

## **175 and Counting: Built on the Rock**

**Matthew 7:21-29**

By **[Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III](#)**

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Matthew chapter 7 as we begin a series on Biblical themes called, "175 and Counting." I want us to look especially at Jesus' word in Matthew 7:24, but if you have your Bibles in hand already, turn back to the reading that Billy did for the morning Scripture reading, and if you'll look at this phrase in 1 John chapter 4, this phrase could sum up the whole sermon this morning: "As He is, so also are we in this world." John is talking about bearing the moral likeness of our loving God and heavenly Father and Savior Jesus Christ in this world in the way we live, in our character, in our beliefs, in our behavior, in our priorities and practices, in our ambitions and aspirations. He's calling us in that passage to bear the image of God, to be different from the world; to be in the world but not of it, to be salt and light. And in the passage that we're going to read this morning, which comes from the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus brings to bear the same exhortation on believers. And this is very significant.

You know, about forty years ago, around 1970, a movement began for church extension called, "The Church Growth Movement." And it was deeply concerned to think with congregations and pastors about what the best way was to reach people for Christ. And it decided that the best way to reach people for Christ in this cultural moment was to remove anything that would be unfamiliar or off-putting to un-churched folk from the services of the church. So the call to worship and prayers were removed, long Bible readings were removed, hymns were removed, even preaching was removed. And these things were replaced with other things that would be less different than would be normally experienced by an un-churched person in this secular environment.

And the effects of that have been interesting. On the one hand, one entire generation of Christians has grown up going to church not having as a part of their services things that fifty generations of Christians before them would have normally experienced. I'll never forget a couple of years ago after a service, Derek had prayed — he was assisting in the service — he had prayed the pastoral prayer just like we normally do in every service, and a young woman, a college student or maybe just out of college, came to me to speak to me with tears in her eyes and she said, "What was that thing that he did in the middle of the service?" And my mind was spinning, "What thing had he done in the middle

of the service?" And I realized; "Could you describe it to me?" "You know that thing when he talked to God and he used those words?" And I said, "Oh that was the pastoral prayer." And she said, "I've never heard something like that in my life." And it was a beautiful, rich, Scriptural, pastoral prayer. I was deeply moved by it, praying along with him as he prayed, and so I immediately assume, "Well this is a young woman who's from an un-churched background." And I said, "Well you must not have grown up going to church." She said, "Oh no, my father's a pastor." And she had never heard a pastoral prayer in a worship service. So the effects of this strategy are interesting.

One of the interesting effects is that evangelical Christians today don't know the Bible because historically the sermons in conservative evangelical protestant services were expositions of Scripture, but over the last forty years that has not been the norm. Normally what had been an exposition of Scripture has become usually an inspirational or practical message on some topic that is immediately relevant in the minds of the hearers and it may or may not be derived from Scripture and it may or may not apply Scriptural principles. It may mention Scripture in passing but it's not an exposition of Scripture or an application of a particular Scripture passage. And so many evangelicals don't know the Bible. Ironically, very often in liturgical churches today, often liberal liturgical churches, more Bible is read in the course of the service than in many evangelical services.

But it's another effect that I'm interested in talking with you about today and that's what we're going to see as we look to Jesus' word in Matthew chapter 7. Remember, Jesus is speaking into a culture that is almost identical to ours today. Jesus is addressing a very religious culture in terms of His own people. They are church-going, God-fearing, Bible-believing folk but they live in the context of a larger pluralistic and relativistic culture in the Mediterranean world. The Roman world was very pluralistic, very relativistic, just like our own today. And so we here in Jackson live in — in comparison to the rest of the country — a fairly highly church-ed culture but within a larger pluralistic, relativistic society. And Jesus is speaking right into that and He's describing what His disciples are supposed to be and do. So listen to what Jesus says here in Matthew chapter 7 beginning in verse 21. Before we read, let's pray.

*Lord, this is Your Word, so open our eyes to behold wonderful things in it. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like

a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.'

