

A Firm Foundation

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 7, the New Testament. Matthew's the first book in the New Testament, so Matthew chapter 7. The text we're going to focus on is the one that's up there, which is verses 24 to 29, the wise and the foolish builders.

But I actually want to, for our reading this morning, I want to go further back. So I want us to start at verse 13 of chapter 7 and then read up to the end of that section there, verse 29. So Matthew chapter 7, and let's start the reading at verse 13.

Listen to these words. This comes from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. Verse 13 of Matthew 7. Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

[1 : 1 8] A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus by their fruit you will recognize them.

Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one 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 drive out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?

And then I will tell them plainly, I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practices 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 the 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 practices 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. When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.

[2 : 3 5] This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask God's help as we study together. Gracious God, won't you feed us this morning?

Won't you feed us with your eternal word? Remind us that in the pages of scripture we have access to our creator God, our designer, who knows us, who made us.

It's an incredible privilege. It's an incredible blessing, and we want to revel in that blessing and that privilege by taking and drinking deeply from the streams of your word.

So bless us this morning by your spirit. Deposit your word in our heart that we might know you and love you and know your son, Jesus Christ. We pray this for Christ's sake. Amen.

We're not back in our series in Acts yet, which we said we'd pick up from last year. There's a bit of disruption with some travel and movement around in that, so I thought it's best to, probably in about two, three weeks' time, we'll be back in Acts, and then we'll have a longer run in Acts, and the disruption will be over.

[3 : 40] So there's a couple of things I'm doing up until that point. And it's still pretty early in the year. It's still January at this point. And so what I want to do, since this is the beginning of the year, is talk about foundations.

What is your foundation going into this new year? Now, the passage that we just read, and particularly the focus section, so that 24 to 29, that comes at the very end of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount.

Many preachers that I know, if you listen to preachers, they try and leave their best, most impactful, tear-jerker sort of story for the very end of their sermon, because you forget everything else that they said halfway through.

And you remember that one story, like, oh, that was a great sermon, even if the rest was nonsense. And in some ways, that's what Jesus is doing here, except everything else up to leading to this point is not nonsense, but he's leaving his kind of most memorable story to the very end of his sermon.

And it's a very memorable part of the Sermon on the Mount. If you grew up in Sunday school, when you were a child, you were probably taught this story like a gabillion times. So if I say, How many of you would know the actions?

[5 : 03] A couple of people, a couple of hands here, you know the actions? So it's a memorable, vivid story. And Jesus uses it here to push his final point home, that you need to choose one of two ways, the broad way or the narrow way, the way of the kingdom or another way.

There's no third option here, there's only two ways. And up until this point in the sermon, he has been setting two paths before all of his listeners. That's why we read from further back. It starts in verse 13 there, where he contrasts the broad way with the narrow way, verse 15, the true prophet and the false prophet.

Verse 21, the true disciple versus the false disciple. And so you've got these sets of contrasts all the way through, the two ways, the way of the kingdom, the way of destruction.

And the entire sermon, actually, going all the way back to chapter 5, where it starts, is a call to, well, pick the narrow way. Pursue this way of the kingdom.

Pursue this way of life in the kingdom of God that Jesus is bringing. And so now he comes to his closing illustration that he caps it all off with. Now you read that story, and we just read it now. At face value, you don't need a PhD in kind of ancient, Semitic, first century parable studies to be able to look and go, well, I can see what's basically going on here.

[6 : 21] It's clear that the guy who builds a house on his rock is a smart guy. The guy who builds his house on sand is an idiot. It's clear that the rock is better than the sand. It's clear that Jesus thinks you should be the smart guy rather than the idiot, and you should build your house on the rock.

So that's like, well, that's sermon done. Easy. But I want us to drill down a little bit on the details this morning. So three headings, the foundation, the builder, and the storm.

The foundation is the builder and the storm. Here's where we're going. Foundation, first one. Look at verse 24. Jesus says, Those were the actions, by the way.

Rain came down, the streams rose. And the winds blew and beat against the 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 practices like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

So one of the first natural questions you've got to ask when looking at the story is, what is Jesus referring to when he contrasts these two foundations upon which the respective houses are built? Now, fortunately, he's pretty explicit.

[7 : 35] So he says, Everyone who hears these words of mine, these words of mine is emphatic in the original there. It's in verse 24. It's again in verse 26.

Clearly, the firm foundation, the rock, is the word of Christ. Now, throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is actually at pains to make the case that his word is authoritative.

And it seems like he succeeds, actually. It's a successful sermon, because if you look at the very end of the sermon, the kind of epilogue, verse 28, When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.

