

A CURIOUS KINGDOM
A Firm Foundation
Matthew 7:24-27
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To stand in solidarity with many of our students who have their 1st day of school this week, I have a pop quiz for us. Are you ready? I'd like to see a show of hands. Who here considers yourself a Varsity level Christian? How many JV Christians do we have? If you identified yourself as a JV Christian, I'm assuming you weren't here last Sunday. Asking questions about what people remember from previous sermons are always risky for pastors, because they can confirm our fear that few people hear or remember what we say. 😊

I asked the Varsity/JV question because we tend to categorize people as either “just plain Christians”—followers of Jesus who aren't that serious about their faith—or disciples—those who are committed followers. Last week I emphasized that if we've invited Jesus into our lives, we're disciples who are being mentored by Jesus through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. There is no such thing as “plain Christians” who aren't disciples. You may be a good disciple or a bad one, a mature disciple or an infant, a committed disciple or complacent, but you're a disciple.

Another way of looking at our identity as Christians involves the term *saint*. We usually reserve that word for people like Mother Theresa, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Reverend Billy Graham. Or, if you've grown up in the Catholic tradition, saints are those special people from history who are revered. A quick look at the Bible shows us a different understanding.

The New Testament church that has the reputation of being the most difficult and perhaps the least spiritual was the Church at Corinth. The ancient city of Corinth was notorious for its promiscuity—it was a modern-day “Sin City.” And the Church at Corinth had its share of problems as well. There was division in the Church at Corinth; people participating in the Lord's Supper used it as opportunity to overeat and to get drunk; a man in the church openly flaunted his sexual relationship with his step- mother and people in the church were proud of it; and, to top it all off, this church questioned Paul's legitimacy as an apostle, because he wasn't an impressive speaker.

The Corinthian Church was a mess but listen to how Paul addresses them in his 1 letter to their church: *“To the Church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his **holy people.**”* 1 Corinthians 1:2 The phrase *holy people* can also be translated *saints*. When Paul wrote to the most dysfunctional church with the most immature Christians in the ancient world, he addressed them as saints. My point is this: if we’re followers of Jesus, we are saints, people who have been sanctified by Jesus. The word sanctified means set apart and made holy. Every one of us who has invited Jesus into our lives is a disciple, a saint, who is on a continuous journey of being inwardly transformed to be more and more like Jesus. When it comes to Jesus’ Kingdom, there are no JV players or “just plain Christians.” We’re all saints, disciples of Jesus.

So, why am I spending so much time trying to convince you you’re a disciple—a saint? The New Testament continually emphasizes a truth that modern psychology has more recently emphasized. **We live our lives based on the identity we claim for ourselves.** Many of the New Testament letters the Apostle Paul wrote—books like Romans, Ephesians, and Philippians—begin by establishing who we are in Christ. After establishing our identity, these letters then instruct us on what it looks like for us to live as followers of Jesus, as disciples, as saints. If we buy into the idea that we’re a JV player or just a plain old Christian, our lives won’t look noticeably different from the people around us who don’t profess faith in Christ. On the other hand, if our identity is firmly established as a disciple of Jesus, a saint, we’ll naturally strive to fulfill that identity. That’s why the Apostle Paul could confidently write: *“being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”* Philippians 1:6 Experiencing transformation in Jesus is the goal for every disciple.

Let’s look now at Jesus’ final words in his Sermon on Mount found in Matthew chapter 7 verses 24-27.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his 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. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” Matthew 7:24-27

I’ve titled today’s sermon: *“A Firm Foundation.”* On what foundation are you building?

As a disciple of Jesus, are you building your life on the rock of God's Word and the life of Jesus, or are you building on sand—something other than God's Word and Jesus' example?

Many of us have known this passage of Scripture since we were little kids and sang the song, "*The wise man built his house upon the rock...*" with the accompanying hand motions. I always like the end of the song when it says, "*And the house on the sand went smash*"—and we made a loud pop with our hands. These words of Jesus are familiar to many of because they're contained in a familiar children's ditty, but don't miss the profound significance of what is being said.

Jesus has covered a lot of ground in his teaching from Matthew chapters 5-7 and He says that all of us who hear these words and put them into practice are like a wise man who built his house on a firm foundation. The **and** in that statement is critical—discipleship is hearing and putting into practice. Someone has said most Christians are educated way beyond our level of obedience. When it comes to faith, we don't need to know more or even be inspired more. We need to obey more. We need to put into practice what we already know. Jesus says the foundation we build on is important, because torrential downpours, heavy winds and flooding will happen—it's called life. And He draws a contrast with the foolish man who build his house on sand. When the hurricane-like wind and rains brought flooding and the streams rose, the house on the sand couldn't stand, because it didn't have a stable foundation. It collapsed with a great crash.

