

HOUSE ON THE ROCK

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 7:24-27
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Matthew 7:24-27

Most of us prepare for the future. When we're young, we go to school, not least so that we'll be able to work for a living. When we're a little older, we realize that there will most likely come a day when we won't be working for a living anymore, so we save and invest.

Later today in Miami, 106 men will crash into each other for three and one-half hours or so. In one way or another, each of them has been preparing for this event for many years now, even if they didn't know for sure whether they'd be in it until two weeks ago. We can only hope that the fifty-three men wearing the white jerseys will be a little better prepared than the fifty-three men wearing the red jerseys!

None of us knows the future. Would you like to be prepared for it, whatever it holds? In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus tells us what to do in order to be ready for the future.

Hear accurately

Matthew 7:24-25:

“Everyone then 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.”

When Jesus speaks of “these words,” he's speaking of his words in the Sermon on the Mount.¹ It's not as if what Jesus says about his words in the Sermon on the Mount don't also apply to his other words, or to the rest of the Scriptures, for that matter; it's just that he's speaking specifically here about his words in Matthew 5-7.²

And what does he say about his words in the Sermon on the Mount? By use of an illustration, he tells us that it is critical that we hear these words and do them. Although it is clearly not enough simply to hear the words of Jesus in the sermon, it is of course necessary to hear them. How are we to do them unless we hear them?

First, we must do the best we can to accurately hear what Jesus says. It is quite possible, of course, to misunderstand him, just as it's possible to misunderstand anyone. Jesus told his disciples multiple times that he would be crucified. They heard him, but they didn't really hear him. The disciples' preconceived notion of who the Messiah was supposed to be and what he was supposed to do didn't include crucifixion, so they misunderstood him.

Blessed are who?

In Monty Python's irreverent *Life of Brian*, a group of people listens to Jesus as he preaches the Sermon on the Mount, but they can't hear everything because some among their number get into an argument.

One asks another, regarding the words of Jesus that he can't make out, “What was that?”

The other answers, “I don't know. I think it was, ‘Blessed are the cheese makers.’”

Another asks, “What's so special about the cheese makers?”

Yet another answers, “Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturer of dairy products.”

Jesus, of course, said, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” not, “Blessed are the cheese makers.”

So we give ear to the words of Jesus, giving special attention to their context. The three most important words in real estate: location, location, location. The three most important words in biblical interpretation: context, context, context. We have been helped in our study of the Sermon on the Mount by proceeding from verse to verse, passage to passage, aware of what we have already heard so that we can better understand what we are currently hearing.

Hear in a transformational way

Although we must hear the words of Jesus accurately, it is possible, of course, to hear accurately but for those words to make no difference to us.

The chief priests and Pharisees, after hearing some of Jesus' parables, "perceived that he was speaking about them." They understood Jesus accurately, but his words didn't benefit them. His words only served to intensify their desire to arrest him (Matthew 21:44-45).

David Roper, a former pastor of our church and one of my mentors, studied Ancient Near East literature as a graduate student at UC Berkeley. He notes: "Frankly some of my non-Christian professors at the University of California had a better grasp of the meaning of the Bible than some of my evangelical colleagues who, interpretively speaking, tend to shoot from the hip. It was the implications of Scripture for life and its ability to transform character that my profs were inclined to miss."

First, we must hear the words of Jesus accurately. Second, we must hear them in a transformational way. In order to hear the words of Jesus in a transformational way, we need the Holy Spirit. Paul says that Scriptures must be understood "spiritually"—meaning, with the help of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore, before, during, and after we hear the words of Jesus, let's ask the Spirit to help us hear them in a transformational way.

A book that understands me

French philosopher Emile Cailliet was raised as an atheist. The horrors he saw as a soldier in World War I only hardened his unbelief. He writes, "During long night watches in the foxholes I had in a strange way been longing—I must say it, however queer it may sound—for a book that would understand me. But I knew of no such book."

After getting out of the war, Cailliet decided to put such a book together by collecting and filing impactful passages from some of the books he was reading. Finally, he collected them in a leather-bound book. He hoped that the quotations would lead him from fear and anguish to release and jubilation.

When he put the finishing touches on "the book that would understand me," he sat under a tree and began to read it. However, the book didn't speak to his condition; the passages only reminded him of his own effort to seek them out. Then he knew that the undertaking wouldn't work because the book was of his own making. It had no power to persuade him. Dejected, he put the book back in his pocket.

It turns out that as Cailliet was reading his book, his wife was going for a walk in their small French village. Much to her surprise, she walked into a small chapel and asked for a Bible, and the elderly pastor gave her one. She came back and handed it to her husband. He read the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Cailliet:

I opened it and "chanced" upon the Beatitudes! I read, and read, and read—now aloud with indescribable warmth surging within . . . I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me: This was the Book that would understand me! I needed it so much, yet, unaware, I had attempted to write my own—in vain.³

Cailliet not only heard the words of Jesus, he also heard them in a transformational way.