So, job done. They're like, oh, there's something special about Jesus' words. Earlier on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sort of constantly pits his own word against the words of the religious teachers of his day.

So there are many places where he starts a new point by saying, You have heard it said, but I tell you. And that is him basically saying, I know you have all these learned religious teachers telling you all sorts of things about how to obey God, but you need to know that what I say is the authoritative word.

[8 : 52] In fact, in Matthew 5, verse 17, he even goes so far as to boldly say that his words are the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures. That is, they are in continuity with the very words of God himself. They carry the same weight.

There's no difference. You can't read the Sermon on the Mount and come away without seeing Jesus as making, I think, and Roland actually brought this point out last week, making the same claim that his words are the very word of God.

Now that's a pretty huge claim, if you think about it. It's Jesus saying that his words are ultimate reality. Our culture is pretty twitchy about those sorts of claims.

Many people will believe there's some sort of God out there. In fact, even the vast majority of people in the kind of secular Western culture believe in some sort of deity. But they're very, very reluctant to give clarity and definition to that God.

And to whether or not he speaks. And speaks definitively. For fear of, if they give him clarification, if they give him, this is exactly who the God is and this is how he speaks through the Bible, well then they're going to be seen as being arrogant and exclusive.

[10 : 08] And so people are afraid to do that. They're happy to go like, I believe in some sort of God, but not give him definition. And certainly not that he speaks definitively in a certain way. But clearly Jesus is not worried about that.

He's not worried about being perceived as arrogant or exclusive. He's quite happy to say the word that he speaks is the truth. He's happy to stand up and say, guys, this is truth. Let's not beat around the bush. This is truth.

Now this is foundational to Christianity. The Christian claim is that God speaks. He communicates with us his creation. He's not silent. In fact, that's the title of a famous book by the Christian philosopher and thinker Christian, Francis Schaeffer, wrote a book called He is There and He is Not Silent.

See, people in our world are relatively happy to go with he's there, but they're not so happy with that second part, he's not silent. Christianity, though, boldly affirms the second part.

He's not silent. God speaks. God has something definitive to say about himself, about this world, and even about you. Now, I suppose you can debate back and forth whether or not God has spoken definitively in and through Christ and whether or not that's an arrogant claim, but I'm not really sure how that helps you in the long run, personally.

[11 : 30] Surely, surely, surely, the more profitable thing to do when you come across a claim like this is to investigate the speech. Investigate the claim that Jesus makes. Investigate it.

Make up your own mind. Listen to Jesus' words. Investigate them. Sitting in judgment over Christianity because it makes exclusive truth claims that God speaks, sitting in judgment over that might sound oh so very tolerant and accepting, but it's not particularly helpful to you in your personal quest for truth.

It's almost a kind of shoot yourself in the foot by limiting your different options of inquiry. So maybe you sit here in that position this morning. Maybe you sit here and your jury's kind of out on Jesus and his words.

I would want to say the silliest thing you can do is say, well, you know, exclusive truth claims, they make me uncomfortable, so I'm not going to investigate Christ and the gospel. You might not end up offending anybody by saying that, but you yourself will be nowhere closer to understanding whether or not Jesus actually holds the key to ultimate reality.

So I don't see how that helps you. Investigate Christ's words. The foundation, the rock, the rock that Jesus is referring to here is his word, the very word of God. And I think from what he actually says earlier on in the Sermon on the Mount, that passage I referred to earlier, chapter 5, verse 17, where he attaches his words to the Old Testament, I think you can extrapolate this to the whole Bible.

[13 : 01] You know, you get those Bibles where you have the direct words of Jesus printed in red. Maybe we've got one of those Bibles in front of you right now. My concern with those Bibles, there's nothing wrong with them, you're not going to hell if you've got one of those Bibles or anything like that, it's fine.

But my concern with those Bibles is that they give the impression that somehow Jesus' words are more inspired than, more kind of word of God than all the black letters in your Bible.

but I think Jesus himself would think that's ridiculous. As far as he's concerned and he makes this case several times in the Gospels, he considers the Old Testament to be the very word of God and he considers his own words to be part and parcel of that collective divine revelation.

Then he goes and he goes out and he commissions the original apostles to speak his word authoritatively and they end up writing or endorsing the rest of the New Testament that we basically have in our Bible.

So using Jesus as your starting point, it's pretty easy to see why Christians believe that the whole Bible, not just the red letters, is the very word of God. That's the foundation. That's the rock.

