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BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison
President, Denison Forum on Truth and Culture,
and Theologian-in-Residence, Baptist General Convention of Texas

Studies in The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship

Lesson Eight
Make the Right Choice

Focal Text
Matthew 7:1-27

Background
Matthew 7:1-29

Main Idea
Truly living as Jesus’ disciple demands deliberately choosing to follow Jesus’ teachings in relating to other people and to God.

Question to Explore
What difference would following Jesus’ teachings make in how you relate to other people and to God?

Quick Read
When we live by the word of God, we find and share true life.

Commentary
Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century. Safe in America, he returned to his native Germany to oppose Hitler and paid for his commitment and courage with his life. Bonhoeffer wrote one of the great classics of Christian literature, a study of Jesus’ teachings called The Cost of Discipleship. He states: “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.”

What did he mean? “Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. . . . An intellectual assent . . . is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins.” Thus, as long as we believe that the Bible is true and that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior and Lord, that’s enough. No life-transforming personal relationship is needed.
As a result,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

On the other hand,

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.¹

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is the most famous discourse in history, and the most challenging. It calls us to give our lives to God’s word and will so that we might find them. We can keep its instructions only by the power of the Holy Spirit. When we do, we prove to the world that we are true disciples of our Lord. And when they see the authenticity of our lives, they will want what we have.

This week we will once again survey more material than can be explored by a single Bible study. As you prepare, please focus on those sections that are most appropriate for your class this week.

How to relate to others (7:1-6)
Our text begins: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matthew 7:1). “Judge” translates krino, meaning to discriminate or separate, to subject someone to harsh, sharp, unjust criticism in a habitual way. Jesus’ words are a present tense imperative: never judge. Stop judging. No exceptions, conditions, or loopholes. Don’t do it.

Speak to others, not about them
This prohibition applies to all unjust criticism. But typically we criticize people in their absence more than in their presence; we slander and gossip. We need to know that we will be treated by others as we are treating them now: “In the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matt. 7:2). If someone will gossip about you to me, they will gossip about me to you.

God is paying attention to such slander and gossip: “Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him will I put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure” (Psalm 101:5). Jesus warned us: “There is nothing concealed that will not be
disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs” (Luke 12:2-3).

So refuse to speak about those who are not present. Scripture is adamant on this point:

- “If your brother sins against you, go and show him is fault, just between the two of you” (Matt. 18:15).
- “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things” (Romans 2:1).
- “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:12-13).
- “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” (James 1:19-20).
- “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (James 1:26).

Saint Augustine placed a sign on his dining table written in Latin and large enough for all to see:

Whoever thinks that he is able
To nibble at the life of absent friends
Must know that he is unworthy of this table.  

Confess your sins first
Jesus continues: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3). The “speck” (karphos) was a splinter from a piece of dry wood or chaff. It would not damage the eye or limit eyesight, but would be irritating. The “plank” (dokos) was a log upon which planks in a house rested in a pier-and-beam kind of construction, the largest and strongest “plank” they knew.

When we see the speck in someone else’s life and ignore the plank in our own, we are hypocrites—Greek actors who wore two masks and played two roles. We act spiritual, when we are carnal. We appear to be helping, when we are hurting and hating. We transfer our sins and problems to others, looking for their faults so we can avoid our own.

To stop slandering and gossiping about others, begin by examining yourself. A wise Bible teacher once taught a truth I’ve not forgotten: there is no sin I cannot commit. Your sins may not be mine, but mine may not be yours. And I cannot see or judge your heart.
There is always something I don’t know, or have wrong. And we tend to see in others those wrongs we commit ourselves. Otherwise we wouldn’t see them. Gossips reveal their own sins in the slanders they repeat.

Remember the words of the aged Apostle John: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives” (1 John 1:8-10).

*Practice spiritual discernment*

Jesus taught us to refuse gossip and slander by examining our own sins before we give attention to those of others. But he did want us to see sin for what it is, and to refuse its contaminating influence in our lives: “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces” (Matt. 7:6).

