

Lesson 3 | December 17, 2023

Life on a Firm Foundation

Study Text: Matthew 7:1–29

Central Truth: Hearing, believing, and obeying Christ is the solid foundation for living.

Key Verse: Matthew 7:21

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven (KJV).
“Not everyone who calls out to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter” (NLT).

Learning Objectives:

- Students will reject a judgmental attitude and embrace restoration of those who experience moral failure.
- Students will choose to enter the kingdom of God through the narrow gate.
- Students will evaluate the words spoken by prophets and teachers, comparing them to the truths found in Scripture.

Introducing the Study

Say: The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most famous speeches in history. But it carries far more weight than an address from any motivational speaker ever could. Jesus Christ, the Son of God himself, shared His divine wisdom with humankind. His revolutionary teachings recorded in Matthew 5–7 showed His followers how to align their everyday lives with the kingdom of God. Today’s lesson focuses on chapter 7, including His admonition to build our lives on the foundation of everything He taught.

Opening Activity—Foundations

Ask: What materials should be used to create a firm foundation for a new building? What shortcuts might builders be tempted to use if they were not required to meet certain standards?

Say: As important as it is to have a firm foundation for your home, the foundation you choose to build your life on matters far more. That choice has eternal consequences. (Share your highlights from the following text.) √ ***(Play Mark Grantham’s testimony about overcoming a life-altering injury by God’s grace. The video is available at RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult.)***

Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are more than platitudes leading to personal fulfillment. In fact, the blessed life we are promised as citizens of the kingdom of heaven comes at tremendous personal cost. Jesus clearly laid out the elements of Kingdom citizenship, addressing the path to blessings, the proper motivation for keeping the Law, the steps to living without worry, and the requirement to remain steadfast and

faithful. In today's lesson, we will be challenged to renew our commitment to Kingdom living.

Part 1—Do Not Be Hypercritical Reserve Judgment

Matthew 7:1–5,12

Say: A legalist is someone who believes they can achieve a right standing with God by keeping a set of rules. As the ultimate legalists, the Pharisees established a standard of behavior even they could not meet. They were blind to their own faults, but they were quick to point out the faults of others. Jesus, on the other hand, instructed His followers to judge others the way they wanted to be judged. He alone is the ultimate Judge. Our job is to love people even when they don't live up to our standards. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Matthew 7:1—"Judge not, that ye be not judged" (KJV)—has been used in many contexts to admonish anyone who offers correction. However, this is not Jesus' intention. The word *judge* means "to form an opinion about after careful weighing of evidence; to form an estimate or evaluation of; to determine or pronounce after inquiry and deliberation."¹ This kind of assessment is sometimes good and necessary, but practicing prejudice, prejudice, unfair criticism, or unjust discrimination is ungodly. It is human nature to pridefully attempt to make ourselves look better by tearing others down. This is the heart condition Jesus was addressing.

God will judge us according to the "standard [we] use in judging" others (verse 2, NLT). Jesus contrasted having a prideful, condemning attitude with having a forgiving, merciful attitude. Some have taken Jesus' teaching in these verses to mean we should be tolerant of sin or immorality, but that is not the case. Instead, we must guard against having a scornful attitude, determining instead to be filled with love and forgiveness. We should pray for one another and humbly recognize God is the only Judge—and He "shows no favoritism" (Acts 10:34, NLT).

The Pharisees claimed to know every aspect of the Law, but they did not understand its essence. They refused to recognize their own sin. Jesus pointed out their hypocrisy by using an exaggerated example in which one person tries to remove a speck from another person's eye without even noticing the log in his own eye (Matthew 7:3). Our spiritual condition often causes us to overlook our own shortcomings while noticing the issues someone else is dealing with. This puts us in the same category as the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

Jesus shows us a better way: "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets" (verse 12, NLT).

1. Merriam-Webster, "Judge," accessed May 6, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/judge>.

Instead of judging others harshly and reserving grace for ourselves, Christians must offer the same grace to others that we want to receive ourselves.

Only God has the authority to pronounce judgment. As people who have experienced His abundant mercy, our job is to show that mercy to others. To echo Jesus' earlier teaching, "God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy . . . If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins" (5:7; 6:14–15, NLT).

Resource Packet Item 1: Judgment and Mercy

Distribute the worksheet. Ask someone to read each of the passages aloud. Then discuss the questions as a group.

Discuss

- ? What might motivate a Christian to be judgmental?
- ? What is the difference between judging someone and holding them accountable?