[14 : 09] Think about the two ways that Jesus is always contrasting here. So the word of God is what tells you the difference between the broad way and the narrow way. The word of God is what tells you the difference between false teaching and true teaching.

The word of God is what tells you the difference between true discipleship and false discipleship. You cannot safely navigate these two options and figure out which is the right option without the word of God as your foundation.

That's what's coming over and over and over again. That's why here at church, at Union Chapel, for example, we teach sequentially through books of the Bible rather than saying, well, what's the latest fad going on today?

Let's speak about that. Even when we do topical sermons where we're speaking about just one topic and it's not part of a series, we still teach on a segment of text to understand that particular topic.

We don't just go and get our ideas from any old place. That's why the fundamental question you should always ask when approaching any kind of major decision or crisis or struggle is, well, what does the Bible have to say about this?

[15 : 17] Now, obviously, the Bible doesn't speak exhaustively about every single thing that you have to do in this life. I remember in my old car when I had a flat tire once, I had to change a flat tire and I had to unhook, it was one of those cars that had the tire underneath and it was hooked underneath the spare tire but it had a weird clasp.

A lot of things in that car were pretty weird but this one was particularly weird, the clasp that was holding the tire there. Now, at that point, I'm struggling there on the sidewalk outside my house trying to get this thing off.

I don't go, take out my Bible app and go, well, let me go to the book of Opal and look for the verse that explains how to release the clasp on my spare tire.

I don't do that. I go onto YouTube and I look for that instead because the car manual didn't have the answer. Obviously, the Bible doesn't speak exhaustively about every single subject but it does provide the principles and the framework to take all of your life and to place it under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

And it does have everything you need in it to help you make the most important decision and that Jesus puts before you here. The broad way or the narrow way. The way of destruction or the way of life.

[16 : 33] So the very first implication of this story is that if you don't want to be a fool in life, you need to at least start with the right foundation.

You've got to start with the right foundation if you don't want to be a fool. But the story goes deeper than simply saying you need the right foundation so let's move to the next point, the builder. Have a look at the first verse again there, verse 24.

Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rocks. So Jesus is not saying you just need the right foundation.

He's actually saying you need to put my word into practice. That is, you actually need to go and build a house on the rock and not just stand at a distance and go, my, that looks like a fine rock.

I'm pretty sure a really good sturdy house would go on that rock. Not just admire it, but actually go and build the rock, build the house. There are lots of people I think who have a very, what we might call a high view of scripture that they believe it's God-inspired word and yet they really don't build the house of their lives upon it.

[17 : 39] And what I mean by that is they believe, they believe the Bible is God's word, they believe it's inspired by God, that it's truthful, that it can be trusted. But when it comes to crunch times in life, they don't use it to inform their thinking, their behavior, and even to some extent their feelings.

I see Christians all the time who've sort of partitioned their lives up. So they come to church, they sing the songs, they listen to the preaching, believe the Bible to be true, but they have all sorts of areas or components of their life that they don't let the Bible have any say over.

Parts of their lives that are sort of partitioned off from Sunday, if you like. So I'll give you a couple of practical examples of this. Here in the City Bowl, our church is in a pretty transient place.

The city center of Cape Town is a very transient place. Most people don't stay here long term in the city. They're often here for their first job out of university or they're here for the vibe or whatever it is that attracts people to the city center.

But often over time, as you mature, the arrival, so the vibe kind of loses its appeal, but you mature, you have kids or whatever, you're looking at advancing in your career, the cost of the city, just the busyness of the city, the compact way you have to live here because all the houses and apartments are already tight and small.

[19 : 05] And so people go, well, I'm going to move on. I'm going to move on to the suburbs or to some of the smaller towns in the Western Cape or maybe even up to Joburg because of career advancement or something like that. So the last 12 years of pastoring this church, I've seen a lot of people move on.

If everybody stayed from when we planted the original Hope City and even if maybe 50% of the people who've left and not for like, oh, we hate you, Pastor, we hate the theology or we're very angry with somebody in the church, just people who left for just ordinary reasons, if 50% of those people said, I think we'd probably be a church of about 400 people based on the people who've left in the last 12 years or so.

So I've seen a lot of people move on. A lot of different people move on. Now that's a pretty big life decision, okay, moving. A pretty, pretty big life decision. It's pretty important and yet for all the church-going people who I've seen move out of the city, I can count on one hand, in fact, I can count on half of one hand really, the number of people who've come to me before making their final decision and said, hey Stephen, I've been thinking about whether or not I should move or not from the city.

And I was wondering what you think about that biblically. How do I apply scripture, how do I apply the gospel to something like deciding when or if or where to move to? I can count those conversations on half a hand.

