

Sure Foundations

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[0 : 00] Now, we're going to begin by reading our passage, which in the Bible sits on page 812. We're going to be looking particularly at verses 24 to 29, the last part of the sermon, but I'm going to read from verse 15 so that we get the immediate context.

In verse 15 of Matthew chapter 7, Jesus says, Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.

A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father, who is in heaven.

[1 : 14] 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 mighty works in your name?

Then I will declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

Everyone then, or everyone therefore, who hears these words of mine and does them, will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

And the rain fell, and 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. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

The rain blew, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. Now, when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to our hearts. Now, let's pray. Lord God, as we have listened to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ over these weeks, these radical words about a radical kingdom, radical change of attitude and life, we realize that some of them are almost too hard to hear.

[2 : 45] Our own natural inclinations, our own sinfulness and self-centeredness, tends always to drive us in other directions. And so help us, Lord, as we come to this final study.

Open our eyes to see what is there. Open our ears to hear what you are saying. And help us in the days to come, to be more truly obedient to your word.

When we return to our ordinary activities, we pray that the presence of Christ will go with us. We ask this in his name. Amen.

Now, having been a teacher all my working life, and in various situations, various age groups, various settings, and still doing quite a bit of teaching, I'm very well aware that teaching is always a two-way activity.

It's not effective if it's simply one way, if it simply goes from the teacher to the listener. Indeed, someone has defined a lecture as the passing of information from the lecturer to the student, without it passing through the mind of either.

[3 : 55] And I must confess, I've been present at such occasions on both sides of the lecturing, I would have to say. Now, as we come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, that is what Jesus is concerned with.

How are we going to respond to the teaching? How are the original hearers going to respond? And how are we, those hearers who hear many, many centuries later, but still finding the words coming powerfully and freshly?

And it's particularly chapters 24 to 29, I want us, sorry, verses 24 to 29, I want us to look at. How are we to respond to this teaching from this teacher?

And the emphasis, of course, is on who Jesus is. Any human teacher is going to be limited. Any human teacher is going to get things wrong.

Any human teacher is going to say things that probably better not say, even if they're not actually false teachers. We all have our limitations. We all get things wrong.

[5 : 00] We get things out of perspective. So Jesus is saying, how are we going to respond to him and to his words? Now, we can't actually ever separate these.

Many people will say things like, it's not the Bible which is our authority, it's Christ. But then, if we don't have the Bible, which Christ are we listening to?

Without the Bible, the Jesus we listen to is increasingly going to mirror our own imaginations, our own fantasies, our own desires. And, of course, I can understand what lies behind that.

It's never simply the letter of the Bible. It's the message that the Holy Spirit takes and applies. God speaks in Jesus, the Word. That Word is faithfully witnessed to by the written Word, the Bible.

And we need the Spirit to bring that Word to life and to bring our hearts to life. So I want to ask two questions, really, about this. First of all, what kind of listeners are we?

[6 : 08] Verses 24 to 27. And secondly, what kind of teacher is Jesus? First of all, then, what kind of listeners, what kind of hearers are we?

Everyone, then, who hears these words. Now, the word then or therefore is very important. It reminds us this is the conclusion of the whole sermon.

This is the final application, if you like. And Jesus hasn't been giving a series of random remarks. As I said several times before, probably the substance of this was delivered at one time on the mountain or on the plateau.

And parts of it would be preached at other times as we find the other Gospels. But clearly, the way Matthew presents this is showing us a kind of structured sermon, if you like, of Jesus.

And this is the sermon, which you will not give marks to. It's not like a Cornhill preaching class, where we listen and assess.

[7 : 16] Jesus is not inviting us to listen to this and ask if we agree or ask who could have been better, if he illustrated his points, if he applied it, and so on. Jesus is giving us the living Word.

And the therefore is important. And so is the story, the parable of the men who built their houses. Jesus is appealing to our minds.

And Jesus is appealing to our hearts and imagination. I think that's so important. He's not simply blessed thoughts. He's not simply the kind of sermon sometimes, blessed thoughts tie together with anecdotes.

Or sometimes silly thoughts tie together with anecdotes. This is powerful teaching which comes to us from this teacher. But first, let's look at the little parable itself.

Jesus' teaching in Matthew, particularly in chapter 13 onwards, is going to be almost dominated by parables, a prominent feature of his teaching. Now, we mustn't stretch all the details.

[8 : 28] I'm glad I'm not preaching this in Carlyle at the moment. The wise man building their house and the floods coming and so on. Although people who know about these things tell us there are too many houses built on floodplains and so on, which I suppose is the contemporary application of this.

But be that as it may, we obviously, obviously our hearts go out to people like the people in Cumbria, some of whom, you know, seen it on the news, some of them who haven't cleared out their houses again, having done it a few years ago.

