



HOW TO STAND IN A STORM

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 7:21-29
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Today we come to end of our series in the Sermon on the Mount. I have found these studies to be very significant. I trust they have been profitable in your walk of faith, too. In his discourse, our Lord's concern is not that we hear his words, or that agree with them, but that we obey them. Jesus is not concerned with making us smarter, but with making us godly. He is teaching for a verdict as he concludes his instruction with a passage of heart-piercing application.

In their significant book *The Day America Told the Truth*, Peter Cam and James Patterson revealed that only 13% of Americans regard the Ten Commandments as relevant or binding. They reported that most Americans routinely lie to their families, friends and associates. Americans admit goofing off at work an average of seven hours a week. Eighty-five per cent of those surveyed were convinced that they could work a lot better. One-half of the work force regularly calls in sick, despite the fact that they are feeling quite well. But the clincher came in this question asked by the surveyors: "What are you willing to do for 10 million dollars?" Twenty-five per cent said they would abandon their families; 23% said they would become a prostitute or a pimp for a week; and 7% said they would murder for 10 million dollars.

Upon hearing this, many people would think that what these authors were describing is the lifestyle of the non-Christian community. But no. Doug Sherman and Bill Hendricks did an extensive survey of the evangelical community and published a book on their findings, "Keeping Your Ethical Edge Sharp." Their shocking conclusion was that the values held in Christian circles were not much different from those of non-Christians. They found that Christians are as likely as non-Christians to falsify their income tax returns. I think I've shared with you about the letter the IRS received some time ago from a man who wrote: "Last year I falsified my income tax return, and I haven't been able to sleep since. Enclosed is \$125. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest." These researchers found that Christians were just as likely to bribe someone to obtain a building permit, ignore construction specifications, shift the blame for wrongdoing to someone else, and steal from the workplace.

These facts are a shocking indictment of the church.

Chad Walsh, in his book *Early Christians of the Twenty First Century*, writes:

Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety, with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from stained-glass windows. Their religion is a pleasant thing of emotional quivers, divorced from the will, divorced from the intellect, and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. I suspect that Satan has called off his attempt to convert peo-

ple to agnosticism. After all, if a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is liable to see it in perspective and decide that it is true. It is much safer, from Satan's point of view, to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity so as to protect him from the real disease.

Jesus wants to free us from this kind of phoniness and hypocrisy. In the Sermon on the Mount, he sets before us the radical choice between obedience and disobedience and calls us to an unconditional commitment to his teaching. In this concluding section he warns of two unacceptable alternatives, the first, a mere verbal profession (21-23), the second, a mere intellectual knowledge (24-27).

We pick up Jesus' words in chapter 7, verse 21:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (7:21-23, NASB)

Jesus is saying these people are relying for salvation on a creed they have affirmed, on what they "say" to him or about him: "Not everyone who says to me... On that day many will say to me." But Jesus insists our final destiny will be settled not by what we say to him today, or by what we say to him on the last day, but by whether we have done what he said, whether we have entered into a relationship with him.

On the surface, the faith professed by these people appears admirable. Note the marks of these individuals. They have orthodox beliefs. They address Jesus as Lord—a divine title. Notice also their apparent enthusiasm and devotion. They address Jesus not as "Lord," but as "Lord, Lord." It is as if the author wants to draw attention to their zeal. And they have an impressive record of spiritual experiences. They prophesied, they cast out demons, they performed miracles. Notice that Jesus does not deny any of those claims. These people are energetic workers who expect admission into the kingdom.

What better Christian profession could one give? Here are people who have called Jesus "Lord" enthusiastically, and in ministry. But Jesus' response is, "I never knew you." He is not talking about knowledge. He is not saying that he is unable to identify them. The word knowledge implies intimacy. Jesus is saying, "I never had a personal relationship with you." The issue is one of relationship. God's will is not to be admired or debated, but to be done. These people professed with their lips, not their lives. They called Jesus "Lord, Lord," but had never submitted to his lordship, and consequently never obeyed the will of the Heavenly Father.