In Jesus’ culture, “dogs” *(kyon)* referred to ethnic impurity (Gentiles), “pigs” *(choiros)* to ethical impurity (eating meat forbidden by *Torah*). Giving dogs what is “sacred” refers to meat consecrated for worship and sacrifice, symbolically to giving Gentiles that which is sacred to Jews. Pearls *(margaritas)* looked like peas or acorns and would deceive the hogs until they discovered the deception.

Wild dogs and pigs were nothing like the domesticated animals with which we are familiar. If you were close enough to them to toss them meat and pearls, and angered or threatened them, they would likely attack you. Think of bears in Yellowstone or coyotes on the open plain.

We are called not to slander or gossip, but to practice spiritual discernment. How? We are to test others spiritually: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1); “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22); “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (John 7:24).

And we are to refuse the ungodly:

- “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people” (1 Corinthians 5:9).
- “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (2 Corinthians 11:14-15).
“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving the Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people” (Rom. 16:17-18).

“They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:4-5).

But refuse the ungodly in love, with a view toward prayerful reconciliation in grace.

How to relate to God (7:7-12)
From the horizontal, Jesus turned to the vertical.

How to pray
This section begins: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7). “Ask” translates aiteo, referring to seeking by an inferior from a superior, as a beggar requesting help from a donor. “Seek” translates zeteo, meaning to strive to find, to look for earnestly. “Knock” translates krouo, meaning to rap on a door in seeking entrance.

Note the ascent. A child asks for his mother’s help. But he cannot find her, and so he seeks her. He still cannot find her, but there is a closed door. And so he knocks at the door, hoping to find the one he seeks so he can ask for the need she can answer. So with us. We ask, but it seems God does not hear. We seek, but it seems God is not to be found. We knock, but it seems the door is closed. But it is not. Your Father will always open to you.

But you must pray. How? First, with urgency. Jesus’ words are imperatives, commands. Clearly praying means something to God. And it must mean something to us. The renowned British Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon said, speaking of prayer, “Those who do not plead with fervency plead not at all.” Maltbie Babcock, nineteenth century pastor, observed, “Our prayers must mean something to us if they are to mean anything to God.” And Spurgeon added, “Do not reckon you have prayed unless you have pleaded, for pleading is the very marrow of prayer.”

Pray with urgency, and pray continually. Jesus’ words are in the present tense: pray and keep on praying. Jesus prayed before light, after dark, all night long, continually. His word commands the same of us: “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

George Mueller, the great minister and man of faith, prayed patiently for five personal friends who did not know the Lord. After five years, one came to Christ. In ten more
years, two more were saved. After twenty-five years, the fourth friend came to Christ. Mueller kept praying for the last friend for fifty-two years, and then Mueller died. The fifth friend came to know Jesus a few months afterward. Keep praying.

Why to pray
Now we come to the hard question: why? Why pray with continual urgency, especially when it seems God is silent? Because your Father always hears you. Jesus promises: “Everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:8). He lists no exceptions. God has an open door policy with the universe. Billions of people pray in thousands of languages, all at the same time, and God hears each one.

God always hears you—Jesus’ parable proves it. Stones along the Sea of Galilee were small limestone balls, in appearance much like the bread of the day. Fish-like snakes grew in the Sea; they were without scales and thus forbidden to the Jews as food (Leviticus 11:12). This is the background for Jesus’ illustration:

Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matt. 7:9-11).

If you were a father in those days and your hungry child asked for bread, would you trick him with a stone? If he asked for a fish, would you give him a snake? Of course not. And compared to God, we are “evil.” Our perfect Father who is love always hears us. This is the promise of God.

When we pray with continual urgency, God always gives us what we ask or whatever is best. But what do we do when it seems he has not?

The Greeks told a story about Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, who fell in love with Tithonus, a mortal youth. Zeus offered her any gift she might choose for her mortal lover. She naturally chose that Tithonus might live forever; but she had forgotten to ask that he might remain forever young. And so Tithonus grew older and older and older, and could never die, and the gift became a curse.

Our God is no Zeus. He loves us so much he watched his Son die in our place, on our cross, for our sins. Do you know anyone who loves you enough to send their child to die for you? One did.

But he cannot give us everything we ask. A farmer prays for rain; a baseball fan prays for sunshine that same day, for that same county. And God loves us too much to give us all that we ask for. When one of our boys was very small, he watched me use a razor blade
to scrape paint from a window and wanted to play with this new, shiny toy. He was incensed that I refused.