Now friends, I've got to be quite honest with you, I think that's quite shocking and betrays something about the lack of reliance we have upon scripture for big and important things in our life.

[20 : 48] Now I'm not saying, please don't hear me wrong with you, I'm not saying you have to come and get the pastor's blessing on every single big decision, that's not the point of the illustration. But the fact that so few have even just had that conversation with me suggests that there are a lot of people going to church, looking at the rock, marveling at how sturdy it is, singing songs about how sturdy it is, sometimes even reading little devotions at home about how sturdy it is, but when it comes time to build their house, they go, oh, I'm going to build it over here.

Another example, do you know how many people have come to me in the last 12 years and said, hey Stephen, I got a really nice bonus at the end of the last year, how should I think biblically about spending that money?

Do you know how many people have had that conversation with me? a big fat zero? Friends, is the Bible this fascinating piece of ancient literature that we like to study and get the occasional pick-me-up from, or is it the very foundation from which we actively live all of our lives?

We're all building houses, you have to go and build houses, you have to go and make all these important decisions all the time. You're making the decisions, so you are building houses all the time. The question is, what are you building your house on?

If you're not building your house on the rock, you're building your house on sand, and Jesus says you're a fool if you do that. In fact, the original word is the word moron. He says you're a moron if you're not building on the rock.

[22 : 36] Now I'll tell you another place where I see this played out. There is actually a time where people come and speak to me about the Bible, and I want to talk Bible, Bible, Bible with me. I often have conversations with people about supposedly controversial or debated passages and doctrines.

So people always want to know what I think about election or predestination or literal versus figurative creation accounts in the Old Testament or gender roles in the Bible or sexuality.

People always want to ask me, what do you think about that, pastor? What do you think about this? They want to know about those parts of the Bible, but very, very rarely does somebody come to me and say, hey, Stephen, help me understand the fruit of the Spirit better.

What would it mean for me to see those fruit develop more profoundly in my life? How do I get them in my life? Hey, Stephen, what does Peter mean when he says, be holy for God is holy?

What does that mean? How does that work out for me? Hey, Stephen, how do I get the kind of love that Paul speaks about in 1 Corinthians 13, that love that is patient and kind and doesn't envy and doesn't boast and isn't proud? Now, again, I'm not saying you have to run every single thing by me.

[23 : 39] Part of the reason we have silly groups is that you can run it by other people, but the fact that so few of these conversations are happening, and yet I have to, ad nauseam, explain what predestination is to people, that's really worrying.

It's a worrying sign. It suggests that the houses of character that we're building in our lives might be getting built on sand and not on rock. You're wise if you're able to not only see that Christ's word is truth, but you actively start building your entire life on it.

Last thing, the storm. Let's look at the storm. What struck me, there's a really, really, really, if you ever want to read the Sermon on the Mount by yourself, there's a great little book, and it's very accessible, written by D.A.

Carson, the New Testament scholar on the Sermon on the Mount, a little commentary. And reading that, he points out that once the houses are built, you actually can't see the foundation anymore, right?

You don't know which one is built on which. You can't see underneath. So Carson says this, he says, picture these two houses. There may not be much in their external appearance to enable the casual observer to distinguish between them.

[24 : 54] Both seem attractive and clean, freshly painted perhaps. One, however, has its foundation resting securely on bedrock. The other has its foundation nothing more substantial than sand.

Only the most severe storm will betray the difference. But granted the storm, the betrayal is inevitable. So this is a constant theme actually in the Sermon on the Mount, that it's hard to discern the difference between the outwardly sort of moral person and the gospel-driven person.

They kind of look the same on the surface level. They both sit in church, they both sing songs, and they sort of look the same. It's hard to tell the difference between the person who is simply engaging in religious performance and the person who is actually living out the kingdom.

The false prophet sometimes looks like the true prophet. The false disciple looks like the true disciple. They look the same, but they're living their lives on radically different foundations. And the only way you actually get to see the foundation sometimes is when the storm comes.

When the storm comes and starts to knock things flat. When the rain comes down, the flood comes up. When retrenchment comes, when marital difficulty comes, when illness comes, when stress, burnout comes, when financial difficulty comes, when the storm comes, the foundation, the part that you normally can't see, well, that gets exposed.

[26 : 20] Now you see it. And do you know where you almost always start to see it first? And I guarantee you, if you polled other pastors on this, they would all say exactly the same thing.

Where you almost always start to see it first is Sunday worship. Attendance at worship starts to get patchy. See, because what do you do in a storm? What do you do in the midst of a storm when the wind is coming at you?

