

“Solid”

Life On the Rock - June 7, 2009
Matthew 7:24-25

I found this story from September of 2008 on Anderson Cooper's website, as well as a few others. Warren and Pam Adams lost a house to Hurricane Rita in 2005, so it seems they'd be relieved to learn their new home withstood Hurricane Ike, but not when their house is the only one still standing in their section of Gilchrist, Texas.

Ike's storm surge devastated the Bolivar Peninsula town, flattening most of the roughly 200 homes there. The Adams' yellow house by at the beach -- supported 14 feet off the ground by wooden columns - - was the only house on Gilchrist's Gulf Coast side not to be flattened. The Adams' hired an engineering firm to oversee the contractor to ensure that the house was constructed to withstand a category five hurricane. I was unable to determine if the house is still standing and has been repaired from the damage, or if the owners had to tear down and start again.

Still, the point is pretty clear. The house is still standing when all the others were swept away by the storms. Now you can see the analogy coming a mile away, can't you? We are all building our lives, one day at a time. And Jesus has something to say about how we build our lives. He wants us to build our life on him...his teaching, his example, his love.

So today we are starting a new message series called “Solid”. Solid can mean having healthy relationships with God and others; it can mean being a solid witness for God's love; and it can mean being able to stand strong in the face of adversity. It's going to be about building life on the teachings of Jesus.

There is a concentrated section of Jesus' teachings on the book of Matthew from chapter 5 through chapter 7. This section of teaching is known to many Christians as the “sermon on the mount”. At the beginning of chapter 5, Jesus goes up on a hillside and he speaks to this large following of people from up on the hill. And that's why this section is called the “sermon on the mount.”

Now in this concentrated section of teaching, Jesus addresses several human issues; normal everyday kinds of things that we all face....things like anger, sexuality, divorce, revenge, love, motives for helping others, how to pray, judging others, worry and anxiety, etc. We're not going to be able to look at all this teaching in a four or five week series, but we will explore some of these topics, looking for the way Jesus wants to help us build solid lives.

Today, we're not going to start at the beginning of the sermon on the mount. We're going to start at the end. We're starting with the end of the sermon on the mount because it can really help us incorporate these teachings into our life. My college band director used to say that the two most important notes in any piece are the first and the last, because those are the two the audience will remember most. Same thing is true about preaching. The parts people remember the most are the beginning and the end.

Now, a lot of you have listened to many, many sermons. Which do you think preachers are usually better prepared for, the beginning of a sermon or the end of a sermon? The beginning of a sermon! Almost always, people put time, effort, creativity [in the beginning] and that's usually the best prepared part of a sermon. Let you in on a little trade secret.

But a lot of times, preachers, once they get started, it's like they think,
Well, I just want to get the plane up in the air and once it's up there, I'll find a place to land it down there somewhere.

You would be amazed how often preachers do not give adequate thought to how they will end their message. I wish I knew how I was going to end this one. But Jesus does this soaring talk, the greatest talk in the history of the world, but He knows the problem that people are going to have. And so, this is how He concludes the talk with a single story, Matthew 7, Verse 24. I want you to try to picture Him, imagine, feel the drama of this moment, the power of this story. You've been listening to this fabulous talk, listening to Jesus as he comes in for his landing.

24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise

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man who built his house on the rock. 25 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. 26 But 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. 27 The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. Matthew 7:24-28 TNIV

End of sermon. Everybody go home. That was kind of a downer way to end the sermon. You wonder, why doesn't Jesus end with something more positive? It's because He knows the human heart. See, this is what every one of us here struggles with. Just knowing the right stuff is a lot easier. We're pretty good, we're pretty smart people. And so, we know, and we like to talk about stuff and we like to discuss stuff and we like to debate stuff. We like to be smarter than other people about stuff. It's easy to know stuff and talk about stuff.

Doing, that is going to cost something. That is not so much about IQ. Doing is going to cost time; it's going to cost energy. It's going to cost me money. So, here's our prayer as we're going through this series; let's pray that we're not just going to be smarter by the end of this series. We're not just going to know better. Let's pray that we will be better doer, better at implementing and applying this stuff in our relationships. This is our prayer,

"God, make us doers of the word. God, make me a doer of your word. Help me to not just hear, not just know, but actually do what Jesus said."

Now, this is not something we do entirely on our own. This is something we do in cooperation with God's spirit.

