

Date: December 31, 2022 - January 1, 2023

Title: *A New Hope*

Scripture: Matthew 7:24-29

Speaker: Dan Irvin

Well, good morning, everyone, and happy New Year again. I don't know how many times you can say Happy New Year. I once had someone tell me on January 21st, Happy New Year. I thought that was too late. But it is good to be together this morning. I am Dan Irvin, the Strip District Campus Leader. And wherever you are this morning, whether you're watching online, at one of our campuses, Butler, Southpointe, or all my friends down in the Strip District, it's good to be together today.

I have been the Strip District Campus Leader for about ten months now, give or take. And Orchard Hill has been a part of my life for the last twenty-plus years. So, I'm very excited to be together this morning and to get to share with you. And if you looked in the Friday email that Orchard Hill sends out or maybe you just saw online, the title of today's message is actually *A New Hope*.

And this is the honest-to-goodness truth, a week ago, someone in the office told me that *A New Hope* is the title of a Star Wars film. I had no idea. No idea. I have never seen Star Wars. I tried one time. I just couldn't get into it. I'm sorry. Some of you are very offended by that statement, but this message today has nothing to do with Star Wars. So, if you came this morning and expected to see stormtroopers or Chris Jamison dressed as Chewbacca - I'm sorry. It has nothing to do with Star Wars today, but I am excited, and I'd like to pray before we begin.

Father God, thank you for your word. Thank you for the way that you have ushered in a new year. And I am excited to be able to share this morning the hope that we have in you. Lord, I pray this morning for all of us here today, wherever we may be, that you would speak directly to our hearts from your word and that you may remind us of how much you love us. It's in your name that we pray. Amen.

So it is that time when typically, at the start of a new year, many of you make New Year's resolutions. And for me, I've never really been a New Year's resolution person. I've always, you know, had goals along the way. But New Year's, I don't know, maybe because I just line up with the school calendar more, but I have some unfortunate news for those of you that maybe have a New Year's resolution.

Sorry to bring this news, but this is from a recent study that I found on the Internet. And because I found it on the Internet, we know it's true because everything on the Internet is true. And here's what this study says about New Year's resolutions. Listen to this. Only 9% of people successfully keep their New Year's resolutions all the way through the year.

That's not great. 23% of people quit by the end of the first week and 64% after the first month and 84% quit after the second month. So, we're going into March. Everyone's pretty much forgotten. According to one cycling running app, most people quit on the second Friday of January. And this app, they have actually named this day quitters day. 43% of people expect so they go into making a New Year's resolution, actually expecting to give up by February. So, 43% set out and say, hey, if I make it a month, that's probably about all I can do.

Now, that may be sobering news, maybe you had a resolution coming in and then you're like, well, I guess maybe I should just do something else. And I want to talk for a minute about the reason for this, the reason that I believe that a lot of these resolutions fail. And for me, this is what's true of me. A lot of the time, my focus is on the wrong thing. The focus is on me, what I can do, my strength, my willpower, and however good-intentioned I might be going toward any goal or any objective, eventually, my strength and willpower will run out. My focus will be on the wrong thing. It remains on me.

Years ago, I was at a middle school camp. I was in youth ministry, and I was at a Young Life camp for middle school students, a summer camp. And one of the adventures that we did with middle school students was a high ropes course. And if you've ever done a high ropes course, you know that it's not a great place to be if you're afraid of heights. You're about 80 to 100 feet off the ground. You're going through these different obstacles and elements, and you're harnessed in so nothing bad can really happen to you.

There's a cabin of about twelve middle school kids. They all go through and there's this one kid in the group I'll never forget. His name was Everett, and he was terrified of heights. Absolutely terrified. Told us from the beginning, he said, hey, I'm not so sure about this.

I'm going to go, and I'm going to watch everyone kind of go through this thing, but I'm not so sure this is my thing. And so, we get to the turn where Everett is up. Everett is the last one to harness up. And all of his other friends had already gone through the course. And I'm right behind him.

I was like, Okay, Everett, are you sure you want to do this? You don't have to do this. This is totally your choice. You know, it's up to you. He's like, no, I want to do it. I think I can do it. I watched everyone else do it. I'm going to try to do it.

Everett gets harnessed up. He's on the first element. And the first element is kind of a tightrope walk across to another platform. And I kid you not, Everett gets two steps out on the tightrope area and then he freezes. He looks down, sees the ground, and he's frozen. And no exaggeration, Everett stayed in that position for one hour and 45 minutes.

