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From Rock to Cornerstone

The Scripture for today is found at the end of the Jesus' most famous teachings, the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew. We're going to start at the end first, as was read today. Last week, we heard from Isaiah 28:16 "therefore thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation: "One who trusts will not panic." We know the foundation is not our strength. It is not our performance. It is not our political preference. It is not our financial stability. It is something — Someone — God Himself has provided. In God sending His Son, Jesus, he has laid the foundation stone, the precious cornerstone. And with the cornerstone laid, the question for today is: what kind of life are we building on it?" Jesus ended his sermon on the Mount with a significant assumption: it is up to us as listeners, whether we choose to be wise or foolish builders; the foundation has been laid, we now have a choice.

If we think back to Moses right before the Israelites went into the promised land. Moses knew he wasn't going into the promised land, and so he left them with a farewell, found in Deuteronomy, right before he died. He kept

placing the future before the people. When You enter the land...he didn't say, when we enter the land, he knew he wasn't going. Their future depended on them and whether they would remember Moses' last sermon; words that came from God. He was reminding them that God had laid out his commandments and would bless them, they just had to obey the Lord as we hear in Deuteronomy 28:1-2 "If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God:" And the last words Moses says in this sermon are found in Deuteronomy 30:19-20 "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

"Choose life so that you and your children may live." God was with them, but they also had a stake in their future, which depended on whether they remembered God's commandments. Jesus ended his Sermon on the Mount in a very similar way. He places before the crowd much of the

same choices - life and death, blessings and curses, and it can sound like he won't be present to lead them through the narrow gate. So Jesus encourages them to find the narrow gate in order to follow the narrow path (Matthew 7:13–14 ““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. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” And yet, while the crowd follows Jesus down the mountainside, Jesus knows he won't be around forever, for them to rely on him to help them figure out who are the false prophets and who are not; they will have to discern this. Matthew 7:15–20 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.” There is no middle ground. It's going to be up to the listeners whether they choose life or destruction, to be wise or foolish builders. They have the foundation; everything Jesus has taught them as Jesus says in Matthew 7:24 ““Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.” In other words, as it was in

the days of Moses and the children of Israel, to do God's will means hearing (remembering) and doing what was taught—as Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus presented life as a choice between two options, he was continuing a long biblical tradition. In the Hebrew Scriptures, especially through the prophets, life was often described in clear contrasts because God's will was seen as decisive—God blesses or curses, rewards or punishes. As a result, people were viewed as either obedient or rebellious, wise or foolish, holy or unclean, with no middle ground. Jesus followed this same “two-ways” tradition. In his teachings (such as the two gates, two kinds of prophets, two kinds of trees and fruit, and two builders), he presented life as a choice between two paths that lead to different outcomes. This wasn't oversimplifying reality but reflecting a common Jewish teaching style that emphasized the importance of choosing the right path before God.

Jesus contrasts his true righteousness with the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees throughout the Sermon on the Mount. While they focus on outward rules (not murdering, not committing adultery, public religious acts), Jesus emphasizes inner righteousness—not hating, not lusting, loving enemies, and practicing devotion privately. Because of this contrast, Jesus ends the sermon with a choice between two paths: the broad way of hypocrisy followed

by many, and the narrow way of Jesus followed by few. This narrow path is summed up in the Golden Rule—treat others as you want to be treated. Every person must choose one of these paths, which ultimately leads either to destruction or to life.

It is possible to know about the rock but still build on sand. Both builders hear the words of Jesus and build a house. The difference isn't knowledge but obedience. It is not enough to admire Jesus - we must build our lives on His words. Storms reveal our foundation, obedience builds stability.

So, we are to build our lives on and follow Christ's teachings....what did he teach? I encourage you to read through all of the Sermon on the Mount, a significant portion of his teachings in a few chapters. It might be obvious. Who doesn't want mercy over judgment, or righteousness over hypocrisy, life over death? Do unto others! As Jesus says, the same gate -- his way of righteousness -- opens up to a path of persecution. The word for "straight" or "narrow" (thlibō) is more often translated "distressed," "persecuted," or "troubled" in other places (2 Cor 1:6; 1 Thess 3:4; 2 Thess 1:7). Jesus' way can be a path of affliction as Jesus says at the beginning of his sermon. Matthew 5:10–12 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile

you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” There are some who profess the way of Jesus but don’t live it, the false prophets. They do not practice what they preach. Jesus believed the disciples would know them by their fruit, yet he was still warning them. Why? False prophets were an issue for Israel. True prophets were often rejected or abused by the people they were sent to because people found their messages offensive or sometimes believed they were heresy. For instance, Jeremiah’s prediction of the coming destruction of the temple sounded like false prophecy to the people as the Lord said he would put his name on the temple “forever” to Solomon. As Rodney Reeves writes, “the pattern of discerning prophets typically went like this: Israel listened to false prophets because their message was appealing and rejected true prophets because they didn’t like what they heard, regardless of signs performed. But Jeremiah said Israel should have known better. False prophets are easy to spot: their lawless behavior led Israel astray. Jesus claimed the same thing: people may prophesy in his name—and even perform wondrous signs—but the lawless deeds of false prophets should make it evident that they are bad trees. Only those who do the will of God, who enter the small gate and walk the difficult path of following Jesus, are good trees that

produce good fruit. Yet what does good fruit from a good tree look like? They look like merciful, peaceful, forgiving, loving, compassionate, righteous, faithful followers of the Jesus way—those who hear and do what Jesus taught. Consequently, what Jesus said about bad trees is true of good trees: “By their fruit you will recognize them.””