When God seems silent, perhaps he’s still preparing you for his answer; you need more time in prayer to be able to hear him and obey. Perhaps he’s still preparing your circumstances. You’re praying for a job, for instance; God must move the person in your job to their next place so you can take theirs. He’s not done with what he must do to answer you.

Perhaps you’re not obedient to what God is saying; maybe sin clouds your eyes and ears, and you need more time in prayer to be right with him. Often he has a better answer than the one for which we are asking. He has already answered us, but we must keep praying until we see that he has.

Why are these truths relevant to your faith today?

**How to relate to God’s will (7:13-23)**

From trusting God in prayer, we turn to trusting God’s providence. Our text continues: “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” (Matt. 7:13-14).

*Choose the best map*

“Narrow” translates *stenos*, meaning *to be compressed or narrowed, as a tight place between rocks or walls*. The word pictures a gate leading to a narrow alley between buildings. This is a gate you can enter only by yourself. No baggage, no companions. Just you.

Other gates are “wide” (*platys*, meaning *broad*). Jesus’ hearers would have pictured the gate leading into the city. It was so wide an army could march through it, and ranchers and shepherds could bring their animals to market. It was easy to see, to choose, to enter, with as much baggage and as many companions as you like.

Next, our Lord told us about the two roads in life, connected to these gates. One is “narrow.” This time, “narrow” translates *thlibo*, a different word from the one translated “narrow” in verse 13. It means *to be pressed down, describing the weight used to crush grain into flour*. This is the road that leads to oppression and suffering, the way of unpopular persecution. The other is “broad,” the Main Street to which the city gates opened, and the wide highway that led to it. Such a highway is level, easy to walk, with as many people and as much luggage as you like. It is the way that is popular.
Now Jesus told us about the two crowds we will find in life. The narrow gate and road have on them “only a few” (Matt. 7:14). The wide gate and broad road have large crowds, for “many enter through it” (7:13). And these gates and roads lead their crowds to the two destinations of life. One is “life” (zoe, meaning to be alive). This is the first use of this word in the Sermon on the Mount. It means life now and eternally, the “abundant life” Jesus came to give us (John 10:10). The other destination is “destruction” (apoleia). The word means absolute ruin, total despair, death now and eternally.

According to the Lord Jesus, this is the way life is. There are only two gates, only two roads, only two crowds, only two destinations. We can choose between life and destruction. There is no third choice.

Of course, Jesus’ words are not popular today. Intolerance is the great evil in our society. Live and let live. There’s no such thing as absolute truth (which is an absolute truth claim in itself). Just do what’s right for you. All roads lead up the same mountain. Whatever God is to you is fine, as long as you’re sincere.

But may I ask you: Upon what basis are you sure that you are right and God and the Bible are wrong? What evidence? Do you want to stake your eternal destination on what you hope is true, or have heard somewhere, or seems popular? Would you do that with surgery for your temporal body? investments for your temporal money? Don’t we want the best experts giving us the best advice, backed by the best evidence and facts?

Here the God of the universe, the One who created all that exists, the only One who knows the future, tells us how life and eternity really are. Trust his direction, for only he knows the way to his home.

Look past looks
Our study continues: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Our Lord begins with an imperative: “Watch out.” That is, beware—be on your guard, pay attention. The command is in the present tense: Keep watching out for this. . . . It is an imperative, a command, with no options. This must be a real problem, or the Lord would not warn us of its existence.

Watch out for “false prophets.” “Prophet” (prophetes) signifies one who speaks forth under divine influence, as the ambassador of God to people. A prophet is God’s spokesperson. “False” translates pseudo, referring to one who appears to be genuine but is not.

Those who pretended to speak the word of the Lord but did not were a problem all through the Bible. Moses warned his people about them (Deuteronomy 13:5), as did Jeremiah (Jeremiah 23:31). Jesus warned his followers repeatedly that “false prophets
will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). Paul, Barnabas, John, and Peter all met false prophets and condemned their deception (Acts 13:6; 2 Corinthians 11:13; Galatians 1:7; Acts 20:29-32; 1 John 4:1-3; 2 Peter 2:1-3; Revelation 2:20-23). Such false teachers “come to you”—they take the initiative to attack the people of God.

