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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: Sand and Rock, Matthew 7:24-29

I don't know whether you noticed but school kicked off for another year this week. Anyone aware of that? In one way or another, you were probably affected by it, whether you are a student that returned to class, elementary, high school, college or university. Or you are a teacher. Or a parent. Or maybe you just noticed that those yellow school buses are back on the road and you have to be on the lookout for students' crossing. Things are busier. The campuses are bustling.

I think I know a little about school. Altogether, I spent 14 years in elementary and high school. I have spent another 11 years in post-secondary institutions as a student. I taught public school for ten years. My position here at North Park is that of the "Teaching Pastor". I think that qualifies me to know a little something about life as a student and teacher. I think it also qualifies me to give some opinion about the qualities that make for a good teacher, don't you think? I have had dozens of them in my life. Can I get you to do something for me for a moment? Whether you are ten years old or 90, think back on the teachers you have had in your life. Can you think of the ones that have had the most impact on you, your best teachers? What were some of the qualities that made them stand out? What are the qualities of a great teacher? Based on some of my experience, I have compiled a list. See if you agree.

Qualities of a Great Teacher

1. Excellent communication skills- speaking and listening
2. Knowledge and passion for their subject matter
3. Ability to build caring relationships with students- rapport
4. Friendliness and approachability
5. Solid preparation and organization skills

6. Realistic expectations for your learning based on ability

I have been fortunate over the years to have some teachers that met all of these qualifications and of course, I have had some that lacked in one or two or all of these areas. Just like you I am sure. Great teachers are a gift to us and if you know one or have had one in the past, take a moment to write them a note and thank them for sharing that gift with you.

Today, we are launching a new message series at North Park to kick off this fall season and it is entitled, *On The Way*. This is a series that has been percolating in me for about a year. I was convicted by the fact that we, preachers get up here every week and put together some sort of teaching on the bible. Oh, a lot of work and prayer goes into it but what if we just took some time to open the gospels of the New Testament and looked intentionally at the content and the methodology of Jesus' teaching?

Why? Well, because Jesus was the greatest teacher that ever lived. I may be a little biased. In scripture, there are a lot of accolades about Jesus but do you know what seemed to amazed people the most about him? It was his teaching. Look at Luke 4:32. There, too, the people were amazed at his teaching, for he spoke with authority. They were amazed by his teaching, it is like it was infused with power and authority.

Just so you don't think I am looking at this through rose coloured glasses, there are even writings about Jesus apart from the bible, that refer to him as a great teacher. Josephus is one such writer who wrote this in the first century AD.

Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works—a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles.

Jesus was a great teacher but what was it about Jesus' teaching that made it so impactful? What was it that convicted people and caused them to stand back and gasp?

Can I suggest 7 teaching tactics that Jesus used that made his teaching/ preaching so powerful? Of course, this is apart from the fact that it was infused with the power of the Holy Spirit.

7 Teaching Tactics of Jesus

1. Jesus told stories.

Jesus told countless parables. He pulled spiritual truths out of everyday life and the content connected with people. Think about the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus could have just said, "God loves you so much, he will welcome you back no matter how far you have wandered away." Which is true but Jesus chose to illustrate this idea using a story of a young man who disowned his family, partied away his inheritance, came home to beg for mercy and surprisingly was welcomed with open arms by his father who had waited everyday for his son to return. Which is more powerful, the words or the story?

2. Jesus shocked people.

He often used hyperbole. He taught using outrageous examples, exaggerations or shocking statements that got people's attention. They were not meant to be taken literally but they got the point across. Did Jesus really mean to poke your eyes out or cut off your hand if they cause you to sin? If so, we would all be walking around blind and without hands. No, Jesus was using hyperbole. He used shock and exaggeration to emphasize his point and grab people's attention.

3. Jesus asked questions.

When I was in teacher's college, I had a teacher mentor who taught me the value in asking good questions of your students to help them to learn. Similarly, rather than telling them answer right away, Jesus led his audience to conclusions by asking them a lot of questions. One time the

religious leaders were trying to trap Jesus and he turned it around by simply asking them a great question.

