

**Solid Ground**  
**A Prep Guide for Session Eight of a Scholarly Stroll**  
**Matthew 7.13-23**  
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The last words of a sermon can make or break the pastoral or prophetic moment. Some preachers spend hours on deep and thorough exegesis, labor long over the precise words of their script, and then slap on a hastily conceived last paragraph, just for good measure. This crash landing rarely serves the congregation.

Others relish their finale so much that they linger and luxuriate in it for what seems like an eternity. We call this circling the runway. When an excellent preacher friend of mine wanders into this second error, he relies on his brilliant and candid spouse to signal from the back of the sanctuary that it's time to land the plane.

As far as we know, Jesus did not take Preaching 101, but he finishes the Sermon on the Mount memorably, with a simple story that helps his disciples and us to realize why what he has just spoken has felt so true. In this, the last session of our "Scholarly Stroll", we'll hear those words with new force, gather the good that Jesus has done in this iconic Sermon, and ask what mark it has left on our learning and our lives.

**A Voice above Voices**

In Session 7, we noticed how on point Jesus's words were for identifying reliable and true voices amid the "cacophony of sound around us". In his wrap-up to the Sermon, Jesus transcends the confusion that his disciples (and we) face amid this confused cackle of itinerants and pretenders. He centers his own words as reliable above all others and claims that actually living them out – unlike the flatterers who cry "Lord! Lord!" (7.22) – will lay a firm foundation for the life that God intends. In 7.13-14, Jesus had summoned his disciples to walk the narrow path, rather than the broad and much-traveled way to destruction. Here again, he presents two ways they and we might choose.

*"Everyone, then, 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. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!" (Matthew 7.24-27)*

Each of the thousands of sermons preached and Bible studies led on these fabled four verses over the last two millennia have directed Christians toward reliance on the authority of Jesus's teaching. It was a whole other thing for Jesus to make the claim about his own words. This was different!

This self-referential authority would not only have distinguished Jesus's voice from the early Christian itinerants, but also from the rabbis whose voices the disciples and others

commonly heard in the synagogue and beyond. Matthew's narrator captures this distinctive quality as it landed on Jesus's hearers: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these words, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes." (Matthew 7.28-29)

Two simple exercises will help you prepare for Monday's class.

First, picture weekly traffic through the Capernaum and Nazareth synagogues in Galilee, with the Rabbis (mostly Pharisees and Scribes), whose authority rested entirely on their interpretation of Moses's words in Torah. What would it have been like to go up a hill down the road from those synagogues and hear a no-name carpenter's son tell you to "build your life on my words!"

Second, imagine yourself in a small gathering of Jesus people a few decades after Jesus preached the Sermon. You're head's swimming as you listen to one visiting prophet/preacher/teacher after another who claims to speak for Jesus. Then, as Matthew's Gospel is read out to you for the first time, you hear Jesus himself speaking these words through the voice of the lector.

Do these two things, and you'll get a sense of how sturdy this Sermon may have sounded to its two audiences – and among us.

### **Remembering the Immortal Words**

I get to preach every once in a while these days, in churches around the nation who hope to learn how AGAPE crosses even the widest chasms in our culture. Every preacher has a process. When I prepare a sermon, I begin with my open and close, then craft the moves it takes me to get there.

I want to try in this final Prep Guide to do in retrospect something that we purposely did not do on our way into the sermon, before we had read. I want us to ask after what makes Jesus's sermon cohere and flow. This is not an easy task, partly because for two millennia teachers and preachers and devotional writers have abstracted and excerpted until the SOM can seem like a random collection of gems. But as we've read together this time in our class, I've sensed more than before a beautiful method to Jesus's holy madness.

- **Open – Divine Affirmation**

My schoolteacher mama taught me to kick off class presentations with a hook – a vivid connector that captures interest and puts the audience on the journey with me. Years later, as I studied Roman orators in grad school, I discovered the perfect words for that function: *captatio benevolentiae*, which is Latin for "earn the goodwill". A lot of times I venture this step with humor or a life anecdote, at a very casual level, but there's more than one way home.

