

Immerse Building on the Rock

Matt 4:27-5:2, 7:24-29

Good morning! Happy All Saints Day. All Saints Day really is a way of celebrating all Christians. On a day like this, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? This week our Immerse reading brings us to the gospel of Matthew and to what is probably the greatest teaching by any one, ever-- the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon shows us what it means to be a disciple and gives us the power to live out that calling.

How often have you asked—What does God want from me? What is God’s will for my life? You know, sometimes we try to listen hard for God and at other times we just convince ourselves that what we want is what God is saying. I heard about a guy who had just started a new diet and found himself driving by his favorite bakery. As he approached he could see all the donuts, cakes, and muffins in the window. He prayed, Lord, it is up to you. If you want me to have one of these delicious treats, open up a parking place right in front of the bakery. Don’t you know it, on the eighth time around the block, there was a parking place! God is so good!

Rather than trying to manipulate God (or fool ourselves), in the Sermon on the Mount we get Jesus’ operating instructions for us. We don’t have to guess about God’s will for us — Jesus tells us exactly.

Today we will look at the who, the what and the why of the Sermon on the Mount. The who, what and why. Let’s start with the Who. Obviously, Jesus is the teacher here. The Sermon on the Mount is chapters 5 to 7 in Matthew’s gospel. The first four chapters of Matthew are an introduction, a prologue to this teaching. They tell us about Jesus’ genealogy, his birth, his escape to Egypt from King Herod as a baby, his baptism, his temptation in the wilderness, and the beginning of his ministry. All of that is summed up at the end of chapter 4—Jesus went all through out Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and sickness. Huge crowds started to follow him and to bring the sick to him for healing. Bible scholar and teacher Dale Bruner points out that in those first few chapters of Matthew Jesus is called many things: Messiah, Son of David, Son of

Abraham, “God Saves”, “God with us,” Ruler, shepherd, Nazarene, one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with Fire, the Father’s beloved and deeply pleasing Son, and the Light of the Nations.

Wow! That is quite a list! This guy is worth listening to! We are leaning forward as Jesus sits down and opens his mouth to teach. Matthew is preparing us to really pay attention to this teaching.

The Sermon on the Mount is the heart of Jesus’ teaching. I heard a pastor call this Jesus’ “stump speech”—this is the core of what Jesus wants us to know. The first thing to notice is that Jesus chooses to make disciples. He had this amazingly successful healing ministry—huge crowds were following him. Suddenly he stops, goes away up on a mountain and teaches? Why? Because he wanted to form disciples—he wanted to shape people who believe and who live out his teachings. He was forming people who seek to help this hurting world. He wants us to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Right here—as Jesus sits down to teach and as his disciples come to him—the Body of Christ is starting to form. This is the beginning of the church. Jesus isn’t looking for fans, he wants followers. Followers who can carry on his mission in the world, that is why he stopped healing and started discipling.

We’ve glimpsed at the amazing Who of the Sermon on the Mount. Now let’s look at the What. These three chapters in Matthew are among the most famous in the whole Bible. You can read them aloud in less time than it takes to watch a sitcom. The great Bible teacher John Stott says the Sermon on the Mount is a call to Christian Counter Culture. Christian Counter Culture. Even people who want nothing to do with Christianity find themselves attracted to this teaching. Author Kurt Vonnegut, who called himself a humanist, said that “if Christ hadn’t delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn’t want to be a human being. I’d just as soon be a rattlesnake.” Mahatma Gandhi—who also was famously not a Christian, said that if he had only the Sermon on the Mount, he would not hesitate to say, “O Yes, I am a Christian.” What is it about this teaching that attracts even people who are otherwise not the least bit interested in Jesus or faith?

The power of the sermon is unmatched. President Harry Truman said that he didn’t believe that there is a problem in this country or the world today which could not be settled if

approached through the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Imagine that! Could it be that these three chapters hold the key to solving all the world's problems?!

The setting for the sermon is up on a mountain. Does that ring any bells for you? What other mountains are important in the Bible story? Moses went up on a mountain to receive the law from God. Here we have God in Jesus giving the new law from a Mountain. We get the new law from the new lawgiver.