Matthew 22:20-21

When they handed him a Roman coin, he asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. "Well, then," he said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God." His reply amazed them, and they went away.

Questions stimulate critical thinking and makes the audience hunger for answers.

4. Jesus used object lessons.

He washed his disciples' feet to demonstrate servant leadership. He called a little child to him to discuss childlike faith. He described unselfish giving after watching a widow drop two measly coins into the temple offering. Jesus used props. Probably the most powerful object lesson Jesus used was his own life. He set an example of the life he called us to live by the way he lived.

John 15:13

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Jesus went and did it. He laid down his life for all of us! Visually communicated truth is far more powerful than just words.

5. Jesus crafted memorable sayings.

Jesus spoke poetically. He often used catchy sayings or play on words but we lose some of the power of it in our English translations of the bible. One example however, may be what we have come to know as the Golden Rule.

Luke 6:31

Do to others as you would like them to do to you.

Christians not only recite this memorable line but it is also a well-known expression in our culture.

6. Jesus used repetition.

Jesus helped his audience understand his teachings by frequently repeating himself. The Kingdom of God is like... Jesus says this several times

throughout the Gospels. He spoke of his death and resurrection over and over throughout his time on earth, although his disciples didn't totally understand what he was getting at. I don't know about you but sometimes, I need to hear things more than once before it sinks in. Just ask Carolyn. Things that get repeated get remembered. Let me say that again. Things that get repeated get remembered.

7. Jesus preached sermons but, he also taught spontaneously, *On The Way*.

There were times when Jesus intentionally gathered those around him, whether it was a crowd or a select few and had them listen as he shared with them some important truths. Much like we do each week in here. It is a little more formal and structured. More often than not though, Jesus would leverage teachable moments as he did life with those around him. In the day to day. When he came across a woman about to be stoned for her sin, Jesus was able to teach a lesson with only one sentence. Does anyone know what it was?

John 8:7

..let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!"

As Jesus spoke those words, the men around this woman departed and Jesus was able to reinforce her worth to God and encourage her to flee from her sin.

When he was a guest in Mary and Martha's home, Martha fussed in the kitchen while her sister sat at Jesus's feet. Martha asked Jesus to intervene and imagine her surprise when Jesus said that Mary was choosing the better thing to do in that moment. Jesus wasn't undermining the value of a good meal or serving others but he was reinforcing the importance of placing priority on those things that matter in the moment.

These powerful lessons were delivered without preplanning, as the moment arose, *On The Way*.

I guess that is what we want to reinforce throughout this message series that we are launching at North Park this weekend. We can come here each week and hear a well-crafted sermon (hopefully) that has been dutifully prepared and prayed over and

through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can learn a lot and grow in our faith.

But if we think the only time Jesus wants to teach us something or grow our faith is limited to one hour on Saturday night or Sunday in here, we are missing the everyday, spontaneous moments that he has for us each and every day. The way that he can teach us through joys in our daily routine, through sorrows, through the mundane and even through the secular. If we are anticipating and open to what he wants to do in our lives. Do we understand that?

In this series, we are going to go back and forth between the teachings of Jesus in a more formal setting and than those that were a little more spontaneous. The goal is to observe the way that Jesus taught. To be personally impacted and transformed by his teaching and to be more perceptive to the teachable moments Jesus has for us, *On The Way*, every day.

Are you ready to dive in? I hope you are excited for this new season and for all that Jesus has for you and our faith community.

If you have your bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to the very first book of the New Testament, the gospel of Matthew. Look what it says at,

Matthew 4:23-25

Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. 24 News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed—he healed them all. 25 Large crowds followed him wherever he went—people from Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from east of the Jordan River.

At this point, Jesus had already been baptized. He had already been tempted by the devil in the desert. He has returned to the region of Galilee, which was his home and he had already called some disciples to follow him and now it is like he is on a public

speaking tour. He is teaching and healing and crowds are gathering around him and he leverages that opportunity to do some very intentional teaching. In the Christian tradition we have come to know this as *The Sermon on the Mount*. Look how it is set up as the passage goes on in,

Matthew 5:1

One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, 2 and he began to teach them.

