

“Solid--Choices”

Today we're wrapping up this series of messages on a section of scripture called the Sermon on The Mount. It's a section of concentrated teachings that Jesus gave on a whole bunch of subjects that apply to lots of facets of life. Today we end where we began, which was at the end. Jesus says, **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock” (Matthew 7:24-25, NRSV).** There's hearing, then there's doing. What are you going to do?

I'm not a big tennis fan, but did anybody watch any of the women's Wimbledon Finals last week? The Williams sisters are dominating tennis and Serena beat her sister Venus to win Wimbledon on July 4th. Serena has an amazing record. Only two women in history have more grand slam singles championships. Now I admire Serena Williams, you may admire her too. Amazing skill, dedicated to her goals. Unbelievable strength and stamina. I admire her. But somewhere out there a kid was watching her play, and when she was watching, her heart started pounding, and her mind started racing, and she thought to herself, “What Serena Williams is doing, I could do. The way she's playing, I could play.”

That kid is reading articles and watching videos, going to the tennis court, finding a coach, hitting balls... She actually wants to become like Serena Williams, and one day she will. There's a kid out there somewhere who watched Wimbledon whose heart started racing, and one day, she's going to be playing at Wimbledon. She isn't just an admirer of Serena Williams, she is a follower.

Now, I'm not in that category. I'll applaud what Serena did, but I'm not going to change my life. I haven't gone out and bought a tennis racquet. I'm an admirer but not a follower, and there's a big difference. An admirer is impressed. A follower is devoted. An admirer applauds. A follower surrenders her or his life.

A lot of people admired Martin Luther King. Some marched with him. Not many went to jail with him. Not many got their houses bombed like he did. A lot of people admired Mother Theresa. Not many people followed her to live among the destitute and dying.

I say this because today we come to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Huge crowds came to hear him and be healed by him and fed by him. It says, **“When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:28-29).**

As Jesus was talking something happened in the crowd that day. Many of those people went beyond admiration, and their hearts started pounding, and their minds started racing. Something deep inside them said, “This is it. This is what I have been longing for my whole life long without even knowing it, without being able to name it, to be cleansed and forgiven of all my sin and all that junk that is part of my life, to know God, to have a life beyond worry, beyond fear, to not be a slave to sexual desire, or unhealthy habits, or the need for more and more money, to be part of God's cause to redeem the world, to have confidence beyond the grave, to not be afraid of death anymore. I have to have this. And if that means following this man, Jesus, I will. I will.”

That day a crowd of people came to see and hear Jesus, they were all admirers, but some of them left that day followers.

The challenge that Jesus gives at the end of this concentrated section of teaching is make the move from admirer to follower. It's a challenge we see him give over and over again. In John 3, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a religious leader, pays a visit to Jesus. It says that **“He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him’” (John 3:2, NIV).**

Nicodemus is an admirer of Jesus. But notice he came to Jesus at night. Why at night? He didn't want to be seen. He didn't want to risk losing his status among the religious leaders of Israel. He was an admirer. Jesus invites him to come and follow. He says that following him is believing, and by believing he means knowing and doing. Following is knowing and doing. Believing is publicly identifying with Jesus even if

it costs you something important to you. And Nicodemus does. When Jesus dies, Nicodemus publicly claims his body, places it in a tomb. He goes from the night into the light to become not just an admirer but a follower of Jesus.

All through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is describing his kind of life, the life of blessing. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. If you want it. Even if you thought you were a million miles away from God. That blessing is yours if you want it. Then he talks about what it looks like. Then at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, he says, "Now if you want this life, here is how you obtain it. *Enter in 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 is the way that leads to life and only a few find it.*" The narrow way is following, the wide way admiring.

What is the narrow way? It's Jesus. "*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*" Love Jesus. Surrender to Jesus. Trust Jesus. Abide in Jesus. Devote yourself to Jesus without reservation and holding nothing back. What is the broad way? That is the way of the crowd. That's what people do in our world. The path of least resistance, kind of drift along, admire Jesus if you want, but reserve for yourself the right to do whatever you want to do when the chips are down, when push comes to shove.

The whole end of the Sermon on the Mount is just a series of pictures that Jesus gives, and every one of them involves this stark contrast designed to force people to choose. There is a narrow gate or there is a wide gate. No third gate. There is a narrow road and a broad road. No third road. There is a good tree and a bad tree. No third tree. There are true disciples and false disciples. No third category. House built on the rock, house built on the sand. No third house. People who do what Jesus says and people who hear and know but not seek to do.