Certainly these words of Jesus are not instructing that the way to enter the kingdom of heaven is by obedience, i.e. that we are saved by our good works. That would contradict not only this sermon, which began with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," but the entire New Testament, which says that salvation comes only through the grace of God, through faith. What Jesus is saying is that people who belong to him, who have been saved, who know the love and grace of God in their lives will obey him; and they will express that faith through works.

The apostles of Jesus never forgot that truth. They all warned about the perils of merely making a verbal profession or having an intellectual knowledge. John, for instance, wrote in his letter: "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie." John charges that the man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar. James warned: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." He went on: "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" The answer, obviously, is no.

Charles Colson tells the story of a young woman in Washington D.C. who demonstrated the meaning of genuine faith. She shared her story with the church which she and her husband attended.

Four years ago this week, a young girl sat crying on the floor of a New Jersey apartment, devastated by the news of a lab report. Unmarried and alone, she had just learned she was pregnant...

'I considered myself a Christian at the time,' she continued. 'But I had found out about Christ while in the drug scene. After I learned about Him, I knew I wanted to commit myself to Him, but I couldn't give up my old friends or my old habits. So I was drifting between two worlds - in one still smoking dope every day and sleeping with the man who lived in the apartment below mine; in the other, going to church, witnessing to others, and working with the church youth group.'

'But being pregnant ripped through the hypocrisy of my double life. I had been meaning to 'get right with God', but I kept slipping back. Now I couldn't live a nice, clean Christian life like all those church people.'

'I felt the only answer was to wipe the slate clean. I would get on abortion; no one in the church would ever know.'

'The clinic scheduled an abortion date. I was terrified, but my boyfriend was adamant. My sister was furious with me for being so stupid as to get pregnant. Finally, in desperation I wrote my parents. They were staunch Catholics, and I knew they would support me if I decided to have the baby. My mother called me: 'If you don't get an abortion, I don't want to see you while you're pregnant. Your life will be ruined and you'll deserve it.'

'I had always been desperately dependent on other people. But I knew this was one decision I had to make alone. I was looking out my bedroom window one night when I thought clearly for the first time in weeks. I realized I either believed this Christianity or I didn't believe it. And if I believed in Christ, then I couldn't do this. God is real, I thought, even if I've never lived like He is.'

'That decision was a point of no return. I put my faith in

the God of the Bible, not the God I had made up in my head. I was still everything I never wanted to be - pregnant, alone, deserted by family, and rejected by the one I loved. Yet for the first time in my life I was really peaceful, because I knew for the first time I was being obedient.

'When I went to an obstetrician and told him of my decision to have the baby and why I had made that choice, he refused to charge me for the pre-natal care and delivery. I confessed my double life to the church, and through the support of Christians was able to move away from my old friends to an apartment of my own. I began going to a Christian counseling agency and felt God leading me to give the baby up for adoption.'

'I had a beautiful baby girl and named her Sarah. She was placed with a childless Christian couple, and we all felt God's hand in the decision.'

'And so that's why I praise God this evening. I thought in the depths of my despair that my life was ruined, but I knew I had to at least be obedient in taking responsibility for my sin. But today, because of that very despair and obedience, I have what I never thought I could - a godly husband and now a baby of our own. But what matters more than anything is that I have what I was searching for so desperately before—peace with God.'

That is what genuine faith produces: peace with God.

A verbal profession or an intellectual knowledge can never be a substitute for obedience, the fruit that comes from genuine faith. We are not studying the historical Jesus on the road from Nazareth to Jerusalem; we are studying the Lord Jesus Christ who has the right to rule as Lord of our lives.

Jesus concludes with a powerful and familiar story. Verse 24:

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and [yet] it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall." (7:24-27)

Some will say, "Oh, I know that story. That's the one about the three little pigs. The first little pig built his out of straw, and the wolf blew it down. The second little pig built his house out of sticks, and the wolf blew that down. But the third little pig built his house out of bricks. And the wolf huffed and puffed, but he couldn't blow that house down." But that is not the story that Jesus is relating here. The point of the story of the Three Little Pigs (if there is one!) is to build your house appropriately—you should build a house that is strong. Jesus' point here is that we should build our house on the right foundation. In both cases the house represents our weak, frail humanity. The thing that will enable us to stand in the midst of life's storms, and in the final storm of judgment, is not our strength, or the strength of the brick structure we erected, but the foundation on which we build our life. And that is

what Jesus has been telling us all along: Count on me! Depend on me! Rely on me! Abide in me! He is the source of our life.

