



Building on the Solid Rock

St. Matthew 7:24-27

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May 17, 2008 – Easter 5

As we've been seeing over the past few weeks, in these last verses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that he's led us to the point of decision. He's described what it means to be in his kingdom, and now he's telling us, "The kingdom is at hand." You've got to make a choice. You're standing at a split in the road. You can keep on walking the way you have been; you can keep on following the easy path; or you can take the turn off. The path is narrow, it's not always easy to follow, but it leads to a different gate. The easy gate leads to destruction. The narrow gate leads to me. Today I put before a choice: death or life."

That's the choice God has always put before his people: death or life. You can't sit on the fence. Either you follow him as his friend or you fight him as your enemy. The choice for life came to full fruit in the Messiah – the person of Jesus Christ, fulfilling all the promises God had given in the Old Testament. "Choose this day," he says to us.

And remember that he warned us: "There are false prophets out there. They claim to speak for me, but their false teaching and their false gospels will lead you astray. Remember: the narrow path leads to the narrow gate and the narrow gate is *me*. Be on guard, be alert, because there are and always will be counterfeits. Don't be deceived and led astray."

And the last time we looked at this passage we saw Jesus warning us further: "It's not just false prophets you have to worry about deceiving you. Don't deceive yourselves. Not everyone who calls me 'Lord,' is necessarily my follower. Lots of people will claim my name and even do great things and good works, but if you really want to know who is truly my follower, look for the people who do the will of my Father in heaven."

Jesus has called us to make that choice: death or life. And we choose life, we

choose him. As we walk the narrow path he warns us not to be deceived or distracted by the false teachers who might lead us astray. And he's warned us to be vigilant so that we don't deceive ourselves. We've made it to him – to the narrow gate – and we've entered. Now what? He goes on in Matthew 7:24-27:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

What Jesus is telling us is that if we're going to follow him, we need to know what we're building on. It's a matter of foundations.

I think Jesus' illustration of these two houses, one built on sand and the other one on solid rock, is something we can really understand. Quite a few of you guys work or have worked in the building trades. Some of you guys are even in the excavation business, digging holes in the ground so that people can build their houses on the solid rock – or at least the nearest equivalent.

I've seen a live action version of this playing out over the past few months right next door to me. Last fall Brian showed up to excavate for a house that was being built across the street from me. I watched him dig the hole. When he was done, the bottom of it was perfectly level, it was perfectly compacted, and I even watched while he and an engineer did "nuclear density" tests to make sure that that the soil on which that house was going to be built was really and truly solid. The builder had good, solid ground and he built a solid house on it.

In contrast when they excavated for the house next door to me, the excavator mistakenly dug the hole a foot too deep. They had to bring fill in it, but they didn't bring in the stuff you can properly compact – they just brought the dirt back that they had dug out. On top of that, it had been pouring rain and the hole had a

foot of water in it. They just dumped the dirt into it. It couldn't be compacted because it was all just mud. To make matters worse, when the guys came to setup forms for the foundation, they found out that the hole wasn't even in the right place, so the excavator had to come back at the last minute to dig the whole few feet wider. It wasn't even remotely flat and level and it wasn't solid. They poured the foundation footing on top of about two feet of mud. And the result, as their painter tells me, is that there isn't a level floor or a square corner in the house. You have to build on solid ground.

Think of all the people who build houses on cliffs over the beach or near a riverbank. A storm comes or the river floods and it erodes away that cliff or that riverbank. The homeowner ends up on the news as his house is about to fall into the ocean or the river because the ground underneath it has been eroded away by the wind and rain. In the end, after the storm passes, the foundation is going to be what's left. Jesus uses this illustration to stress to us the importance of building our lives on a solid foundation. And so we each need to ask ourselves what our foundation is, what we've been building on.