The symbolism of this gesture would not have been lost on the crowd around Jesus on this day. He went up on a mountainside and gathers people around him to teach them. Do you know of any other prominent figure in the bible that went up on a mountain? What about Moses? In the Old Testament, Moses spent a lot of time on the mountainside hearing from God. Jesus' posture of sitting was also reminiscent of Moses who was the first leader of the Jewish people and in this text it is like Jesus is taking his place as the new Moses.

The Sermon on the Mount stretches from Matthew chapter 5 to chapter 7 and it crystalizes what Jesus taught his followers as a new way to live. It outlines the kingdom way of life in a world that was oppressively controlled by the power brokers of the Roman Empire. From the mountainside and the posture of Moses, Jesus teaches God's will for the people of His Kingdom. The unique element to the Sermon on the Mount is that the beginning of it ties into the end of it. Listen to Jesus' opening again.

Matthew 5:1

One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, 2 and he began to teach them.

Then he goes on to teach them a lot of things. Now listen to the way this sermon ends, two chapters later. Jesus ends the sermon by calling the people to do what he had just taught them.

Matthew 7:24

"Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise.

It is like he is saying, "What I just taught you, I actually want you to go and do it. If you are familiar with this passage, you will know that Jesus doesn't simply stop there. If he would have, it would have been okay. Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise. We would understand that, right? It is pretty clear.

It would be like me saying, if you are driving in a car, it is wise to wear a seatbelt or if riding a motorcycle, it is wise to put on a helmet. No problem. That is good advice.

But what follows as this sermon concludes in Matthew 7 is what sets Jesus apart as a teacher. It takes him from being a good teacher to a great teacher. He says, "Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a...and he goes on to tell a story because visually communicated truth is more powerful than just words.

"Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse because it is built on bedrock. But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand. When the rains and floods come and the winds beat against that house, it will collapse with a mighty crash."

Is there anyone in here that does not understand this image that Jesus has presented here? If so, all you have to do is look at some of the news footage of the devastation that torrents of rain, floodwaters and the mighty winds of Hurricane Dorian caused to parts of the Bahamas and the Abaco Islands this week. Catastrophic. Those images reinforce Jesus' metaphor here. At the close of this intentional time of teaching on the side of a mountain, Jesus calls those who choose to follow him, to do what he teaches. Put his words into practice. Those who don't, are called foolish. How foolish? Well, he illustrates it with a story. Jesus invites his listeners to imagine two kinds of builders. One he labels wise and the other foolish. Why? The first one, the wise one Jesus says, listens to my teaching and follows it. This person is like someone who builds a house on solid rock.

The other one, the foolish one, is the person who Jesus says, hears my teaching and doesn't obey it. They are like someone who builds a house on sand. Why do you think these tropical islands in the Caribbean, like Bahamas or Abaco Island or last year it was Puerto Rico are so susceptible to major damage and destruction when hurricanes or tropical storms hit? It is because a greater percentage of their buildings are built on a foundation of mostly sand on the surface. Of course, when you are facing 160 mph winds, it is going to do damage to even the most secure foundation but the buildings that can withstand the storms are ones where care has been taken to dig through the sand and anchor into the bedrock located much deeper. That takes time however and often times, much more money and some builders neglect or scrimp or just can't be bothered to take the proper precautions.

During the time of Jesus, the area of Nazareth which was up in the hills, was surrounded by rock solid ground on which to build but the closer you got to the Sea of Galilee the more likely the ground was a sandier consistency. Due to its geographical features, this area was susceptible to intense storms and flooding.

The general wisdom of the day was, build on rock and the building will last, build on sand and you may one day find your home in a heap. One was a wise decision the other a foolish decision. So, why would people do it? Why do some build their homes on sand? Maybe it is because sand is the easier and cheaper route. It provides a ready prepared level surface that is easy to dig in whereas a rocky site takes more effort to excavate and prepare for building.

