

## The Sermon on the Mount:

### Foundations and Fruitfulness

#### Matthew 7:13–29

<sup>13</sup>“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

<sup>15</sup>“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup>You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup>A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup>Thus you will know them by their fruits.

<sup>21</sup>“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. <sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ <sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

<sup>24</sup>“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

<sup>28</sup> Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, <sup>29</sup>for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

I have this book titled *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* by British scholar FF Bruce. It has 70 chapters! That tells us something about Jesus' teaching, doesn't it!?! I think most of what we just heard from our readings today are in this book! And much of what's in the entire sermon on the mount too!

And this is what Jesus is telling us when he invites people to enter through the narrow gate, and when he says that the road is tough that leads to life. Sometimes the sayings are hard because they are hard to understand, and we need guidance to fully know what Jesus is saying so we can take it to heart. Sometimes they are hard because, even though what Jesus teaches *is* understandable and as clear as a sunny day, we are asked to do difficult things that don't always come naturally to us. Like loving our enemies. Like keeping a loose grip on our possessions ("don't treasure your treasures" as Jesus puts it in Matt.6). Like choosing to pray, and wait, and ask, and wait, and listen. And wait. All of the things that Jesus has taught in the sermon on the mount. Not easy, Jesus says, but the great news is that they lead to life. And, Jesus says, when we act on them, we have a strong foundation on which to stand, and build our lives.

Mark Twain once said, it isn't the parts of the Bible I don't understand that disturb me. It's the parts I *do* understand that disturb me. Because they are often challenging. As Jesus put it, right out of the gate at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you won't enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt.5:20) And the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is an exposition and explanation of that *inner* righteousness that leads to life. It's easy to follow rules. Just give me some rules. I'm a rule-follower so I like that for myself. It's more work, but so much better for me and for people around me, if I tend to my heart and soul and let my life be shaped by the solid spiritual principles that Jesus gives us.

With regard to the "narrow way," Oliver Wendell Holmes said "Most people are willing to take the Sermon on the Mount as a flag to sail under, but few will use it as a rudder by which to steer." That's the invitation from Jesus here. A different metaphor, but the same idea. Christian faith is not a bumper sticker that we put on our car, but a way of life. A path, a pilgrimage, that leads to life, and a strength that helps sustain us through the storms that will come.

If I could summarize this last section, this home stretch of the Sermon on the Mount, I'd summarize it this way: Faith (and life) isn't primarily about what

we say, or what we hear, but what we *do*—the actions we take, and the decisions we make that bear good fruit, based on what we hear and say.

The goal in all of this is to have a strong foundation on which to stand, on which to build a life. And as always, I love it that Jesus doesn't do any moralizing here, or finger pointing. He simply gives a little illustration, a little story for us to reflect upon. And then we get to decide what to do with it. He doesn't moralize and point a finger and say, "You bad people... straighten up or else!" He simply says, "Here is what one person did, which was wise and it created a good result; and here is what another person did, and the result wasn't so good. You've been a great audience. Thank you. I'm out." There is a kind of microphone drop at the end of this extended teaching, where Jesus finishes and everyone starts talking to each other, like, "Wow. What just happened here?"

And in the midst of what can be considered a series of warnings here in this home stretch of teaching is the great news: there is a road that leads to life, fruit-bearing *is* a result, and there is a strong foundation that we can build upon that will help us weather the storms of life. When we act upon what we hear from Jesus, when we do what we know to be God's will, we are on solid ground. The

world benefits from us bearing fruit; we benefit from being strengthened against the storms of life.

Speaking of storms... we are living through one prolonged storm right now, aren't we? Or maybe a convergence of at least 3 storms. This storm (these storms) will test the foundations of our lives. They're kind of testing the foundation of our society too. Sort of like the storms we endured in early January. One right after the other, with heavy rain and wind, setting the record for the wettest start to the year—7 inches of rain in less than two weeks, and power outages! It was exhausting. I told people, if I hear the term “atmospheric river” one more time I'm going to lose it. Yet, storms are part of life. Atmospheric and otherwise!

