

Day 1: Matthew 9:9-13

Our theme for VBS this week is: Jesus is our strong foundation. And as we are beginning this week together, I want us to really think about what this actually means. I want us to examine our lives and what kind of foundations we have been building upon. Is it God? Is it friends? Is it grades, things, or approval? There are so many options of “materials” that we can try to use as our foundation, but each one will eventually fail us. The one and only true foundation that will hold fast is Jesus. This idea is what we will be exploring all week. Today’s focus is on Jesus’ love for you and me. And not in a generalized or indirect way, but instead the very specific love and pointed love that Jesus has for you. Personally. Because He **CHOSE** you.

What does Jesus choosing you have to do with love?

Read Matthew 9:9-13

What do you know about tax collectors during this time?

Ancient Rome was taking over the whole known world at this point in history and they would use the people from the different regions they conquered to work for them. One example was tax collection. Obviously, everyone needs a job, so this doesn’t seem like a big deal, but the problem was that for tax collectors, there were no restrictions on how much “extra” they could put in their own pocket. No one could dispute them, or hold them accountable because they had the freaking Roman Empire backing every decision. These tax collectors were despised because they were in essence betraying their own people. Matthew a Jew, was extorting excessive amounts of money from his fellow Jews for nothing more than his own personal gain.

From this description of tax collectors does Matthew sound like a good candidate to be a disciple of Jesus? (circle one) Yes or No

Why?

Matthew was hated by his fellow Jews, but Jesus called him to be a disciple. After this life changing moment, Matthew throws a dinner party for Jesus and the other disciples. He invites his only friends, which are other tax collectors and some “low life’s” who had fallen short of religious society’s expectations. As Matthew and Jesus are enjoying the company, the pharisees pass by and observe what is going on.

What is their reaction?

Offense. The pharisees can't believe their eyes. How in the world could Jesus call himself a teacher and eat a meal with such despicable people? Rather than approach Jesus directly they questioned His disciples. "Why is he doing that?" Jesus, who is not interested in playing a game of telephone, responds and gets right to the point.

In your own words, what is the gist of Jesus response?

Hey y'all missed the point, and also, you are the sinners. Being religious, being good enough, having it all together is not what Jesus is interested in, and obviously is not the point, because we can't be those things anyway.

The phrase Jesus says "learn what this means: I desire mercy/compassion and not sacrifice", comes from the book of Hosea, which is a living picture of the crazy relationship between God and Israel.

Read Hosea 6: 4-7.

So, Israel basically just always sucked at following and loving God. But God never once has failed them or stopped loving them (and us). In the Old Testament, way back, God made a covenant with his people, which was basically a contract, but even more a super crazy binding agreement where like if you broke it, you die. Usually the two parties enter in, but God knew his people so well, that he entered both sides of the covenant for us (because he knew we are the worst) so that we could actually keep it.

In these verses we see the word "Loyalty". Israel's loyalty has failed. The Hebrew word here for loyalty is "*Hesed*", means loving-kindness, which many times in the Greek is used as "*eleos*", and it means mercy and compassion. Over and over again, they betray God. And rightfully so, God is less than pleased about it. Israel has got things backwards. Rather being a people of loving-kindness, compassion and mercy, they are stuck on law, rules, and sacrifices to make up for sins. Instead, God would prefer and intended for genuine faith and relationship. The sacrificial system has always been a symbol and foreshadowing of our need for the Messiah, Jesus. Israel didn't get it, the pharisees of Jesus day didn't get it, and many people today still don't get it. *God has always wanted and still wants our hearts, not our actions. He wants genuine relationship with us and not our ritual religious tasks.*

The pharisees know exactly what Jesus means here. He says "a doctor heals the sick not the well. And as the messiah he came to save the "sick" not the "heathy." As humans we like to put people in categories. The pharisees saw themselves as righteous and "right". They saw this group of tax collectors as horrible and "wrong".

If you could place yourself as a character in this story, who would you be and why?

I like to think I'm a disciple or at best the tax collector, but if I'm honest I am a pharisee. I put people in categories. I think that I am right more often than I am wrong. And the reality is that we all at one point or another can be each person in this story. Jesus said that he came for the sick, the sinners. And what he was hoping the pharisee's would realize is that they too, are sick. In their minds, because of their strict adherence to the law, the pharisees thought they were the healthy ones. They thought they had no need for a doctor, but the reality is: We ALL need Jesus. We all need to be healed by the "doctor." Once for our salvation and then again and again as we grow and mature in our relationship with God (the fancy word for that is: sanctification). It was Jesus' mission to come for us. To choose us while we were sick. While we were sinners, because without a doctor we are destined for spiritual death.