Do the words

If we partner with the Spirit to hear accurately and in a transformational way, doing what Jesus says may not come easily, but it will come more readily. Think of it in terms of stimulus and response. If the stimulus is received (hearing), the response will be more likely to follow (doing).

Jesus' words first of all draw us into relationship with him. The first thing to "do" in response to his words is draw close to him.

As we practice doing what Jesus says, we become better at doing what he says. It's like anything you do repetitively: you improve at doing it. Practice makes perfect, the old adage goes, and while practicing what Jesus says may not make us perfect, at least until we see him face to face, practicing what he says will make us more perfect: we will be better able to do what he says.

As we become better at doing what Jesus says, we may increasingly enjoy doing what he says. If you learn to play a musical instrument, you may not always enjoy what you need to do in order to play well. But when you start playing well and hearing the music you produce, you start enjoying the instrument more.

If we do what Jesus says, we do what we were made for. If we have a sense that we were made for something, and we do that thing, don't we experience joy? The words of Jesus help us to live joyfully in the presence of God and others, in what Eugene Peterson calls "the unforced rhythms of grace." Rightly understood, doing the words

of Jesus, though difficult at times and in ways, is an exhilarating way to live.

Muir Beach Overlook

Consider these words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Ask and it will be given to you” (Matthew 7:7).

Many of you will remember that I go on an annual personal retreat north of the bay, especially inasmuch as I made of sermon out of my retreat last year. If you were here when I preached about it, you will remember that I experienced a flood of biblical proportions. I was like Noah, only Noah had an ark and I all I had was a Mazda. I am happy to report that I experienced no such flood on my annual retreat this year in January. The skies were clear and the roads were dry.

On the way to Point Reyes, I stopped, as usual, at the Muir Beach Overlook and spent about an hour there in prayer and reflection, looking out over the Pacific. Once, years ago, I saw a whale off in the distance. This time, a spontaneous prayer rose from within me: “Lord, I’d like to see a whale.” As soon as I asked, I remembered Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Ask and it will be given to you.” I looked and looked and looked, and right before leaving, I looked again. No whale.

Later that day, after checking into my room at the retreat house, I was reflecting on my request from earlier in the day. I looked out the window and saw a bald eagle flying above the Tomales Bay. I’ve see whales in the Bay Area before, but I’d never seen a bald eagle. I asked for a whale, and I got an eagle. It never occurred to me to ask for an eagle.

Doing the words of Jesus keeps you on your toes. It also prepares you for the future.

Prepare for the future

If you hear and do the words of Jesus, did you know that you were like a wise man? I’ve been listening to the words of Jesus and (usually) trying to do them for more than forty-six years now, and I don’t know that I’ve ever thought that as I was doing so, I was being wise. That’s what Jesus says you are—if you hear and do the words of Jesus, that is.

Jesus tells us how to live. Listen to his words in the Sermon on the Mount. He knows how to live better than you do.

Hearing and doing the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount makes you like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Just as a house built on the rock is able to stand up to storms and floods, so you will be able to stand up to the storms and floods of life, so to speak, if you hear and do the words of Jesus. As you not only hear the words of Jesus but also do them, you are strengthening yourself, not physically but spiritually. When difficulties come, as they surely will, you will be ready for them.

Therefore, start now: ask the Spirit to help you hear the words of Jesus in a transformational way and act upon them. You’ll be glad you did.

What if you invite the Spirit to help you hear the words of Jesus, and you hear the words of Jesus, and they seemingly do nothing for you? You’re not gripped. You’re not challenged. You’re not encouraged. You feel no “indescribable warmth surging within.” Nothing happens.

Who are you to say that nothing has happened? Whether you know it or not, you’re building your house. You’re building your house on the rock. Something is happening to you. You’re being formed. Moreover, you’re preparing for the future.

If you have read and studied the words of Jesus for a few years, how often have those words come back to you when you faced difficulties? Probably more times than you can count.

Yes, build your house of faith on the rock, the words of Jesus. Next, Jesus warns us about what can happen if we don’t.

Unprepared for the future

Matthew 7:26-27:

“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. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

Did you know that if you hear the words of Jesus and don’t do them, you’re like a foolish man? I said I’ve been listening to the words of Jesus and trying to do them for more than forty-six years—usually. I didn’t really

stop to think that when I was disobedient to the words of Jesus, I was being a fool, but now that I think about it, and see how things have turned out, I'd have to agree with Jesus: I was a fool.