But generally speaking, Jesus is talking about sure foundations. Build on a sure foundation. When I was a boy, there was a chorus.

The wise man built his house upon the rock and there were actions to go with it. Some of you will know it. We're not going to sing it. I'm sorry if any of you are disappointed, but we're not.

Anyway, and the floods came down and so on. And the house on the rock stood firm and the house on the sand fell down. Now, the wise man, now that draws very deeply from the Old Testament.

[9 : 36] The wise man, the wise person in the Old Testament, was the one who feared the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Beginning of wisdom, beginning there doesn't mean you start on this elementary principle and you go on to something else. It means the guiding principle which you begin and which governs

everything else all during your lives.

Let me try and illustrate it this way. A child learning to play an instrument is not in the same position as Beethoven or some other musician.

Nevertheless, I presume when Beethoven was small, he did learn how to play an instrument. See, you see what I'm getting at. The early teaching in playing an instrument is something which will stay with people all their lives and be developed.

A child learning the alphabet is not Shakespeare. Nevertheless, Shakespeare presumably learned the alphabet in order to be able to write. And similarly, a child being told not to tell lies is not in the same situation as a world leader who has to make big decisions affecting the lives of millions.

[10:49] But only insofar as that leader remembers early teaching to be honest, be a person of integrity, will these decisions be right. So I think that's what it means.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, a sense of worship and a continued obedience. The fool, on the other hand, is what I would call a practical atheist.

The fool, says Psalm 14, has said in his heart, there is no God. Very few people actually are atheists. There are some, of course, like Richard Dawkins, although sometimes I think Dawkins protests too much.

He's almost trying to cover up what he fears might be true. But there are many practical atheists. What I mean by that is people who live as if God wasn't there.

In fact, let's be honest, many of us are practical atheists an awful lot of the time. We make our decisions according to other principles and so on. And the atheist is the person who thinks they can live their life effectively without God.

[11:53] And in the book of Proverbs, both wisdom and folly build houses. And I think this is the picture here in the background. Wisdom builds a house on seven pillars, its foundations.

Folly builds a house which will not last. If you read these chapters in Proverbs, read Proverbs 8 and 9, you find the invitation from wisdom and folly sounds very alike.

They say the same things come and have a great meal with me. And this is the way it happens today as well. So, wisdom and folly are always speaking.

Wisdom, says the book of Proverbs, utters her voice in the streets and calls out in the marketplaces. Notice it doesn't say wisdom utters her voice in the church and calls out in the congregation.

We hope it does. But the point is wisdom is speaking everywhere. Everywhere people gather. Everywhere people live. Everything people do, there are voices calling us.

[12:53] Some voices calling us to the life. To the, come back to the illustration earlier on in the passage, going through the narrow way that leads to life, and folly calling us the broad way that seems attractive that leads to destruction.

So, you can see how the false prophets fits in with this. Jesus is saying, if you listen to me, you will be building your house on the rock. If you listen to them, to the false teachers, you will be building your house on the sand.

And Paul says in 1 Corinthians, the only foundation is the foundation of Jesus Christ. Everything else will be burned up. But what's built on Jesus and on his word will last into eternity.

The false house swept away. And some of the prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel use this image, a flimsy wall of lies. So, Jesus is saying, look around you.

Look at ordinary house building and see what lasts. Now, many of us, I'm sure as I do, live in a modern house that was built five years ago.

[14:04] I don't imagine that will be here in a hundred years' time. I mean, I won't be here to see, nor will anybody else in this room. But so many of the buildings built today will not last the way that some of these great buildings built in the past will.

But every building is vulnerable. And unless the building that's built on Jesus. Now, you see, it has important lessons for us.

It means that we need to think clearly. Our minds have to be engaged. That means when we're studying the Bible, whether we're studying it on our own, whether we're studying it somewhere like this or in a house group or wherever we are, one-to-ones, it means that you can never simply be emotional, hyped-up feelings.

And that's fine. But then the glow very soon disappears. There must be serious thinking. We can't grow in holiness without growing in knowledge.

But the second thing about this parable is it also appeals to the imagination and the emotions. You see, if it's true to say that when we're studying and teaching the Bible, it must never simply be hyped-up emotion.

[15 : 21] On the other hand, it must never either be simply intellectualized ideas, abstract ideas. That's why when we listen to Scripture, we need to be alert to hear the Master's voice.

It's not simply, as I say, emotions, but nor is it simply intellect. Because when we divorce that, you see, if it's simply emotions, you'll feel great.

We'll come, we'll have a hyped-up message, we'll sing some jolly song, then we'll go away, and before we reach the bottom of the stairs, we'll have forgotten about it. If it's simply intellectualized, then we'll also...

Now, this is over my head, I can't understand this. The teaching of the Word of God must appeal to the emotions and the mind as well. But it also must appeal to the will.