Don't Waste Good

Matthew 7:6

Say: In the television series *NCIS*, Agent Gibbs is known for his rules. Rule 5 is, "You don't waste good."² Jesus taught that His followers should not "waste what is holy on people who are unholy" (Matthew 7:6, NLT). There is no value in attempting to convince people to believe in God if they are unwilling to hear the truth. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Matthew 7:1–5 teaches us to show humility in our relationships because of our own sinful condition. But in verse 6, Jesus emphasizes the need for discernment when deciding whether to share Kingdom truth with someone. Jesus described those who reject the gospel using the Greek words for "dogs" (KJV) and "pigs" (NLT). Jews often used these terms to refer to Gentiles who were not part of God's covenant people.

In Jewish culture, dogs were not household pets, but wild animals that roamed in packs and attacked animals or even people. Calling a person a "dog" implied he or she was immoral, vulgar, and ignorant. Calling someone a "pig" was even worse. Ceremonially unclean in Jewish culture, wild pigs were scavengers that became aggressive enough to attack people when hungry.

Jesus likely used these terms to refer to those who are unclean because of persistent, rebellious sin and unbelief—including the Jewish religious leaders who were so quick to criticize Him. Even today, people who reject Jesus may become hostile to believers who are spreading the good news about Him. While Jesus certainly did not intend for us to

2. *NCIS*, Season 8, Episode 22, "Baltimore," directed by Terrence O'Hara, aired May 3, 2011, on CBS, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1683263/characters/nm0001319>.

keep the gospel secret, we must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading when evangelizing in certain settings.

Discuss

? How could you apply Jesus' teaching to not "throw your pearls to pigs" in your current setting?

? Who do you think would be most receptive to the gospel in your community?

Part 2—Find Life on the Narrow Way

Choose the Right Gate

Matthew 7:13–14

Say: In downhill skiing competitions, flags are set up to create "gates" the skiers must navigate. They are not allowed to create their own course but must go through the gates in order to cross the finish line and win. Jesus explained we can "enter God's kingdom only through the narrow gate" (Matthew 7:13, NLT). There is no other way to experience the eternal life He offers. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount by teaching about the unique blessings of Kingdom living. He also explained that His followers would experience difficulty, a theme He continued in this passage. The gateway to heaven is narrow, yet it is the only way to gain access to the Kingdom.

Entering by the narrow gate requires submitting to God's will and obeying His commands—something few people are willing to do. The road of self-indulgence is wide open, but those who travel it discover it leads to emptiness, dissatisfaction, and ultimately, condemnation.

Jesus died on Calvary to provide a way of escape, but everyone who does not accept Him as Savior will face eternal judgment. Each person who hears His words must choose which gate to enter. The gate to eternal life is narrow, the road is not easy, and "only a few ever find it" (verse 14, NLT). Jesus said in John's Gospel, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, NLT). Salvation through Jesus is the only way to access heaven. He *is* the narrow gate.

Discuss

? Many people think Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven. How can you most effectively share the truth that Jesus is the only way?

? Why do you think so few people find the narrow gate? What does this say about our responsibility to share the gospel?

Evaluate Prophets

Matthew 7:15–23

Say: Jesus warned His followers about false prophets, describing them as wolves in sheep's clothing. There are eternal consequences when someone believes false teaching. Jesus doesn't want anyone to pay that price. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 2: Decision-Making Time

Distribute the worksheet. Have students complete it individually or in groups. Encourage a few students to share their answers.

False prophets may have the appearance of goodness, but their messages are deadly. By describing the way they disguise themselves, Jesus was teaching His followers that false teachers are not always easy to identify. His listeners were to test prophets' integrity based on what their lives produced. Ezekiel 13 describes God's judgment against lying prophets who were "inventing their own prophecies" and "following their own imaginations" (verses 2–3, NLT). Such prophets may seem harmless as sheep, but their words can destroy people's souls.

How should we guard ourselves so we continue to faithfully follow Jesus without being drawn into error? We must carefully discern the fruit being produced in someone's life before we listen to their teachings (Matthew 7:16–18). Actions speak louder than words; sooner or later, behavior betrays motives. A corrupt heart cannot be hidden for long, but a life lived out of pure love and sincere faith produces good fruit.

Generally, false prophets promise fulfillment by way of the wide gate. They use enough Christian language to make people believe their message and may even exhibit spiritual behaviors. But Jesus said, "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father will enter" (verse 21, NLT). In the end, God will judge those who deceive others for their own selfish motives. Even some who say, "Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name" (verse 22, NLT) will hear those dreaded words: "I never knew you: depart from me" (verse 23, KJV).

True disciples obey the Father alone. Not only will God reject false prophets on that day, but He will also reject those who believed their lies instead of the truth of His Word.

