

Matthew 7:24-29

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[0 : 00] I can return to Matthew's Gospel and chapter 7. Matthew's Gospel in chapter 7. And we're going to concentrate this evening on verses 24 to 29.

When I was in primary school in the village of Brora in the far northeast of Scotland, we used to spend hours down at the beach, especially in the summer.

It was just a few minutes walk to the beach and it was a great place for doing all kinds of things. Swimming, believe it or not, in the North Sea.

Exploring caves, playing cowboys and Indians. Jumping off the sand dunes. All these kinds of things. It was an excellent playground. And one of the most exciting things that we did from time to time was to build dens.

With my brother and our friends. Now, the sand dunes and the sandy soil back from the beach was just excellent for that kind of thing.

[1 : 20] And there are two dens that stood out in particular in these years. The first one was back from the beach, cut out of the sandy soil, underground. It had a corrugated roof and it even had a chimney.

And you don't have to think too hard what happened to that den. But fortunately there was no loss of life. The second one was actually built in the sand dunes or on the sand dunes as they faced the North Sea.

And it was dug out of the wet sand. Some turf used to build it up. To shape it into almost like a sort of mini fort propped on the sand dunes itself.

Fantastic project. It was going to house the gang. And repel anyone who tried to invade the east coast of Sutherland. I loved it.

And that summer we built it. It was one of the best, I think. But one day after that summer had passed, we went to autumn. The first storms of autumn had hit the east coast.

[2 : 30] We took a trip down to the shore to have a look at the den. Now not only had the first storms damaged it, the truth was that the wind, the rain and the waves had completely obliterated it and removed all trace of it.

In fact, we couldn't really honestly say exactly where that den had been. And yes, I suppose it's quite obvious why I tell that story.

And it is that easy for all our joys, all our memories, all our hopes for the future to be wiped out when they have no real, no proper foundations.

Tonight, as we look at this very last section of Jesus' famous sermon on the mount, we see that he leaves us with a very stark choice for each one of us to make about our lives.

Well, as is often the case with some of Jesus' stories, his parables and his illustrations, it's all too easy to get off on the wrong foot. And if we do that, we turn something which is beautifully simple, a beautifully simple saying into something rather complicated.

[3 : 57] It's all too easy to misapply it, to over-focus on some of the details, such as what direction did the wind come from, or whatever. But these things don't really help us or get us any very far.

So, I want to, before we go any further this evening, to lay some foundations before we look at what Jesus says about the wise man and the foolish man and the houses that they built.

First of all, this is the Sermon on the Mount. It is coming to a close. Jesus is speaking to the same people who he has been addressing throughout the Sermon on the Mount.

That is, his inner core of disciples, who presumably, as you see how the events unfolded, were closest to him. So, yes, he talks to them.

And in some parts of the Sermon on the Mount, you can see that Jesus is focusing more particularly on them. And yet, as he was speaking and teaching them, more and more people had gathered, so there was now a huge crowd around Jesus within earshot of what he was going to say.

[5 : 09] So, this message about the builders, the wise and foolish builders, yes, goes to his inner core of disciples, but it also spills out to the large crowd gathered around him.

As we say on a number of occasions, what Jesus says makes a clear distinction between the person who is truly a disciple of his and the person who is not.

Clearly, what he has to say about the wise and foolish builders bears some relation to that. Who is truly a disciple of mine? Who is not?

But, first of all, more importantly, it is what all who hear Jesus have in common that we have to consider.

They all heard Jesus' words. Everyone on that mountainside that day, they all heard Jesus' words.

[6 : 12] They all had that in common. And so, in the story of the two builders, on the surface, these men are the same.

They are both builders. They both build houses. And that will be important to keep that in mind as we go on this evening.

If we don't, we might jump ahead, get ahead of what Jesus is saying and think, well, Jesus is speaking about believers and unbelievers. But if we race ahead too far, we will obscure something of what Jesus is saying to us.

Everyone on the mountainside were hearers of Jesus' words. Both the men in the story were builders who build houses. Second thing is to just appreciate something of the problems or the situation that faced a first century builder in Palestine.

We perhaps, unless we have visited there, I haven't, but we perhaps in our minds have a picture of a rather dry and dusty land. Only.

[7 : 25] It's dry and dusty and that's it. But, that is not, of course, the whole story. There is rain in its own season.

There are sudden winds and storms that get up in the Mediterranean and blow on shore. And another feature that you come across in different parts of Scripture is that the riverbeds, which can become absolutely dry, dusty, bone dry in the summertime, can suddenly, very quickly, become raging torrents when the rains come.