You see, you might hear everything that Jesus says here in his sermon and say, "Sure. This is all true. Jesus is saying some really great stuff that'll help me live an upstanding life if I follow them. I just have to go out and try harder." More people who hear these words do just that than anything else. Just consider how popular this part of Scripture is with unbelievers – with people who would otherwise tear out these pages and toss the rest of the Bible in the trash. But if that's your take on what Jesus is saying here, you've missed the point. Jesus is saying, "I'm not asking you to go out and try harder. You can't do that. If you're just going out to try harder at being a good person, relying on your own strength, well, that's like building a mansion on the sand. You might put on a good show for a while, but it won't last, no matter how hard you try. The only way you're ever going to achieve that kind of character is when you build on me."

And that's the most important point in these verses. Jesus Christ *is* the foundation. He's the rock.

Isaiah wrote of the coming Messiah:

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.” (Isaiah 28:16).

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, saying:

[You are] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.
(Ephesians 2:20)

And remember not long after Jesus’ resurrection, St. Peter told the Sanhedrin, the highest court of the Jews:

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. (Acts 4:11)

And in his first epistles he tells us:

For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” Now to you who believe, this stone is precious.
(1 Peter 2:6-7 NIV)

Jesus ends his teaching here by telling us what we have to do. He’s saying, “If you want to build something that’s going to last, not just for this life, but last for eternity, you need to build on me.” Dear friends, we need to be looking at what we’re doing and asking ourselves if we’re building on Jesus Christ or if we’re building on something else. Think of the words of that popular hymn in which we sing about Jesus Christ being the solid rock:

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.*

*On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand...*

The early believers were called “Christians” by the people in the world who saw them following Christ – who saw them building on that solid rock. Christianity is Jesus Christ, and so the life of blessing that he promises us is a life that first has to be established and build on him.

The second point here is just that: A life built on Jesus Christ is the life that will stand. I know we’ve all heard that, but do we really understand it? Have we thought it through? You need to think through what this means and have it firmly planted in our minds. A life built on Jesus will stand. Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation. **But** take heart; I have overcome the world.”

I don’t care when you live, there’s always going to be some kind of tribulation. That’s one of the points of the book of Revelation. Our world is a fallen one. Whether it’s tough economic times like we’re seeing today or some other worldly concern, or whether it’s the active persecution of the Church by those who oppose Christ himself, this side of eternity, we will always be in the midst of tribulation, trouble, and sorrow. The good news is that Jesus has overcome the world. He will see us through. And he’ll see us through on judgement day too.

It’s the Christian who is building on Christ and whose mind is captive to the will of God who can triumph gloriously over all these things (Romans 5:3). Remember Job’s friends? Eliphaz reminded Job and said, “For affliction does not come from the dust, nor does trouble sprout from the ground, but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:6-7). In Eliphaz’s terms, each generation is like a stack of wood placed on the burning embers of the past. That’s our destiny – to pass through the fire – and in due time to be released forever. Every one of Adam’s race – every one of us – is going to experience sorrow, pain, suffering, disappointment, and eventually death.

People try to find all sorts of solutions. Most people try to run away, but that never lasts. The only real solution is to build on a sure foundation. And that’s why Jesus says that when the rain falls, the wind blows, and the flood rises, the life that is built on him is the life that will survive.

It’s true. Ask the people who have tried it. Ask Job! It was true for Moses and David and Isaiah and Jeremiah and all the other Old Testament saints. And it was true for men like Peter, James, John, and Paul in the New Testament. It was true for those who came after, following in their footsteps – men like Polycarp who were

thrown to the lions, but stood firm on the foundation of Jesus Christ to the very end. Think of men in our own tradition like Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, burned at the stake for lifting high Jesus Christ and who, even as they died, with their last breaths were praising God that in their deaths he was lighting a fire for the Gospel in England that would never be put out.

Sometimes we turn our backs on the foundation without even realising what we’ve done. Joseph Parker was a Congregational minister in England during the last half of the 19th Century. He was one of the best and most famous preachers in England. His church, City Temple in London, would have been a “mega-church” by our standards. But in his autobiography he wrote about a time earlier in his life when he gave too much of his attention to the modern theories about Scripture that were just then starting to become popular. He put his time into reading the books written by the textual critics, joining in the discussions of the liberal theologians, and gradually he started to feel himself losing his grip on the fundamental doctrine of salvation through the atoning blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says that was when a great sorrow entered his life. His wife, whom he loved deeply died, and he found himself unable to share his grief with others. He says he would walk through his house with a breaking heart, feeling around for some kind of footing that would sustain him – but there was no footing in all those liberal theories andologies. “And then,” he writes, “my brethren, in those hours of darkness, in those hours of my soul’s anguish, when filled with doubt and trembling in fear, I bethought myself of the old gospel of redemption along through the blood of Christ, the gospel that I had preached in those earlier days, and I put my foot down on that, and, my brethren, I found firm standing. I stand there today, and I shall die resting upon that blessed glorious truth of salvation alone through the blood of Christ.”

