

## **Solid Foundation: II**

Menno Mennonite Church  
August 7, 2022

**Purpose:** To affirm the words of the sermon as the founding story of Christian life.

**Message:** We are invited to know the challenges of the sermon as a foundation for life.

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:12-20;24-29

**Synopsis:** With all of the words and iconic notions of the sermon on the mount, we are given the string of what feels like the greatest hits. Yet together as it is—the declaration of the way of the kingdom of God—it becomes our firm foundation for the ways we are called to live our lives. We come again and again not to live in judgement of the one who sets the way, but to be fully rooted and grounded in the way of Christ, our firm foundation.

This is the conclusion of the Sermon on the mount series.

- We started here in our exploration of the sermon on the mount. We are coming back for a couple of reasons.
  - To engage these sayings more directly—we didn't do that before
  - To circle back to the foundational principles that we have built and to give it another look
  - To hear it in its completion, more or less, the whole arc of the sermon

**Matthew 7:12-20; 24-29**

<sup>12</sup>“In everything do to others  
as you would have them do to you;  
for this is the law and the prophets.

<sup>13</sup>“Enter through the narrow gate;  
for the gate is wide  
and the road is easy that leads to destruction,  
and there are many who take it.

<sup>14</sup>For the gate is narrow  
and the road is hard that leads to life,  
and there are few who find it.

<sup>15</sup>“Beware of false prophets,  
who come to you in sheep's clothing  
but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

<sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits.  
Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?

<sup>17</sup> In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit,  
but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

<sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,  
nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

<sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>20</sup> Thus you will know them by their fruits.

<sup>24</sup> “Everyone then who hears these words of mine  
and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

<sup>25</sup> The rain fell, the floods came,  
and the winds blew and beat on that house,  
but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.

<sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine  
and does not act on them  
will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

<sup>27</sup> The rain fell, and the floods came,  
and the winds blew and beat against that house,  
and it fell—and great was its fall!”

<sup>28</sup> Now when Jesus had finished saying these things,  
the crowds were astounded at his teaching,  
<sup>29</sup> for he taught them as one having authority,  
and not as their scribes.

Sometimes, we remember the word well beyond the meaning of the thing. We know the lines—sometimes too well. The nugget of the line, speech, that elevates itself beyond the thing itself takes on a life of its own, never mind whether it has anything to do with the original thinking or intent of the thing in the first place. Similar to one of John F Kennedy’s most famous lines – “I Eich Ein Beliner” being popularly interpreted as “I am a jelly doughnut” by speculating that there was a mispronunciation that changed the meaning from one of expressing solidarity in the face of the real and present danger of a hostile world around them to gaff that misses the mark. Never mind it is an urban legend, it is a sticky concept that in many ways outshines the quote in Berlin at the time of the Berlin Wall going up in the first place (Kids—you can ask your folks what that was).

Or another way. We are well acquainted with *Romeo and Juliet*, the tale of the star crossed lovers and their ill fate. We have the various romantic quotes in our heads—what’s in a name, goodnight, goodnight; a thousand times good night. We might even remember the last line: *For never was a story of more woe; Than this of Juliet and her Romeo*. It is the sentimental favorite ending what is thought to be the ultimate love story. Yet when we bring the broader context to it holds a more significant meaning. Spoken by the ruling prince on the discovery of the dead lovers, and their desperation being revealed to the assembled families who break their feud in tragedy, this is really a reproof of the folly that has brought them to this place. It is driving home the ironic tragedy of the play. Hear it with some context:

*A glooming peace this morning with it brings.  
The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head.  
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things.  
Some shall be pardoned, and some punishèd.  
For never was a story of more woe  
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*

Sometimes the context changes that which we take for granted.

We are given some of the same genre of saying here in winding down the Sermon on the mount. A little bit of Jesus greatest hits are right here to be digested. The Golden rule; the wide and narrow gate; you will know them by their fruits; the solid rock and the sand. These and so many more like them—let’s face it these 3 chapters are full of the stuff that our lives, our faith are full of. So much so that the ideas have transferred well beyond the world of the church and into the common language that most people don’t really even know that the words that they are

referencing scripture in their day-to-day existence. These are the words that we know without knowing them, and sometimes without retaining the why and wherefor. Especially in a period where our distance from the church is increasing, the source and meaning of these words become a bit more obscure. Do unto others as you would have them do to you could, for some, just as easily belong with the likes of Benjamin Franklin as it does from the central teachings of the one who would claim lordship in life and living. Out of context and its containing intent it is easy to have this all fall under the much broader heading of plain good advice than the life altering strategy of the coming kingdom that it is.