Now, if you are a first century builder in Palestine, and probably if you're a builder in Israel or Palestine today, if you fail to take account of this when you build your house, it could understandably result in disaster.

Well, first of all, in looking at what Jesus says, we see that he draws a distinction, he makes a contrast, as he has so often previously done in the Sermon on the Mount.

His whole method, his whole way of teaching in the Sermon on the Mount often revolves around making a sharp contrast between two opposing views or opinion, two opposing practices or beliefs, and forcing the consequences onto the hearers.

[9 : 01] Well, this is what he's doing again. And indeed, as he's drawing towards the end of the Sermon on the Mount, you'll see that these contrasts are sharpened. He speaks about narrow and wide gates.

As we read tonight, he speaks about the good tree and the bad tree. And now he speaks about a wise builder and a foolish builder. Often, by using these contrasts, what Jesus has been emphasizing is the difference that there is between saying and doing, between the person who says something, or as we might say, who talks a good game, and the person who does something, who plays a good game.

You trace the Sermon back to verse 21 of chapter 5 and look at that section right through to verse 18 of chapter 6. See how Jesus draws the distinction between one who says and one who does.

But here, as he closes the sermon, the contrast is particularly between he who hears and he who does. Or, better, between hearing only and hearing and doing.

It is indeed, of course, one thing to hear what Jesus says is another thing to do it. Everyone on the mountainside had this in common. They all heard Jesus' words.

[10 : 36] Did everyone on the mountainside go and practice? Did they take to heart and believe what Jesus had said and go and do what he said? Probably not.

You see, when Jesus puts this in front of us, when he makes a distinction between hearing and actually hearing and doing, he isn't calling on us to stop for a moment of reflection, to have a time of meditation.

He doesn't ask us whether or not we approve of his teaching and what he requires. What he demands of us. He doesn't ask us whether or not we find this interesting and stimulating.

He doesn't even ask us to consider whether it might be practically possible. Is it practicable to follow the teaching of Jesus?

We might ask. And many, particularly, in relation to the Sermon on the Mount, have asked that question. But Jesus doesn't call on us.

[11 : 48] to do these things. As we often hear said today, what Jesus is telling us is just do it. His words are rock.

Now, elsewhere, Jesus himself is likened to a rock. But particularly, it is his words, his teaching, that is being likened to a rock.

A solid foundation on which to build your house. On which to build your life. Anything else, anything else is sand.

If it cannot be tied into Jesus' words, if it cannot be brought back to the rock that are Jesus' words, anything else which you choose to use as a foundation is, according to Jesus' illustration here, simply sand.

And if we are not building on the rock that is Jesus' words, we betray the fact that we do not have a relationship with the one who makes this call into our lives.

[13 : 02] The one who issues these challenges and these demands throughout the Sermon on the Mount. If we will not take the rock of his words and build our lives on it, then we show we have no relationship with the one who speaks.

And the one who calls us to live a life that runs counter to the natural way of humankind. As I hinted earlier, it's no use, you see, comforting ourselves with the knowledge that we are members of the church.

We are, as the phrase goes, is it not, members in good standing of Christ's church. If in reality, all we ever do is spend time, and we might spend quite a good deal of time, we spend time listening to what Jesus is saying, but rarely a second of our lives putting it into practice.

It's as much good as some who, I suppose, they probably don't see it as comforting themselves, but in reality, that's what they're doing. They're comforting themselves that they are followers of Jesus.

Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus. Even although they will have nothing whatsoever to do with His church.

[14 : 35] You know, we don't need institutional religion, we don't need the church and its organization and its structures, and so on. Yes, I follow Jesus, the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, but I don't need anything to do with His church.

And also, of course, the Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount as a further comfort to themselves is not the Jesus who died on the cross and rose from the grave.

Here's the greatest comfort there. That was the invention of the church. And I don't need the church. I follow Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. You see, it's not always immediately obvious, you see, who the foolish builder is and who the wise builder is.

They have this in common. They hear or they have heard Jesus' words. Both houses may appear remarkably similar. You cannot necessarily tell by looking at the house itself, the structure, the superstructure, and say, this builder was wise, this builder was foolish.

On the outside, they can, of course, be completely identical. So it is with the lives of so many people today. You can't just pick a person's life and what you know of it and say, this person must be foolish, this person is wise.

[16 : 08] To all intents and purposes, their lives are largely the same. So many things are comparable will stand comparison.

It is only, as Jesus tells us here, it is only the arrival of the storms that lay bare the foundations, to use Ezekiel's phrase, that then reveal who is a wise builder, who is a foolish builder.

so it is with those then who profess to be disciples of Christ. Many people may profess. They may profess in their own terms as I have just described, but they profess all the same.