So, for one hour and forty-five minutes, we are trying to help Everett. We're trying to say, hey, Everett, do you want us to come to get you? Do you want us to lend a hand? He's like, no, don't touch me. Don't touch me. You know, he's terrified, absolutely frozen in fear and staring at the ground. And it wasn't until finally one of the counselors at the camp who was on the other side of the ropes course looked and got Everett's attention and said, hey Everett, here's what I want you to do.

I want you to not look at the ground anymore. I want you to look at me. Look me in the eyes. I just want you to walk right towards me with your eyes on me the whole entire time. And after an hour and forty-five minutes, Everett took a deep breath, and with his eyes on the person from across from him on the next element, started walking across the tightrope, finished the course, and had a great experience.

But it wasn't until Everett's focus was on something that could actually help and sustain him. His focus wasn't on the ground, and the very thing that he was terrified of. Sometimes in our life, our focus, when it's off, can really derail things. When our hope is in our own ability or perhaps in another person, it'll let us down.

So, today what I want to talk about is what I believe Jesus is trying to say in this text in Matthew chapter seven is that when our hope, when our focus is fixed upon Christ; we can lead lives. We can lead lives that are different, that are living in a different way, that can stand up when trials come, and when things don't go as planned.

But before we get into that, before we get into chapter seven in Matthew, I think it's important that we understand Jesus' words as recorded by Matthew were specifically directed. He was talking to a group of people that were already convinced, that was following him, that said this Jesus guy who was doing these miracles, he was teaching, healing - we're in. We want to follow him in our lives.

So, he was giving them the sermon. This later became known as the Sermon on the Mount. This was the very end of it. Jesus was giving them instruction on how to live, and they saw only because they saw his impact, perhaps in their own lives or the people around them, that they began to put their trust in him.

And it's only then that those that put their hope, their trust in Christ, in his wisdom, know some things to be true about Jesus. And I want to talk about a few of those things and highlight a few of those things as we work through this text today. The first one that they knew to be true about Jesus from their experience with him was that Jesus was a willing servant.

A willing servant. There's a very popular, fast, casual restaurant franchise today. I don't even need to say the name. As soon as I say this phrase, my pleasure, you know probably what restaurant I'm talking about. They have coined this phrase. They've taken this phrase and they've made it their own. And it's part of their employee 101 handbook.

If you go into this restaurant, you'll place an order. You will ask for something. And not only will they get it for you with a smile, but they'll say it's their pleasure to do that. Not just willing to help because they're getting paid or because it's their job, but it's the sense of they actually are delighted to serve you, to help you.

And there's a difference when you receive help like that when you receive somebody who is caring for you like that and doing anything, going above and beyond to serve you versus someone that's maybe just doing it out of obligation. You feel like a VIP, you feel important. Jesus acted this way constantly throughout the Gospels. Not only was he serving people, loving people, and healing people, but it was his pleasure. It was his delight to be in the lives of people. And we see this in Matthew.

I want to jump ahead. This is Matthew, chapter eight, directly after the words that Jesus shared in Matthew seven. He comes down from the mountainside after teaching. And here's what it says in Matthew chapter eight, "When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

So, here's a man with a skin condition, perhaps leprosy, perhaps with some other sort of skin disease. But basically, when you are afflicted with something like this in Jesus's time, they did not know what it was, how to heal it, or what to do with you. So, they put these lepers, they put these people with these skin conditions outside of town, totally isolated from anyone else, people, community.

And so, this man, who knows how long he'd been afflicted with this, came to Jesus in a beautiful display of faith. Listen to what he said. He doesn't walk up to Jesus and demand that he's healed and say, you need to heal me right now. You owe me one. Jesus, look at my life. My life's been so hard, you know, woe is me. He said, if you want to, you could if you want, if you're willing, you could be the one to heal me. Having full faith in Jesus' ability, but also realizing he's not owed anything.

Listen to Jesus' response. This is verse three. "Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy." And so here we see something. Not only was Jesus willing, more than willing his pleasure, but he went one step further and he actually touched this man who perhaps had an experience, any kind of human touch for a very long time.

Who knows what that meant at that moment to him? And it was a risky move, too, because I'm sure people that were watching Jesus do this said, Jesus, I'm not sure you should do that. Don't touch him. What if you get what he has? We don't know how to heal it. Then you'll be like one of those guys. But Jesus went there because He loved the man and wanted to see him healed.