But before we get to that, let's just pause right here for a moment. Jesus is talking about being both a hearer and a doer. It's both knowing and doing. So if you don't know what Jesus teaches us, then acquiring knowledge is your first step. This is why we consistently are inviting you to read the Bible for yourself. If you don't know what Jesus says, then how can you do it. So getting the knowledge base is important. And if you want to improve your knowledge of what Jesus said and did, then you need to dive into the first four books of the New Testament. These are called the gospels, or the good news of Jesus, and they tell his story and share his teachings with us. So first, get a knowledge base.

Once you have some knowledge, some base of understanding about Jesus, then it's about doing. And this is exactly what Jesus is pointing to...A more common problem among followers of Jesus is not that they don't know what he did and said, but that they don't live it out. We all have a knowing/doing gap.

There are studies out there from Stanford university about organizations that suffer from a particular problem, a kind of inertia or inactivity. For example, a company knows they need to improve quality control. They know this. So, they talk about it, they listen to presentations about it, they read books about it, they look at state-of-art systems for it, they just never actually get around to doing it. They never actually raise quality control. Or, a company that has customer service problems. They know they have customer service problems. They know how important it is, they do studies on it. They appoint task forces to make recommendations. They write "customer service" in their core values. They just never actually do customer service. It's a problem. It's not a problem of ignorance. It is not a problem of a lack of information. It's not that they're not smart enough. The problem is a problem of knowing too much, but doing too little. There is a gap that they call the "knowing/doing gap."

Now aren't you glad that even though this can happen to an organization, it never actually happens in the life of a human being? Aren't you glad that as long as the right information gets poured into you, you find yourself effortlessly doing everything that you know you ought to do. Isn't that good news that all you have to do is just shove information into your spouse or your child or your employee and you'll know that they'll just do what they ought to do? Maybe not.

Have you ever been on a board or committee or in an organization and you've gathered the information, done all the studies, and still nothing really gets done?

Here is where this knowing/doing gap hits my life. A few weeks ago I'm getting my teeth cleaned. Now, I know that in addition to brushing, I should also floss, but I hate to take the time to do it.

So I'm getting my every 6-month mini-lecture from the hygienist. She's telling me that if I would floss, then his little dance we do where she shoves her fist in my mouth and gouges my gums (as gently as she can and still get all my build up off) and asks me questions that I can't answer, this dance would not be so tiring or painful. I believe her. I just decided this time not to make an empty promise, but to be honest. So I said, you know, the truth is, I'd rather just sit here and take it every six months than floss. I'm not sure she was expecting that, but she said OK and began scraping again.

Just a little side note; I'm not sure why, maybe because I was finally honest about it, but I've started flossing regularly since this last visit. Something snapped and I bridged the knowing/doing gap with my teeth.

I've known someone for a very long time who has financial problems. This is not an intelligence issue - he's a smart guy. It's not a knowledge issue, because he's read the books and taken the courses and gathered the knowledge to break his financial cycle and turn it around but he won't. It's not about knowing, it's about doing.

I know that Jesus says that when I help someone in need, then I am serving him. I know that - and I do some of that - but I don't do anywhere near what I should be doing for the needy and poor in our community. Here's another knowing/doing gap.

There are lots of Christians who know about Jesus. But knowing about Jesus and striving to apply his love to every aspect of our life and all of our relationships is something different altogether. Paul saw this in the churches he started and encouraged. That's why he said,

2If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. I Cor 13:2 TNIV

Paul is saying that it is not about what we know. We can know have eloquent speech, know all there is to know and even have great faith, but if it doesn't end up being applied to sharing Christ like love, then it's useless. That's the knowing/doing gap.

So Jesus has a plan about putting this story at the end. Jesus is not about piling on rules and ethical guidelines on top of the exhaustive list his audience already has. They've been hearing talks about the laws of Moses their whole life.

The concentrated teaching in Matthew 5-7 is really a description of something Matthew introduces in chapter 4.

From that time on, Jesus began to preach, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near. (Matthew 4:17). TNIV

And then, in Verse 23 it says,

Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news. (v. 23)

Now, another way to translate that is the Gospel. When you think about the Gospel and you ask, What's the Gospel that Jesus had to preach?

It was the Gospel, the good news of the Kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Then, in Chapter 5, Jesus begins to paint the picture of what this kingdom looks like, what it acts like.

The Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God (in Mark and Luke) is a phrase that Jesus uses to describe the realm or reality in which everything that God wants to happen happens. It's not a specific place, just a description of that reality where God's will is accomplished or God's purposes are served out; where God reigns. It's the range of God's effective will. And this is what Jesus describes in the sermon on the mount and in many other places, especially with his parables. Jesus wants them to see what it looks like because he knows that they are not experiencing the Kingdom. His message is that the Kingdom of Heaven is near...it is something they can experience.

The reason they didn't experience this kingdom is the same reason that we don't always experience it. When God created human beings, part of what He does is He kind of gives us each our own kingdom. If you think back to the Book of Genesis, some of you know this. God says,

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Let us make human beings in our own image and let us give them “dominion.” (Genesis 1:26)

That’s a kingdom word. You have your own little kingdom where what you say goes. It’s the range of your effective will. And we can extend that. I get into my car and when I turn on the radio, the stations, the little buttons, are all set to the stations I want them to be set to. The seat is positioned just where I want it to be positioned. The mirrors are just as I want them to be. I walk into my office and the books are all arranged there just the way I want them to be. Why? That’s my kingdom. I walk into a house at the end of a workday. There’s an easy chair with slippers lying by it, there’s iced tea on the table, there are steaks cooking on the grill. Why? I’ve walked into the wrong house!

But, again, the idea here is, see, I have a kingdom, you have a kingdom. We’re made in the image of God. Your kingdom is where what you say goes. And this is part of why it is so important that you have a body. When you look at a child learning that it’s able to move its arms and its legs, learning it has a kingdom. “The range of my effective will”—there’s something God liked about that—that’s a really good thing. And part of what it means to be human is we can extend our kingdoms and they merge and they intersect. You have a kingdom, you do, you do, you do, and that’s really good. And then, as they merged, they form families, neighborhoods, school systems, corporations, countries. And you put all of that together, see, just practically speaking, what the Bible talks about, you put all that stuff together and that is what the Bible calls, “the kingdom of the earth.” That’s the kingdom of the earth in which we live.

What Jesus is saying, is the Kingdom now there is this invitation to a new kind of life and in the Kingdom—now it will take wisdom and discernment and the help of the Spirit to apply this—but in the Kingdom people are characterized by love. And they love, not just when it’s easy, but they love when it is difficult. This is a new kind of love. And then things begin to be done on earth as they are in Heaven, which is in a prayer that Jesus teaches us in the sermon on the mount. As all of us as followers of Jesus, with all our intersecting and overlapping kingdoms, allow Jesus to lead our life, then the Kingdom of God is near and it becomes visible in our world, not through what we know, but because of what we do.

Now, of course, as we seek to actually follow Jesus we will fail all over the place. Of course, we will. And how is this any different than before Jesus. What’s changed? Folks have always known they are supposed to do stuff and always failed to do it. But, something fundamental has changed. What’s changed is “Up There Is Coming Down Here.” A typical rabbi would have said, “whoever listens to the words of the Torah, and does them is like a wise person.” Jesus says, “whoever listens and does these words of MINE. You used to have the Torah. Now you have me. What you have been hoping for is me. The coming of the kingdom has begun, Jesus says, because now I’m here—my life, my teaching, my death, my resurrection. It’s all happening through this one man. What’s changed is that it’s no longer about rules and laws, it’s about overwhelming, amazing love we receive through our relationship with Jesus. It’s a love that conquers sin and wipes out shame, and heals wounds and patches broken dreams and ultimately changes the world, one life at a time.

This amazing love of God’s kingdom has been given to us, the church, for us to live out in our kingdoms, in our spheres of influence. This is how the Kingdom of God is coming to this earth - it arrives when we become people who don’t just talk love, but do love. That’s when up there comes down here. This really is God’s project; by his grace, we get invited to help out.

Up there comes down here when we forgive, when we love those that are hard to love, when we set aside prejudices, when we serve others in Jesus name.

Living a solid life is not based on what we know about God’s love. It’s about what we do with God’s love. That’s what it means to build our house upon the rock. Life on the Rock is not about security or safety. It’s about an attitude of faith – making our individual kingdoms resemble God’s kingdom – something we can only do in partnership with God, by God’s grace. Life on the Rock means to not be hearers only, but to also be doers who put love into action.

Prayer: Jesus, would you make me a doer? Would you make up there come down here through us?