

**“Building Better Homes and Gardens”
Matthew 7:13-28**

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In a Hank Ketchum cartoon, Dennis the Menace and his family are greeting their pastor on the way out of worship. Shaking the pastor's hand, Dennis exclaims, "My dad says he likes the ends of your sermons a lot better than the beginnings!"

Today we consider the end of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*. These last weeks we have considered the nature of happiness, the excellence of kingdom ethics, the privacy of prayer, the power of priorities, and the freedom of non-judgmentalism. Today we are asked to decide. Which road will we travel? Which leader will we follow? Will we plant thistles or fruit trees in our garden? Will we walk the walk or just talk the talk? On what kind of foundation will we build our houses?

Once to every man and nation, comes a moment to decide. Life forces decision. We can hesitate making up our minds but we cannot hesitate making up our lives for our lives get made up one way or another. So Jesus concludes this teaching with a series of contrasts and asks us to make a choice that will affect our lives for eternity. It is to this set of choices that I call your attention today.

“If you want to build a better home, travel the right road,” said Jesus. I invite you and encourage you to walk through this passage with me today. *Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life and few*

there be who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

The roads we take determine our destination. Robert Frost put it this way:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh,
Somewhere ages and ages hence.
Two roads diverged in a wood and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that made all the difference.*

If life is a pleasure ride without a specific destination, then most any old road will do. Just go in any direction, anytime, at any place. But if you are trying to get somewhere at a specific time, for a stated purpose, the road you take makes all the difference. Or as somebody said, "It's impossible to reach your destination by traveling faster in the wrong direction." The choices you make affect your destiny.

This reminds me of an experience I had traveling home from Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, a few years ago. I was traveling on I-40 east of Knoxville headed back to Kentucky when I ran into a terrific traffic jam near the tunnels. I don't do well in traffic jams--patience is not one of my long suits. So I edged my way along the side of the interstate until I got to an exit. I left the interstate sure that I could find my way through the Smokey Mountains even though I didn't have a map and didn't have a clue where I was going. Thirty minutes later I was on a single lane gravel road that was running out of gravel. Finally, I saw a car sitting beside the road. I surmised that if there is a car here, then somebody had to have driven it there. So I stopped, got out of the car, looked over at the bank of the river that I was driving beside, and I saw an old mountaineer fishing. "Catching any fish?" I asked. He took one long look at me and said, "Yer lost, ain't ye?" I said, "Yes sir, I'm afraid I am. Could you help me?" He said, "I can help you. You turn around and you go back up this here road about three miles and you'll see a bridge

on the right. You cross that bridge. After you cross that bridge, you will come to at least twelve forks in the road. Every time you come to a fork, you go right. If you'll go right every time, you'll wind up in Pigeon Forge." I thanked him very much and before dark I got to Pigeon Forge. I also had a sermon that I could keep.

It's simple and straightforward. Get on the right road. Stay on the straight and narrow. It may not be the easiest road, the biggest road, or even the road most traveled. If it's the right road, and you keep turning right, you will reach your destination. If you want to build a better home choose the right road.

"If you want to build a better home," said Jesus, "follow the right leader." Look at verse 15: *Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

Bob Dylan released a song a few years ago entitled, *You gotta serve somebody.*

*You might be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble; you may like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls,
But you're gonna serve somebody, yes indeed,
You're gonna serve somebody.*

The reason you serve is dramatically important. More than anytime of my years of ministry, the gods are many, and the prophets are multiple. The voices are calling us from all kinds of directions, asking for allegiance, and promising all kinds of things. As Jesus said centuries ago, "Choose wisely." The leaders you follow determine your destiny.

This reminds me of one of my favorite stories about the man who fell in the pit and couldn't get out.

The Christian Scientist said, "You only think you are in a pit."

A Hindu said, "Your pit is for purging and making you perfect."

Confucius said, "If you would have listened to me, you would never have fallen in that pit in the first place."

A New Ager said, "Maybe you should network with other pit dwellers."

The fundamentalist said, "You deserve the pit."

The realist said, "That's a pit."

The idealist said, "The world shouldn't have pits."

The optimist said, "Things could be worse."

The pessimist said, "Things will get worse."

But Jesus, the Christ, saw a man in the pit and He reached down with His loving arms of mercy. He put His arms around him; He lifted him out of the miry clay and set his feet on a rock to stay. Choose your leaders well for they will determine your destiny.

If you want to build a better home, sow good seeds.

Verse 16: You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way every good tree bears good fruit but bad trees bear bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit or a bad tree bear good fruit. You will know them by their fruits.

Jean Elstain, Professor of Ethics at the University of Chicago, says stemming the tide of family collapse is the best protection we can offer a child against becoming the victim or the perpetrator of violence.