The good news of the Gospel and the good news as we head into 2023 is that not only is Jesus willing to move into our lives, to listen to us, to serve us, to heal us, not only to enter into the mess with us, but he's willing to stay close, perhaps when things don't even go the way we think they should go, perhaps when everyone else in our lives is running a different direction. Jesus stays with us.

Let's turn back to Matthew chapter seven right now and look at something else. The people that put their hope and trust in Jesus would know this to be true or believed it to be true about Jesus. They would believe him to be the immovable rock. We see that in verses 24 through 25.

It says this. "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock."

So, I know very little about home construction and building a house. I've never built a house, but I do know that the foundation is an important part of the house. In the past couple of years, we've done a little bit of moving around, moving to some different homes, and bidding on some different homes. And if you bought a house in the last

couple of years, you know that you probably had to maybe put an offer in on a house with and say crazy stuff like, I will bet on this house, but no inspection necessary.

We did that a couple of times, and it was a little intimidating because the one thing that was going through my mind was you can see the pictures, you can walk through it, but the foundation of the house without a home inspector that really knows what they're looking for, what if something's wrong? What if something's wrong with that foundation?

It's critical for the integrity of the house and so much more in our lives, too. And so, Jesus, as he talks about himself as the rock, as a foundation that's immovable, unshakable, and will stand the test of time. He is the one that has the power to hold us together, is what he's saying in this text. Even when all hope seems lost.

Look at verse 25 again. He said the rain came down and the streams rose. He didn't say if the rains happen to come, if the streams happen to rise, it was almost as if Jesus was saying, you should expect things in your life to go wrong at some point, to go in a way that you're not prepared for.

Preparation for that in life, for preparing for a storm is something we probably have all dealt with in our lives. Just about a week ago here in Pittsburgh, it was about -1000 degrees outside. I don't know if you remember that because it's spring now, but you might have prepared for a storm. Then perhaps you went out to the store and you got toilet paper and milk and butter and eggs. All of the things that a good Pittsburgher gets before a big storm, right? We could predict because of the weather. We could see that coming. Knowing about a storm is one thing, but sometimes we can't prepare for some of the things that come up in our lives. And the great philosopher of our time, Mike Tyson, says everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

I remember as a kid I was growing up, we took a vacation to South Carolina. We're on the beach and my aunt and uncle had a house, probably about twenty or thirty houses down the beach from where I was staying with my sister and my mom at the time. And so, it got to be late. We were hanging out at my aunt and uncle's house, but it got late, and we decided to walk home on the beach that night instead of walking home through the streets.

Just a nice walk on the beach. What could go wrong? What we didn't know is there was a storm that was coming off the ocean, and it affected the tides. The riptide was getting crazy. And so, we were walking along the beach and all of a sudden before we could even react, we were waist-deep in water. Chest deep in water. You know,

I'm little, I'm seven, eight years old. My sister was a little bit older. My mom was a little bit older and taller. And so, you know, I'm the first one to kind of go, the water is up to here on me. And I remember at one point my mom had to reach down and pull me out of the water.

I was completely submerged and this riptide was pulling us out. It was pretty hard to get to shore. And I remember this moment as a seven or eight-year-old when I panic and say, what are we going to do unless somebody can pull us out of this? And luckily for me, at that moment, my mom and my sister were able to help and get us to shore and we got back to our house safely.

But in those moments when we don't see storms coming, when we can't really predict that they might be on the horizon, we need someone that has a greater strength or greater ability than us. And in Matthew chapter eight, we see this. We see Jesus reacting this way with his disciples. Again, this is a story that goes past when he healed a man with leprosy, and now he's in a boat with his disciples, and there's a storm that comes up on this boat.

And perhaps you've heard this story before, or maybe you haven't. But the story goes. The disciples were terrified of what was going on. Jesus was kind of just hanging out. He was asleep in the boat, not really concerned. And they woke him up and they said, Jesus, there's this big storm. Don't you care? Don't you care that we're all going to die? And Jesus wakes up calmly and he rebukes the wind and the waves. He told the storm what to do.

And here's their response in Matthew chapter eight, verse 27, which says this, "The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" Even the winds and the waves obey him. Jesus is calm in the face of a storm, a physical storm, a storm in our life.

