

When Jesus had finished saying these things...

Matthew 7:24-29

Some years ago, a professor at an American university set her literature class the task of reading and then reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount. For many of them it was the first time they had ever read for themselves the words of Jesus.

And some of their responses were fascinating:

"The stuff the churches preach is extremely strict and allows for almost no fun without thinking it is a sin or not."

"I did not like the essay 'Sermon the Mount.' It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is."

"The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery? That is the most extreme, stupid, un-human statement that I have ever heard."

And you might think this could have been a bit deflating for this Christian professor. In fact the opposite was the case! She says,

At this point I began to be encouraged. There is something exquisitely innocent about not realising you shouldn't call Jesus stupid. This was not exactly intellectual agnosticism talking here, usually the perceived foe of the faith. It was just down-home hedonism. It was Herod watching Salome dance. It was the disciples asking "Who then can be saved?" when Jesus deflated their dreams of wealth with the needle's eye. This was the real thing, a pristine response to the gospel, unfiltered through a two-millennia cultural haze.

These students heard Jesus words as they actually are.

For when you actually pick up and read what Jesus actually says in this famous Sermon, you can't help but notice that most of it *is* totally bonkers! Here are some of the things we've heard Jesus say:

- True blessing belongs to the spiritually bankrupt and the persecuted. Chapter 5 was full of doozies:

- Cut off your hand if it is a danger to your holiness.
- Be unrelentingly generous to those who want to take advantage of you.
- Love your enemies. Oh and don't just do the best you can, be *perfect*, just like God.

Oh, and while we're at it:

- You should call the God of the universe your Father and expect that he will listen to you and answer you when you pray.
- Do all your best work in secret so that no one except God can see.
- Jesus says that you if you really want to know how to live a godly life, go out into a field and take some life advice from the flowers and the birds.

And the stakes are high: all of these things are a matter of life and death. Ignore what Jesus says and you're headed towards judgement and destruction. Jesus teaching spans heaven and earth, from every little moment of our lives to our eternal futures.

There is a culturally hazy view of Jesus' teaching that sees the Sermon on the Mount as common sense that we can all agree on. But on closer inspection, you simply cannot reduce the Sermon on the Mount to *good advice* or *mere ethical teaching*. Jesus preaches the sort of stuff that gets you crucified. It really does sound like something out of this world: and maybe it is.

And so as Jesus concludes his Sermon, and as we read of the crowds response, we find ourselves needing to reckon with what Jesus has spoken to us, and how we must respond. We need to consider the *nature of Jesus' words, and the necessity of our response.*

The Nature of Jesus' Words

So firstly, we need to consider the nature of Jesus' words. And as Jesus describes his words his words as a *rock* in this final parable, there are three aspects of Jesus' words that come to the fore.

The come with Divine Authority (The Unqualified "I")

Well, number one. As Jesus speaks we must recognise that Jesus' words come to us with divine authority. The authority of Jesus' words, of course, is the most striking thing to the listening crowds. Having heard Jesus' speak they are amazed *because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*

The whole Sermon drips with authority. Jesus announces blessing from the mountaintop in the same way that God spoke blessing from the mountaintop through Moses. All through chapter 5, Jesus places himself right next to the authoritative words of the Law. Without qualification Jesus says, "You have heard it was said...but *I* say to you!" And now we see exactly the same thing in our passage for today. Again the focus is entirely on Jesus. Anyone who hears these words of *mine* and does them is truly wise. And as Jesus describes his words as a *rock* it echoes the repeated refrain of the Psalms:

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalm 18:2)

In the Sermon On The Mount, Jesus does not speak as a teacher or even as a prophet. But as Lord and God!

They are Demanding (The Unqualified "do")

And just as these words come from the *Lord*, they are demanding of us. Last week we considered that the Sermon on the Mount is demanding in the sense that it is hard. This week, however, Jesus shows us that they are demanding in the sense that they *require a response*.

Jesus says, the truly wise person hears Jesus' words *and puts them into practice*. Jesus' words are *practical* and they speak directly into the mess and the muck of our everyday lives. Again image that Jesus uses in this final parable teaches us this. Jesus' words don't drift around in the clouds as abstract ideas to be contemplated. Jesus says they are a **rock** to stand on, and a **foundation** upon which you can get on and *build* everything you say and do and think in every sphere of your life.

