaring in these wonderful statements, is that kingdom life; the good and beautiful life God offers right now to those who hear and obey Jesus' teachings, is open to all people.

You see, while one can study the Beatitudes from the standpoint of "happiness"; for the word used for "Blessed" also means "happy ", **perhaps the best translation of the word which begins each of these statements is "well off"**. "Well-off" are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. "Well-off" are the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness, and those who are slandered because they believe in Jesus.

Why are they "well-off"? Because they can, indeed they will, experience the kingdom of God if they listen and obey. Now we must be careful here lest we hear this great news only with 21st-century American ears.

Twenty-first century American ears, so greatly affected by the common narrative that we have to earn God's favor through our actions, will automatically assume that this list is a description for how we get God to be happy with us. In other words, many will use the Beatitudes in a legalistic way.

But, if we hear this great news with first century Jewish ears we will appreciate that what Jesus is listing in his Beatitudes are some very specific issues facing the people of his day who were wrestling with the flawed teachings of their religious community.

Again, the focus' of Jesus teaching is the Kingdom of God. And the teaching of the religious community in Jesus' day was that this kingdom, for which the Jews were waiting for God to give them, was not exactly inclusive.

The dominant narrative of the Jewish religious leaders was that God had chosen the nation of Israel and was not going to invite non-Jews to the kingdom.

Males would receive the kingdom; women were considered second-class her even worse. Some rabbis even said that women did not have the same souls as men.

The rightful recipients of the kingdom would be the faithful keepers of law; in other words, those were holy and ritually pure. If someone did not eat kosher or could not observe the Sabbath perfectly..... much less those who are prostitutes, adulterers or tax collectors, were in fact shut out of the kingdom that God would restore to the Israelites.

-Also, as we saw so often in the stories of Jesus life, sickness was for the religious community a sign of sin and God's curse. The kingdom was to be entered by those who were physically whole and healthy, not by those who were diseased, blind or lame.

-And finally, the poor were seen as abandoned by God. Therefore the kingdom was for those who are wealthy; the poor were not on the kingdom guest list.

In short, as James Bryan Smith summarizes,

*Those who would enter the kingdom of God comprised an exclusive club:
they were Jewish, male, religiously upright, healthy and wealthy.*

But, Jesus offered a radically different teaching. He offered that teaching in his life, as his actions ran counter to the commonly held narrative of the religious community of his day. Jesus blessed the poor, he touched lepers, he healed and forgave Gentiles,

even female Gentiles. Jesus associated with, and even welcomed, women to follow him, and he associated with notoriously sinful people.

Here, at the beginning of the greatest sermon given by the greatest person who ever lived, through what we call the Beatitudes Jesus is turning the rabbinic teachings of his day upside down by declaring that the kingdom of God is open to all people.

Now, can you imagine the excitement of the crowds who gathered to hear what Jesus had to say? I'm sure we can imagine the concern, even the hatred of those in the religious community for what Jesus was saying. But can you feel the hope of those who were flocking to Jesus in such numbers that religious leaders began looking for a "solution"?

I've heard it said that up to 90-95% of the people of Jesus day were one way or another excluded by the religious community as impure. Daily demands on their time, requirements of their work, kept a high percentage of Jews from adhering to all the Jewish laws. Can you imagine what they were feeling when Jesus began his teachings by saying that they were "well-off" they could be "happy" or "blessed"?

We, indeed **all** people, are welcome to follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God by listening and obeying him.

A second very quick observation about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is that,

2. The issue before us is not the high cost of Christian discipleship, but the higher cost of non-discipleship.

One of the great lessons I've heard all my life is that it is worth the extra money to buy quality products. My dad used to always say that, but my thriftiness has regularly convinced me to waver in my obedience to this lesson. For years I have purchased numerous bargain basement priced weed-whackers, snow shovels and bicycles, and paid for their disposal, rather than buying and caring for quality goods.

We are always, are we not, re-learning that lesson because we try our hardest to avoid that upfront cost; to avoid having to spend the extra time and energy and money to dig 2 feet beneath the sand in order to discover rock? And yet how often are we confronted with the reality that it would have been worth that extra time and energy and money to "do it right" from the beginning?

The good news is that it is not too late to put that lesson into practice, as it relates to life here on earth. It is not too late to choose the more difficult "narrow road" which leads to a Good & Beautiful Life. It is in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus proclaims:

Matthew 7:13-14

¹³"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

When we first hear what Jesus is asking us to do, we are shocked at what is going to cost us in time, energy and perhaps even money to be successful. We hear Jesus saying that anyone who would be his disciple must take up their cross and follow him. Such a statement tends to scare people away.

And yet there is a truth here we must affirm; **an important truth** we must hear as we consider whether or not we are willing to pay a high price of being a follower of Jesus in this world. That truth is simply this, **in the end, it will be a lot more costly for us to not follow Jesus that it will be to follow him.**

Dallas Willard explains the cost of not doing what Jesus teaches us to do, in this way:

Non-discipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that

stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10).

Source: Dallas Willard, "Non-discipleship Costs Abiding Peace", from Smith, Foster, Devotional Classics, 1992,p.6.

So, before you decide that you cannot "afford" to do what Jesus teaches us to do, count the cost of missing out on the good and beautiful life God wants you to experience right now as we await our future in heaven.

What kind of life would you have if you took Jesus up on his invitation and actually did what he told you to do? What would your life be like if, instead of finding yourself standing on the shifting sands of worldly promises, you had your life's foundation built on the bedrock of Jesus teachings and example? What would happen if you acted according to Jesus teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and chose to live without anger, lust, lying, revenge, pride, hoarding, worry, or judgmentalism?

What kind of life would you have? I can hear the world laughing now; either declaring the impossibility of such a life, or declaring such a life as dull or boring. But in fact, if we did what Jesus told us to do, living as Jesus taught us to live, what we will discover is a "good and beautiful life"; the kind of life God has always wanted us to experience.

As we quickly approach the weeks of summer, let me offer you this general challenge: Discover the life God has always wanted you to live by listening to Jesus' teachings every Sunday, and then putting them into practice. Discover what a "good and beautiful life" is all about during these weeks of summer, and then take your transformed life into the fall.

Begin this week with a very simple assignment; I want you to write a letter to God and I want you to begin that letter with the words at the end of this morning's sermon notes:

Dear God,

The life I want most for myself is....

Remember, God has great things in store for those who are his children through faith in Jesus Christ; people that do what Jesus teaches us to do. Heaven is waiting, and life in heaven is good and beautiful. Today I invite you to discover that even now, on this side of heaven, you can taste that good and beautiful life if you follow Jesus.

AMEN

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