We love to play the politics of "family values" but the question I ask today is "What kind of values are you really communicating to the significant people in your life?" Some children were asked one day to give their parents advice on how to raise kids. Here's what the elementary school

children, said:

- Stop talking on the phone and talk to me.
- Sometimes could we just play?
- Don't spoil me and later yell at me for being spoiled.
- Don't fill up every minute of my day.

A set of roots and a pair of wings, are you giving your children these two things? What kind of seeds are you sowing into the lives of the significant people that are entrusted to your care? Remember what Paul said in Galatians 6:7-9? *Do not be deceived. God is not mocked, for we reap what we sow. If we sow to the flesh, we will reap corruption from the flesh but if we sow to the spirit, we will reap eternal life from the spirit. So let us not grow weary in well doing, for we will reap at the harvest time if we do not give up. Sow good seeds.*

United States Air Force Captain Scott O'Grady, was shot down over Bosnia on June 2, 1995. For six days O'Grady managed to evade capture, subsisting on a diet of leaves and insects. Then in a daring rescue mission, a Marine helicopter swept down and lifted him to safety. Captain O'Grady, in reflecting on that experience, says, "My life priorities were suddenly slapped into line that first week of June, 1995. I came to realize that there were only three things really important in life: One was faith in God, the source of all goodness. Two was the love of family and friends. Three was good health. Beyond that, everything was negotiable." Do you have your priorities in line? Mary, Nancy, Jim, Joe, how does your garden grow? Are the fruits of the Spirit plentiful at your house? Is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, established values in your life? Sow good seeds.

If you want to build a better home then practice what you preach. Verse 21: *Not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does*

the will of my Father in Heaven. It's one thing to talk the talk but it's another thing to walk the walk.

A certain pastor set out to build a deck on the back of his house. Every day while he was building the deck, a neighbor kid came over to watch. Finally the pastor asked the boy if he was hoping to become a carpenter someday. "Nope", replied the boy, "I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his finger with a hammer." Whether you are a pastor or politician, banker or builder, designer or DJ, a student or one soaring to new heights in business, you can bet there are people of all ages watching you, observing your values. They don't care a lot about what you say but they are intricately interested in what you do. It is my conviction that if we can communicate civility, tolerance, peace and patience we might empower others to solve their problems, understand their value, and live more productive lives. I never had many conversations and lectures with my boys that amounted to very much but I do hope they saw, and continue to see, what is tremendously important in my life. When it comes to practicing the faith, do you talk the talk or do you walk the walk?

Billy Graham tells the story of flying from New York to North Carolina with a drunk in front of him on the plane. First the man harassed the attendants and when that didn't work, he decided to go to the cockpit to help the pilot fly the plane. In a matter of minutes, the co-pilot helped him back to his seat. That's when the man suddenly realized who he was, turned around and said, "Are you Billy Graham?" Dr. Graham replied, "I am." Then the man said, "I want to shake your hand, your sermons have done me a world of good throughout my life." It's not the sermon that people want to see; it's a life people want to observe. If you want to build a better home, put your faith to practice.

One more thing, if you want to build a better home, lay a

firm foundation. We're down to the story that everybody knows. The wise man built his house upon a rock. When Sandy and I were looking for a house earlier this year, we spent a lot of time counting rooms, evaluating yards, and looking for vaulted ceilings. What every house buyer ought to know is this: what's underneath is more important than what is on top. What is unseen is more pivotal than what is seen. Walls can be painted but foundations need to stay put. What is true of houses is true of homes. It's the unnoticed stuff that matters. It's the unseen guest that makes a difference. It's the foundation not the furnishings that reveal the true nature and strength of a place.

I say to you today, from the depths of my heart, build your life and your significant relationships on the solid rock of Jesus Christ. It will give you a foundation that will endure through the stresses of time. Oh yes, the storms **will** come. The rains **will** fall. The floods **will** rise. That's why foundations are so critically important.

Roberta Bondi, Professor at Emory University, writes: After sixteen years of marriage, with two kids and two careers in the making, my husband announced one afternoon that he was very unhappy in his marriage. What could have been the end of Robert and Roberta turned out to be a growth point for the two of them. How did they do it? They truly committed to getting through it. They deliberately decided to speak the truth in love. They each took responsibility for their own stuff and each dared to accept the grace of God for their own mistakes. In this climate of mutual respect and mutual responsibility they found the grace of God to carry on. Wise people establish solid foundations. It makes a difference in a storm.

So in the name of Jesus Christ, I ask you today: Which road are you traveling? What leader are you following? What seeds are you planting? Are you walking the walk or just

talking the talk? Are you building on sinking sand or on solid rock? The choice is yours. The decision is yours. But remember this: we can hesitate making up our minds but we cannot hesitate making up our lives, for our lives get made up one way or another.