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The Wise Man and the Foolish Man

*Whoever hears these words of Mine and produces them,
I will liken him to a wise man.*

—Jesus Christ

During His ministry, Jesus Christ continues to preach the message which John the Baptist was preaching to prepare people for God's new way: "Repent, the kingdom from heaven is at hand" (Mt 4:17). As Jesus travels from place to place preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God to all who will listen, He calls some believers to become His disciples and "fishers of men" (Mt 4:19). From time to time, Jesus visits the city of Capernaum in the region of Galilee. According to tradition, the Mount of Beatitudes, located about a mile from Capernaum, is the place where Jesus presents what is popularly called "The Sermon on the Mount" (Mt 5-7).

When Jesus teaches on the Mount of Beatitudes, most in His audience are already believers. Not only those whom He has called to be His disciples, but also many in the multitude, have previously believed God's gospel promise to send the Messiah, and now they are following Jesus Christ, thinking that He might be the Promised One. Of course, Jesus is the promised Messiah and, furthermore, His teaching on this occasion is far more than just a sermon on a mountain. In this mountainside discourse, Jesus Christ delivers the New Covenant which God promised in

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Deu 18:15-19).¹ At the end of the New Covenant, which is recorded by Matthew (Mt 5-7), Jesus tells the parable of “The Wise Man and the Foolish Man” (Mt 7:21-27; cf. Lk 6:46-49).

What does Jesus expect from believers who want to follow Him? An answer to this question is given in John’s gospel: “Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples’” (Jn 8:31). Jesus expects His disciples to do the things which He commands and to continue to do them; specifically, they must follow His new way, obeying His New Law and Commandments handed down in the New Covenant. To emphasize His expectation that His disciples be obedient, Jesus concludes the New Covenant with the parable of “The Wise Man and the Foolish Man,” comparing believers who obey His New Law with believers who do not obey His New Commandments.

Luke records a concise version of this parable:

But why do you call Me “Lord, Lord,” and not do the things which I say? Whoever comes to Me, and hears My words and does them, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a [wise] man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock. But he who hears and does nothing is like a [foolish] man building a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream beat vehemently; and immediately it fell. And the ruin of that house was great (Lk 6:46-49; cf. Mt 7:21-27; Lk 13:24-30).

¹ The Old Covenant Law, called “the Tablets of the Testimony,” was written on stone tablets by the hand of God (Ex 32:15-16). When Jesus delivers the New Covenant to His disciples, He does not write the New Law on stone; instead, He speaks the words because, as the disciples hear and obey His New Commandments, the New Law is written on hearts of flesh, not stone, just as God promised (Jer 31:33; cf. Eze 11:19-20; 18:31; 36:26-27). Later, Paul declares that the Corinthians are “an epistle of Christ, ministered by us [ministers of the New Covenant], written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart” (2Co 3:3). For more information about Jesus’ New Covenant, see George R. Law, *The Law of Christ: God’s Will for New Testament Believers* (Pfafttown, NC: Ready Scribe Press, 2011).

Jesus is describing two types of disciples: believers who hear His words and obey, and believers who hear His words and do not obey. Jesus says one who hears and obeys is “wise.” In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is often attributed to someone who believes, fears, and listens to God. On the other hand, one who hears but does not obey is “foolish.” In the Bible, the word “foolish” describes someone who is acting as if he does not fear God (Ps 10:4; 53:1; cf. Ps 111:10; Pr 1:7).

In this parable, the wise man is building a house and the foolish man is building a house. Both do so because they know that they need to prepare shelter for the coming, unavoidable storm. In the Bible, the concept of “house” often describes one’s lifework, essentially, one’s inheritance. The coming “storm” is symbolic of a day of judgment. Here, the idea of “building on the rock” is set in parallel to obeying Christ’s commandments. Thus, the wise man obeys and is building his inheritance on a stable foundation; in contrast, the foolish man does not obey and is building his inheritance on sand, an unstable foundation.

When the inevitable storm comes, it tests both houses—the work of each man (believer). The wise believer’s house withstands the test, but the foolish believer’s house collapses during the storm. Jesus is teaching that the house of a wise believer, who has obeyed His commandments, will withstand the scrutiny of divine judgment, providing the wise believer with a lasting inheritance. On the other hand, the house of a foolish believer, who has not obeyed Christ’s commandments, will not survive divine judgment, and the foolish believer will lose his inheritance.

In Matthew, immediately before this parable, Jesus gives another illustration to reinforce the warning against failing to obey His Covenant. If a believer desires to enter His kingdom, recognizing that Jesus is “Lord” (the promised Christ) and hearing His teaching is not enough—one must obey His New Covenant Law (like the wise man). The setting of this illustration is the future Bema Seat Judgment where Christ will judge believers’ works. Some of the believers before Christ’s Bema Seat are calling Jesus “Lord”; they have eaten meals with

Him, listened to His teaching (cf. Lk 13:26), preached in Jesus' name, and done miracles in His name (Mt 7:22).

