



Series: FOUNDATIONS:
Standing Firm – Moving Forward
Sermon: “Doing the Gospel – How?”
Scripture: James: 1:19-27; Matthew 25:31-46
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We are headed into the last third of a series titled, FOUNDATIONS. There are three reasons we are preaching this series. The first is that we want to firmly plant and understand what the mission of our church is – the mission of our church is to develop fully-devoted followers of Jesus. That is why God has placed us here – that is what we are going after. The second thing we want to do is begin to cast a compelling vision of what the future might look like. The vision of our future is that a day will come when everything that we do glorifies God, grows disciples, and results in change in the world. We believe that happens one person at a time. The third reason we are teaching this series is to deal with and talk about foundational stuff – what it means to be a part of the body of Christ, and what it means to be a part of the church. During the last several weeks of this series, we are centering on doing the Gospel because we believe that our experience of Jesus does not stop when we accept Him as Savior; it comes with the mandate – or the compulsion – to begin to work out our faith in acts of justice, mercy and compassion and in ways that will change the way we live our lives and impact the world of which we are a part.

Why do we do the Gospel? We do the Gospel because faith in Jesus without works is dead and works without faith in Jesus is nothing more than hollow religion. When you put faith and works together and marry them – that is, the stuff of a vital relationship with God – that changes our lives and our world. When faith and works are separated, that vital relationship dies. A person who claims to have faith without works is like a person who puts all of their effort into building the foundation of a house but they never put anything on top of that foundation. Over a period of time, the house becomes useless because it gets filled with all of the muck and stuff that comes with the weather and the years. A person who does great things but has no faith is like a person who builds a house on top of a foundation of sand; it may stand for awhile, but sooner or later – because of the weather and the years – it will topple in upon itself. When a house is put upon a strong foundation, however, it provides stability and becomes a great place to live. Likewise, when faith and works are put together, it provides a life of discipleship that stands firm that will not cave in the storms of life.

James 1:22 tells us, “Don’t just listen to the word – do what it says.” Doing the Gospel is what we are about here – we BRING people to Jesus, we CONNECT people to Jesus, we PREPARE people to serve Jesus, and then we SEND them out in the name of Jesus into mission and ministry. That is simple, straight-forward stuff. Why then do most churches that I am aware of – and many individual Christ-followers – neglect, fail or have forgotten how to do the Gospel?

A few years ago, I attended a seminar led by Lyle Schaller – a Christian sociologist who has forgotten more than I will ever know. He has never had a thought that he did not write down and sell in print. He is an expert on how to grow churches. He said in this seminar that there are two distinct kinds of churches – each one founded on one of the great commandments of Christ. Do you remember the two

commandments of Jesus? Jesus was walking along one day when He encountered some people who wanted Him to tell them what was the greatest of all of the commandments. They thought they were asking about the Ten Commandments, but Jesus took this to a whole different level. He said, "The first commandment is this: you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength." In other words, the first commandment is to love God. Then He said, "The second commandment is much like that: you should love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, the second commandment is to love your neighbor.

Schaller then went on to say that most modern churches are second-commandment churches – we spend most of our time, energy and resources caring for our own and neglecting those who fall outside of the four walls or outside of our immediate family. He then called for us to help the church to become first-commandment churches that love God. If we get this right – to love God and glorify God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength – then we will also fulfill the second commandment – loving our neighbors and reaching out to meet the needs of strangers. This is what Jesus did when he modeled this by telling the story of the Good Samaritan right after giving these two commandments. Schaller concluded by saying, "Second-commandment churches stagnate and die while first-commandment churches flourish and live." What kind of church do we want to be? Do we want to be a second-commandment church that loves its own? Or do we want to be a first-commandment church that loves God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind and all of our strength, as well as our neighbors and the stranger down the street?

Have you ever read a passage of scripture that you would just like to drop out? This passage in Matthew chapter 25 is a troubling text; it is the story of the separation of the sheep and the goats. Jesus reminds us that our faithfulness to and our love of God is acted out in the things we do for others – acts of mercy, justice and compassion. He tells us how to DO the Gospel. He says I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me. I want you to notice something – these are acts of mercy, justice, and compassion that are done out of a first-commandment love of God because they are done for everybody, for friends and for strangers. Jesus is calling us to do the Gospel and giving us suggestions on how to do it.