I harbor a long-time ambition. One of these days I am going to go ahead and make it happen. I would like to work on presenting the whole of the Sermon on the Mount as just that—a sermon. To bring it to life and read as it is as spoken word, without further comment or context. It would be something. I hesitate to go there both because these are words that demand that you not just read them, but that you do them justice and perform them fully—something which the last weeks have not allowed. We also hesitate to do that because we read these words with the red-letters that we see in the Bible; as the words of Jesus that are meant to be revered far more than spoken by the likes of me. Yet I think we would gain something for the hearing and knowing the work of the thing that is here in its full, comprehensive narrative that holds together as something far different than the piecemeal wisdom that we tend to learn, remember, and apply them as. By themselves, these are words to live by—some of many that we are offered as good advice for a good life. As a whole and coming within and out of that context, we are given the reasons why these words have endured as they have. They have the authority of the one who has spoken them with power and promise—something solid from which we can be led and challenged time and again.

That doesn't mean that these words come easily, or take life within us naturally or by inclination. The illustration of the wide and narrow gate speaks to just that. We of course hold this as an illustration of making that fateful decision for or against faith—do we say yes or do we say no. Sometimes we even hear this as exactly that sort of binary question of which side that we are on. I will always recall the time when I was working outside the church in Tucson as part of a work day and was engaged by a couple canvassing the neighborhood who explained that unless baptism fit their formula—full immersion if I recall correctly—then everyone before us were not going to make it, and chosen the wrong door. I made the comment that I thought that

was a whole lot more about the broader way of living life and I was assured it was much more the work of following that made *the way* than the method of getting started which, I believe, earned me a comment of some sort around being a false prophet for getting the critical choice wrong. We left it agreeing to disagree, if I am not mistaken.

I think this is what happens when we make the quote, the nugget the thing far more than holding the whole in context: we get something that is shaped by the narrow notions of that which we recall and treasure as we treasure them far more than being confronted with the wholesale invitation to the work of following that Jesus was offering. Maybe that is what is easier to work with—a simple way of being on the right side rather than time and again being called out to the work of discerning where the call lies to be part of the kingdom and where it does not, and how it might work for us. The narrow gate is as much about confirming the difficulty of the work of following after then the threat of what might happen if the wrong choice is made.

We began this whole discussion of the Sermon on the Mount being “Our text” as Christians in the Anabaptist style. I don’t think that can be underestimated. Martin Luther the great reformer offered the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount as only reminding us of the impossibility of the work of following Christ. He takes great pains to set up the 2 worlds in which we live and learn: the secular and the Spiritual and argues at length that the spiritual realm is that inhabited by the ethics of the kingdom, and the secular realm and its responsibilities demand something far more practical of us, compromising all of this in the name of getting stuff done. In his commentary on the Sermon he complains that “[Anabaptists] do not recognize the difference between the secular and the divine, much less that there should be distinctive doctrines and action in each realm.” (Pelikan *Luther’s Works* V 21 5). This insistence, he argues, replaces the notion of grace with the emphasis on what we do. Elsewhere he suggests that the Sermon was put in place solely to convince us that the way of being is so thoroughly out of touch with the demands of reality that its real purpose is to convince us of the impossibility of follow such demands in the first place, obscuring the grace involved. Needless to say, he goes on at some length about the impossibility of it all.

But I would dare answer Brother Martin this way: If there are two realms, as you suggest, and that one way of being does not work in the other realm, why would you limit the working of the kingdom to only the realm that is eventual, and not the one that is immediate and

physical? Is not Jesus the Lord of both, and speaking to people in a very much immediate and practical way? I would rather work at implementing that of the kingdom in the world now that we can, knowing its imperfection and its fragility than to pretend that the kingdom can only every be waited on in hope and in promise. We need the already in order to wait upon the not yet.

But here is where I would concur with him: this is our firm foundation, our hearing of the word and doing it, living it and being it has everything to do with the grace we find in the one who we found revealed in the telling and in the living. The way we hear the whole of the sermon, the whole of the call of Christ has everything to do with the encounter that we have with the grace of God known in Christ. It is entirely true that even with these words as our firm foundation we will fail. We will judge others; we will fall short of sharing the blessings that we have been given. We will covet that which is not ours—on and on it goes. But we cannot lose heart for wanting something easier to digest and live than the way of Christ. For in inviting us into this way we are given the challenge and hope of knowing something new. We need to hear these words not just as good ideas to be lived one day, but as the challenges that they are, calling us to something new.

May we live, each in our own way, the costly discipleship borne of the present grace of the one who speaks the truth that we need to hear, and roots us, fully, in every storm.