Their appearances are deceiving in the extreme. They wear “sheep’s clothing”—shepherds wore sheepskins, with the fleece against their skin. But “inwardly they are ferocious wolves,” in places we cannot see with our eyes. Wolves are the deadliest enemies of sheep. Four times the Bible condemns false spokesmen for God as “wolves” (Ezekiel 22:27; Zephaniah 3:3; Acts 20:29; John 10:12).

So how are we to tell who they are, if appearances cannot be trusted? “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt. 7:16). A wolf can disguise himself, but a tree cannot. It must be what it is by nature. An apple tree must grow like one, be the size of one, have the trunk and bark and leaves and roots of one, and produce apples. It cannot help it. The way to tell what someone is by nature is to examine what they do, the results of their way of life.

We bear good fruit through our relationship with Jesus: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Then our character exhibits the “fruit of the Spirit”: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Our lives lead others to our Lord. We reproduce spiritually by helping people follow Jesus, as a tree reproduces physically through the fruit it bears. And we glorify God as a result: “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:8).

Such living evidence is proof of who we really are, in our souls: “Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit” (Matt. 7:16-18). Thorns don’t produce grapes, or thistles figs. A healthy tree must make healthy fruit; a sick or diseased tree cannot. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

So look past looks. Success is not how we appear, but who we really are. Look to our communion with God, connected to him as a branch to its vine. Look to our character as we demonstrate the Spirit at work in our lives. Look to our ministry and witness, as we produce disciples who follow us to Christ. This is success with God. This is what matters to him, and should to us.
Bear good fruit

Why is this definition of success so urgent? Because “every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 7:19). What is this “fire”? Let’s review briefly the word of God on the subject.

A judgment day is coming for every person who has ever lived and ever will: “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Who will judge us? “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). When will this final exam occur? “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him” (Matt. 25:31-32), and he will judge them.

What will happen? Revelation 20:11-15 is the setting. Here, first our relationship with Christ will be judged from the “book of life” (Revelation 20:12a). Moses said to God: “Please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.” The Lord replied, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book” (Exodus 32:32-33).

God has your name in his book, and must “blot it out” if you choose to reject his free salvation in Christ. When you die without Christ, God is forced to remove your name from his book of life, and you’ll be “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14). Scripture is very clear: “Nothing impure will ever enter [heaven], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27).

But if you have accepted Christ as Savior and Lord, your name will be there forever. Jesus said to his disciples, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). Paul addressed the Philippian Christians as “my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life” (Philippians 4:3).

Then the other book is opened, the book of works, and we are judged according to what we have done (Rev. 20:12b). Here, all unconfessed sin is judged by God. Secret sins will be judged: “God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14). Jesus confirms it: “There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs” (Luke 12:2-3).

Our words will be judged: “I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken” (Matt. 12:36-37). After listing all sorts of unconfessed sin, Peter declared that those who do such things “will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:5).
What will happen to them? “His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. . . . If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames” (1 Cor. 3:13, 15). Ungodly, unconfessed sins, thoughts, or words will be revealed at the judgment and burned away. Because heaven is perfect, these things cannot enter in; they must be burned off, destroyed. Sin is forgiven, but reward is lost.

That’s the bad news. Here’s the good news: the “good fruit,” all work done for the glory of God, will be recognized by heaven and rewarded by God. When we pay a price to follow Jesus, we receive the “crown of life”: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). Jesus said, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

When we share our faith, we receive the soul-winner’s crown: “What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20).

When we stay faithful to God for a lifetime, we receive the “crown of righteousness”: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

When we lead others faithfully we receive the “crown of glory”: “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Peter 5:2-4).

Enduring temptation; winning souls; staying faithful to God’s purpose; serving God’s people in love—these lead to rewards that will last forever. They can be yours. But you must choose them now.

Don’t trust in religion
Jesus continues: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 7:21). These are the right words; “Jesus is Lord” is the first and central affirmation of the Christian faith. We find it written in Greek on catacomb walls in ancient Rome. Many will say the right words, calling Jesus their “Lord.” They will have the right urgency, repeating their affirmation of faith.
And they will have the right works: They will “prophesy” or preach “in your name,” representing Jesus, claiming to speak his words and carry his message. They will “drive out demons and perform many miracles” (7:22). They will demonstrate religious works of the highest magnitude and worth.