Even though these reports are true, Jesus cautions His audience, "Not everyone who calls Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom from heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in Heaven [he shall enter the kingdom from heaven]" (Mt 7:21). Jesus' purpose in giving this illustration is not to convince unbelievers that they must believe God's gospel promise to send the Messiah; instead, His purpose is to advise believers that they must obey the will of the Father if they want to have the privilege of entering the Kingdom from Heaven.

What is the will of God? When Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai and receives the Old Covenant and its Law, the Israelites are informed of God's will for His covenant people. Likewise, when Jesus Christ meets with His disciples on the Mount of Beatitudes, He proclaims the New Covenant and its New Law, and His audience is informed of God's will for them as New Covenant believers (cf. Deu 18:15-18; Jer 31:31-34).

Evidently, God's will has changed: He no longer expects obedience to the Old Covenant Law, because Jesus has given the New Covenant Law.² As Jesus starts to give the New Covenant Commandments, He encourages His disciples not to "break. . . the least of these commandments" and further informs them, "unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom from heaven" (Mt 5:19-20). To have the privilege of entering the Kingdom of God, believers today must do the will of God by keeping Jesus' New Commandments; regrettably, those believers who do not obey His commandments will live outside of His kingdom and not enter its gates (cf. Mt 8:11-12; 12:48-50; 16:24-27; Rev 21:24-27; 22:14).

Jesus exhorts all of His disciples, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate; for I say to you, many will seek to enter and will not be able" (Lk 13:24). Once again, when Jesus warns of the

² See the reasoning given in Hebrews (Heb 1:1-2; 2:2-3; 7:12, 18, 22; 8:6-7, 8-12, 13; 9:1, 15, 18; 10:9, 16-17).

“many who will not be able to enter,” He is not describing unbelievers who desire to believe the gospel but are somehow rejected (in fact, this does not happen—unbelievers are not rejected when they come to receive Christ, cf. Jn 1:12). Instead, Jesus is describing believers who have already accepted Him as Messiah and call Him “Lord” but have failed to obey Him. Consequently, after Jesus judges their works, these disobedient believers will live outside the gates of His kingdom.

In Luke, after warning that “many [believers] will seek to enter and will not be able,” Jesus gives this illustration:

When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to knock at the door, saying, “Lord, Lord, open for us,” and He will answer and say to you “I do not know you, where you are from,” then you will begin to say, “We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.” But He will say, “I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of unrighteousness” (Lk 13:25-27).

By saying that He does not “know” the one outside knocking at the door, Jesus indicates that He does not “acknowledge” that person as a descendant of Abraham or “recognize” him as one who has kept His Covenant (e.g., Ex 2:24-25; Jer 24:5-7). Generally in the Bible, “to know” someone is to have some level of intimacy with him or her. For example, the most intimate human covenant relationship is the one between husband and wife: when Adam “knew” (was intimate with) Eve, they produced a child (Gen 4:1, 25).

If Jesus says, “I do not know you,” denying that He knows a believer, He is saying that a believer has not maintained the covenant relationship. More specifically, this believer has not been Jesus’ friend because he has not obeyed His commandments (Jn 15:14); therefore, not having done God’s will, he will not receive the New Covenant’s blessings.

In Jesus’ example of believers standing before the Bema Seat Judgment who are calling Him “Lord” and presenting their arguments for being included in His kingdom, they list all the great things accomplished in their ministries: we have “prophesied in Your name,” we have “cast out demons,” we

have done “miracles in Your name” (Mt 7:22). Even though they accomplished great things during their ministries, Jesus declares that they were not doing the will of the Father. Jesus explains that, instead of doing the will of God specified in His New Covenant, they “produced lawlessness” (Mt 7:23) and are “workers of unrighteousness” (Lk 13:27). This is the reason Jesus asks those coming before Him, “Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Lk 6:46).

Paul describes the coming, unavoidable, divine judgment when believers will stand before the Bema Seat of Christ: “For all of us must appear before the Bema Seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done while in his body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2Co 5:10). This judgment will involve the testing of a believer’s works:

Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1Co 3:12-15).

At the Bema Seat Judgment, when a believer’s works are tested by fire, if his works are worthless, like hay and chaff, they will be destroyed. On the other hand, if a believer’s works have value, being done in obedience to Christ’s commands, they will survive this fiery judgment and he will be rewarded with an everlasting inheritance.

The parable of “The Wise Man and the Foolish Man” illustrates Christ’s teaching that a wise believer will hear and obey His commands, and his works will provide him an everlasting inheritance. Nevertheless, a believer who calls Jesus “Lord” and has done other good works and even has had a wonderful ministry, but who fails to obey Jesus’ commands, is foolish; he will lose his rewards and be left outside the gates of the Kingdom from Heaven.