And so without qualification, Jesus simply tells us to do what he says. If you need to reconcile with someone drop everything and go and do it. If there is deep-rooted sin in your life, get on with it and deal with it. If you are going to give, or pray, or fast, don't wait until there's a crowd, do it *now!*

Jesus words in the Sermon on the Mount are the original "Just do it."

These are words not to be dissected in an essay but done in the world.

Listen and *then* live them out.

Jesus says, *hear these words of mine and put them into practice*.

They are a Firm Foundation (The Unqualified promise)

Then thirdly, as Jesus words come to us with all the weight of his divine authority, and with their demanding practicality, they also come with a promise: Jesus says, if you build on my words you **will stand**.

Once again we find a vein of gospel gold. For Jesus doesn't qualify this promise by saying that if we build a strong house, or a big house, or an impressive house *then* we will stand. It is not the quality of our building that counts, it is our **foundation**.

Once again we see that the real target of Jesus' teaching is not *unrighteousness*, but *self-righteousness*.

The real problem according to Jesus is the way that we can minimise God's good commands to give the appearance of righteousness as a mask for our own self-centredness. And we can perform our devotion in front of other people to give the appearance of piety as a mask for our own pride. And we can set ourselves up as judge over others to avoid facing up to our own sin.

And like the false disciples who come before Jesus and appeal to what they have done – "Lord, didn't I prophecy, didn't I cast out demons, didn't I do many miracles." – if we try to stand before Jesus on our own two feet, his words **will** become the for us the measure by which we are judged and we **will** be cast away from his presence.

If after listening to Jesus we get on with building our lives upon our own works, or wealth, or wisdom, chasing after our selfish dreams and our sinful desires, when the storms roll in, our lives will crumble before our eyes. And so Jesus ends the whole Sermon with the foreboding words: *and it fell with a great crash*.

But the person who humbly recognises that they are poor in Spirit, and who hungers and thirsts for righteousness; Jesus says, "you're blessed." And for the person who prays for forgiveness, and who faces up to their own sin before casting a critical eye at those around them. He says that we have a Father in heaven, who gives and forgives and

protects us. And though following Jesus doesn't mean freedom from the storms of this life, He says that when the winds rage and the waves surge against us we will somehow find the strength to extend mercy, to remain pure, to make peace, and even suffer for the name of Jesus.

And before the judgement seat of God we will not be so foolish to appeal to anything we have done, but we will point to Jesus, and *his* works, and *his* wealth, and *his* wisdom. We will sing:

*My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.*

And on Christ the solid rock we will *stand*. For as we hear the words of Jesus it makes all the difference that they are the words of *Jesus*. And when we receive them with faith, we will find that they come with his divine power to actually *produce in us* what they demand.

And so Martin Luther comments on our passage for today:

*"The Word possesses such power wherever seriously considered, heeded, and put into practice, that it **never remains barren of fruit**. It always awakens new thoughts, new pleasures and devotions, and cleanses the heart and its meditations."*

To the person who responds to Jesus' words with faith and obedience, Jesus' words are not a threat hanging over our heads, nor are they a mountain we must climb to ascend up to God. They are a rock. They are solid ground. They are a firm foundation. And so the question is, what are *you* building on?

The Necessity of Our Response

And so given the nature of Jesus' words it is absolutely necessary that we respond.

It's so interesting the way that Matthew records the response of the crowds. Matthew said they were *amazed* by the words of Jesus. Which is tantalisingly ambiguous isn't it?! Was their amazement the end of the matter? Or did it lead into the hearing and putting into practice that Jesus commends? Were they simply fascinated? Or did they have faith?

Well, whatever the crowds did when they went home, the ambiguity of those final verses actually turns the question over to us. Now that Jesus has spoken how will you respond? Will you wisely build on this foundation or will you foolishly continue to build upon the shifting sands of self?

And for each of us, real wisdom will require listening again and again to Jesus' words and prayerfully asking for God to show us how we can put it into practice. But to get us started along that track, I have a quick-fire seven suggestions from all we have considered in the Sermon on the Mount.