We can say the right words and do the right works, and still hear the most terrible statement in all of eternity: “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” (7:23). “Knew” (*ginosko*) means personal, intimate knowledge, a personal relationship, not just a performed religion. As we will see shortly, this is the only basis for admittance to heaven, for assurance of eternal life. God must *know* us. It’s not enough that we *know about* God.

Jesus makes clear that performance is not the basis for assurance. Saying the right words and doing the right works are often considered to be the essence of religion. And yet they are not enough to know that you will be in heaven, to be sure of your faith and eternity.

No seminary degree can give assurance of salvation. No words preached or works performed are enough. Don’t trust in religion—it will fail your soul.

*Trust in relationship*
How can you be absolutely assured that you will “enter the kingdom of heaven”? There is only in one way: “only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (7:21). So it is imperative that we ask, *What is this will?*

Jesus told us: “My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40); “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:29). John added: “This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us” (1 John 3:23).

Then our words and works will reflect our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We will bear the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22) as a natural result of branches connected with the vine. We will walk on the road to abundant life, and our words and actions will witness to that life. We will serve Jesus with sacrificial commitment, repentant hearts, and transformed souls. And one day, instead of hearing “I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23), we will hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (25:21), the most blessed words in all of eternity.

*How to relate to God’s word (7:24-29)*
We are fallen people, living in a fallen world. Jesus warned us: “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Some of our trials are our fault; some are not. But problems are part of life. The question is not whether rain will come, floods will rise, winds will rage. The question is whether we will still be standing after they do.
There's only one way to withstand the inevitable storms of life. We'd best know what it is, for the rain is going to fall. Maybe today.

**Trust Scripture**

Our final section begins: “Everyone who hears these words of mine” (Matt. 7:24a). No exceptions, no qualifications. Every person among us can qualify. Each can hear the words of God. But then we must “put them into practice” (7:24). Many do not.

The Lord warned the prophet Ezekiel:

> My people come to you . . . and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice (Ezekiel 33:31-32).

It’s one thing to hear the word on Sunday, but another to obey it on Monday.

James adds: “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like” (James 1:23-24).

Every time you and I look into the mirror which is the word of God, something about our lives should change. Conviction of sin, direction of life, leadership from the Spirit—there should always be life-transformation for hearing from the Lord of the universe. When did the word of God last change your life?

When we seek God’s word for our problems and decisions, and do what it says, we are “like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt. 7:24b). “The rock” (petra) refers to a strata, not just a specific stone. In the limestone country of Galilee, when a builder digs down through the topsoil and sand, he will always find such a level of solid stone. It was common to dig down to this level, and build the house’s foundation on it.

Now “the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house” (7:25a). Rain bombarded the roof, streams flooded the flooring, winds pounded the walls. Every part of the house was assaulted. But “it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (7:25b). Proverbs 10:25 says, “When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.” This is because our foundation is solid.
Refuse every other foundation

We have another option: “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matt. 7:26). The “foolish” (moronic) man hears exactly the same words. He has access to the same revelation of God’s holy truth. He knows the same biblical revelation. But he does not put these words into practice. He does not stop to ask God’s word for guidance before his decisions. He chooses behavior that contradicts God’s word and will. He pays deference to the word on Sunday, but ignores it on Monday.

He “built his house on sand.” The “sand” (ammos) here is not a beach or sand pit as we might imagine it, but loose topsoil and rocks lying above the underlying strata of solid rock. The most common place to find such soil was in a dry river bed.

During the dry season, the region went for months without a drop of water. So a man builds his house and moves into it, and all is well. Until the first storm. Then the same rains that bombarded the wise man’s roof fall on his; the same streams that flooded the wise man’s flooring rise against his; the same winds that pounded the wise man’s walls assault his. But the fool’s house has no foundation. No underlying rock. No place to stand.

And so the house “fell with a great crash” (7:27). It was a mega crash, according to the Greek. This is the crash that is coming to every life not built on obedience to the word of God.