Discuss

- ? How do you evaluate words spoken by modern-day prophets and teachers?
- ? How do you evaluate your own motivation when you speak or act in the name of Jesus?

Part 3—Choose to Build on Truth Build Well

Matthew 7:24–27

Say: Everyone faces storms in their lives. But our spiritual foundation determines the way we respond to the torrential rain, rising floodwaters, and brutal winds Jesus describes (Matthew 7:25). If our foundation is built on someone else's faith, it will not survive. Instead, we must establish our faith on the immovable truths of God's Word—specifically Jesus' teaching (see verse 24). People who build their faith on that foundation will stand firm no matter the storm. (Share your highlights from the following text.) V (**Play the video available at [RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult](https://www.RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult).**)

Resource Packet Item 3: Foundational Issues

Distribute the worksheet and read the case study. Have students discuss the questions and prayerfully consider how to establish the kind of foundation that can withstand any tragedy.

Jesus contrasted His rock-solid words with the unstable words of false prophets. Building on their words leads to utter destruction and rejection by God, but building on His words leads to steadfast faith and eternal life.

Growing up in a carpenter's home, Jesus would have been well aware of the importance of a strong foundation when building a house. He used this knowledge and experience to illustrate the consequences of building one's life on solid rock or shifting sand. Obedient people are wise, Jesus said—like a person who builds a house on a solid foundation. Such wise people will not experience catastrophic failure in the storms of life, because they have already put their faith to the test and obeyed God's Word. On the other hand, those who hear Jesus' teachings but do not obey them are foolish. "When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash" (verse 27, NLT). The life the foolish person has built will be swept away in an instant.

What separates Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists from Christians is not the sheer magnitude of faith. Adherents of those religions are often completely convinced they are on the path toward eternal reward. The difference is the foundation of each religion's faith. There is only one true God, and the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven is through faith in Jesus. A person can believe anything else and build an entire religious system on it, but eventually—when Christ returns—that system will collapse. It is built on sand.

To faithfully follow Christ and build a life that lasts into eternity, we must embrace the truth, reject false teaching, do the Father's will, and obey Jesus' teachings.

Discuss

- ? What sandy foundations do you see people building their lives on today?
- ? Think back over Jesus' teachings from the Sermon on the Mount that we've studied in the past three lessons. What steps can you take to align your life with His words and construct a house "that won't collapse because it is built on bedrock" (verse 25, NLT)?

Embrace Truth

Matthew 7:28–29

Say: The crowd listening to Jesus’ sermon knew it was unlike anything else they had ever heard. His words stirred them, demanding a response then as they do now. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

When Jesus finished talking, the people were in awe. They recognized He “taught with real authority” (Matthew 7:29, NLT). Although the Pharisees spoke many truths about God, they didn’t personally obey them. Therefore, their teachings did not carry the authority Jesus’ did. Rather than simply reading the rule book, Jesus explained the background and motivation behind it, helping people see and understand the value of humble obedience to God. Not only did Jesus teach the Word with unprecedented authority, He *is* the Word. “The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. . . . He has revealed God to us” (John 1:14,18, NLT).

Discuss

? Jesus said, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18, NLT). Is it possible for His followers today to teach the Word of God “with real authority” (7:29, NLT) as Jesus did? Why or why not?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: The authoritative teachings of Jesus are beautifully encapsulated in the Sermon on the Mount. It’s up to each of us to decide whether we will hear and follow them. Are we calling ourselves Christians but living completely outside His will? Are we saying and doing the right things just to put on a show? Are we shuffling alongside everyone else on the wide, easy road instead of searching out the narrow gate? Are we making selfish, short-sighted decisions and building our lives on sand instead of Christ, our solid Rock? As long as there is breath in our bodies, it is never too late to search out the narrow way that leads to eternal life. When we repent and humbly submit to God, the gate to the Kingdom swings wide open.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Repent for judging other people and determine to reach out a helping hand and seek restoration instead.
- Compare a popular prophet or preacher’s words to the Bible and determine if his or her message is true or not. Ask a trusted Christian for guidance if needed and listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit.
- Pray for God to reveal whether you are living according to your own desires or God’s purposes. Repent and make the necessary adjustments before it is too late.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Life Ordered by the Lord.

Psalm 37:23–31

Tuesday:

Be Immovable Like Mount Zion.

Psalm 125:1–5

Wednesday:

Live by Wisdom from God.

Proverbs 2:1–9

Thursday:

Build on Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:10–15

Friday:

Built on the Right Foundation.

Ephesians 2:19–22

Saturday:

Be Doers of the Word.

James 1:19–25