Jesus tells us how to live. Listen to his words on the Sermon on the Mount. Do you think you know better? Really?

Hearing but not doing the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount makes you like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. Just as a house built on the sand is unable to stand up to storms and floods, so you will be unable to stand up to the storms and floods of life, so to speak, if you hear the words of Jesus and don't do them. As you hear the words of Jesus and ignore them, you are doing nothing to strengthen yourself spiritually. When difficulties come, as they surely will, you will not be ready for them.

James warns us, "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like" (James 1:23-24). If you hear the words of Jesus without doing them, you forget who you are. How, as a follower of Jesus, are you going to stand up to the storms of life, which challenge you to abandon your trust in Jesus, if you forget who you are as a follower of Jesus?

Earlier this month, we invited you to submit prayer requests to pastors and elders. We broke up into four groups and prayed for two hours. It was awesome. It's always awesome. I was struck, as I'm always struck, by severity of the storms that have beaten many of you. But I was equally struck, as I'm always struck, that your houses of faith, so to speak, were still standing. In fact, they seemed stronger than ever. We have a lot of wise men and women in this church who are building their lives on the word of God.

A great fall

Matthew 7:26-27 clearly echoes Matthew 7:24-25. Jesus contrasts those who listen to his words and do them with those who listen to his words and don't do them. Note, however, the difference in the way the two sections end:

—" . . . but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."

—" . . . and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

In the first section, the house built on the rock did not fall because it had been founded on the rock. Because the parallels up to this point have been so exact, we expect Jesus in the second section to say that the house built on the sand fell "because it had been founded on the sand." But that's not what he says. Jesus comments not on the reason for the fall but on the magnitude of it: "great was the fall of it."

Israel had a house. That house, the temple, also called the house of God, had been built on the rock, atop Mount Zion. Israel herself was referred to as a house: the house of Israel. However, because Israel as a whole did not recognize Jesus as her Messiah, God's judgment was upon her. Jesus prophesied that God would destroy the temple: "See your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:38, Luke 19:43-45). Indeed, the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 A.D. Great was the fall of the house—the temple and the house of Israel. Israel had built on the sand, not on the rock.

Those who hear the words of Jesus and dismiss them are setting themselves up for a fall—a great fall. For those who don't submit to Jesus, indeed, the fall will be great: in the end, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. To miss out on Jesus and his words for all eternity: oh, how great the fall! Therefore, if you have not yet given your allegiance to Jesus, listen carefully to his words. What do you want to do: build your house on the rock of Jesus' words or on the sand of false hopes?

Lagunitas Creek

At the beginning of my personal retreat north of the Bay, I asked for a whale and got an eagle. At the end of my retreat, I checked out of my room and set out for my next stop on the way home: Lagunitas Creek. The creek has a small run of endangered Coho Salmon. In the past, right around the turn of the year, I've seen salmon spawning in the creek, but not for the past five years or so. Upon beginning my journey home, I said, "Lord, I'd like to see a salmon."

No sooner had those words escaped my mouth than a fox pranced across the road. I pulled over, parked, and followed the fox for a while. It was beautiful! It never occurred to me to ask for a fox. An hour later, I walked up and down Lagunitas Creek. No salmon.

Ask for a whale and you get an eagle. Ask for a salmon and you get a fox. Jesus says, "Ask and it will be given to you." If you read his words carefully—hear his words!—you'll notice that he doesn't promise that you'll

get what you ask for. He says *it* will be given to you; he doesn't say *what* will be given to you. Moreover, he doesn't say *when* it will be given to you. Ask for a whale immediately and you get an eagle—four hours later. Ask for a salmon in an hour and you get a fox—immediately.

Paul reminds us that God is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). This occurs to me: my whole life has been like this. God has done far more abundantly than what I've asked for.

Do you know what the Father was doing? I think he was having fun with me. I think he was playing with me. I was doing what Jesus said: I was asking. Indeed, the Father was giving—but giving in surprising ways at surprising times. How about that for an image of God: a God who has fun with us, who plays with us, who delights in surprising us?

In the end, I guess I did what Jesus said. I asked. I received. What fun! It is so fun to follow Jesus! What a way to live! Why would you want to live any other way?

Doing the words of Jesus: It's exhilarating. It even prepares you for the future. Hear and do the words of Jesus in order to prepare for the future. Build your life on the words of Jesus.

Endnotes

- 1 Matthew uses the words “these words” in reference to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:28, though the English Standard Version translates them with the words “these sayings.”
- 2 In Matthew 7:21, Jesus said whomever “does” the will of the Father will enter into the kingdom of heaven. Now he extolls whoever “does” his words. The will of the Father is that we do the words of Jesus.
- 3 Emile Cailliet, *Journey Into Light* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1968), 11-18.