If you look at our verses for today you see how focused they are on Jesus. The WHO of the Sermon is essential to the WHAT of the sermon. In just the first two verses it refers to Jesus over and over, 6 times! He saw, he went, he sat, his disciples came to him, he began to speak—this is all about Jesus teaching. Throughout the rest of the sermon we don't hear any other voices—no questions, no interruptions. Just Jesus. Then at the end of the sermon Jesus focuses our attention on the importance of following “these words of mine.” He repeats that phrase twice—follow these words of mine. Not these words of the law, or these words of Moses—but these words of MINE. Jesus is asserting his personal authority over everything! What is worth paying attention to? What is essential to follow? It is the words of Jesus. These operating instructions for our lives as disciples. The heart of the sermon on the mount is not just about its content, but the one who gave it. This amazing Jesus—he is the one worth following.

As we see who Jesus is, as we hear the authority in his teaching--what will we do? How will we respond? Will we follow him or turn our own way? The choice is ours! That is exactly the choice that faced the people listening to the sermon on that mountain with Jesus too. The Bible says that the crowds were ASTOUNDED at his teaching. Astounded! Because he taught with authority, not like the teaching from the scribes they were used to. His own authority shone out of him. People responded to it—follow these words of mine Jesus says—that is the WHAT of the sermon.

Who Jesus is gives what the sermon says, its message, such power and influence—so much that even people who otherwise avoid church and religion find themselves drawn to it. That brings us to the WHY of the sermon—what difference does it make for us? Why should

we even think twice about this ancient teaching? To answer that, we look at the end of the sermon— the end of chapter 7.

Jesus says “everyone—EVERYONE!-- who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 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 the rock.”

What is he saying? Don’t just sit there! DO something! Don’t just sit there nodding your head. Don’t go eat lunch and say what a nice sermon. Jesus is saying don’t just sit there--If you hear Jesus’ words, then ACT on them. Our *action* is what matters.

Jesus makes this crystal clear. He contrasts the wise man who hears his words and acts on them with the foolish man who hears his words and does not act on them—he is like a man who built his house on sand. When the storms come, when the rain falls and the wind blows—and they will---what happens? The house falls! And great was its fall!

Jesus asks everyone in that crowd, and he asks all of us--will you be wise or foolish? Jesus is telling them --and us-- that the key thing, the main point of all of this is—what? To follow him! To ACT on what he says. What do we choose? Do we just nod and say “good teaching” and go on about our day? Or do we *do* something?

Alice and I like to walk around the neighborhood. We were walking on U’s campus and noticed that the school of business building had a huge sign up—about 4 stories tall with a picture of a young woman sitting at a desk. In enormous letters the sign read: “DOERS WANTED.” Doers wanted. Not just thinkers or ponderers or debaters. Doers. I think that was Jesus’ slogan here too—Doers wanted. Right belief without action is not enough. It won’t protect us from the storm.

This story of the two houses urges us to be wise and to act on Jesus’ teaching. Notice that the same storms come to both houses. The winds blow, the rains beat against them—it is bad. Life is hard sometimes, for everyone, friends. Following Jesus doesn’t keep the storms from happening. But the house built on the rock stands. When we act on Jesus’ teaching, when we build on the rock—the house stands. The promise is not that it will become a mansion or have all the latest gadgets—no, the promise is it will protect you through the storm.

It will keep you safe. The others who don't act—the people who think that Jesus' words are important enough to hear but not realistic enough to live out—they are the ones who have the house fall in on them.

Each one of us is building a house. We are building a life. We all are building on some foundation. What are you building on? What is the foundation of your life? What are you counting on to keep you safe? The shifting sands of culture? Of fashion? Of popular opinion? Of your own best guesses? It does not have to be like that.

When we build on the rock our houses, our lives, can survive the storms that inevitably come. In Greek it emphasizes that we are to build our lives not just on any rock, but on THE ROCK. Jesus wasn't just contrasting rock vs. sand, but THE rock vs. sand. What rock is he talking about? The Rock is Jesus' words—the Word of Christ is the rock that saves us. But we have to act on it. That is the question of discipleship. The Rock of Jesus' words is there—will we build our lives on it?

What does a disciple do? Disciples DO what Jesus teaches. Are we just going to church for the company or the habit? Or are we willing to respond---to act? To help the needy, to walk for water, to protect the powerless? Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr said that 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. Are we willing –are we wise enough—to use it as a rudder to actually shape how we act? The storms are coming—will we be ready?

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you for your word. Thank you for teaching us—help us to be doers of your word. Help us to hear your word and to live it out. Lord—make us different because we are following you. This week, even right now today—nudge us to act on your call. May we hear and obey!

Amen!