It all comes down to this: Are you moving from admirer to follower? You can admire somebody from a distance. To follow somebody means to stick close to them. Rob Bell talks about in ancient times young men who wanted to become Rabbi's would follow a Rabbi so closely that they would get the dust from the road on them that the Rabbi stirred up as he went about his business. They wanted to emulate him. They wanted to be near him as he taught, as he went to the market, as he took care of the ordinary stuff of life. They wanted to see how he did life so they could do life like that Rabbi. It was the goal of these young men to be covered in the dust of the Rabbi because they followed so closely. Admirers don't pick up that dust. Followers do.

Now I want to be clear that I'm making a distinction here today but this isn't about judging, this isn't to say a follower is more valuable or more loved than an admirer. I'm just trying to give us a way to know where we are. So how do you know where you are?

If think if you ask folks who are admirers of Jesus, "Do you believe in Jesus?" They would most likely say, "Sure, I believe, in my own way." And they may or may not go to church. They may volunteer sometimes. They may give some stuff, but they key difference between an admirer and a follower is that an admirer wants to retain control of their lives. If getting close to Jesus would mean risking something they don't want to risk, like their success at work, or if it would mean changing their lifestyle, or mean humbling themselves to get help with a crumbling marriage, or mean getting serious about immersing their mind in Scripture rather than just drifting along, or it would mean not sleeping anymore with somebody they aren't married to, or would mean getting help with their anger or some habit they have. If getting close would mean that, then that's letting go of control and they would say, "Too close. This is my life." So they admire Jesus, but they will try to maintain a certain distance between them and Jesus. A distance where they admire but don't allow what Jesus taught to have a claim on their time, money, skills, relationships, etc.

There's a line there on your outline. Where would you put yourself? Closer to admirer or closer to follower? Do you to maintain total control of your life and appreciate Jesus from a distance, or do you want to give him an increasing amount of control in your life and get closer to him?

I want to give a picture of the difference between admiration and full devotion. I want to start with a word that I had never heard until this week. Funambulist. That's a fancy word for a tightrope walker.

There have been many, many of them, but there is one who towers over everyone who has ever lived. About 150 years ago, he was at the peak of his game. His name was Charles Blondin. He came over to the United States from overseas and he was fascinated with Niagara Falls and wanted to cross over Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He strung a rope of 1100 feet across, and 160 feet above, Niagara Falls.

He was quite a showman. This was 150 years ago. A crowd of 100,000 people gathered to watch Charles Blondin walk a tightrope across Niagara Falls inch by inch, step by step. He did it 9 times one week in July of 1859. Can you imagine the drama of that moment? Life or death. He had no safety net there. He crossed all the way over. Tons of people, of course, were taking pictures of him, so he did it again. He crossed over and brought a camera with him and took a picture of the crowd while they were taking pictures of him.

He went another time and took a chair with him, balanced a chair on the rope and stood on the chair. He went back another time and fixed an omelet. He actually did this and lowered it to passengers on the Maid of the Mist so that one of them could have it for breakfast. He went another time and took a wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls with him. The crowd went crazy. This man walks the rope, "with authority, not like our teachers of the law."

He turned to the crowd and asked them, "Do you believe I can do this?" Of course, they all believed. Then he asked them, "Now, who will get into the wheelbarrow?" Then, it got real quiet. Do you believe, or do you just admire? All 100,000 people were silent. One man, a man named Harry Colcord stepped up to get in the wheelbarrow. He was Blondin's agent. He had worked with him. He had seen him do it hundreds of times. He got into the wheelbarrow...inch by inch...step by step. Can you imagine that ride? In a wheelbarrow over Niagara Falls? They make it to the other side. Of course, the crowd goes crazy. Harry Colcord trusted Blondin because he'd been following him for years, he'd seen what Blondin could do. He trusted him.

Jesus finishes the Sermon on the Mount, and everyone is amazed, but Jesus is not interested in amazing the crowd. Jesus never went up to people and said, "Admire me." He said, "Follow me." And he said it over, and over, and over. Come on, get in the wheelbarrow.

