

### Location, Location, Location

This is a really nice neighbourhood. And you know, with the ups and downs in the real estate market over the last couple of years, there's a real mix of people the old residents, immigrant, a few big new house. And I think it's the mix that makes it healthy. O, sure, like every neighbourhood we have our problems, but since the Message, it's been different in this neighbourhood. Most of us were there that day -- it was just up on the hill. -- that one right there. Now, I've sat through preaching all my life and let's face it, not all of it is exactly *memorable*. But that was something else up on the hill. . .Woah! In fact we're still talking about it around here. "The Message of the Mount," we call it. And like I say, there's a lot of different people in this neighbourhood and not everyone agrees on exactly what we're supposed to do about the Message. But the really big question around here is whether it's even possible to live out the Message right here. In the neighbourhood.

Some say only a saintly few will ever reach that level. I mean "a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees!" Who's up for that? Some are of the opinion that live the dream that pious few would have to go away and set up some kind of a gated community – keep out the riff-raff. Free themselves from distractions, meditate, that sort of thing.

And us? Well, the best we can do is be inspired by their example.

But I don't buy it. The Message is for everybody. I was there and it was as if he was speaking to *me*. That's the one thing I remember. It was almost spooky. . .

"You have heard, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to *you*: Love your enemies. . .

Some take the Message to mean we have to draw a line between our personal lives and what we must do publically. For example, a judge in a courtroom *must* condemn a thief, even that thief is a personal friend. Kind of like, "Sorry, we have to stone you. But it's nothing personal. . ." But that's kinda weird. See, what I got out of it is, if you're going to be his disciple, you are by bound his words. There was no escape clause in the Message. It's a total package, take it or leave it.

Then there's hard-liners in the neighbourhood – the "born-heres" who always want more rules. I call them the "crack-down people" -- are always calling for stiffer penalties for this or that. Punishment. That seems to be their solution to everything! But, yeah, the Message calls us calls us to a higher standard, but you can't lose the love. You can't lose the freedom. You can't legislate neighbourly behaviour.

So we're all really not on the same page about the Message around here.

Like the other day, at work: we started talking about the Message and this one guy says, "Maybe if I *really, really* believed the end of the world was coming soon. Maybe I'd give it my best shot and live out Message. But to keep it up day after day, year after year? So the guys says, "It's not like we're always sudden death in the play-offs." You can't live like that. Not realistic. O, sure, the Day of the Lord will come – some day. But the Message is all about marriage, family, life with the neighbours – you know. We have assume we're going to be here a while. Find some way to "give back".

Some of us anyways have come to believe that this *kingdom* of God is already here among us. It's something within. And *that* is what the Message is about.

Of course, there's always going to be those who are all talk and no action. Those who think the Message is nothing more than one of the many ways "see" our world in a more enlightened way. But, you know talk is cheap. And every time I look up at the hill, I know that

Message is no mere call to “mental purity”. It’s an action plan – a *battle* plan.

But hey, I’m no white knight. I’m not gonna go crusading through the neighbourhood straightening everybody out. I have enough to do keeping my own yard in decent shape”

In fact, there are days when I think the Message is really kind of a judgment on us all -- because who really does live up to everything? No one in *this* neighbourhood.

I can tell you that much!

But just when I get discouraged about the whole thing, that’s when I remember the blessings:

“blessed are the poor in spirit for there is the kingdom of heaven. . . “

I guess the biggest step to solving a problem is admitting you have one.

If anyone can really live the Message, it’s Jesus. I really believe that.

And that gives me hope.

[put down rake]

## **Our dilemma**

The Sermon on the Mount continues to be a source of both blessing and bafflement for the church. Here, Jesus paints a glorious picture of kingdom life, but it leaves us with dilemma: how to live that life in an imperfect world where evil is ever-present? How can kingdom people withstand the pounding assaults of unbelief, cynicism and falsehood and hatred? This world can really “eat us up.” Some, in pursuit of spiritual survival feel they must withdraw from interaction with the world. But such faith always seems to lack any real practical value. Others, seem intent on living *far too much* in the material world, so much so that, for all intents and purposes, they no different from unbelievers for they are unable to integrate real spirituality into their daily lives.