Here we go:

1. *Soak in the story*

The sermon on the mount is not just a list of commands. The commands of Jesus are given in a framework that very much reflects the story of the Bible. In the Beatitudes we saw a *movement from* poverty of Spirit **to** purity in heart. Jesus picks up all the Law and the Prophets from the past and says he has come to fulfil them in the present. Jesus looks around the world and sees a world made by his

Father, and cared for by his Father, and he invites us to see the world the same way. And Jesus lifts our eyes to a future including and beyond judgement day.

And if we are to live as Jesus calls us to live, we must see the world as Jesus sees the world. We must soak ourselves in the story of Scripture rather than the social media story, or the Netflix story, or the front-page story, or the middle-class Aussie story. The story of the gospel, and its life-changing power must be so real to us that we really can look at a flower and see the Kingdom! That we can see the birds in the sky and learn the lesson that God has our back.

In Acts 5, Peter and the apostles have been thrown in jail for preaching the gospel and they are brought before the high-priests and it seems as if their life is hanging in the balance. And yet when questioned by the high priest Peter responds with *the story*:

We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.

The apostles see the story so clearly. And they know they are now *part of the story*.

And Jesus invites every single one of us to enter into this story, to be witnesses to the exaltation of Christ and the salvation of sinners. And if we want to obey God and not human beings, we too must be soaked in the Grand Story of the Kingdom, and not in the little stories of this world, or our own stories about nothing.

2. *Spice up your life*

And if we do really soak ourselves into the story of the Kingdom, well, life will get interesting. So, number 2, responding to Jesus will mean spicing up your life.

In Acts 5, we see that the apostles can't help but proclaim the gospel in every situation they find themselves. They're in prison, oh have you heard about Jesus. Before the high priest, now has anyone told you about Jesus. They are sent into the streets, hey everyone! We have the best news you have ever heard!

Because the early Christians dared to speak the name of Jesus, and had the courage to walk the Way of Jesus, they were flung out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, and some of them even to their death. And yet through their witness the world was transformed by the power of the gospel.

I know there are people in our church who have come alongside friends and neighbours in very difficult situations, and it has brought mess and stress into your own life.

And I know there are people in our church who speak about Jesus in their workplaces or in their families and suffer because they follow him.

But Jesus says, *blessed are the peacemakers*. He says, *blessed are those who are persecuted because of me*. For though you may have given up your comfort you have found yourself right in the thick of the Kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, let us spice up our lives by seeking that sort of Kingdom life – so that others will get a taste of the goodness of God.

3. Get creative

And so we're going to need to - number 3 - get creative! I love here that Jesus doesn't say: here are the detailed architectural plans for the *Christian house*. No, he says: here's a foundation, now build!

In the golden rule, Jesus invites us to use our imaginations, to think creatively about how we would like to be treated in any given situation and then go ahead and do that for others.

In our work, when we go to school, as we live with our families and hang out with our friends, as we speak to the people in our street or as we gather together as a church family, Jesus liberates us to use the gifts he has given us, and the opportunities before us, in whatever ways we can to shine for the light of the kingdom.

There is something beautiful and exciting about the creative freedom of the Christian life. The world is not a dull place, it is a theatre of God's glory, and Jesus invites us to take up the Script of the gospel, and to improvise a life of love for God and for our neighbours, to display to all the world the glorious goodness of God.

4. Pray, pray, pray!

Which means, fourthly we need to pray. And it's right in the middle of our seven suggestions because it is right in the middle of Jesus' sermon. Prayer is the renewable power source of life in the Kingdom of God. And in the sermon on the mount Jesus gives to us the comfort of *set prayer* in the Lord's prayer. AND he gives to us the encouragement of *free prayer* in his call to ASK, SEEK, and KNOCK. And most of all he gives us the assurance of God's attention – for God is not our heavenly boss, or heavenly landlord, he is our heavenly Father, hanging on our every word.

I imagine you have heard that we shouldn't be too quick to ask for things from God, but should pray first and more often prayers of thanks and praise. And there is a truth in that advice, but it is worth saying all throughout the sermon Jesus dignifies the simple asking of prayer. Here is how one writer puts it:

*All six sentences of the Lord's prayer are **petitions**, that is, they are **askings**. And the right way for disciples to appear before God is not as givers to a divine Egoist, but as receivers from a generous Father. There can be more self-centredness in the praise understanding of worship, which assumes that we are the important actors and God the passive recipient, than there is in the asking understanding of worship, which lets God be God and us be human beings.*

How many of our prayers go unprayed because deep down we don't want to really face up to the fact that life is well beyond our control. Or deep down we just don't believe that God is interested in our little concerns.