These are the two alternatives: We can either go it alone, and try to produce life out of our own resources, or we can count on Jesus and his resources.

So the sermon ends with our Lord presenting the same radical choice which we have seen throughout. Jesus hasn't presented a set of easy ethical rules, but rather a set of values that is entirely distinctive from those of the world we live in. He has called us to be different. He has described Christians as the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world." He has pointed out that the Christian and non-Christian communities are fundamentally different. John Stott put it this way, "The world is like rotting food, full of bacteria, which cause its disintegration. The followers of Jesus are to be the salt of the world, arresting its decay. The world is a dark and dismal place, lacking sunshine and living in shadows. The followers of Jesus are to be its light, dispelling its darkness and its gloom."

Jesus then went on to show how different Christians are: Our righteousness is to be deeper, reaching even our hearts. John Stott summarizes it this way, "Our love is to be broader, embracing even our enemies. Our giving and praying and fasting are to be genuine, not for show. For our treasure, we choose that which lasts for eternity, not that which disintegrates on earth."

Instead of conforming to the world we are called to imitate our Heavenly Father. And so the choice is either to follow the crowd or follow our Father. We will either be a reed swayed by the winds of public opinion or people ruled by God's Word. That is why Jesus' conclusion is so radical. There are only two ways (narrow and broad) and two foundations (rock and sand). We can't exaggerate the importance of the choice between these two, since one way leads to life while the other leads to destruction. Far more important than the choice of a life work or a life partner is the choice about life itself. Which road are you going to travel? On what foundation are you building?

The outcome of Jesus' teaching was not unexpected. Verse 28:

The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (7:28-29)

What struck the crowds, and the disciples, was Jesus' extraordinary authority. He didn't hum or haw or hesitate. He wasn't tentative, apologetic or arrogant. With quiet assurance he laid down the law for the citizens of God's kingdom. And the crowds were "amazed." That is a strong verb. One scholar translates it, "dumbfounded." They were astonished. And after nineteen hundred years, we are too.

What separated this Teacher from all the others? It was this: all the other teachers and scribes claimed no authority of their own. They delved into commentaries and claimed the support of famous rabbis. Their only authority lay in the authority they were quoting. But Jesus never received

a scribal education. He spoke with a freshness that captivated many but infuriated others. A.B. Bruce summed up the difference well when he said the scribes spoke, "by authority, while Jesus spoke with authority."

Matthew adds these last words to remind us that the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is not simply to lead us to amazement, which it does, but to lead us to commitment and submission to Christ's authority. Having been exposed to Jesus' message, are we willing to experience it, to make the kinds of choices that will ultimately lead the Holy Spirit to produce this kind of life in us?

It is appropriate that we end our study by celebrating the Lord's Table. The only way we can live the kind of life described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is by means of the resources that he has provided for us in his death and resurrection. He gave up his rights as the Son of God that he might come to earth and live among us, that we, too, might trust his Father in everything, as he did. He lived a perfect life and died a criminal's death that we might have life eternal. He took the penalty that was rightly due to us, separating himself from the Father that we might have fellowship with him. Now that same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to us that we might live the way God designed life to be lived. The choice that each one of us faces is this: who is going to control our lives? Is it going to be God or the forces of darkness? As we come to the Table, let us examine ourselves. Is there something about us that we have not yet turned over to the Lord, some part of life where we have resisted his lordship? Let this be the day when we say to him, "Lord, I'm willing to change. Please have your way with me today that I may fully experience your lordship in every area of my life."

May God grant that we will take these amazing words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount and, by the power of the Holy Spirit residing within us, live them out daily in our homes, in our church, and in the world.

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