Jesus was not a classically trained orator, but he was the consummate Teacher (capital T). You may have noticed that he opens the Sermon on the Mount by connecting with his "audience" in a much more authentic, powerful, and significant

way than my toss-off joke or personal anecdote. With the Beatitudes, he dignifies their existence by sharing God's preference for them – against the grain of their (and every) culture's adulation for the high and mighty. Jesus connects by telling truth that is good news: they are the Blessed (5.3-12, they are the salt and light that the world needs (5.13-16)

- **Move One – Faithful Inside and Out (5.17—6.18)**

### **Deepening the Commands**

Jesus must have known controversy would come – that some would see him as a rogue pretender or a careless innovator. He anticipates this with the first section of the Sermon, when he establishes his fidelity to Moses and Torah. This opens the door for his deepening of the very behavior-based and broad-marketable way that Moses is being taught. The preachers of his time painted an attainable but not aspirational ethic: avoid committing homicide or extra-marital coitus, be good to the people who are good to you, and everything will be fine. To their low-bar lectures, Jesus says “au contraire”. He moves the blessedness of non-violence and marital fidelity into the soul and widens the field of people who deserve the disciples' love, even to those who hate them.

Through Jesus's eyes, Moses wanted more from and for Israel: a thoroughgoing flourish as individual and community. Attaining this wholeness requires changing the goal from “a little better than my neighbor” to “God-like”. It's no wonder Luther thought the Sermon was meant to break us and guide us to grace. But Jesus never even hints that his new standard should be anything but our standard.

### **Authentic Prayer and Piety (6.1-15)**

If the antitheses moved the center of gravity from the external to the internal on “thou shalt not” commands, Jesus turns next to teaching how the “thou shalt” acts of piety can move from outward to inward. As with abstaining from murder and adultery, so here with engaging in alms, prayer, and fasting, the whole self is involved in the obedience. The malady he heals here is hypocrisy – a willful and often insincerely-motivated disconnect between behavior and motivation.

Again, Jesus wants more for his disciples. This time, the lesser good is the admiration of people, while the greater good is connection to God internally. The behavior looks the same; but no one who does alms, prayer, and fasting secretly, “for an audience of One”, could be accused of being “a whitewashed sepulchre”. (Matthew 23.27) Rather, in Jesus's vision of flourish, the good that the world sees on the surface is generated by a deep relational connection to God within.

- **Move Two – Serenity and Stuff (6.16-34)**

In the famous “Don't Worry!” section of the Sermon, Jesus continues to imagine for his disciples a life in which outer states are generated by the inner peace they have with God. Here he woos them away from a soul-deadening worship of money and

stuff, in favor of a simple trust in God's supply that produces generosity toward others and serenity in the self. The juxtaposition of how frantic life is chasing more to the unhurried luxury of reliance is finally captured in a call to simple devotion: "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness and all these things will be added to you." (6.33).

We noticed along the way a striking absence to this section of the Sermon. Given Jesus's clear care for the poor and those who need, we would expect that any mention of money ought to come with a call to direct it toward that population. Matthew 25 is perhaps the most famous moment for this, as it pictures all the nations ultimately being judged solely on whether they helped the hungry, thirsty, unclothed, unhoused, sick, and imprisoned ones. But the sadness of the rich young man who was charged to sell everything "and give the money to the poor" comes in as a close second.

This mid-section of the sermon centers the disciples' relationship with money but conspicuously does not direct them to help others with theirs. Jesus is so focused on the vision of God-connected living that he does not feel obliged to add the object of the generosity of "the good eye" in his charges. Remarkable!

- **Move Three – Wisdom for the Road (7.1-23)**

The last bit of the Sermon's central core offers the disciples practical wisdom as they navigate their daily life in community, with its temptations – to condemn others without self-examination, to squander time and energy on fruitless endeavors to persuade, to follow the easy and popular path, to fall prey to false prophets and false piety.

This prudent path Jesus grounds once again in a trusting relationship with the Giver of wisdom through asking, seeking, and knocking on the divine door. This sage counsel culminates in the Golden Rule, which both sums up his most recent words and brings to a close the arc from 5.17 to 6.12 that is the substance of Jesus's moral teaching.

- **Finale – Solid Ground (7.24-27)**

Famous last words are a fixture in the history of human speech, and Jesus's last words of the Sermon don't disappoint. They offer firm footing. The one who began by truly seeing his disciples (and the crowds) for the blessed ones they are now ends by assuring them that the vision he has cast, the life that he is offering is a solid foundation for building a whole life. His disciples and all who will hear these words have an option – sinking sand or solid rock.

See how my sense of Jesus's flow compares to your own. I'll see you Monday evening!

### **Our Class Reading Schedule**

05JAN26	Blessed	Matthew 5.1-16
12JAN26	Deepening Torah	Matthew 5.17-30
19JAN26	Chasing Perfection	Matthew 5.31-48
26JAN26	Building Integrity	Matthew 6.1-18
02FEB26	Non-Anxious Presents	Matthew 6.19-34
09FEB26	The Gold Standard	Matthew 7.1-12
16FEB26	Discerning the Voices	Matthew 7.13-23
23FEB26	Solid Ground	Matthew 7.24-29