But the Sermon on the Mount remains the core of what Jesus taught. But it does not yield up it’s mysteries easily. It continues to baffle. It continues to press upon us the crucial question: How can we be spiritually minded people in the concrete, physical world?

## **Nothing is more concrete than real estate.**

And as the Sermon on the Mount concludes, Jesus tells a short parable (Mat 7: 24-27) that really is the key to the whole message. : It’s a parable about real estate and how property values can change overnight. And the spiritual message in the parable is about how our lives are being built each day on certain values *and* how there will always be one thing -- *one supreme value that is really at the foundation of each person. That value is what they are really all about. It’s their bottom line.* This goes way deeper than religious connections or dogmas prescribed to us by experts. No. The parable takes us to *core of our beings.* What gives my life enduring value? If my life were a piece of real estate, what would determine it’s value? Any real estate agent will tell you the three most important things that determine value estate are . . .

## **Location, Location and Location**

So note where the parable takes place. A flood plain. In ancient times, (and even to this day), people *chose* to live on flood- plains knowing full well they would flood. Especially in dry climates when rain comes in one short season, flooding is a beneficial part of the agricultural cycle. A spring flood brings both water and a fresh layer of new fertile soil. But a person who builds on the flood plain, if they’re not careful, may have a deposit of sand beneath

their house. So when the torrential rains fall and rush down the from the hills and flood the plains, the sand will quickly wash out and the house will be swept away. To build on sand is foolish.

But notice: the wiseman's house is in the exact same neighbourhood. He too, built on the flood plain. He is hit by the exact same flood. In ancient times, and in the absence of irrigation systems and chemical fertilizers, people farmed on flood plains. Flood plains were prime real estate because the annual floods watered the soil, and deposited the precious topsoil that gave the fields their yield. Historically, flood plains are *always* the most desirable places to live. Yes, the floods will come, but the fertile deposits are worth the inconvenience.

### **The trick is to build your house on a rock.**

The truth of this parable is not that we should try and locate our lives off in some lofty community where floods are never known. Because regardless of where we live, there will always be forces in the world that impact our lives. And yet those very forces which can be so traumatic, are the very forces that leave behind the fertile layer of experience from which we can *grow* if we withstand their impact.

What do the storms look like? What storm is in your life today? Storms can be both within us or without – intensely private and personal or raging publically all around us. The storm could be *internal* force of our impulses and desires -- *emotions which* are not bad in and of themselves but can flood us and destroy us and those around us if unleashed in an unloving way.

Or storms can be the *external* forces of peer pressure, cultural themes, media bombardment. At times our culture seems like a howling wind whining and battering at the windows of the Christian home.

*There are also spiritual* forces active in the heavenly realms. In the Book of Daniel, for example (10:1,13) the response to Daniel's prayer is held up by a war in the angelic world. Our lives can be impacted by things over which we have no control. Paul reminds us that "powers of this dark world" are teamed up with "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

This is the reality with which we live. So it is wise to build on a rock.

So the first thing you do when you look at a house is . . .

### **Check the Foundation**

When we were renovating the Rainy River church, we needed to remove the concrete steps that led up to the front door. At first we used sledhammers, but got absolutely no where. The concrete just would not break. It was just solid! So we rented a jack-hammer, and found that, after an hour or so of deafening disturbance to the entire neighbourhood, we barely managed to break off a few small chunk, but enough to discovered the source of our difficulty. When they poured the concrete so many years before, the builders had reinforced it with chasis from old automobiles and heavy drivshafts from trucks. This make-shift re-bar was embedded throughout the concrete. We finally had get a backhoe to drag the steps away in one solid peice. The folks who build those old church steps believed laying firm foundations.