Romans 5:8 says: *But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

This is true love, that God choose to love us even though we literally did nothing to deserve it. He has shown his loving-kindness, his mercy and compassion to those who respond to his call to follow Him. Like Matthew, who was the worst of the worst, according to human standards, Jesus choose him to be a disciple. Like Israel, who was unloyal, unfaithful, and untrusting time and time again, He chose them to be His representatives. He chose you to be a part of His family and to be a disciple. No matter what you've done or will do. That is true love, true mercy, true compassion and we can actually build our lives upon that foundation because it will never be broken. This is our foundation, a God who loves us.

Spend some time reflecting and responding to these questions.

1. What are some foundations you've tried to build your life on? (friends, things, being "good", being smart, something else?)

2. What would it actually look like to depend on Jesus' love for you as a foundation in your everyday life?

Day 2: Acts 26: 1-29

Our memory verse for this week is Philippians 1:6. *"for He who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* This is a promise that we can hold on to, as we walk through life. Times get tough, hearts get broken, dreams get crushed but God is never done working. He won't start something He doesn't intend to finish. This is even more true when the problems in our life are caused by our own hands. Sin wreaks havoc in our lives often, and it might seem to hinder the work God is doing. We might be tempted to give up, walk away, or just give in but God is faithful to forgive our sins, always. And He won't let that sin get in the way of what He has intended for our lives. This was true for Paul, and its true for you and I.

Read Acts 26:1-29.

Before Paul had his encounter with Jesus, he was pretty terrible to Christians. List all the things Paul did in verses 9-11.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

In verses 9 and 11 we even get a hint at Paul's mental/emotional state. What two things do you see here about Paul's thinking?

1. _____
2. _____

Paul was a murderous, persecuting, enraged Pharisee. He was filled with hate and contempt for these people. Paul at the time thought he was acting righteously in the name of God, but it's easy for us to see now how apparent his sin was. Sin is blinding, and often we cannot even see it in our own lives. That's why we need other Christians in our lives to help us see, and if needed God will help us see all on his own.

Paul is in whirlwind of fury heading to Damascus and what happens to him in verse 12- 15? (Write in your own words)

Before we move much farther, I want to make sure you don't miss an important thing here, in verse 14 what question does Jesus ask Paul?

In Verse 9 who exactly does Paul think that he has to be hostile towards?

Don't miss this. Paul's sin was against Jesus. Yes, he was doing terrible things to many people. And yes, obviously he was sinning against those people. But ultimately his sins were directly against Jesus himself. Sin separates us from Jesus because it is a direct offense against Him. Any sin, even directed at other people, breaks our relationship with God. Sin, no matter how "big" or "small", is a big deal. Thank God for the Cross.

Reminiscent of yesterday's lesson, in the middle of Paul's wretched sin, what does Jesus do next in verses 15-18?

Jesus picks him up off his feet, dusts him off and gives him a job. Paul is forgiven there and then and Jesus places a purpose and calling on his life. Instead of persecuting and killing all who follow Christ, he is to now be a witness and preacher of Christ. He is to become like those he persecuted. Now we know from other scriptures that Paul, confessed and repented of his sin. His immediate obedience to Jesus' direction during this encounter is evidence to his changed heart.

In your own words retell the conversation between Paul and Agrippa from Verses 19-29.

This story takes place towards the end of Paul's life. And as we can see in Paul's recounting to Agrippa, he has been faithful to what Jesus directed him to do. He was forgiven by Jesus and able to participate in the work God had determined for him. Jesus started a work in Paul even before he encountered Jesus on the road. While Paul was obedient to him, Jesus carried that work and finished it in Paul's life. I am sure Paul continued to sin throughout his life, but that's why God is awesome, because he forgives.