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

For over a hundred and twenty-five years now, conservative, evangelical protestants have been defending the Scripture against the attacks of liberal critics and advocating for a high view of the Bible. In the 19th century in the wake of the enlightenment, German liberal higher criticism undermined the authority and the accuracy of the Scripture by denying its truth claims and attempting to point out what it considered to be errors in the Biblical text of a variety of natures — history, science, etc. — and over against that the great Princeton theological, Charles Hodge and his son A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, strove valiantly in responding at a profound intellectual level but a deeply faithful Biblical level to those assaults on Scripture. And they asserted the inerrancy of Scripture and the inspiration of Scripture and the infallibility of Scripture and the sufficiency of Scripture over against the various attacks that were coming from the critics.

And that particular discussion has continued to our own day and time. The seminary that is here in town with a long history here with First Presbyterian Church, Reformed Theological Seminary, was born out of this very controversy. If you remember, our dear departed ruling elder, Bob Cannada, I've heard him on more than one occasion give his speech called, "The High View of Scripture and the Low View of Scripture." And it was the low view of Scripture that was being taught in all the denominational seminaries of our old southern Presbyterian church. And that's one of the reasons that the Reformed Theological Seminary was created — so that seminarians could be educated in the Word of God from the standpoint of a high view of Scripture, of its inerrancy, of its authority, of its truthfulness, of its applicability. And so Reformed Theological Seminary was born out of that very controversy.

The same thing, of course, has happened amongst our Southern Baptist friends. Beginning in the 1970's there was a conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention to make sure that in all the seminaries of the convention a high view of Scripture was propounded where, in fact, a low view of Scripture had taken over. So when Al Mohler went to become the president of Southern Baptist

Seminary in 1993, the entire faculty and the entire student body stood up and turned their backs to him during his inaugural address because they were offended by his high view of Scripture. And it was interesting — the cry of those who were leading for a low view of Scripture amongst the Southern Baptist Convention had been, “Let’s stop squabbling over theology and go to the mission field! Why are we arguing about the Bible and about doctrine when there are people that are being lost? We need to go out and do work and do missions and stop squabbling about theology!” And so Al Mohler’s opening address was called, “Don’t Just Do Something...Stand There!” And his point was we need to stand on the Word of God. It makes no sense to say, “Let’s not squabble over theology and go do missions” when you don’t agree on the Gospel, when you don’t agree on the Bible from which we learn the Gospel. And so unless we stand there on the foundational things we won’t be able to do things together like missions and evangelism. It was a clarion call that was much needed.

But you know one of the things I’ve found fascinating, especially looking at what sociologists have observed in the last twenty-five years, is that they have noted that the beliefs and behavior of conservative evangelical protestants, those who say they have a high view of Scripture, have become more and more like their secular counterparts. For instance, if you go online you can read the kinds of statistics that are given by Ron Sider in his book called, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience; Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Or, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, two sociologists who did a survey of three thousand teenagers from conservative evangelical protestant backgrounds, and they wrote a book called, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, and they said that these teenagers do not believe in traditional Christianity; they believe in something Smith and Denton labeled “moralistic therapeutic deism.” And the five points of that belief are:

A God exists who created and ordered the world and he does watch over human life on the earth. Two: God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Three: The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Four: God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. And five: Good people go to heaven when they die.

And not surprisingly, the young people who believe those things instead of the teachings of Scripture, also in their personal life, in their moral life, look very much like the culture.

John Piper, in his book, *Finally Alive*, quotes some statistics and he makes this observation:

What matters most for my concern is the way the term, the label, ‘born-again’ is being used today and applied to people, in particular, the way the

Barna Group, a Christian research firm, has used it in reporting their findings. In their report, entitled, "Born-Again Christians Are Just as Likely to Divorce as Non-Christians," Barna uses the words 'evangelicals' and 'born-again' interchangeably and then reports this: 'Only nine percent of evangelicals give ten percent of their income to the Lord's work. Of twelve thousand born again teenagers who took the pledge to wait for marriage, eighty percent of them had sex outside of marriage over the next seven years. Twenty-six percent of born again or traditional evangelical Christians do not think pre-marital sex is wrong and white evangelical Protestants are more likely than their Roman Catholic friends to be racist in their views.' In other words," Piper says, "the broadly defined evangelical church as a whole in America and the West in general is apparently not very unlike the world. It goes to church on Sunday and has a veneer of religion but its religion is basically an add-on to the same way of life that the world lives, not a transforming power.