In other words, we need to ask, what are we going to do about it? What are we going to do about the Sermon on the Mount? Now, that may not mean something specific we have to do in the outward sense.

[16 : 31] It may mean, my attitudes are wrong on this. It may mean, I've been thinking in a muddled and confused way. And it's never just simply one experience that changes everything.

We must go on listening. We must go on hearing. We must go on obeying. And teaching of the Bible ultimately works when it appeals to the heart, to the mind, but finally to the will, unless we actually do something about it.

Then it simply becomes something we enjoy. All of us, I'm sure, have hobbies. All of us have things we enjoy, which don't greatly impact on our lives. The listening to the Word of Jesus is not like that. And if we're not listening, if we're not obeying, if we're not changing, then we aren't truly listening. So what kind of listeners are we going to be?

Are we going to be those who go away and say, that was great, I was edified to bits, and I'll come back again? Or are we actually going to do something? I'm dressing myself as much as anybody else, because any preacher and teacher knows that it's not just the listeners who go away and don't do anything about it.

[17 : 47] It's very often the preacher and teacher who doesn't do anything about it. So that leads us to the second question. What kind of teacher is Jesus? Now, as I said already, in teaching and learning, sometimes it's the teacher at fault.

Sometimes it's the learners at fault. Sometimes it's both. But here, this is a different teacher altogether. Verse 28, When Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished. Dumbfounded would actually probably get the nuance of the word here. They were absolutely amazed. They'd never heard anything like this. In other words, it wasn't just imagination.

It wasn't just intellect. They were absolutely stupefied. We haven't heard this. Why were they astonished? He was teaching them with authority. Now, what does authority mean here?

Does it mean personality? Does it mean he had the kind of personality, kind of voice, the kind of manner that made people listen? It's interesting, isn't it?

[18 : 51] We know none of those things. Don't know how tall Jesus was. Don't know what color his hair was. We don't know what his voice sounded like. The Holy Spirit has not chosen to tell us.

I'm very glad about that in many ways. Although I'd be curious to know, as you would. I'm very glad about that because you could just imagine we had been told these kind of things.

You would have got groups of people saying, oh, well, the kind of people we want as our preachers must be the same height as Jesus, of the same color of hair as he did, have a voice that sounded like his.

And the Holy Spirit has, with his infinite wisdom, decided not to tell us these things. Did he thump the lectern?

Well, I wouldn't have a lectern. Did he speak forcefully? Remember, of course, that people have different styles. What counts as passionate preaching in one culture doesn't in another.

[19 : 54] When I was in Durham, remember, we used to have a lot of African pastors who would come over. And they were, it was very exciting to listen to them. And they were, many of them were tremendous orators and tremendous storytellers.

But that doesn't mean everyone has to be like that. Preacher from storm the way is unlikely to have that kind of style. And people have different styles.

And God has made us different. But the point is that Jesus actually spoke words which people realized were true. Even if they didn't respond, they could never be the same. They had to make a decision. They had to decide where to build their house, if you like. He is the unique teacher. In other words, he's not simply bringing a message. He himself is the message. Ultimately, the gospel is not about Christ. The gospel is Christ. But in order, of course, to know who Christ is, to understand who he is, we need this message.

[21 : 04] And he places himself at the center. And it's very interesting that at the end of this gospel, in the Great Commission, he says, All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go and make disciples. Now, you see the point of that. No one who preaches or teaches the word, no one who shares the gospel with a friend, has in themselves the authority. But Jesus says to his followers then, to his followers now, I have been given authority. And he says, I am with you till the end of the age. In other words, when we go to teach and preach and share the gospel, we go in his authority. We go in his name. And that's how the whole of the teaching hangs together. And later on, he is going to be giving us other bodies, blocks of teaching. Now, as we finish, let me just make one or two quick points. First of all, one day, the word that Jesus speaks will be the judge. It will judge us all.

[22 : 13] It's asking us what kind of hearers are we? How do we listen? Do we take it on board? And as always, throughout the sermon, this is not just about behavior. It differs from culture to culture. This is about basic attitudes. Jesus spoke with authority. Their scribes didn't speak with authority. Many of them just, there's a great example in the beginning of this gospel. When the wise men come, the scribes, the Pharisees, the leaders come together. And Herod asks them, where is the Christ, the Messiah, to be born? And they still go in Bethlehem. And what do they do about it? They do absolutely nothing. Jesus is saying, don't be like the scribes and the Pharisees. Be like the wise men who came to worship Jesus and return to their own country in a different way. And that's what he's saying, too, at the end of this sermon.

[23 : 10] Build on sure foundations. Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for these words. And we realize that in ourselves, we have no power to do them. And so we trust in the one who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. And we pray that in his name, we will follow him and we will lead others to him. Amen.