Some of Jesus' teaching in The Sermon on The Mount is difficult to understand and even more difficult to consistently practice, but these words are easy to understand. Those who build on the foundation of Jesus and his truth will thrive. Those who build on sand as their foundation (or anything other than Jesus) will watch their house collapse when the storms of life hit. Consider the past year. All of us have experienced rain, winds and flooding. In the midst of all the difficulty we've faced, one of my biggest disappointments during the COVID pandemic has been the lack of discernible difference in response from followers of Jesus and those who don't claim faith in Him. When I make that statement, please understand I'm not just being grumpy and taking potshots at people I'm upset with or nameless Christians out there. I've been disappointed in myself, in people who are close to me, in our church, in our community

and in our country. Most of us have been guilty at one time or another over the past year of losing our grip on the hope we have in Christ.

Personally, I've been disappointed in my inability to listen well and receive complaints and differing opinions from people without becoming frustrated and defensive. I've felt tired and depleted by decisions I and teams I'm part of needed to make and have felt the weight of the reality that whatever we chose, nearly half of the people would disagree with the decision and many would be upset with us. During my time away this summer God recentered me on Him and gave me perspective, focus, healing and new strength. He reminded me of three questions He has brought to my attention regularly over the past 20 years while I've served as McBIC's Lead Pastor—Whose church is McBIC? Whose Vision is it? Whose people are these? God brings those questions to mind for me when I'm acting as if McBIC is my church, our vision is my vision and the people of McBIC are my people. And He reminds me that the correct answer to all 3 of these questions is: His—his Church, his vision and his people.

As I was thinking and writing the sermon this week, it occurred to me that while the foundation we build on is essential, **another key for us in thriving as disciples is maintaining our focus on Jesus.** You and I may build our lives on the solid foundation of Jesus and his teaching, but when tough times come, we might still find ourselves struggling with our focus.

Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospel all report the incident of Peter walking on the water and then sinking. To set the stage for us... After Jesus fed the 5,000, the disciples went ahead in a boat while Jesus went up on a mountainside to pray. Just before dawn, the disciples noticed someone or something walking on the water. They were afraid, thinking it might be a ghost, but Jesus identified Himself to them. Peter, always quick to say impulsive things, said, *"If it is you, Lord, tell me to come to you."* Jesus said, *"Come,"* so Peter hopped out of the boat and began walking on the water. I'll pick up reading now from Matthew chapter 14. *"Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'"* Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. *"You of little faith,"* he said, *"why did you doubt."* Matthew 14:29-31

As I reflect on the past year and think about my journey and as I continue to observe the responses of Jesus' followers to COVID, racial injustice and our political climate, my sense is

that our greatest challenge as disciples of Jesus may be maintaining our focus on our Lord amidst the wind and waves of the storm. It's tempting and easy to take our eyes off of Jesus as we walk toward Him and fixate on all that is happening around us. When we do that, like Peter, we'll probably find ourselves sinking and crying out to Jesus in fear. The foundation we build our life on is critical, but maintaining our focus on Jesus and walking in faith rather than focusing on the winds and waves surrounding us is equally important.

I mentioned last week how much I appreciate the way various parts of Scripture tie in with each other. As I thought about Jesus' challenge to build our lives on the strong foundation of his truth, I was reminded of Psalm 1. Listen to these words,

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.

Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.
Psalm 1:1-6

This psalm speaks to the ongoing importance of walking with Jesus, delighting in his Word and meditating on it. Building on Jesus' example and teaching as our foundation isn't something we do once and then forget about as we move on to something else. It's a daily choice—a choice we make repeatedly throughout the day.

I want to return to a verse I discussed with you last week—Romans 12:2. Here Paul writes, *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* Romans 12:2 Using Jesus' word picture, following the pattern of this world is like building our lives on sand and allowing Jesus to transform us through the renewing of our minds is equivalent to building our lives on rock. I have two questions I'd like us to ponder as close our service today and move to our time of response.

- What foundation is your life built on...God's Word and the example of Jesus or something else?
- Where's your focus—are you struggling to keep your eyes on Jesus as the wind whips around you and as the waves rise and fall and knock you about?

I have 2-pronged benediction for you as we leave this morning. John King reminded me that the Mennonite founder Menno Simons used to sign off his letters with 1 Corinthians 3:11, *“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”* That's an important reminder for us. Secondly, I urge you to receive the truth of Philippians 1:6: *“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”* As disciples who follow Jesus and submit to his work in our lives, we can be assured that He will bring his good work to completion in us.