

“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. 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.” And 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.

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Everyone knows (or should know) the words that we refer to as, “The Golden Rule”; *“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”* (Matthew 7:12, NKJV) Some of the most misunderstood and misquoted words of Scripture are the words: *“Judge not, that you be not judged.”* (Matthew 7:1, ESV) Maybe you are familiar with the phrase: *“Ye shall know them by their fruits.”* (Matthew 7:16, KJV 1900). And we all should know that Jesus says: *“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16, ESV)

What do all these words have in common? They are all from Jesus’ teaching that we know as *The Sermon on the Mount*. The Sermon on the Mount has been preached on over and over again in the history of the church. Authors have written about the sermon, with more words than Jesus Himself used. Martin Luther has a commentary dedicated to the Sermon on the Mount. Leo Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace* observed that there would be no evil in the world if everyone acted in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount.

There are those who think that the Sermon on the Mount wasn’t actually a single sermon, but that Matthew simply gathered together a compilation of Christ’s teachings. It is true that Matthew’s Gospel is not a strict chronological record of events in the life of our Saviour. The Gospels were written to instruct people. Matthew does this by focussing on five discourses or sermons from Jesus. They each fit a particular context, like the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew begins his Gospel by laying the foundation, with the genealogy and birth of Christ. He moves into the ministry of John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Jesus, and then to Jesus’ baptism and temptation in the wilderness. He notes that Jesus begins his ministry, and calls his disciples. In the verses leading up to the sermon on the mount, we are told that Jesus: *“went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.”* (Matthew 4:23, ESV).

We cannot say how long Jesus had been teaching before delivering the great sermon before us today. Just because it is early in Matthew’s Gospel doesn’t mean it was, as some believe, Jesus’ inaugural sermon. It would seem that the sermon comes out of the time in Jesus’ ministry we refer to as the year of popularity, or the second year of His earthly ministry. Crowds follow Him wherever He goes. Matthew tells us: *“Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.”* (Matthew 5:1, ESV) Jesus would take time away from the great crowds, and here He goes on the mountain, and His disciples join Him. That helps us understand the context of the sermon. It is first and foremost for the disciples, although we know that there were others who came up on that mountain, and that *“the crowds were astonished at his teaching,”* (Matthew 7:28, ESV)

We don’t have anywhere near enough time to review the entire sermon and its meaning for our lives. This may be a great topic for our next cycle of Bible study on Sunday mornings. I’ve preached at least 50 sermons on verses from these words of Jesus. There are those wonderful Beatitudes, that remind us of the blessings we enjoy as God’s people. There is Jesus’ commentary on the commandments, reminding us that the child of God lives under His grace to show greater faithfulness to the Law of God than that which was seen in the Pharisees. Jesus teaches us to pray, giving us

the Lord's Prayer. He reminds us that we need not worry or fear, for God knows our needs and provides for us. It all culminates in the verses of our text today, those verses that remind us that we are to build our lives on a solid foundation—a foundation of faith in Jesus Christ.

The Sermon on the Mount has often been regarded as law and not as gospel. Jesus is thought of as expounding the true sense of the law over against the shallow and perverted views of the Jewish scribes and rabbis. There are those who would see this as the checklist for salvation; as the things we must do to be saved. But then, we hear Jesus say: ***"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*** (Matthew 5:48, ESV) Now we see how the things that are set forth here are so far beyond us. The words of Jesus remind us that we fall short of the glory of God. We don't love our neighbour as ourselves. We don't necessarily turn the other cheek. We don't always do for others the things we would have them do for us. We fail. We sin. We are far from perfect.

Again, there are those who would say, "well, Jesus knows our every weakness, so just do the best that you can." The idea is that Jesus grades on a curve; if we're all failing, He takes that into account. That also misses the idea of what Jesus is saying. Jesus never simply says, "Be all that you can be". Rather, He says: "Be all that you are by My grace and power at work in you." To borrow from St. Paul: ***"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*** (Galatians 2:20, ESV)

It is in this sense that we understand the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is teaching His disciples—people who already have been saved by faith in Him—what it means for them to be His disciples. The sermon deals with the life of these true disciples and uses the law only as the rule by which they live and prove themselves to be true disciples. The sermon speaks of the works the disciples are to do in the power of the Holy Spirit by faith.

That is the great blessing that we see in the sermon on the mount. Jesus calls us as His own, giving us His Spirit to bring us to faith in Him. He assures us that we are blessed, for we are comforted, forgiven and alive in that Saviour who has given Himself for us on the cross, dying in our place, but then rising again as the victor over death and hell. As Jesus said to Paul, so He says to us: ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*** (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV) His grace leads us in this new life, a life drawn fully and completely from God, our King; a life we live by faith in Christ and in communion with Jesus, God's Son, our Saviour.

And that is why I used the last verses of the sermon as our text today. Jesus says: ***"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."*** Jesus is that rock, that foundation we need for our lives. The only solid foundation is faith in Him—faith that not only hears His words, but which puts them into practice. Far too often we come to church on Sunday and hear the Word of God, but then leave that Word at the church, rather than taking it with us into our lives. The Word may ring in our ears, but it does not burn in our hearts. We don't let that word guide our actions and decisions; we don't turn to it for the answers and help we need in the midst of the storms.

If we build on the shifting, shallow sands of man's wisdom, wealth and might, then the tides of sin and all the storms they can bring to our lives will easily sweep us away to our destruction. But when we build on the Rock of Ages, following His wisdom and guidance in this sermon, then no matter how severe the storms of life may be, they will never ruin our happiness nor rob us of the blessings that our God wants us to have forevermore. When His word is not just something we hear, but that which is alive in our hearts and lives, we will not only endure whatever this world will bring; we will also enjoy the blessing of life for eternity, a life safe and secure in the hope that we have through the Lord who died and rose again for us.

The request for today was to preach on the Sermon on the Mount as the greatest sermon of all. It is the great sermon to guide us in our lives as the redeemed children of God. But I would suggest that Jesus actually preached a greater, more powerful sermon. It was the sermon preached at the cross. There the true nature and consequence of sin is clearly seen. But it is also the most vivid and powerful declaration of God's love for you and me. In Lutheran terms, the

message of the cross and the empty tomb are the greatest Law and Gospel sermon of all time. Sin brings forth death, but your Saviour took your place, dying for you, that you may be forgiven. Jesus bears the punishment of the Law for all people. He also brings life, that life that flows from His own resurrection from the dead. When it comes right down to it, what more can He say? What more does He need to say? When this is the foundation of your life, you are standing on solid ground, and you will find joy, guidance, encouragement and direction from the great sermon of Jesus—the sermon He preached to His disciples on that mountain so long ago. Amen.