1 John 1:9 tells us that *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* This is a foundation that we can build our life on. Sin breaks down. Satan accuses and demolishes. God will build up and mend our lives upon His forgiveness. When we

understand that God will always forgive us, we can continue with confidence. We can and will do the work God has called us to because He is faithful to us. Like Israel, we sin and we always will, but that is what makes God so amazing. He chooses to use us anyway. He chose to provide a way to stop sin with Jesus on the cross. He provides direction when we don't know what to do. He gives us strength when we are weak. He forgives us when we mess up. He is faithful when we are not. We can take courage in the fact that even though we are sinners who offend God on the daily, He is faithful to forgive us. He will not give up on us. We can be confident that whatever God has started in our lives, He is going to finish. He won't leave us hanging. This is our foundation, a God who loves us and a God who forgives us.

Spend some time reflecting and responding to these questions.

What are some areas of sin in your life that you need to confess and ask God for forgiveness?

What purpose or calling do you think God is working in your life?

Action Step: Take a sharpie from the kitchen table and write the word forgiven on your hand or wrist. As you go through the day, let it remind you of what you read this morning. Let it remind you that you are forgiven and called by God.

Day 3: Matthew 26:36-46

What is worth? What is value? You've heard these words before. We use them quite often. We ascribe value and worth to just about anything. To things, ideas, places or even people. You might be picturing things in your mind that are expensive or people who are precious to you. But we also assign worth in the opposite direction. We can very easily think of things, ideas, places, and people that we decide are worthless. They hold little to no value at all for us. Across the board each of these things will have a different worth depending on who you ask.

Do you have people in your life who think you hold great worth? Do you have people in your life who think you are worthless? The answer is yes to both of these questions. But here is the tea, *any assessment of you made by man, of either positive or negative value means nothing in comparison to the opinion of God.* Read that sentence again, I'll wait.

No really, read it again. God is the only one who can assign true worth. And the good news is that He has already assessed and determined our value.

Read Matthew 26:36-46.

What does this story have to do with our worth?

Often when we hear this story of Jesus praying in the garden, we are told to think of Jesus suffering or fear, and then focus on His trust in and submission to God. Or we talk about how weak human flesh is and that the disciples couldn't even stay awake. These things are true and good lessons to study and learn from but I want to approach this story from yet another perspective. I want to approach this from the eyes and emotions of God the Father.

So here is another story to help us picture what's happening in the garden.

Once upon a time a father took his children on a hike. The father loved to spend time with his children and help them discover new things. For this particular hike he was going to take them to his favorite place. It was a gorgeous meadow that contained one of the rarest flowers in the world. It was a very special place to the father and he was excited to share it with his children. The father decided to take all of his children, the oldest brother, both sisters and even the littlest brother who was five.

Now to get the meadow, the family had to cross a ravine with an old bridge. The father had crossed this bridge many times before, since he was the one who made it when he was a young man. He knew exactly where the weak spots were, which places to step, and how slowly to go across. Jumping on or swaying the bridge was not a good idea. As they crossed each one followed the father's movements and footsteps carefully. They made it safely across. The family spent the day wandering, discovering flowers, and even playing in a river. The father enjoyed the company of his children and they in turn enjoyed the company of their father and each other. It was a pleasant day, a perfect day even, and the father was overjoyed.

The sun was setting and it would be dark soon. It was time to return home. The children were tired and as they walked back the house, they began to fight with each other. The little one complained

that he couldn't walk one more step. The sisters bickered and yelled at the little one to stop complaining. The older brother, silent, scooped up the little one and carried him on his shoulders. This relieved some of the "noise" but there was still fatigue and tension in the group. The father lead his family on, knowing that they were almost to the bridge and would be home soon.

Upon the sight of the bridge in the distance, the bickering sisters began to run. In their urgency to return home they forgot the father's instructions. They did not wait for him to cross the bridge. When the father realized what was happening, he yelled out for them to stop but they did not listen and charged on. The oldest brother, recognizing the danger and knowing he was faster than his father, tried to run after them. The little one still bouncing on his shoulders. The girls stepped on the first planks, then continued to bounce their way across. The older brother was now just a few paces behind them, while knowing the danger, he only slowed a little so that he could reach them in time. To the father's horror, now all four children were on the bridge. The girls would not stop running despite his urgent instruction and warnings. As the father helplessly watched, the bridge broke out from under their feet. The girls clung to the ropes. The oldest brother tried to toss the little one to the edge as best he could while scrambling to hang on himself. The father rushed to the edge with fear looked down into the chaos. The youngest was crawling up the bridge like a ladder, the two girls were securely holding a dangling rope while the oldest brother managed to grab the very edge of the bridge before it had separated. The father began to pull up the bridge as best he could. The little one was scared. They all were. The father pulled and pulled. There was little progress. The father could see the strain on the ropes. Knots loosening. He knew it was a matter of minutes before everything would fall apart and all his children would be lost.