Yet this time that we are living through right now is both a test of our faith AND an opportunity to shine like stars. It isn't easy. Jesus is realistic about that, and we can be honest and realistic about that too. Jesus never promised an easy discipleship, or an easy life. In John 16:33 he said, “In this world you will have trouble...” That's pretty straightforward. Now, the second half of the sentence, which we don't want to miss is, “...but fear not, I have overcome the world.” That's the assurance of the solid rock on which we can stand.

Jesus is realistic about storms and trouble. I'd rather follow someone who is honest with me than someone who says it's all rainbows and unicorns, and easy. Every house faces storms, according to this illustration he uses. And Jesus uses identical language in both cases, about both houses. He doesn't say that the house built on the rock of his teaching had no storms, or smaller storms, and the house built on sand faced hurricanes and tornadoes. I think sometimes Christians like to believe that when we choose to trust and follow Jesus Christ, that we become immune to the storms of life (like a bumper sticker I saw on a car that said, "Jesus is my vaccine"). But that's never promised to us. What *is* promised is strength—a strong foundation to withstand the storms, when we build upon the rock of our salvation, Jesus Christ. Christians face storms, non-Christians face storms, equally.

I read a story about a couple who, because they were tired of the weather in the northeastern part of the United States a few years ago—snow storms, rain storms, high winds, nor'easters—moved to the Midwest, and no sooner did they get there, than the midwest had some of the worst flooding in decades. Then they moved to Florida and guess what? A hurricane came and caused thousands of dollars damage to their house. Then they moved back to New England where—guess what? There was a near-record snowfall the following winter.

They couldn't escape the storms no matter where they went. In fact, it looked like they were storm *chasers*!

What would have made this story perfect is if they had moved to California when the worst wildfire season came, last summer. They were trying to find the most storm-free place in the country to live, but they discovered: it doesn't exist.

There is no place on earth that doesn't face storms—whether it's meteorological, political, a pandemic, or an obnoxious next-door neighbor. And there is no *life* that doesn't face storms—whether it's the storm of sickness, or unemployment, rebellious children, or interpersonal conflict. We all face storms in our life. And Jesus is realistic about all of this.

And Jesus does not say that God caused the storms. Or that the devil caused the storms. We shouldn't try to theologize about why storms come, why bad things happen to good people and all that. The Bible never tries to answer that question, and Jesus never does. He simply tells us, storms happen. That's life. And they happen to everybody, including Christians.

The main point here, though, the big and most important point is, we have resources available to us to withstand the storms that come. The faith, hope and love that Jesus teaches us to enact, strengthens us *inwardly, spiritually and*

*emotionally*. And, the relationship-building that Jesus teaches us to work toward creates a support system of *reconciled relationships* that provide the strength of *community in Christ* that we need and want to help us through the challenges of life. We need each other! That is always true, but especially at this time, even if socially distanced, our reaching out to each other helps strengthen us.

As I've shared, I lived in the San Francisco bay area after college for a couple years. One of my favorite things to do when I had free time was walk across the Golden Gate Bridge. Beautiful, fascinating, and a miracle of engineering, considering it's one of the most earthquake prone regions in the country.

Civil engineer told me: it's the safest place in SF during an earthquake (ok, that might be a little overstated, but I believed him). The bridge has enormous flexibility: it can sway 22 feet horizontally, and 10 feet vertically if necessary—engineers say it's so, but I wouldn't want to be on the bridge to test that during an earthquake! So it has enormous flexibility, **and** it has great interrelatedness—in engineering terms I'm told it's called *redundancy*; that is, all of the cables and beams redundantly interconnected; it's very simple and uncomplicated. And super strong. But the greatest aspect of the safety is the foundation of the giant

piers of the bridge buried deep into the rock under the bay. Right along the of the San Andreas fault line! That's how strong and sure the foundation of the Golden Gate Bridge is, buried deep into the rock underneath the bay.

For me it has always provided a great reminder that when my life is grounded in Jesus Christ and his words, I'm secure. I have *flexibility* amidst storms, and my interconnectedness with others helps me stay strong in that foundation.

That's how sure and certain our hope is in Christ! That's how much he can be trusted, how strong of a foundation we have when we put his words into action.

Bethany—prayer