Perhaps it's a tragic death that happened in your life recently. Perhaps it's the loss of a job. Perhaps it's just marital or relationship troubles within your family. You could probably fill in the blank with a number of things that have been hard for you this year or things that maybe you're looking ahead to and saying this is going to be a challenge.

Jesus holds the power over all of them and he's ready and he's willing to enter into those situations with us. And so, here's the last thing that those people that Jesus was talking to, they had put their trust and hope in Jesus, this is what they knew to be true about Jesus. They knew that Jesus was the way. Here's what it says. This is John,

chapter 14, verse six. Jesus said, "Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

So, let's look at verse 24 again really quick in Matthew seven, he says, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice..." And when we see that word, therefore in Scripture, it's important to go back, to look back and say, what's this therefore talking about? Why is that? Jesus was looking back at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, which starts in Matthew Chapter five, and he says this in Matthew Chapter five, verses one and two. "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them."

So here he is with his group of people that know him, that is trusting in him. And he began to teach them, to talk to them about a way to live life. These are a group of people that he was talking to that had put everything on the line. Many of them had left their jobs and left their families because they trusted, they saw what Jesus was doing, and they saw that he was different.

A teacher that was different than all the other ones that had come before him and taught. Here's what it says. Here's what they say about that in Matthew chapter seven verses 28-29, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."

Jesus taught differently, in a way that had authority because He was claiming to be God. You have heard it said was a repeated phrase. If you read the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus constantly says, you have heard it said, and then He follows it with a phrase or a direction on a better way to live. He was expanding upon their Jewish upbringings, the way they knew how to live life, and Jesus was taking it to the next level and saying, now that you know me, now that you have put your trust in me, and now that I'm here, this is how you can live.

So, this new group of followers, I believe, were eager, they were hungry for someone like this, for someone with authority, for someone claiming to be God, and for Jesus's authority to claim that. Some would say that just Jesus claiming to be a moral teacher, isn't that what Jesus was?

And that argument for me and a lot of people, doesn't really work because he also claimed to be God. And so, no moral teacher at the time would actually claim to be God. They would point to the things of God and who he was, but nobody in their right mind would claim to be God. So maybe, well, you could say, Jesus was just a

crazy person. Maybe He was just saying things and doing things and had some sort of mystical power that was making him do these things.

But when we look at Jesus's life, for me, that argument also doesn't kind of make a ton of sense because you look at his life, the way that he treated people, the way that he carried himself, the way that he loved people so well, and the way that he was about others. That doesn't really measure up for me with how a mentally unstable person might act.

Well, you could also say, perhaps Jesus was just a liar. Perhaps he was just a slick con man, and he was trying to deceive everybody to gain notoriety and popularity and just wanted people to follow him. Well, I believe that idea also breaks down a little bit when we look at the lives of the disciples.

And we know that from history, as Jesus was crucified and then resurrected from the dead after the resurrection, many of his disciples had the chance to stand up and say, do you believe that Jesus really rose from the dead? And they said, yes, absolutely we do. We saw him. We touched him with our own eyes. We believe this to be true.

And now, if at that moment, that was a lie, if Jesus really didn't do that act, why in the world would they go through with this? They would say, oh no, I'm caught in my lie. You know, I was just trying to do whatever, please don't kill me at this point. But they went through with it even all the way to death.

So, if he's not crazy, if he's not a liar, if he really is God, if he really is the son of God, then there's something about Jesus that is different. He has power and he has an ability in our lives that is different than any other teacher, any other person as he says, these things and tells us these ways to live. It's a different way. It's an ancient way. It's a way that leads to true living.

And Jesus' words in Matthew seven were helping people take what he was saying and live it. So, as we look at Matthew seven and look back at the Sermon on the Mount, if you read it, some of the things that Jesus was telling people to do, it's impossible to do on our own strength and our own will.

There's a book that I love. It's written by a man named Richard Foster, and it's called *The Celebration of Discipline*. And he says this in regard to our efforts in the way that we fall short. He says, "It is not that we plan to be this way. We have no intention of exploding with anger or of parading a sticky arrogance. But when we are with people, what we are comes out. Though we may try with all of our might to hide these things,

we are betrayed by our eyes, our tongue, our chin, our hands, our whole-body language. Willpower has no defense against the careless word, the unguarded moment. The will has the same deficiency as the law. It can only deal with externals. It is incapable of bringing about the necessary transformation of the inner spirit."

