

True Wisdom

Matthew 7:24-29

Many of us will be familiar with the famous description of Helen of Troy as ‘the face that launched a thousand ships.’ To borrow that phrase, it could be said that this final reading from the Sermon on the Mount is the passage that launched a thousand Sunday School lessons and children’s songs. Jesus’ story of the wise and foolish builders, one building on rock and the other on sand, is another of the more memorable images found in the Sermon, indelibly imprinted on the minds of any of us who have sung of the rains coming down and the floods coming up.

This memorable illustration would perhaps have been even more compelling for the first hearers of the sermon than it is for us. Jesus lived and taught in a time when almost all homes were ‘self-build’ projects and not just the places where most people lived but also where tradesmen worked. Gerard Kelly notes that, ‘In a culture in which little leisure activity existed outside the home, in which few people travelled and in which most employment was to some degree home-based, the house that a man might choose to build would be the focus of his dreams and aspirations.’¹ Flash flooding was also a danger recognised by many in a climate where heavy rain can cause sudden surges of water down normally dry wadis.

The disciples listening to Jesus teach might also have been struck by the imagery of rock and sand. The description of God as ‘rock’ is found in several texts in the Old Testament to communicate the safety and security which he offers Israel (see, for example, Deut 32:4; Ps 18:2; Ps 19:14; Ps 61:2). For Jesus to speak of his teaching in terms of being like a rock is to claim for it a particular power and authority. We can’t be sure what exactly he is alluding to when he speaks of the storms which we might face, whether it’s the daily trials to be expected by any believer or the final judgement (which is described using the language of flooding in Matthew 24:36-39).

At the end of the sermon, we are reminded by Matthew that it’s not just been the disciples listening to what Jesus has said. The crowds have been listening in as well and they ‘were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law’ (7:28b-29).

We are offered no further explanation of how this authority manifested itself, but Gerard Kelly’s comments provide a helpful suggestion: ‘... it does seem that the authority of these words is an authority with its feet firmly on the ground. The wisdom of Jesus is a wisdom that embraces the lives of common people, that stands with them in the sweat and grime of their compromised lives.’²

¹ Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 97

² Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 101

Perhaps the final word on the final words of this sermon should be left to the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas. He notes the amazement of the crowds who heard Jesus preach but then writes:

‘And yet astonishment is not the response that Jesus would have from those who hear him. He does not want our admiration. What he has taught, what he is, requires nothing more than our lives. We cannot serve two masters... He teaches as one having authority. That authority, moreover, extends to asking us to be willing to lose our lives for his sake (Matt 16:25). Only the Son of God has the authority to ask for our lives, and that is the authority behind every word of the Sermon on the Mount.’³

For discussion

1. ‘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 (Matthew 7:26). When we read this parable which concludes the sermon, we are immediately struck by how stupid this second builder is. Why would anyone build on sand? Can you think of reasons today why people continue to build their lives on material which does not offer a firm foundation?’
2. Can you think of times in your life when you faced especially hard challenges but felt that you were able to endure because of habits or values that you had established in your life based on Jesus’ teaching?
3. Can you think of a leader who stands out in your mind because of the spiritual authority they seemed to possess? In what ways did that authority come across?
4. According to Matthew 7:28,29 the way in which Jesus spoke was clearly a contrast with the ‘teachers of the law,’ and the crowds who listened to him were clearly impressed. What can we learn from these verses about the sort of qualities which might be compelling to those in our own society who are looking for spiritual direction?
5. As you look back on the Sermon on the Mount, what passages stand out in your mind, either because of the personal challenge they represent or the challenge they represent to SBC? You might find it helpful to think about these issues using the imagery of these closing verses, as Gerard Kelly encourages us to: ‘Picture the life you have chosen to lead as a house, and survey it. Where are the structural weaknesses? What are the small sins that let the rain through the roof in steady drips? Where you are shaky, is it because you have not sunk your foundations deep enough into Jesus?’⁴

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*, 2006, 92

⁴ Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 98