In the parable, the durability of the one house and the collapse of the other are not due to any weakness in design. These two houses could have been built from identical blueprints. Nor was the quality of the timbers and shingles and windows and door any different. It was the *ground* on which they were built -- one on bedrock the other on sand.

This story is about what anchors our lives to God. There are those who, true enough,

may have carefully learned and studied the Scriptures all their lives yet never have known the undergirding love of God, and they crumble under this world's pressure. Others may have only learned and studied briefly but allow that message of God's love in Jesus to become the steel reinforcement. And although they must go through the trauma of giving up on all they have ever believed. They hold firm.

Because it's not about religion. It's about the foundation. And the foundation is the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In Jesus' day, so much of the religious teaching revolved around petty squabbles by religious insiders over minor details of social behaviour. Ritual purity. Priestly finaglings allowed the rich and ruling elite to avoid what was really being asked of them in the Torah: to love God and neighbour.

So to the ordinary people who heard Jesus preach out in some farmer's field or a local synagogue *religion* was something to be avoided as much as possible. Religion was the tool of the rich and powerful. Religion grabbed poor people by the throat, pounded them with an iron fist, but lacked any genuine compassion and love.

But Jesus saw the Jerusalem Temple as "a house built on sand" – a house of religion without any authentic experience of God. A house ruled by the Sadducees who were book-bound slaves to the opinions of men. Who lived in a world of abstract ideas *totally detached* from real life of the Spirit and equally detached from real needs of everyday people in the street.

He was not like the Scribes and Pharisees with their senseless religious rules. What impressed people about *Jesus* was that he spoke . . .

### **With authority**

Jesus had a spiritual wisdom and knowledge that was anchored into the concrete of this world where there disputes and lawsuits and divorces and taxes, poverty and violence and oppression. And Jesus addressed these with issues with authority. There was no room in his thinking for those who could oppress their neighbours and then show up in the Temple to make long prayers. Such people needed to check the foundations on which their lives were built. And what's more, he made the *audacious* claim to be the ultimate "*building inspector*".

### **Read Mat 7:21- 23**

Who in his right mind would make such an audacious claim about himself? Just *who* does he think he is? Jesus was conscious of being Israel's Messiah. He was claiming to be the one who could be and do what only Israel's god could be and do. Believe it or not, he claimed to be God. And with that in mind, he tells them this parable.

The rain and the flood are symbols of God's final inspection of our lives. How can one escape the judgement if one's spirituality was not able to withstand life in the human world? If one has not lived with love for God and neighbour, why should God admit to even knowing them? Sometimes when people build houses they. . .

### **Cut Too Many Corners**

Some attempt to escape the issues of life through drugs or alcohol which can dull that horrible sense of insecurity for a little while. But it only comes back. So they come back for more and more of the *substance* until they're *addicted*. The substance becomes the foundation of their lives. They become so obsessed with the substance that it *begins to subvert other important*

*values*. Family life or work become neglected.

Some pursue money or sexual relationships or political power. But the bottom line is always the same: if we I we never really experience God's love, so that it becomes the foundation, we have built upon the sand.

### **Canons**

One of my first memories of life here in the Kootenays is a helicopter trip I took to the summit of the Kootenay pass, way up above the highway on Windy Ridge. Teams of mountaineers were installing the new avalanche cannons which are used each winter to bring down the snow before it becomes a danger to the highway traffic. These "canons" are large tubes into which, at appropriate times, are filled with a mixture of propane and oxygen and then a spark plug ignites the gas, which explodes, shaking the mountain and bringing down the snow. All this is done under the careful control of an avalanche expert.

But the canons had to be securely fastened to the mountain, they had drilled holes deep into the solid rock. They then placed large amounts of epoxy glue into the holes and pounded in high tension steel rods *fifteen metres* into the rock. It was on top these steel rods that they bolted the cannons. So when the cannon fires, it literally shakes the snow off the mountain. The shock waves are carried deep into the mountain and shake the rock.