I’m sure we’ve all seen the devastation of homes by floods or hurricanes, and this will continue as we build homes next to the shores, but there’s always some that make it. Because of our knowledge and the foundations of our day, we can often build structures to withstand high pressures. For instance, a couple of years ago, a major flood in our area, picked up our deck in our backyard, moving it, destroying the foundation it had been on since we had built it ten years prior. When the contractors came to build the new one they asked if we wanted it to have a foundation that wouldn’t move this time. If anything took this deck next time, we’d have to worry more about our house, than we would our deck. We weren’t getting fooled by the floodwaters in our area, as that was the worst flood we had experienced in our home since we had moved there almost 20 years prior. So, we agreed. We had learned from the last time. In Jesus’ day, you couldn’t put your house anywhere you wanted. You had to look for a rock to build your house, which could often be found up the mountain. Building on sand was shortsighted foolishness. To

disregard the hard-earned wisdom of neighbors who built their homes on solid rock foundations was an act of great arrogance. It was only a matter of time before your beachfront house collapsed for everyone to see. As Jesus is on the mountain, he encourages the crowd to build their lives on his words — they are rock-solid. You don't need to look elsewhere for a foundation. Following his words and way, choosing to live in his shelter meant that no persecution, flood, affliction, or trouble would overwhelm them. They would weather the storm.

Eric Liddel, born in China to Scottish Missionary Parents, eventually moved to Scotland for his education. In 1924, he competed in the summer olympics for Scotland as a runner. He was the favourite to win the 100-metre race, an event he had trained for years to run. Shortly before the Olympics, Liddell discovered that the qualifying heat for the 100-metre race was scheduled on a Sunday. Because of his Christian conviction that Sunday should be kept for worship and rest, he refused to run. The decision sent shock waves throughout the sporting world. People thought he was throwing away his chance for an Olympic gold. Instead, Liddell entered the 400-metre race, an event he was not expected to win. Yet he ran with extraordinary determination, and won gold, setting a new Olympic record. But his story continues. Liddell later left fame and Olympic success to become a missionary in China, where

he eventually died in a Japanese internment camp during World War 2. Liddell's life illustrates building life on obedience to Jesus, not on public success or approval. As Jesus says in Matthew 6:33 "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Liddell built his life on the foundation of putting God first—even when it cost him something. When the "storms" came—public pressure, criticism, sacrifice—his life did not collapse, because it was built on obedience. As Jesus says, the wise person hears His words and puts them into practice. Liddell did exactly that: He heard Jesus' teaching about putting God first. He acted on it, even when it cost him his running career. His life showed a foundation that held firm. The real test of a foundation is what happens when pressure comes.

In 2006, a gunman entered an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania and killed five young girls before taking his own life. What shocked the world was what happened next. Within hours, members of the Amish community visited the killer's family, hugged them, and expressed forgiveness. They said the decision by the community to forgive the killer and his family was not as simple as it has been seen to be. "It's not a once and done thing," said Linda Fisher from the community. "It is a lifelong process."

On the day of the killings, members of the community took food to the widow of the killer and her family. Six days after

the shooting, families who had just buried their daughters attended the killer's funeral. Money from funds that poured in from around the world was diverted to the killer's family, even though many victims faced huge medical bills. Aaron Esh Sr, a member of the community, said the bereaved parents started to look at forgiveness as "the one good thing that can come out of this tragedy". With the killer dead, he said, there was nowhere for the anger to go. There had been no foreshadowing of his ghastly act. He was known only as a loving husband and father, a good neighbor. The Amish believe that harboring anger and resentment is corrosive. "It will eat you up," Esh Sr said. "Forgiveness," he said, "is so ingrained in our heritage that it's part of our character". Terri Roberts, the gunman's mother, has become a friend to many of the Nickel Mines families who were affected by what her son did. She is invited to gatherings and often visits Rosanna King, who was six when she was shot. She is confined to a wheelchair, unable to talk and fed through a tube, and has seizures. Esh Sr and others met with families bereaved at Virginia Tech and at Sandy Hook, where children and staff were killed in 2012. As he said, "Terri Roberts rode in a bus with us to Sandy Hook and the families and teachers there could not believe that we would even associate with her, let alone that she would come up there with us." This response didn't come from human instinct—it came from a foundation of faith built over generations. Their trust in

Christ shaped their response in the most unimaginable situation. It showed that when your life is built on Christ—the cornerstone—you can stand even when tragedy strikes. And not only did it impact their life, but their response showed the world what forgiveness can do, what a life built on Christ can look like. The wise builder acts on Jesus' teaching. Discipleship is not admiration of Jesus—it is alignment with His words.

So, as we heard last week in Isaiah 28:16, God provides the foundation, and today we hear from Jesus that we need to choose to build our lives on it. Building and living your life on Jesus' words and way makes you a wise person who is able to weather the storms of life because Jesus builds what other often overlook. I want to end with a quote from Rodney Reeves who said, “Jesus knew what he was talking about: to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, to live with the confidence that you are blessed by God because you follow Jesus, to enter the kingdom of heaven now, to pray for God's will on earth as it is in heaven, to look upon all creation with kingdom eyes, to love your neighbor as yourself, to love even your enemies. This is the only way to live—to enter the narrow gate leading down a difficult path that ends with great rewards for the wise. Only a fool would think otherwise. Yet it will take the rest of the story to see the difference.”