Incapable of bringing about the necessary transformation. So, what is capable? If we are incapable of bringing about the transformation that we wish to see in our lives what is capable? I believe it's a recognition, it's an understanding of our brokenness, our sinfulness, knowing that without Jesus intervening to save us not only from our sins but to save us to a life that is better and greater than we could ever hope for, we're lost.

One commentator says it like this in response to Matthew five through seven, the Sermon on the Mount. He says this says, "I don't see how a single line of this sermon can be read without feeling summoned to one's knees before God Almighty to what the Apostle Paul calls faith. And yet, in this sermon, the summons to our knees is never an end in itself. The calisthenics of this sermon is to move repeatedly from kneeling to standing." In other words, if you read through Matthew five through seven and you think to yourself, boy, this is going to be hard, I think that's the point.

I think that the point when Jesus said these things is he wanted people to realize that this life that he was laying out for people, that he was giving to people as a gift, is hard and it's going to draw us. It should draw us to a place where we are on our knees recognizing that we are not God, but there is a God who loves us and wants to help us live in this way from kneeling to standing.

Someone told me this years ago and it's always stuck with me. He said Christianity is not a spectator sport. We have a role to play in the work that God is doing and the way that He is working in our lives and the lives of other people in response to God's love. Putting these things into practice implies just by that very word, that we won't be perfect at this ever. Practice, by definition, we're practicing because we're not all the way there yet. We wouldn't practice if we had it all figured out, but we practice because we strive for this way of life, the Christian life.

It's learned through experience, through doing, it's learned through failing. And it's also learned in community with other people. George mentioned a few things earlier in community news, and I would say that groups and serving, things we talk about in Orchard Hill all the time, perhaps for you in this New Year, you've always thought now maybe it's the time to get involved in a group or step up on one of the serving teams, and you've never really pulled the trigger. You thought I don't know if it's the right time. I don't know if I have the time. I have so many other commitments.

My encouragement to you is if you're serious about your relationship with Christ, if you're serious about wanting to know more about who Jesus is, even if you're just at of place where you are saying, I'm not even sure I have a relationship with Christ, but I'm interested and I want to know more about it. I'm getting involved in a group. Getting involved on a serving team with other people is a great way to understand and wrap your mind around some of these things they were talking about.

So, as you head into the New Year, I don't know whether you are full of optimism, maybe full of dread, or full of looking back at the last year and saying I just hope it's better than last year. One thing I do know, wherever you are, is that at some point the waters will rise to a point that you won't know what to do, and you might need someone greater than yourself.

And here's how some of us operate. I know I've operated like this in the past and will say, well, when it gets hard, I'll just pull Jesus out of my pocket, pull the Jesus card and say, hey, God, you know, white flag, I need your help. I need your help right now. I know we haven't connected in a while, but I'm going to use my Jesus card right now because it's getting really hard.

Now, there was a moment like that for me again when I was younger. We lost our dog. And I remember being a young, 10 - 11-year-old kid. I had never really prayed much in my life at that point or really thought much about God from what I can remember. But I remember praying for one of the very first times, God, if you bring home my dog tonight, I'll do anything for you. I made a deal with God. I said I'll do anything for you.

You know, it was the sense of I need God really bad right now, so I'm going to pull him out of my pocket. And sometimes we operate like that. By the way, we found the dog. The dog was okay. But here's the thing. If our house is built on any foundation that's other than Christ, we're starting at a point where we're behind because our foundation is shaky, and we'll struggle in those moments when the water rises.

So, Jesus, the immovable rock invites us, all of us to follow him, to follow his way, to put our trust in him because he's willing, because he loves us, and because he's an all-powerful God that wants to speak directly into our lives. And he only has the power to work in our lives in a way that we can't do.

Let's pray. God, thank you for the truth that is recorded for us in Matthew chapter seven and throughout your Gospels. Lord, that you love us, that you are willing to

enter into our lives with us, that you lay out a way for us to live, a way that we can be truly transformed if we put our hope, if we put our trust, in you and your son. Thank you, God, for the sacrifice of your son, Jesus, that we no longer have to try our hardest. God, we know we no longer have to have enough willpower or strength that you have said that you will intervene on our behalf and that you will carry us in our weakness. God, thank you for the gift of a new year. I pray this morning that as we go forward that we would keep your love directly at the center of our lives today and every day. It's in your name that we pray. Amen.