

BUILT TO LAST

Sermon, January 22, 2017

Texts: Matthew 4:23 - 5:2, 7:24-29, and 9:35

The background for today's Gospel is that Jesus is being followed by huge crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis area¹, Jerusalem, Judea and Syria. These are crowds of people seeking help, healing, and direction; these are crowds of needy people who don't have it all together. In Matthew 4:23 we read, *"And Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and every sickness among the people."* Then, five chapters later, in Matthew 9:35, we find almost verbatim the same summary: *"And Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness."* "Sandwiched" between these two summary descriptions of Jesus' Galilee ministry are five chapters divided into two major sections.

In chapters five, six and seven we have the Sermon on the Mount, dedicated to Jesus' teaching, and chapters eight and nine, dedicated largely to accounts of Jesus' miraculous power. Five chapters designed by Matthew to present us first with Jesus teachings, and then with Jesus power ... as if Matthew wants to communicate, *"We can't have one without the other."* We can't have the teaching Jesus of the Sermon of the Mount without the miracle-working Jesus who cleansed the leper, stilled the storm, took on the demonic, healed the blind, and even raised the dead. We can't separate the two. We can't do what some people try to do ... that is, they admire the ethical teacher of the Sermon on the Mount, but don't want to get seriously involved with this supernatural, probably-mythical miracle man. Nor can we do what others try to do ... some may be fascinated with the miracle-worker Jesus, but when it comes to actually getting seriously involved with the One who said, *"Don't swear, don't call your brother a fool, don't commit adultery, don't even lust, don't return evil for evil, love your enemy, don't sit in judgment on others, don't break your word, keep your promises,"* — well, that's another story. The miracle worker who heals and blesses and takes away my problems? Yes, we like him. But this radical intruder into my personal lifestyle? Not so interested.

Well, Matthew is apparently saying to his readers that who Jesus is, is inseparable from His teaching. We can't have one without the other. You want His blessings? Then follow His teaching!

Please note how this five chapter block opens. Matthew 5:1 reads, *"Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside, and sat down. His disciples came to him, and He began to teach them, saying"* It may seem like a minor point to make, but note: Just who is the audience here? It is the disciples. We are told that seeing the crowds, Jesus went up this hillside by the lake. There, with His disciples gathered around him, sitting in the front "pew" so to speak, He begins to teach the long and fascinating Sermon on the Mount ... directing His words to them, His disciples. So these are words for those who profess to follow Jesus. Jesus isn't trying to persuade the crowds; He's primarily teaching His disciples. Think of two sort of concentric circles (*one of the only things I remember from high school geometry, "concentric" means two or more circles having a common center, or axis*): here we have the "inner" circle of the disciples, and the "outer" circle of the crowds, with Jesus at the center.

Jesus sits down on the spot and delivers this extemporaneous sermon, full of over one hundred points (*not a three point sermon, but a hundred-plus point sermon!*), over one hundred practical things to live by, and He quotes no authority but Himself. The Sermon on the Mount is the largest straight block of Jesus' teaching that we have in the Bible ... in this sermon we have the Beatitudes, which we read last week. There is also Jesus' commentary on some of the Ten Commandments, each commentary with a twist that moves beyond letter-of-the-law legalism to deeper matters of the heart.. The Sermon also contains admonitions to pay special attention to the poor and needy, to pray with sincerity, to seek first the kingdom of God, and to do to others what you would have them do to you. Over a hundred things to live by! The Sermon takes up three chapters in the text, Matthew 5, 6 and 7. And then at the very end of chapter 7, Jesus ends with one final little short parable ... which we'll get to in a moment.

So, in 5:1-2 we are told Jesus taught His disciples, and at the end of the sermon in Matthew 7:28 we read, *"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority and not as their teachers of the Law."* So it is clear that the crowds were listening in on all this, even though they weren't the primary

¹ The Decapolis (Greek: deka, ten; polis, city) was a group of ten cities on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire in Palestine and Syria. The ten cities were not an official league or political unit, but they were grouped together because of their language, culture, location, and political status. The Decapolis cities were centers of Greek and Roman culture in a region that was otherwise Semitic (Nabatean, Aramean, and Jewish). With the exception of Damascus, the "Region of the Decapolis" was located in modern-day Jordan, one of them located west of the Jordan River in Palestine (modern day Israel). Each city had a certain degree of autonomy and self-rule.

target audience. It also seems clear that Jesus **wanted** the crowd to listen in, even though His sermon is **primarily** addressed to disciples. As a bit of an aside, that's the way our Sunday services are conceived. The elements of the worship service are prepared to encourage, inspire, teach, and train those who are really making every effort to be disciples, to be followers, of Jesus Christ. Not to knock the good and sincere desires of other worshipping communities, but we do not "dumb down" our liturgy for the "seekers" in our music, our readings, our words and so on. We prepare and plan worship for professing and committed disciples of Jesus.