It is only when the storm comes that it can be known that it is revealed who is wise, who is foolish. That storm can come in a number of ways.

Of course, it might come in the form of some tragedy. It may come in the form of some failure in life, or a perceived failure to achieve goals in life.

[17 : 22] It may be ill health. It may be a very severe and persistent temptation. And it is only then that those who have solidly built their lives on the foundation of Jesus' words are revealed for what they are.

True disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Others, well, the trials of this life don't reveal what their foundation is actually made of.

Certainly, the last day, the day of judgment, will expose any faulty foundations. things. When we look at what Jesus is saying, it is not very comfortable.

You may feel uncomfortable. In a sense, I hope you do feel uncomfortable. I cannot stand here and feel easy with what I read and what I hear Jesus say.

And indeed, the Bible itself is a dangerous book. book. It's a dangerous book to have in some parts of the world, to actually just have in your hand or in your house.

[18 : 37] But it is more than that. It's actually a dangerous book if you pick it up and begin to read it. No wonder it has been banned in so many countries.

No wonder throughout history there have been attempts to stamp it out, to remove it, to withdraw it, or to refuse to allow it to be translated into a language that people might actually understand.

Even the church virtually banned it from the people for quite a long period of time. Why is it so dangerous? What makes the Bible dangerous in this way?

Well, it's because in Scripture we hear Christ's words. we hear that rock-like foundation. And if we join the church of Christ we say we believe in Him who speaks these words.

If we say we believe in Him who speaks these words we then consequently have a responsibility to act on what we hear and what we say we believe.

[19 : 57] You see, that is dangerous, is it not? To have picked up and read that word, to have been attracted to Jesus Christ, to have committed ourselves to Jesus Christ, to have become members in His church, because it leads to this responsibility to act on what we hear and what we say we believe.

Now, all too often in the church we then go about finding ways of neutering the power of Jesus' words.

We dress it up in different ways. We call it theological debate. But in fact, what we want to do is make sure that we don't face up to the implications of what Jesus teaches.

We term it careful explanation and perhaps we should put a more technical polish on that. careful exegesis. But again, sadly, all too often, what we are aiming at is removing the sting from what Jesus has actually asked of us.

We can speak too about differing traditions. Well, in our tradition, we don't do that. We don't do that. Jesus said it, but in our tradition, we don't do that.

[21 : 29] or we might even say, we prefer to focus on devotional exercises and developing a purity of heart and mind and spirit.

Now, all of these things, of course, can be legitimate exercises, perfectly appropriate for Christians to do and engage in, to think on and reflect on and so on.

But, am I so wide of the mark to suggest that they also are used as covers to avoid what Jesus actually tells us?

and when they are, be they in the church, be they have they the most fine-sounding names, and be they utilized by the sharpest of minds, it all turns out to be sand.

The house that is built on them will be swept away when the storms come. we try to call it wisdom when really it is foolishness.

[22 : 47] Too readily, these things become the substitute for doing what Jesus says. For what we have heard, we substitute doing with debate, explanations, excuses, and so on.

Now, when this of course reaches crisis point for a church, a whole denomination, for a single congregation, when it reaches crisis point, what you have is a world and a society that is both repelled and strangely on the other hand apathetic towards the church.

On the other hand, when those who profess to know and to love and to be known and loved by the Lord Jesus Christ, when they begin to exhibit His values in their lives, we can expect two things as well.

On the one hand, a world that is attracted and not repelled. And on the other hand, a world that is persecuting and not apathetic.

well, there is a contrast between hearing and doing. But when we come to the very, well, it is not even really part of the Sermon on the Mount, is it?

[24 : 13] But it is actually Matthew's concluding comment on the Sermon or Matthew's postscript to the Sermon on the Mount. We see another contrast and that is between divine and human authority.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.

The final contrast, divine and human authority. Quite simply, the people were dumbfounded at what they had heard.

No one had ever spoken like this. They were on the whole quite used to hearing religious teachers speaking from the Hebrew scriptures from the Old Testament, speaking in a very learned way and so on and so forth.

And in their own sense, in their own way, had a certain authority. They had the role of teacher in Israel and they were to be listened to and they would give various pronouncements on all kinds of issues to do with life based on their understanding and interpretations of the Old Testament.

[25 : 30] Although, in fact, it had become certainly by Jesus' day more to do with their understanding and interpretations of other people's interpretations of the Old Testament.

And so, in listening to Jesus, they were flabbergasted by what he had to say and the way in which he said it. He had an authority that they were not used to hearing.