Piper says:

I want to say loud and clear that when the Barna Group uses the term, 'born-again' to describe American church-goers whose lives are indistinguishable from the world and who sins as much as the world and sacrifice for others as little as the world and embrace injustice as readily as the world and covet things as greedily as the world and enjoy God-ignoring entertainment as enthusiastically as the world, when the term 'born-again' is used to describe these kinds of professing Christians the Barna Group is making a profound mistake. It is using the Biblical term 'born-again' in a way that would make it unrecognizable to Jesus. Here is the way the researches define the term in their own research.

He's quoting from the Barna Group report:

Born-again Christians are defined in these surveys as people who said that they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated that they believed that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their Savior. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as 'born-again;' they were classified as 'born-again' not based on their church or denominational affiliation or even their church involvement.

In other words, in this research the term 'born-again' refers to people who say things. They say, 'I have a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and it's important to me.' They say, 'I believe that I will go to heaven when I die. I've confessed my sins and accepted Jesus as my Savior.' And then, the Barna Group takes them at their word, ascribes to them the infinitely important reality of the new-birth, and then slanders that precious Biblical

reality by saying that regenerate hearts have no more victory over sin than unregenerate hearts. I'm not saying that their research is wrong. It appears to be appallingly right. I am not saying that the church is not as worldly as they say it is. I'm saying that the writers of the New Testament think in exactly the opposite direction about being 'born-again.' Instead of moving from a profession of faith to the label 'born-again' to the worldliness of these so-called 'born-again' people, to the conclusion that the new-birth does not really radically change people, the New Testament moves in the opposite direction. It moves from the absolute certainty that the new-birth radically changes people to the observation that many professing Christians are indeed, as the Barna Group says, not radically changed, to the conclusion that they are not 'born-again.' The New Testament, unlike the Barna Group, does not defile the new-birth with the worldliness of unregenerate professing Christians.

Jesus is speaking into precisely that problem in His own day and age, and here's how He handles it. Look with me at Matthew chapter 7. Look especially at verse 24. What does He say? "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock." Notice that Jesus does not define His disciples as people who say things. His disciples are not simply people who claim things. In fact, what had He just said? "There will be many who say, 'Lord, Lord,' and I will say to them, 'I never knew you.'" So who are His disciples? They are those who hear Him and do what He says. In the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew in general Jesus says His disciples all do three things. They come to Him, they listen to Him, and they heed Him. They come to Him, they listen to Him, and they heed Him.

## **CHRISTIANS COME TO CHRIST**

In Matthew chapter 11 He says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." And over and over in the gospels, isn't it interesting, that the gateway into personal relationship with God is always through Jesus. So when Jesus is talking to the woman at the well, what does He say? "I can give you the water that gives eternal life," or He says to her later on, "I can bring you into the enjoyment of the spiritual worship of the Father." And later on to Martha in John chapter 11 He can say, "I am the resurrection and the life." Over and over in the gospels, Jesus sees Himself as the only way into personal relationship with God. And so His first message to everyone is, "Come to Me. Only I can give you forgiveness. Only I can give you pardon. Only I can give you acceptance with God. It won't be based on what you do; it will be based on who I am and what I have done for you." So the first message that He gives, and you see that message even in the Sermon on the Mount, is, "Come to Me."

## **CHRISTIANS HEAR CHRIST**

But then He says, “Having come to Me, listen to Me. My disciples listen to Me. They believe what I teach.” It’s interesting, when you look at these statistics and you simply ask the question, “What do people claim?” It is true that the statistics amongst professing believers and the secular society look very similar. The minute you begin to start asking questions about what a person believes, those statistics begin to vary radically. If you ask, for instance, the question, “Do you believe that the Bible is inerrant?” Suddenly the statistics begin to vary. If you ask the question, “Do you go to church every week?” the statistics begin to vary. If you ask, “Do you believe that Jesus was the sinless Son of God?” the statistics begin to vary. And it’s not surprising, is it? Jesus said His disciples listen to Him. They believe what He teaches. They come to Christ and they hear Him. They come to Jesus and they listen to Jesus.