This summer, Carolyn decided to expand our gardens in our backyard in London. As we began to dig into the ground we found it was surprisingly tough slugging in some areas because of the rocky soil. It was difficult to get the shovel in there. A few weeks later at our cottage close to Grand Bend, I had to do some repairs to my septic tank so that meant digging down three feet to get to the opening of the tank. Honestly, I was not looking forward to the task given what I had experienced digging the gardens in London. After the first few shovels, I realized it would be a breeze. Why? The ground was different. It was all sand. It made the

job so much easier. Human nature often chooses what looks easy on the surface. Of the two builders in this story Jesus tells, one is thoughtful and conscientious. He deliberately plans his house with an eye to the future. The other one is short sighted and callous and chooses to take the easy route avoiding the hard work of digging deep to ensure a strong foundation. These people may never think of the long term ramifications instead just being content to live in the moment and present comfort and ease.

Here's the thing about this story Jesus uses at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. The houses were similar. There is nothing in the story that would indicate that the homes that the wise and foolish builders were different. They were probably very similar homes much like you find in some of the new subdivisions scattered around London. They all pretty much look the same. I hope you have caught on by now that the houses in this story are a metaphor for our lives. On the outside, we can all look pretty similar. We can project this outward image that everything is fine, can't we? What else is the same in the story? The storms. In both cases, the homes are struck by rain, floods and winds. Very often in the bible, storms that include rain, floods and winds are used as imagery for the trials we encounter in life.

Psalm 69:1-2

*Save me, O God,
for the floodwaters are up to my neck.
2 Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire;
I can't find a foothold.
I am in deep water,
and the floods overwhelm me.*

Storms are a metaphor for the trials and tribulations we have in life. Perhaps some of you are going through a storm even now. It feels like you are being battered by the gale force winds of a hurricane, everything is swirling around you and your life feels out of control. You feel like you are drowning in it all. The fact is, none of us are immune to the storms of life. In fact, scripture tells us,

John 16:33

In this world you will have trouble.

For some it is relationship strains, marriage break ups or estrangement from your children. For others it is health problems, sickness and disease maybe a cancer diagnosis. For some it is economic problems, financial woes and debt. For others it is addiction or loneliness, depression and battles with mental health. We all live in the same fallen world which means that we will have storms in our lives. That is similar to all of us.

Back to the story Jesus told. The houses are the same. The storms are the same. Everything looks the same from the exterior, from the outside. What is the only difference? The only difference is the foundation on which the structure, our lives are built. The wise builder builds on solid rock and the foolish builder builds on sand and when the inevitable storms of life hit, one of them cannot support the pressure and comes crashing down. Which one? The one built on sand!

If you build your life on sand, when the rain and the wind and the floods, the storms of life hit, there is a good chance, you will crash. Maybe some of you have experienced it. I know I have. That is what ultimately caused me to surrender my life to Jesus when I was a teenager. I was trying to build my life on all these other things such as popularity, acceptance and worldly things. My foundation was so weak, so shallow like sand and it all came crashing down. I came crashing down. With a thud! I was fortunate to get a second chance. To rebuild and choose a better foundation, Jesus.

In Ephesians 2:20 it says,

Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.

Jesus is the very cornerstone, the rock foundation in which we can build our lives. In fact, he invites us to build our lives on him. Some of us do and some of us don't.

As Jesus launched into his sermon on the mount, he went up on a mountainside, sat down and gather those around him and he began to teach. We are not sure how long he taught but the content takes up five pages in my bible which is a lot.

He taught about obedience, the law, anger, lust, divorce, marriage, loving your enemies, money, generosity, prayer, worry, having a critical spirit and he taught about the way to heaven. At the end of his sermon, he looks out upon the people gathered around him and says,

“Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. But anyone who hears my teaching and doesn't obey it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand.

The wise builder is someone who listens to Jesus' teaching and follows it. Jesus is the solid foundation of their lives and not even the harshest storms can cause them to collapse.