What was this authority that Jesus had? Well, again, to go back to the teachers or the rabbis, they were accustomed to teach on the basis of what, as we said, their predecessors taught.

In order to give an opinion, it was important to cross-reference what rabbis from previous ages and generations had said about any particular matter, any particular issue.

And the interpretation of Scripture therefore took on a sort of character which, to give a sort of modern illustration, was akin to settling matters of law on the basis of precedent.

[26 : 41] That is, previous decisions of judges in similar cases. And that is the sort of approach that has been adopted towards Scripture.

But Jesus, in the way that he speaks, sweeps all of that away. He had no need to refer to others. He had no need to cite them. He had no need to quote them.

In fact, again, when you even just glance through the Sermon on the Mount, how many occasions does Jesus say to the crowds, I say to you, you have heard it said of all times, but I say to you.

And it's not just a question of style. Wasn't it that Jesus adopted this sort of fresh approach, fresh style, in your face, challenged the people, don't bother quoting dusty old rabbis from the past, just say, I tell you.

It wasn't just a question of a different style. It was a question of one who genuinely has authority. And because he has authority, it is a teaching that has far reaching implications.

[28 : 03] Here's just a few to finish. First of all, this Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One.

We began our worship this evening by singing of David's choosing and anointing of David as his ruler over Israel. When Jesus comes as the Christ, the Messiah, he comes as the one in the line of David, the anointed ruler over Israel.

He comes self-consciously as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, particular prophecies, that he would fulfill in his life, in his work, indeed in his death, in his resurrection.

He in fact, more than that, as he says in the sermon itself in chapter 5 and verse 17, he comes to fulfill the law and the prophets.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. This is what he says of himself.

[29 : 11] He is also the Lord. Now, that word as it appears there in the sermon, if you look at chapter 7 and verse 21, where people come to me, says Jesus, and say Lord, Lord, that word could mean, in the original language, could mean no more than Señor or Signore means in Spanish or Italian.

But interestingly, just as these words in these languages today can mean so much more than Mr. or perhaps even Sir, so in the language of Jesus today, these words could mean so much more than Mr.

or Sir. And then, of course, when we look at verse 21 through to verse 23, and we see the context in which the words are used. What we have is a picture of the last day at the entrance to the kingdom of heaven.

People, Jesus says, coming to him and saying, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?

And he tells them plainly, I never knew you, away from me, you evil doers. Then, the words Lord, Lord, mean much more than hey mister.

[30 : 46] He is the Lord. He is also the Savior. And, in many occasions on the sermon itself, he has said that entry to the kingdom of God can only be found by those who listen to him and follow him.

Now, that in itself is quite remarkable. That is certainly claiming an authority for your teaching as well as for your position. That you cannot enter God's kingdom unless you listen to me and you follow me.

That is remarkable enough. But when you consider as recorded elsewhere in the gospels that Jesus also says, I am the way, the truth and the life, then we are forced to decide where do we stand in relation to this man?

What is our relationship to him? Do we listen to him? Do we follow him? Do we believe that he is the way, he is the truth and he is the life?

And then finally, and it's not finally because it doesn't exhaust what we can say about Jesus of Nazareth, but finally tonight, he is the judge. No teacher, no prophet, no priest, no king before Jesus dare to presume that they would stand as judge over people on the last day when the history of our world, of our universe is wrapped up and all will appear before God accountable to him.

[32 : 35] No teacher, no king, no prophet, no priest ever dare presume that they would stand as judge over the people on that day.

But that is what Jesus does in his Sermon on the Mount. That is what he does and is made plain in the New Testament elsewhere. So if we perhaps said this evening, maybe even as we turn to Matthew chapter 7 and we read these words, and I think particularly the ones about the wise man who built his house upon the rock and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, we felt a little underwhelmed by the familiar words of Jesus.

Hopefully tonight, what we have considered is a wake-up call. And we will ask ourselves, firstly, who is this man?

And secondly, what does he demand of me? Amen. Let's join together in prayer. Oh Lord God, we bow our heads before you and we acknowledge that in your sight we must appear as nothing.

And yet, Lord, even as we say that, our nature begins to rebel and resist and to claim that we have our space and we have our place in this world and that we are important and of significance.

[34 : 10] Lord, forgive us for this and remind us that we do not have our place and we do not have significance if we have not first turned to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray then that we would see him with fresh eyes this evening. If our hearts have grown cold, we ask that you would set them on fire once more.

And if our minds and hearts have been closed until this moment, we ask that your spirit would open them so that we may know Jesus as he really is.

We ask it in his name. Amen. Amen.