*On Christ, the solid rock I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand...*

Now there’s a third point here for the Christian too. What are you building on the foundation, Christian? And you might point down and show me that you are on

the foundation. Christ is your Saviour. But lots of people only ever make it that far. They've made Christ their foundation, yes, but what they then build on that foundation is something that is ultimately worthless and won't remain as fruit for eternity. Saved yes? But wasting the precious gift that Christ has given. Listen to what St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation [that's Jesus Christ] with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

I see two mistakes that people can make with Jesus' teaching. On the one hand there are a lot of people who think that they don't need a foundation. They just drift through life. The problem is that if you drift, you always drift downstream. It's the wide and easy way that leads to death and destruction. A drifter needs a foundation.

But on the other hand, there are a lot of people who understand that they need a foundation. They see the need, but what they build on that foundation is all wrong. They made that mistake with the house next door to me. It's not just that the ground wasn't prepped right. The foundation was poorly done, the framing was poorly done, the siding was poorly done.

Friends, you may have Christ as your foundation, but what are you building? Are you building the precious things of God? Or are you building things that look good today, but won't last in eternity? The great poet Shelley once saw a huge, but broken and armless statue of Ramses the Pharaoh and it prompted him to write a poem about the ridiculousness of great works that don't last. In the poem that great statue lies in the desert, half buried in sand, its legs broken, its arms missing, but its inscription still there: "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair." We take that attitude far too often. Look at all the

things I've done! But will they last? Are you laying up for yourself treasure on earth where moth and rust destroy?

What are you building on the foundation that God has given you? Are you still living for yourself? It's entirely possible for you to be a Christian and still spend most of your time living for yourself. Or are you living for him?

About the same time Joseph Parker was preaching in London, William Borden was attending Yale. He was the heir to the Borden corporate fortune, but while he was at Yale he decided that he wanted to be a missionary to China. His family and friends thought he was crazy – that he was going to squander his potential instead of taking charge of the family business. But he had heard God's call. He never made it to China. In Egypt, while training for the missionfield, he contracted spinal meningitis. He knew he was going to die. At that point he could have said to himself, "What a waste. My friends and family were right. I could have stayed in Connecticut and been wealthy and successful." Some years before he had written in his Bible "No reserve." Later, at the time he committed himself to mission work, he wrote next to that, "No retreat." And after his diagnosis, knowing he was going to die, he wrote, "No regrets." He had committed himself to building heavenly treasures on the foundation of Christ. Even though it meant giving up earthly treasures, at the end he had no regrets.

Jim Elliot, who was killed by the very South American Indians he was seeking to evangelise wrote the famous words, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

How can men like Borden and Elliot make those sorts of statements: "No reserve, no retreat, no regrets." It's because they learned to build on a firm foundation. Like so many who went before them and like so many who have come after them, they were prepared – prepared to pass confidently into the presence of Jesus Christ and to hear his warm welcome: "Well done, good and faithful servant!...Enter into the joy of your master."

Again, Jesus Christ is our foundation – our solid rock – but what are you building on

that foundation? Will what you are building last? Are you still building something for this worldly kingdom or are you building for the Kingdom of God?

Please pray with me: "Our Father, we've spent the last year studying these three chapters in which your Son lays out for us the priorities of your Kingdom and describing the character of Kingdom people. We ask that by your grace and the strengthening power of your Spirit within us, that we would make the choice to follow Jesus Christ, to enter the narrow gate, and that as we diligently study your Word, that you would daily show us the things you would have us build on that solid foundation. We ask this in his name. Amen.