The foolish builder is someone who hears Jesus teaching and doesn't obey it. Their lives are built on the foundation of worldly values, shifting, shallow and unstable like sand and when those inevitable storms of life arise, it will all come crashing down.

The key difference between the wise and foolish builder, did you notice? It is how we respond to the teaching of Jesus? Do we hear and follow it so it becomes the very bedrock of our lives or do we hear it and it is like it goes in one ear and out the other? Or do we pick and choose which parts we like best and follow some but not the others that are maybe more difficult or harder to follow? Or maybe more controversial to those around us? That too is shifting sand.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives an invitation or maybe better stated a summons or challenge to not simply accept him or believe in him because even Satan believed in Jesus. But what Jesus is calling those around him to do is to actually embrace him and do what he teaches us to do. To make Him and the teachings of the Kingdom of God, the very foundation of our lives.

So, let me ask you today, have you done that? Have you made Jesus and his teachings the foundation of your life? More than showing up here every week and listening, hearing and believing in Jesus but, actually following what he asks us to do. Not picking and choosing the teachings that are easier, less controversial or more comfortable.

Throughout this fall message series at North Park, *On The Way*, we are going to look at some of the teachings of Jesus. Some of them will be more formal like those contained in the *Sermon on the Mount* and some will be more spontaneous as Jesus encountered people in the day to day routine of the first century world in which he lived.

Chances are we will be amazed by his teaching just as many were in the bible, but Jesus was concerned with much more than whether he entertained a crowd. His challenge to those around him was whether or not they would follow and obey his teachings.

As we launch this new season at North Park, this is a new beginning and I am anticipating that God is going to do great things in our midst as we engage the teachings of Jesus together.

I want to ask you, are you anticipating that God is going to do great things in your life? Are you open to it? Are you at a stage in your life where you just feel like your foundation needs a little shoring up?

This past summer, I did a lot of boating on Lake Huron. It is beautiful and the homes that sit along the shoreline are stunning but water being as high as it was this year, it is beginning to cut into the beach and eroding away some of the property on which these homes sit because it is mostly sand. Some of the cottages are precariously close to the edge and unless they do something to divert the water and stabilize the foundation, the cottages is going to collapse into the lake.

Maybe that is how you feel today. You have heard about Jesus for years. You have come to church and listened. Oh, you believe but grown more and more complacent. When the storms of life come to you now, you find yourself more and more beaten down and unsteady and just hanging on. Do you know that life can be so much better than that?

This can be a new day. By saying to Jesus, I come to you with an open heart today. I pray that I may see you in a new way through your teachings and my desire is to earnestly follow you and build my life upon your sure foundation. May I be aware of your presence and activity in me and around me as I live each day, *On The Way*.

Will you stand with me as I pray and if you are open to praying something like that and you feel comfortable, just open your palms to God and demonstrate that you are receptive for what He has for you in the days ahead. Let's Pray.

Points to Ponder

On The Way ~ Matthew 7:24-29

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Think of a teacher(s) that you have had that really impacted you. What was it that made that person such a great teacher?
2. Discuss with your group the qualities of Jesus' teaching that have made some of his words in scripture really stand out for you.
3. Can you think of a time when you were involved in your daily routine and somewhat surprisingly Jesus just seemed to show up, "*On The Way*" and teach you a valuable lesson in the midst of it all? Share your experiences with one another.
4. Share any examples you may have of times when you have built something on a solid foundation and other times when the foundation was a little more shaky. What was the end result?
5. What do you think causes people to hear the words of Jesus but not put them into action?
6. Talk about a time when you have experienced a storm in your life and although things seemed a little chaotic, you found peace and hope through Jesus as your foundation.
7. If you feel comfortable sharing this with your group, discuss those things that Jesus taught that are a little harder for you to put into action. What is it that is holding you back from trusting him fully in that area?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically that as we launch a new fall season, that people's hearts and minds might be open and willing to receive Jesus' teaching with faith and obedience and be willing to build their lives on his firm foundation.