Last week, I also talked about another seminar that I attended led by a gentleman named Frank Tillepaugh. He wrote a book that was transformational for me titled, "Unleashing the Church." He said, "We as Christ-followers, have either neglected or have forgotten how to do the Gospel. No generation has the opportunity to penetrate our culture like our generation has. We live in a time of shift and change and the culture that is surrounding us and is filled with broken and hurting people. Those people will be very responsive to the Good News that we have to offer in Jesus if we will do the Gospel – if we will put our faith and works together ministering to their needs and also caring for the strangers that are around us." Then he backed it up with statistics. He said, "Ninety percent of churches in America are not growing. In the last three years, zero counties in America had an increase in worship attendance. Jesus called us to be fishers of men and women, but most Christ-followers have become content being keepers of the aquarium. The only hope we have is to recapture the church and to begin to do the Gospel." He concluded with this statement, "If we cannot turn the churches around in the next 20 years, history tells us that we will lose the culture. Nothing has the capacity to reach the culture like the church does."

Do you want to be a first-commandment church or do you want to be a second-

commandment church? Do you want to love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength? Or, do you just want to care for people who are just like you? I think God is calling us to be a first-commandment church. How do we do that? I have four suggestions that I want to offer to you.

The first suggestion is to PRAY. I know this should go without saying, but all too often we forget to pray. How many of you have ever had someone ask you to pray for them for something, and you said you would, and you forgot to do it? Almost all of us have had that experience.

I have a mother and a brother-in-law who have sleep apnea – a condition in which people go into such deep sleep that they fail to breathe and become deprived of oxygen. They wake up more tired than they were when they went to sleep because their body keeps shocking them awake in the middle of a deep sleep so that they will get enough oxygen. In the worse case scenario, sometimes people die from sleep apnea. I have a concern that many Christ followers today suffer from 'prayer apnea.' For the follower of Jesus, prayer should be as normal as breathing. Just as breathing is to our response to our need for oxygen, prayer should be our natural response to our need from God – but so many of us get our prayer lives in such a weakened condition that we die spiritually. It is not until our lives are in a state of crisis that we are startled to wake up and begin to pray again. We need to pray if we want to be responsive to the things that are happening around us.

Do you want to be sensitive to doing the Gospel? Then you should pray. Pray that God will make you sensitive to the needs of people around you. Pray that God will give you a heart for broken people. Pray that God will provide the will and the way for you to help. Pray that God will use your actions to witness to your faith in Jesus. Pray that God will open all kinds of doors that were previously invisible to you. Pray that God will give you eyes to see ways of doing the Gospel that you were incapable of seeing before. Pray – and there will be no telling what God will call and use you to do in Jesus name; but you have to pray.

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement over 200 years ago in England. He knew something about prayer. Later in his life, he said, "Give me one hundred people who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God in prayer. I do not care whether they are pastors or lay people, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up God's kingdom upon the earth because God does nothing except for prayer." Are you willing to pray?

The second suggestion is to LOOK and LISTEN. James says, "Let everybody be quick to listen." Matthew chapter 25 paints a picture of faithfulness of someone who looks around and listens to human needs. If we want to be doing the Gospel, we need to learn to look for and listen to human needs before acting in response. Jesus said, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me." All he had to do was look around and listen to the needs, and He knew how to do the Gospel. What do you think Jesus would add to the list if He were talking to us this morning? I was an unwanted child and you adopted me. I was homeless and you gave me shelter. I was an AIDS victim and you gave me loving care. I was a young person who had no role model, and I was headed a hundred miles an hour in the wrong direction, and you reached out to me and mentored me. I was illiterate and you taught me to read. I was a cultural minority and you accepted and you loved me. I was a single parent and you supported and cared for me. I was a widow and you helped repair my house. I was lonely and you befriended me. I was old and you honored me. I was an

addict and you helped me find sobriety. There are all kinds of opportunities for us to do the Gospel to and for Jesus right in front of us – if we will just look and listen.

Two weeks ago, we had Ralph Bauserman here to preach, and one of the things he said during his sermon cut me to the quick. Since I was able to listen to it four times, I was cut deeper than the rest of you. Ralph said this, “One of the things that got Jesus in trouble was that He was always hanging around with the WRONG people. One of the things that gets the church today in trouble is that we’re always hanging around with the RIGHT people.” The question I have for us is – are we willing to hang around with the people that Jesus was willing to hang around with so we can look at and listen to them, to see what the needs are?