You cling to the foundation, right? And the things that are stuck firmly to the foundation. You cling to the thing that's never going to move, that the wind can't take down.

And so, if Christ and his word has been your firm foundation, if that's what you've been actively building your life upon, then when the storm comes, you instinctively hold on to that.

You reach and you grab with all of your might and you hold on to it. So, rather than running away from something like worship, you run deeper into it. And so, when people stop running to worship in the midst of a storm, it's so often a telltale sign that they were holding on to something inferior as their foundation.

[27 : 34] If the storm rocks you to the point that you're not engaging with God through prayer and Bible reading and gathering with God's people for worship, you find yourself running away from those things, the more the storm waters rise up, the more the wind blows, then I want to say to you, I think it is high time that you start to check the foundations, what's actually underneath.

Get down to that basement and say, what's down there? What's at the heart of who you are as a person? What are you basing your life on? Yes, maybe you come to church sometimes.

Yes, you say you're a Christian and that you believe this stuff, but when you look down at those foundations, what are you really building a life on? In the very next chapter, the disciples who are now at this point sitting listening to the Sermon on the Mount on the side of the mountain, they're going to find themselves in a boat, in a literal storm.

Let me read to you about this literal storm. It's in chapter 8. It says, then Jesus got into the boat and his disciples followed him and suddenly a furious storm came up on the lake and so that the waves swept over the boat.

But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him saying, Lord, save us. We're going to drown. And he replied, you of little faith, why are you so afraid? And then he got up and he rebuked the winds and the waves and it was completely calm.

[28 : 58] The men were amazed and asked, what kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him. See what Jesus says to his disciples?

Why are you of so little faith, he says. It's actually, that little phrase is actually one word in the original language there. And it occurs four times in Matthew's gospel.

Every time Jesus uses it, he uses it within the context of God's provision, God's good provision, trusting in God's good provision. So he actually uses it earlier on in the Sermon on the Mount, chapter 6.

Why do you worry about your clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, you of little faith, is that word.

Every other time he uses this word, it's in connection with not trusting in God's providence. You see, what Jesus is saying to his disciples on the boat, and what he's saying to you and me this morning, is he's saying, why won't you trust me in the storm?

[30 : 10] Why won't you trust me in the storm? Why won't you trust me with the most important and dear things in your life? Why won't you trust me with those things? Why will you occasionally come to church and sing the songs but not include me in decisions about who you marry, where you live, how you spend your money?

Why are you of little faith? Jesus would say. Why don't you trust him to take you through the storm? And he has very, very good reason to ask that question of us.

He, of all people, can ask us to trust him in the storm and kind of be incredulous when we don't trust him in the storm because he is the one person who went through the storm of storms for us.

So when the floodwaters of his impending death began to rise up and he stood firm, he stood firm there, nailed to the cross for you and for me for our salvation. When the rain of God's wrath against all evil and sin was poured out on him, he stood firm, nailed to the cross for you and for me for our complete forgiveness.

Jesus stood firm in the worst of the storm, a storm unlike anything we will ever, ever, ever have to face. And so he rightly then asks us in the face of much, much smaller storms, why don't we stand firm on the rock of his word?

[31 : 37] Why won't we trust him? There's another song I remember from when I was a kid. It's a little bit more sophisticated than the wise man built his house upon the rock. I was fortunate to grow up in a church that did a lot of hymn singing.

I remember the older men in the church always singing the great hymns of the faith really loud and always made an impression upon me. We had a minister who used to, you're very grateful that I don't do this, but we had a minister who always used to lead from the front with his kind of operatic voice in those hymns.

But I really appreciate that experience. I am very grateful that I learned the words of so many of those classic Christian hymns because of the richness of the theology, the beauty of the poetry.

One hymn I remember is the hymn How Firm a Foundation. Now we actually have no idea who wrote the hymn. It appears in a hymnal in 1787 and the author is just listed as K, the letter K.

But here's how it goes. How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word. What more can he say than to you he hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled.

[32 : 52] Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed, for I am thy God and will still give thee aid. I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow. For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all sufficient shall be thy supply. The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to his foes. That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake.

Friends, storms are going to come. They're going to try and shake you. They're going to expose parts of your life that you don't want to expose, but you need to know that because Christ stood in that original storm on the cross, you will never be shaken if you cling to him by faith.

[34 : 08] You build your life on that foundation, you will never be shaken. We're at the beginning of the year. What is your foundation this morning?

Let's pray. through the afternoon. Thank you.