The father did not have the strength to pull all 4 children at once. One had to be sacrificed to save the others. The father had no time to waste. He looked his oldest son in the eyes.

"Son", he said. "You have to let go."

The son in disbelief says, "you have to think of something. I'm scared".

"There is no time, son. I love you." Responded the father.

Knowing the answer the son asks, "Is there any other way?"

With an immeasurable amount of pain in his heart the father says, "This is the only way to save them. I love you."

"I am afraid. But if you say this is the only way I will do it."

The father watches with hot tears stinging his eyes, as his oldest son grits his teeth and let's go of the rope. The rest of the children scream and cry as the father is now able to pull them all up to safety. The father holds his children, and weeps tears of grief and joy because he did not lose all of his children because of the selflessness of his oldest son.

This is our story with God. This is the story of God the Father and Jesus. While it's not the perfect analogy, it draws us towards the emotions surrounding the sacrifice that was necessary. Jesus Praying in the garden, is the father and sons last exchange before the "oldest son" lets go of the rope. Three times Jesus in anguish asks God. "Is this the only way? Do I really have to die?" And the father says, "yes, my son. You have to die, you have to go to the cross, because they are worth it." God wants his children. Going through the horrific pain of watching his beloved son die was worth having a relationship with you.

I think when we have been around church long enough, we hear that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, over and over, and we can become desensitized to it. We know the significance of the story but it doesn't affect us. For any number of reasons, we can become callous.

When you hear the story of the cross how does it affect you, if at all?

Jesus Chose to die for you because He believed you were worth the price of dying. You matter to God. You have value to God. Jesus' death is proof that this is what God thinks of you and me. He endured the heartache of watching His son die. Jesus endured the pain, torture and full wrath of God, because He thinks YOU ARE WORTH IT. You matter that much to God.

We can stand on a foundation of worth because we know that we matter to God. No one else's opinion of our worth has any significant importance. He said we are worth it, and we can build our lives around that truth. This is our foundation: a God who loves us, a God who forgives us, and a God who thinks we are worth it.

Spend some time thinking and responding to these questions.

Do you ever struggle with you sense of worth? Why or why not?

Look at your answer for how the story of the gospel affects you on page 8. Do you need a fresh perspective? What needs to change in your life to allow the gospel to bring you to feelings of gratitude and praise?

Action Step: Today, take the coin from the front of the folder, and place it in your pocket. Whenever you feel it. Remember your worth before God, and say a short prayer of praise thanking Jesus for his sacrifice on the cross.

Day 4: Matthew 28: 1-10 and 16-20.

Yesterday, we talked about the fact that Jesus thinks your worth it, so much so, that He died. But today even better news is that He rose from the dead three days later, just like He said He would. He conquered death once and for all.

Like here's the thing about God, if He says He's going to do it, He does it. God cannot lie, and He will always keep His promises. Jesus is our firm foundation of promise.

Read John 2 :18-21

Write in your own words what Jesus said was going to happen:

Read Matthew 28:1-10

Write in your own words how this passage confirms what Jesus said.

Over and over again God says He is going to do something and then He does it. The Bible is full of promises that God makes to His children. Abraham had a baby when he was an old man, walls fell down, nations were won, a baby was born to a virgin, the messiah healed people, and then He rose from the dead. Provision, purpose, strength, salvation, the list goes on. God is faithful to keep His promises.

Read Matthew 28: 16-20.

What promise does God make in this passage?

What does this promise mean for you and me?

In John's Gospel, Jesus promised His disciples that the helper would come. He would not leave them alone. Not being bound in human form, the Holy Spirit can be with every believer at all times and in all places. This is how Jesus can be with us always. We see Jesus make good on his promise in the beginning of Acts.

Read Acts 2:1-12.

In your own words write what is happening in this story.