But we are also well aware that in any gathering this size on any given Sunday there may be people who aren't really committed disciples ... people like the crowds in Matthew who are drawn to this Jesus, but really haven't made up their minds about Him. On any given Sunday we will have people who are drawn to Jesus, drawn to this church, but may not really feel like they belong here or who may not have made up their minds that they WANT to belong here. We also may have people on any given Sunday who were once very serious about following Jesus, but something happened; "life" happened ... and for whatever reasons they went away from Jesus and church for awhile ... but now, they are back. Again, primarily the service is designed to teach and inspire professing disciples and direct the disciples in worship of their Savior and Lord, but *all* are welcome to come and listen in ... the curious, the onlookers, the skeptical, the searchers, the doubters, the returners, anyone ... let them come and hear the words of Jesus the same way the crowds heard, gathered in around the disciples. This was often Jesus' way in the Gospels, He wanted to be heard and He wanted to be overheard! And more often than not, those in the outer circle(s) of the crowd liked what they heard and saw, or they liked what they saw in what happened in the lives of these disciples as a result of Jesus words, and so they eventually worked their way in to the inner circle of those who became sincerely and seriously committed to following and worshipping Jesus.

As mentioned, this sermon goes on for three chapters, some of which we'll look at in more detail in the next few weeks. Then He wraps it all up with one final little story. This story is simple enough. We have two builders; the subheading in our Bibles has "The Wise and Foolish Builders." First, we have the wise builder. He is most likely a sensible, thoughtful, prudent man who takes the time and trouble and energy to dig down deep until he finds rock, until he finds a solid place to lay and anchor the foundation of this house he's about to build, and then he begins to build the structure. It undoubtedly took some extra time and work to find that firm footing ... but it was well worth the extra work. When rain came beating down on the roof, and the winds came blasting at the sides, and when floodwaters rose up ... you get this picture of a storm bringing pressure and potential disaster from ALL sides, all at once ... well, after all that beating, the house remained standing. It stood.

The second builder was a foolish man; I love the word used here in the Greek, it is "moe-roe." It's the word from which we get our English word "moron." It seems Mr. Moron just started in right away with the building, with full energy he knocked out the house building project in a speedy manner. He did it *his* way; he didn't take time and energy and expense to dig around looking for the bedrock, but I'm sure the house looked great when he was done. In fact, it's probable that his house looked just like the house the other man built; the one difference being the largely-unseen foundation. But, he had a house, and maybe even a really nice house! However, what happened to the Mr. Moron's house? When rain came beating down, and the winds came blasting, and when floodwaters rose up ... the sand footing of the house was just too weak to resist. The house fell with a great crash, with an utter collapse.

It's important to note that both builders described are people who have heard Jesus' words. Again, these words are directed to those who profess to be disciples. And notice that the exact same things happen to each of the two houses. Difficult things happen, tragedy happens, emergencies come up in everyone's lives ... the rain hits every roof, the streams wash up against every foundation, the wind slaps against the walls of every house. The question is, when the storm is over and has done its worst, will the house still stand? The obvious rhetorical question for the disciples of Jesus is this: Have you taken time to build your life, your home, on the solid and sure and tested foundation of God's Word? Both hear. Both build. Both have the storms hit. The two are exactly the same except for one thing: the foundation. One hears Jesus' words and puts them into practice. And one hears Jesus' words and does NOT put them into practice. When the inevitable storms of life come ... which house endures? Obedience to Jesus' words is not so much a protection from troubles as it is a protection IN them.

Jesus was brought up in the home of a carpenter; He knows something about proper construction and what it takes to build a solid house. Jesus was not just the son of a carpenter; He was (and is) the son of the Heavenly Father, the One Who knows how things are designed to fit together. Jesus knows what it takes to build a good and solid life; His words are sound; they are true, tested, trustworthy. We would do well to hear AND DO His words.

And we can build our lives upon them.