### **God will rock our world.**

He knows what he's doing. He creates at will the controlled avalanches of conflict and trial and loss in our lives. He knows how to shake our world. But he also knows exactly what he's doing and exactly how much we can take. Jesus spoke words with power -- not as the scribes and teachers of the law. He is the Lord, His words **should** shake our world.

Everything depends on where our lives are anchored. Paul speaks of "the foundation which is Jesus Christ" -- the death of Jesus on the Cross for our sin and his resurrection from the grave.

But in the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus himself describes the foundation a little differently: he says the foundation is "hearing and doing my words".

But Jesus and Paul are saying essentially the same thing. We really can't understand what Jesus did for us on the Cross unless that act of love translates into action. The Love of God must explode upon us and rock our world. Jesus words are rods that carry the love of God deep into the depth of our being and transform our lives.

Jesus makes a far greater claim on us than any other prophet or teacher before or since because, in his words, it is God himself who speaks. The one who *hears* Jesus words is brought into the kingdom because this person is changed by love.

You see, there's one more thing about real estate: a buyer can find the perfect location, check out the foundations, find them to be solid. But they can't live there unless they can. . .

### **Close the deal**

My Great-grandmother Fuller lived way down by the lakefront on Empire St. This was coal-blackened brick, Victorian-era row housing -- some of the oldest in Toronto. It looked like Coronation Street. In fact whenever we tuned down her street, I could always hear that sad music [skat]. Empire St. was grimy and run down. On a Monopoly board, it would be one of the purple cards. At the head of Gramma Fuller's street was the Goodyear tire factory, to the west

Molsons, and the sugar refinery. To the East, the grim sweat-shops of the garment industry. Depending on the way the wind blew there was either the reek of rubber, or the smell of brewing beer and burnt sugar. We always loved to visit my great-grandma, in her skinny little house; but we knew this was the poorest neighbourhoods in the city. Nevertheless, Gramma Fuller seemed to like it, had lived there all her married life and we knew she would never move. But when she passed on, the family quickly sold her little house on Empire St. for a pittance

Today Empire St. is one of the hippest neighbourhoods in Toronto. Where factory workers once sweated it out day after day, journalists and software designers live in trendy loft apartments. Dance all night in clubs. The old Victorian row housing is still solid as a rock, all sandblasted, and clean, and refitted with new windows. A property on Gramma's old street today would literally cost you a million bucks.

*Somebody knew when to close the deal.* Somebody saw the value in what others would have simply bulldozed down to make room for a parking lot.

Which brings us the significance of this Table:  
God closed the deal. . .

### **At the Cross**

The religious elites of Jesus day – the nobles, the priests – saw the multitudes who gathered on mountains and in their synagogues to hear Jesus as nothing more than worthless trash – something to be bulldozed under, impure, defiled, unworthy of God's consideration.

Jesus saw them as prime real-estate in the kingdom. He would build his *church*, his household – “on the foundation of the apostle and prophets, himself being the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20). Jesus saw the inestimable value of our humanity as something worth laying down his life for on the cross.

So the Sermon on Mount ends with this parable of the wise and foolish builders. It is his way of closing the deal with us. Each one who hears his Message has a personal decision to make. He needs to close the deal with us. That closure comes in the Sacrament. Because if we really believe that God was indeed made flesh in Jesus, then we must do what Jesus commands. If we don't then we don't really believe. And he commanded us to “do this in remembrance of him.”

You may come to this Table today in some way feeling kind run down and worthless and shabby. The world tells us that in so many ways. We are constantly being undervalued. Compared to the gleaming people we see in TV ads, most of us seem to be living on the wrong side of the tracks – down in the slums. But God sees a value in us that a heartless world can never see. He sent his Son to die on the Cross for us.

Don't be fooled: there is a bidding war going on for each human soul.

But at this Table, in the bread and in the cup, we express the faith that only God can offer the highest price.

Because it's all about location.

And on Christ the solid rock we stand.

All other ground is sinking sand.