How do people build on sand today? If your salvation is resting on intellectual acceptance of the truths of Christianity, you’re building on sand. Only when Jesus is your Lord, your Master, your King and Boss and God, are you standing on the rock. When the storms come, we’ll all know which foundation is yours.

Lost people build their salvation on the sand. And some saved people build their lives next door to them, on the same sand of self-sufficiency. We who follow Christ are tempted to compartmentalize our lives, to build one room on Christ and one on the world, our friends, our resources, ourselves. Or to stand on the rock part of the time and the sand the rest of the time.

Is there a room in your house that is disobedient to the revealed word of God? When last did you consult that word before your decisions, your actions, the day before you? When last did the word of God change your behavior?

Jesus was a master carpenter. He knew that appearances are deceiving. The roof, walls, and flooring can look excellent in workmanship. It takes a rainstorm to reveal the leaks, the cracks, the faults.
What do the storms of life tell you about your soul? Do hard times frustrate you? discourage or depress you? Do they cause you to turn from God in anger? Or do they draw you closer to your Lord, make you more dependent on him, reveal more of his love and truth through your life to others?

To discover the quality of a grape, crush it. To find out what’s inside a bottle, shake it. To learn the nature of a tea bag, drop it in hot water.

**Live By God’s word**

When Jesus finished the most famous discourse in history, Matthew says that “the crowds were amazed at his teaching” (Matt. 7:28). “Amazed” translates *ekplesso*, a word which means to *be beside yourself with astonishment, to be spell-bound.*

Why? Because “he taught as one who had authority.” “Authority” (*exousia*) means literally *out of your own being.* It is power that you possess, that no one need confer on you. I have authority to call a staff meeting, but not a special session of the Texas Legislature. You have authority to do some things, but not others.

Jesus had “authority” to speak these words, and “not as their teachers of the law” (7:29). The prophets typically began, *Thus says the Lord.* Jesus never did, because he was and is the Lord.

The priests and professors quoted the law, the prophets, and writings—what we know as the Old Testament. They collected verse-by-verse commentaries (*Midrash*), topical commentaries (*Mishna*), commentary on legal matters in Scripture (*Halakah*) and devotional applications (*Haggadah*). Then they made commentary on the earlier commentary (*Gemara*), and collected it all into their *Talmud*. A rabbi would quote a rabbi, who quoted a rabbi. If in this lesson I were to quote Barclay quoting Bruce citing the Greek New Testament, I would teach as their “teachers of the law,” citing various references.

Not so with Jesus. Twelve times in this Sermon he says, “I say unto you.” No rabbi in Jewish history had ever done this. His words were the word of God.

They will be so forever: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8); “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matt. 24:35). They lead us to salvation: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

They keep us from sin: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11); “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word” (Ps. 119:9). They instruct and guide our lives: “All Scripture is God-breathed
and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

So choose now to live by the word of God. What decision is facing you today? Decide that you will consult Scripture before making the decision. Live by the light of God’s word. What actions or attitudes in your life are unbiblical? Where is there bitterness toward another person, coveting toward a possession, lust of eye or mind, pride of heart? Decide that you will confess it and live by the light of God’s word.

You may face a future that is dark. Trust the only light you own.

**Conclusion**
Pastor and author Dr. Earl Palmer wrote these words about the need for a solid foundation in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount:

I live in earthquake country. And the church I serve in Berkeley, California, is next to the campus of the University of California which sits astride the Hayward fault, itself connected to the gigantic San Andreas Fault that stretches from Mexico to Alaska and directly under the city of San Francisco.

Earthquake specialists have pointed out several important facts about home construction in earthquake terrain: A wood structure is ideally suited for the stresses of horizontal land movement, which is the terror of an earthquake, provided that the wood structure is bolted to its foundation. . . . The nonbolted home moves a few inches away from its foundation, [causing] the collapse of the structure. . . . A safe house is that house which relates as much of the house as possible to its foundation. It not only rests upon a rock; it is built into the rock.

Dr. Palmer adds that the strategy behind the Golden Gate Bridge is similar: its two great towers are deeply imbedded into the rock foundation beneath the sea. As he says, “the bridge is totally preoccupied with its foundation. That is its secret!”

Is it yours?
Matthew 7:1-27. Make the Right Choice

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