Here is the question: Have you wholly devoted yourself to following Jesus? Not, do you admire him? Not, do you believe? Are you a follower? Because this is the most momentous decision I can make, I want to be real, real clear on what goes in the wheelbarrow. My sin goes in there. My guilt goes in there. Then also, you put in your present and your future. This means your time. It isn't yours anymore. Your energy. Your resources. Your money. Your security. Those all go to Jesus, not yours anymore. Your life isn't about piling them up. Your relationships and how you behave in them. Your mind. Your sexuality. Your emotions. Your allegiance. Your language. Your work. Now, of course, I can't even do that. I can't live Jesus' life and Jesus knows that, but he says, "You can ask me to come and live my life in you."

I'll give you a picture of this. Several years ago Janet and I went to St. Paul, Minnesota for a little vacation. We flew into the airport there and as we picked up a rental car and they said, "Along with this car, if you want, you can also get a little box...it's a guidance system." Have you ever seen those? You plug it in and punch in your destination. It's quite amazing. A voice will tell you how to get to wherever it is that you are going.

"Do you want to add this also to the car?" My immediate response was, "No. That is going to cost something. I don't need that. I can find where I'm going without that. No, I'm not going to pay for that." Anybody want to guess what my wife weighed in with? "Get the box." We got the box.

There was this voice coming out of the box. Someone talks to you. It's a British voice, because people who talk with a British accent always sound smarter, don't they? You're just inclined to do what they say. It was a woman's voice, because...same thing.

Now, here's the deal: You can get the box. You can have the lady in the car, but that doesn't mean you trust her. If you trust her, what do you do? You do what she says. You go where she tells you to go. She says, "Turn left," you turn left.

Now, to follow Jesus means I will do what he says. I will mess up a lot. I'm going to need his power. I know that, but I form the intention. I say to him, "God, with your help, as best I can, I will do what you say. I will give you my life, my time, my obedience."

Here's the thing: If that is not your settled intent, then it's best to be honest about it. Acknowledge it, own it. And know that Jesus loves you no matter what, but he's calling you, imploring you, beseeching you, to follow him. Because being an admirer leaves you so vulnerable.

There is something else you need to know about him. At one point, when we were driving in this car...I was quite sure the lady was wrong. She said to go left, and I didn't go left, I went right because I knew she was wrong. Then as a real interesting response, she said, "Re-calculating route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn." I knew she was wrong...so...I unplugged her. That's the beauty of that little box. You can unplug her.

And...I got lost. And my wife enjoyed that immensely. So we plugged that lady back in, and you know what she said, "I told you so, you little idiot." She said, "You think I'm going to help you now? You rejected me. There is no way. You just find your way home by yourself." No, she didn't. She said, "Re-calculating route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn." Now see, that's grace.

As soon as you're ready to listen, as soon as you're ready to surrender, God will say, "Here is the way home. Execute a U-turn." That's repentance. I'll bring you home." That is grace. That's Jesus. Jesus is it. He's offering his authoritative wisdom about how to live. He's the only one to bring about the possibility of forgiveness for your sin and mine. He is the only one to give any kind of realistic hope of conquering death, of life beyond the grave.

He does not present himself as a good, spiritual teacher to be admired from a distance. He presents himself as master, as Lord, as the one to be followed and served and obeyed and worshiped.

You need to know this. Jesus message is clearly, "It's OK to be an admirer, but don't make that your permanent position. If you really admire me take steps toward me and follow me. Be willing to trust me about your life, your relationships, your resources, your abilities."

Here's the truth about me. Some days I'm a follower, I listen for Jesus' direction and I do it. Other days, I'm just an admirer. I think, "Well, Mr. Jesus, that's a nice thought, and I think you're great, but I'll do my own thing today." Either way I choose to live, either way you choose to live, his love doesn't change. What changes is what your life looks like.

Admiring him is safe. Following is dangerous. Admiring is comfortable. Following is adventurous. Admiring means you call the shots. Following means you follow the call. Admiring means you trying to work out all your issues yourself. Following means accepting that God can help you find the best way. Admiring means a little happiness along the way. Following means complete joy. Admiring means being alive. Following means being fully alive.

My challenge to you is to take a step, make a move from wherever you are to becoming more of a follower of Jesus. To look at your life and see where you can make a move. See where you make a U-turn if you need to. See what you have yet to put in the wheelbarrow.

Jesus said, one last time, "**Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock**" (Matthew 7:24-25, NRSV). And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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