

Strength to survive the storms of life — # 6 in “The Greatest Sermon in History”

Sermon for Sunday, May 16, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 7:24-29

The Greatest Sermon in History is the message given by Jesus Christ as recorded in Matthew 5-7. This series aims to apply Jesus’ timeless truths to the situations that people face today.

Introduction: Someone we can trust

Do you know who is the most trusted person in Canada? If someone was to say “This is the truth,” more people would believe this person than anyone else in the country. It’s not Stephen Harper; nor is it any other political leader. It’s not Sidney Crosby, nor some other sports hero. No minister comes close. Nope, none of these.

The most trusted person in Canada is Lloyd Robertson, the anchor for the CTV National News. CTV spends hundreds of thousands of dollars splashing his picture in magazines and on TV ads — all designed to build up his reputation. His clothing, his hairstyle, and especially his voice are all part of the image.

If Lloyd Robertson says, “This is the truth,” most people will accept it as gospel. With all due respect to Mr. Robertson, I think there is One other who is qualified to receive that trust — Jesus Christ.

In the Bible, Jesus begins speaking with the words “I tell you the truth” 78 times! When Jesus speaks, we listen.

1) Listen to Jesus again... for the first time

Matthew 7:24, New International Version:
“Everyone who hears these words of mine...”

When you and I hear the words of Jesus, they have already lost some of their power. First of all, many of us in the church have been hearing these words since we were babies. We’ve gotten so used to the words that we’re, well, *used* to them. They have lost their freshness, their bite.

Secondly, we’re in a different culture. When Jesus spoke, it was electrifying. It is difficult for us to realize just how shocking it was for the Jewish people to hear him. Listen to this description of the effect he had on his audience:

Matthew 7:28-29, New International Version:

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.

William Barclay, the Bible commentator, describes it like this:

To the Jews, the Law was absolutely holy and absolutely divine; it is impossible to exaggerate the place that the Law had in their reverence:

Aristeas wrote: “The Law is holy and has been given by God.” *The Teaching of the Rabbis* said: “Those who deny that the Law is from heaven have no part in the world to come. Even if one says that the Law is from God, with the exception of one verse, he stands condemned. He has despised the word of the Lord.”

This is what the Jews thought of the Law. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus six times (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44) quotes the Law, only to contradict it and add a teaching of his own. He claimed the right to critique the most sacred writings in the world, and to correct them out of his own wisdom.... Nor did Jesus argue about this, or seek in any to justify himself for doing so. He calmly and without question assumed that authority.¹

Even the prophets of the Bible, when they were giving their message, began by saying “Hear the word of the Lord.” Jesus began by saying, “But I say unto you....”

On one occasion Jesus gave a hard message, and many in the crowd of followers left Jesus. Jesus asked the disciples if they, too, were going to leave him. Peter’s reply reveals how deep in his heart he had listened to the words of Jesus:

John 6:68, New Revised Standard Version:
“Lord, whom can we go to? You have the words of eternal life.”

2) It’s not enough to talk the talk — you gotta walk the walk

Matthew 7:24, New International Version:
“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice...”

But listening is not enough. We must live out the words.

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible*, vol. 1, p. 134.

It would be possible for someone to spend a lifetime studying the Bible and even memorize it, and be able to answer all kinds of difficult theological questions, and even stand in a pulpit and preach inspiring sermons — all without ever living the words.

One of my favourite cartoons is a picture of a woman sitting on the examining table in a doctor's office. She's pale and sickly looking. She asks the doctor, "Tell me what I can do to feel better, without stopping the things that are making me feel bad."

It is not enough to simply hear Jesus. It is not enough to nod our heads and think, "Yes, I think what he said is true." It is not even enough to say, "Yes, I believe in Jesus."

What we need is a conscious, deliberate decision: "I will follow Jesus Christ. I will model my life according to his life and teaching. For the times when I go wrong, I ask him to forgive me, and help me get it right." This means more than just my actions; it involves my attitudes, my beliefs, my values.

The result of this change is to have a life with meaning and purpose. You may know the old saying, "Aim at nothing, and you're sure to hit it." Many people go through life without ever considering why they're here. At the end, when they look back over what they've accomplished, they may think, "Is that all there is?" An aimless life is not a satisfying life. Jesus Christ gives us the direction we need.

But there's another result besides that....