## **CHRISTIANS OBEY CHRIST**

And then, they live for Jesus. They not only believe what He says, they do what He teaches. Notice His words again. “Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does them is like the wise man who built his house on the rock.” And have you noticed how similar this is to the Great Commission? Because of the missions conference we’ve been thinking about the Great Commission for the last several weeks. And listen to what Jesus says. If you look at Matthew 28 verse 19 and then the first part of verse 20, what does Jesus say? “Go make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded.” Now did you hear the three parts of that? You make disciples — how? By calling them to Jesus, and then what? Teaching them. They have to listen to Jesus but not just so that they have a bunch of ideas in their heads but so that they can observe all that He has commanded.

Now Jesus is not saying, “If you will add to your faith your works, then God will forgive and accept you.” Jesus is not saying, “If you will add to your trust your obedience, then you can become a Christian.” Jesus is talking about what His disciples look like. His disciples come to Him and then having been forgiven and accepted by His grace, they listen to Him and they obey Him. Jesus is talking about what we might call justification and sanctification. We are pardoned not on the basis of our own deeds but on the basis of what Jesus has done for us. We receive that by faith alone. Having been pardoned, God begins to change us. How are we changed? By listening to Jesus and doing what He has commanded.

Listen to what Charles Simeon says about this. Charles Simeon was a great evangelical Anglican who preached in Cambridge in the 19th century, sent out so many missionaries to the mission field and here’s how he describes Christians:

Christians come to Christ. This is absolutely necessary to their entrance

upon divine light. Until they have come to Christ under a sense of their own guilt and helplessness, they have not pretensions of godliness and they are oblivious to the curse of the law and the wrath of God. Secondly, after they have come to Christ, they hear His sayings, they sit at His feet like Mary, they desire to be fully instructed in His mind and will. With this view, they study the Holy Scriptures and meditate in them day and night. With this view they also attend the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper and receive the Word not as the words of man but as it is in truth, the Word of God. And third, they do not, however, rest in hearing His saying but they go forth to do them. They desire to know His will in order that they may do it. They love the most searching discourses because by them they discover the evil of their own hearts and they are led to aspire to a fuller conformity to the divine image; nor would they rest until they feel that every thought and desire had been taken captive to the obedience of Christ.

Christians come to Christ, they hear Christ, they obey Christ. They depend on Him for acceptance with God. They believe what He says and they do what He teaches. That's how Jesus defines His disciples. That's what a disciple is, and someone who does that is going to be different from the world and that is what God intended the church to be. The irony is, though our church growth friends with all sincerity, suggested what they suggested for the sake of reaching people for Christ, the most powerful way of reaching folks for Christ is to be different from the world because then the world knows that you're not about what it's about and the power that is in you does not come from it and the satisfaction that you seek for cannot be supplied by it. And then the message, the message, is heard. And so Jesus is saying His disciples are not those who simply say that they follow Him or simply listen to what He says, but His disciples are those who listen to Him and who obey Him. Come to Jesus who is the only way to the Father and the only hope of salvation. Listen to Jesus like your life depended on it. Live as if Jesus is your Lord and your treasure. That's what Jesus is saying in this passage. That's what His disciples do.

My friends, one of the most important things that we can do as a witness is to be different from this world, to believe differently, to behave differently, to have different priorities and practices, to not be like the world. Or again, in the language of John, "As our Father is, so are we in this world." To be in the world and not of it — that is crucial as we go forward together. Having been together for a hundred and seventy-five years, we have been given a legacy by members, by deacons, by elders, by women in the church leaders, by pastors who highly valued the Word of God. They had a high view of Scripture and they believe the Scripture against all the assaults of the unbelieving world, but they also believed that the Scripture needed to be listened to and heeded. It needed to be obeyed. Why? So that we will be different from the world. Will we follow in their footsteps? That is key to our witness in this community and we need to be faithful in that witness to this community for the glory of God and for our own everlasting good.

Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word. Thank You that You have spoken in the Gospel of Your Son. We ask that by Your Holy Spirit we would listen and listen carefully, believing what Jesus says, believing the Scriptures, and then living them out, especially in the storms of life, O Lord, where we so often find out what we really believe. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

Now would you take your hymnals in hand and turn with me to number 141? We'll sing, "God in the Gospel of His Son."

Receive now God's blessing. Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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