One night many years ago, William Booth could not sleep, so he woke up to take a walk through the streets of London. He walked across the Thames River onto the poorer side of town and, in the cover of darkness, he looked and he listened. He saw the pain, the drunks, the castaways, and he heard the cries in the night in their anguish. When Bill arrived home that night, he woke up his wife and he said, “I have been to hell!” Out of that nightmare of looking and listening was born the dream of the Salvation Army, which has been alleviating suffering and offering salvation to millions for years. What if Booth had not left the security of his home to look and listen that night to become aware of the needs and dreams of others? If he had not done that, he would never have dared to dream a big dream for God. People would still be broken and hurting. Are you willing to look and listen?

A third suggestion is to PLAN. Those of you who know me well enough by now should know this is not a surprise coming from me. I do it in my life, in my work, and I never come to a meeting without an idea of what ought to happen there. Somebody has to plan ahead – and it might as well be me. If I do not die when I think I should, I will be upset because it will not be on schedule. You see, I firmly believe those who fail to plan, plan to fail. Once we pray and ask God’s guidance, once we look and listen to the human needs around us, we can easily become overwhelmed. That is when we need to come together and develop a plan. You see, nobody can solve all of the problems around us by themselves; but, if each one of us tackles one and some of us come together and combine our skills and abilities and resources, what we cannot do alone, we can do together. We just need to have a plan. I have seen this happen in my own life.

Last week, we celebrated our son Joseph’s birthday. Beth and I both thought back to the time when she was carrying him when we did not think that he was going to make it into the world. Beth was about three months pregnant, and our oldest son, Nathan, was fifteen months old at the time. Beth was a busy young mother, I was in my first church, and I was busier than I had any business being. Beth began to hemorrhage. We rushed her to the hospital. The doctors said we had a choice – she could continue what she was doing and we would lose Joseph, or she could lay flat on her back for three to four months. She went home to bed, and we did not know what we were going to do.

There were a couple of women in our church who were praying. They were looking and listening, and they developed a plan. They found people to prepare meals for us the next three and a half months for every meal. They found people who were willing to come in and clean the house twice a week for the entire time so that Beth could lie on her back. There was a woman who had recently left a job and was not looking for work outside the home. She volunteered to come and baby-sit and wife-sit for 50 hours a week for three and a half months and would not take a dime. There was a list of people who I could call at any time if I needed them to come to the

house so Beth could lie flat on her back and they could minister to us.

When Joseph was born, the whole church rejoiced. I know the reason that happened was because I was their pastor; and we learned a lesson – if we can do it for one of our own, we can do it for anybody. So for the rest of my time at that church, and into the next church that I served, including the way we are going to live life here, we learned that we are going to pray. And we are going to look and listen and develop plans that meet real human needs – because people desperately need to experience the love of God embodied in us. Not just people in here, but people out there.

The Church Board met and approved unanimously a strategic plan for the church. This is nothing new for our church. We have had strategic plans about every five years for the last twenty years. This is the newest version and is the first time that we have done it with me here. On Thursday and Saturday of this coming week, I will be meeting with all of the ministry team leaders of the church to talk about the mission, vision and values, and our strategic plan. I will be working with our leaders to try to encourage them to pray, to look and listen, and to plan, so that we might be able to meet real needs into the community around us – just like Jesus would. Are you willing to plan?

The fourth suggestion I have is you have to ACT. I have been to all sorts of churches that have finely-written strategic plans that are in binders and folders on shelves. They are absolutely no good unless you do something with them. So if you pray, seek God's guidance. If you are looking and listening to the needs around you, and if you begin to develop a plan, then you have to work out the plan and act. That is what Jesus is talking about in Matthew chapter 25. I believe Jesus realizes that we cannot do everything; He knows we can do something. If we do not do something, Matthew 25 tells us in the last day, we lose.

So what is it going to cost you? Not much – just your life that was bought back with the great price by Jesus. Will it take some of your money? Maybe. Will it take some of your time? Probably. Will it take a realignment of your life? Possibly. Will it take your investment in kingdom work? Definitely! It will involve living a life of stewardship. Do you know what stewardship is? It is all that you do with all that you have once you have said yes to Jesus. It will involve living a life in response to grace. That is not much really for the gift of salvation, is it? Just your life. Are you willing to act?

Sometimes the stakes of doing the Gospel are really high. If you don't believe me, listen to what Jesus said, "Then the King will say to those at His right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, and I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When was it that we saw you as a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? When was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' Then the King will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"

Don't you wish it just stopped there? It doesn't... "Then He will say to those at His left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and His angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, I was

naked and you did not give me clothing, I was sick and imprisoned and you did not visit me.' Then they will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' Then He will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it not for one of the least of these, you did it not to me.'"

What do you want to be? Do you want to be a second-commandment church or a first-commandment church that loves God and our neighbor and the stranger down the street?