*Oh what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

But what a friend we have in Jesus! And what a Father we have in heaven! So ask, seek, knock. Pray, pray, pray!

5. *Give for the gospel*

Then number 5: Give for the gospel! One of the most counter-intuitive lines in the whole Sermon on the Mount is chapter 6 verse 21 – Jesus says, *where your treasure is **there your heart will be also***. The order there seems backwards to me. I expect Jesus to say that if your heart is in the right place then your treasure will follow! But Jesus says if we treasure the right things we will find our heart will get in line.

So if you find yourself wondering how you can ignite passion in your heart for the Kingdom, then perhaps the answer will be to invest your treasure in the Kingdom. I was hearing from Andrew Miller yesterday about the constant needs with DMI, maybe you could invest in sharing God's love with the deaf community around the world? Or you could contact one of our mission partners, or invest in another ministry here in Sydney or around the world. Be creative!

Or perhaps your time is your treasure. Maybe you could chat to Steph about serving in kids church, or volunteer with a Christian organisation. Again, be creative!

Put your money where the gospel is, throw your treasures into the Kingdom, and watch your affection grow for the things of God.

6. *Examine yourself*

And then number 6. *Examine yourself*. If the great danger is self-righteousness, then self-examination is crucial for the Christian life. All of us must give attention to the planks in our own eyes. Or to extend Jesus' metaphor here, we must assess whether we are digging down into the rock, or whether we are trying to build an extension onto the sand.

A medieval Catholic priest called Ignatius of Loyola wrote a book called *Spiritual Exercises* which included a series of prayers for the end of the day. It was called the daily examen (E-X-A-M-E-N) and was to be a period of thankful reflection and humble reflection. It included 5 elements:

1. *Ask for the light of God to shine, so that we would see as God sees and not just with our own eyes.*
2. *To give thanks for God's provision*
3. *To reflect upon the events of the day*
4. *To confess our sin and seek God's forgiveness.*
5. *To look ahead and pray for the day*

It's like a method for plank removal, kingdom seeking and rock building. Examine yourselves.

7. *Fix your eyes on Jesus*

But then finally, we do not keep our eyes looking inward at ourselves, we turn ourselves out and fix our eyes upon Jesus.

Someone in our home group this week made a brilliant connection. Jesus tells us that we are the light of the world in Matthew 5:14. And then later in chapter 6 verse 22 he says this:

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.

The real question is: what do you have you eye on?!

And if you want to shine your light, then keep your eye on Christ!

If you want to live for the Kingdom, then keep your eyes on the King!

For even as we think of the necessity of *our* response to Jesus' sermon; the most stunning thing is actually Jesus' *own* response to his words – and it is here where we will finish:

For Jesus does not remain on the mountaintop as judge. No in chapter 8 verse 1, we read the glorious words: *Jesus came down from the mountainside.*

And in the coming chapters Jesus reaches out and touches a leper and makes him clean. He extends his mercy to the outsiders and the outcasts. He forgives sins with the divine authority of God, and commands a paralysed man to walk. He dines with tax-collectors and raises the dead. He gives sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. And then in the ultimate act of cheek-turning love Jesus goes to a cross to die so that his enemies might know the mercy of God. And he rises from the grave to show that God's Kingdom really is coming, that life really does triumph over death, and light really does drive back the darkness.

The Jesus who speaks the Sermon on the Mount is not just the law-giving Lord, but he is also the Law-fulfilling Saviour. And because he has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets in his life, death and resurrection, we have a foundation on which we can build the lives of sincere love for God and neighbour that the Law and Prophets were aiming at all along.

When we clear away the cultural haze, we find ourselves confronted and challenged with the other-worldly teaching of Jesus. But even more than that we find ourselves confronted with the other-worldly person of Jesus. And if we come to him with faith and obedience, he will carry us through every storm and make us an other-worldly presence in this world.

Jesus says:

*Therefore **everyone** who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds house on the rock. The 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.*

**Almighty God, give us grace to be not only hearers, but doers of your holy word, not only to admire, but to obey your doctrine, not only to profess, but to practice your religion, not only to love but to live your gospel. So grant that what we learn of your glory we may receive into our hearts, and show forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen!**