The disciples went from asking a million dumb questions to being filled with the spirit and preaching to crowds in different languages. They had wisdom, and actually knew what to say. They were bold and not afraid. The Holy Spirit gives us power, strength, wisdom, and/or help in every situation. Everything that we need. Like the disciples, God promises to give us the power to be bold. He will give us words to speak, and the wisdom we need in all things. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit is always with us. We are not left as orphans. Do you recognize how amazing this fact is? We are not alone in this Christian life. Think of our memory Verse. "I am sure of this that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God promises that He is not done with you. You are not finished but still a work in progress. God is not going to leave you alone in that work. He is with you in the working. He is present in your life. What a promise! This is our foundation: a God who loves us, a God who forgives us, a God who thinks we are worth it, and a God who will always keep his word.

Spend some time thoughtfully considering and writing about this question:

What should the promise, *Jesus will always be with you*, actually look like in your real life? Be specific!

Now is this really what it looks like for you? Why or why not?

Day 5: Matthew 7: 24-29

Think back to day one. I asked you to think about what kind of foundation have you been building your life on. I want you to do that again as we are ending our week together. What is your foundation? So far, we have learned that Jesus is our foundation of love, forgiveness, worth, and promise. I hope your starting to understand that what we build on matters. This truth is the most basic thing an architect needs to understand when designing a home. Any logical person can understand this idea and even Jesus taught this in His most famous sermon.

Read Matthew 7:24-29

What is the basic principle Jesus is teaching here?

Do you get it? Solid, firm, sturdy foundation = good. Shaky, loose, uneven foundation = bad. What is your foundation? As a Christian the right answer is Jesus, obviously, but sometimes it's easier to say and harder to actually implement. What does it mean to actually stand on Jesus as our foundation to life? It just sounds so vague.

Look at our verse again I want you to fill in the blanks.

"Therefore, everyone who _____ these words of Mine and _____ on them will be like a _____ man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the rivers rose, and the winds blew and pounded that house. Yet it didn't collapse, because its foundation was on the rock. ²⁶ But everyone who _____ these words of Mine and _____ on them will be like a _____ man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, the rivers rose, the winds blew and pounded that house, and it collapsed. And its collapse was great!"

What do you observe is the key to being wise or foolish?

The key to being wise or foolish is directly linked to obedience to God's instruction. Jesus uses this parable as the ending to his sermon on the mount. Why? Because basically, what He is trying to tell them is this: *"hey guys look, I just said a whole bunch of really good stuff about what it means to be my followers. If you actually do it, you will be blessed, you'll be wise, you'll be able to endure. You have to hear it and do it. But if you don't, you hear it and then do nothing about it, then your life will literally crumble to the ground."* -the Harmony paraphrase version.

Jesus instructions, His commands for our lives are not restrictions, but instead actually tools that build our lives into the best that they can be. Jesus words and instructions give us life. Our obedience makes us able to stand. Sin or disobedience, can only bring us destruction. Sin can only destroy.

So, in a very practical way, if you want to build your life on Jesus as your foundation what do you have to do?

Listen and obey.

Do you want to be follower of Jesus? Listen and obey. Do you want to find your purpose? Listen and obey. Do you want to not have anxiety? Listen and obey. Do you want to have meaningful and deep friendships? Listen and obey. Do you want to experience joy? Listen and obey. Do you want to feel love and give love? Listen and obey.

Listen AND obey. It's that simple and that hard.

Is it hard for you to obey God? Why or why not?

Wisdom comes from obedience. Foolishness comes from disobedience. God loves you and thinks you are worth everything. He has forgiven you and promises that He will always be with you. Does it make sense that he would ask you to obey things that might harm or hinder you? Or that he might ask things of you for no reason? No, it doesn't. But it does make sense that a God who loves you deeply and wants nothing more than to be in relationship with you, is going to ask you to obey things that are going to fulfill his intentions of love, purpose, and relationship with you.

What kind of foundation have you been building your life on? Is it God? Is it friends? Is it grades, or things, or approval? Jesus is our foundation of love; He chose to love you. Jesus is our foundation of forgiveness; it doesn't matter what we have done. Jesus is our foundation of worth; He decided you are worth the greatest sacrifice. Jesus is our foundation of promise; He will always be with you. We will be wise when we listen and obey Him. To reject his instruction and disobey is foolishness. Jesus is our strong foundation.

What have you learned this week about God that is new?

Have you developed a new perspective on what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus? Describe it.