3) Jesus Christ is the Rock of Ages

Matthew 7:24, New International Version:

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."

Jesus the carpenter knew the value of a strong foundation when building a house. Two houses may look the same to the eye; but it's what lies under the surface that makes the difference. The same thing is true of people.

The "rock" that gives the strength is Jesus Christ himself. Again, there is a deeper meaning here, hidden to us, but obvious to the Jews gathered around Jesus. The Old Testament contain dozens of passages which picture God as the rock:

Psalm 62:2

God alone is my rock and my salvation;

he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.

Psalm 40:2

The Lord lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;

he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

When Jesus figuratively says, "I am the rock. Build your life on me," he is boldly claiming what no one else has a right to claim — that he is God.

4) Surviving the storms of life

When our lives are solidly built on the rock of Jesus Christ, we have a strength that will allow us to weather any kind of storm that life may throw at us:

Matthew 5:25, New International Version:

"The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock."

This passage gives a similar promise:

Romans 8:28, New International Version:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Danny Moe, a pastor in British Columbia, put it this way in a talk about Romans 8:28:

Many of us, at various times in our lives, have prayed a prayer that is only two words long. There is a comma between the two words, and a question mark at the end. The first word begins with "W", and the second word begins with "L." Do you know what the prayer is? "Why, Lord?"

Ever prayed it? Sure we have. We wonder why in the world God has allowed this situation to happen in our lives. We cry out, "Why, Lord?"

Jesus does not give us the answer to our question. Instead, he calls us to live by faith in him. Faith in action. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that "Without faith it is impossible to please God." It's faith that pleases God. That's what God wants us to develop in our lives: faith.

Suppose God were to come to you and say, "I just want to chat with you for a moment, because tomorrow afternoon about four o'clock, someone is going to steal your car. You won't find it for three days, and when you do, it'll be sunk in the Lake Erie, totally ruined. But I

wanted to let you know ahead of time, because I want you to know how I'm going to make it work for good, and what's going to take place over the next few days, and the lives you're going to touch...." and on and on.

Tomorrow afternoon comes and, sure enough, at four o'clock someone steals your car. Will you get all panicky and frustrated? Will it be difficult for you in this situation to keep on trusting God?

Well, not really, because if you believe what God told you, then you know it's going to work out for good. You can see down the road that it's going to be all right. Actually, you're quite excited! "Wow, this is terrific! It's happening just exactly like God said, and it's going to work out for good."

Now, would it take much faith to get excited and praise God and trust God while this was taking place? Not really, because God spoke to you and told you all about it.

What is it that God wants to see in your life? Faith. So guess what? God doesn't tell us how it's going to work out. He wants to give us the opportunity to develop and exercise our faith. How can our lives honour and glorify God? Faith. If God told us everything that was going to happen, it wouldn't take any faith to trust him.

When we begin to see it this way, we don't need to pray, "Why, Lord?" Instead, we pray, "Thank-you, Lord. Thank-you for your love. Thank-you that even though I can't see the future, I know that even now you are working things out for good. Thank you for being my rock in the storm."

I have a lot of questions that I want to ask God when I get to heaven. Most of them begin with that letter "W." You probably do, too. Now, when that time comes, I really don't expect to win any arguments with God about the way he should have handled things. In fact, after it's all said and done, I'll probably feel humbled, even ashamed that I was suspicious of God's ways. Instead, I'll be able to say, "Thank-you, Lord, for loving me and looking after me, even when I doubted you."

If I have true faith, I won't have to wait until I get to heaven to say that. I'll be able to say it now. Even right in the midst of a storm.

"Thank-you, Lord. Thank-you for your love. Thank-you that even though I can't see the future, I know

that even now you are working things out for good. Thank you for being my rock in the storm."

Theme for today: How do you react when things go wrong? Self-pity, calm, anger, confidence, frustration, prayer, swear? Why? Why do some choose one attitude while others choose another?

A proverb says, "When you bump the pail you are carrying, whatever is inside is what will spill out." Whatever you carry in your heart, that's what will come out when you get "bumped." If you find you still respond with anger and bitterness, that's a clue that you haven't allowed Jesus to permeate every area of your life. Your "hot button" is the area you're holding out, where that thing is more important than God. Confess it, and surrender it over to Jesus. Ask him to truly be Lord over all.