

1
Building A Life On Rock!
Matthew 7:24-29

Please pray with me: May the words from my lips and the thoughts in all our hearts be acceptable to You, God of grace. We come to You just as we are. We are amazed and grateful that You want us to come in exactly that way. We are amazed and grateful that You love us and accept us. Amen

In my early church ministry I was a minister of Christian education and had the opportunity to visit a large Presbyterian church in Hollywood California. I was doing some research and wanted to see what the leaders at First Presbyterian were doing in the area of Christian Ed. For many years the director of that church's Christian Education department was a woman named Henrietta Mears. Literally thousands of young university and college men and women went through her bible classes at that church. She wrote a very helpful book for Sunday School teachers and others called *What the Bible is All About*. Evangelist Billy Graham thought highly enough of Henrietta Mears as a teacher of the Scripture that he promoted her book on his television program.

The following is a true story: Imagine with me this 82 year old woman, wearing a broad rimmed hat, sitting in a chair and all around her were young university aged men. She called them her "boys." They were asking her questions when one of them said to her – "Dr. Mears – If you had your ministry to do over, would you do anything differently?"

Now, Henrietta Mears didn't miss a beat or take any time at all to think about the answer that came right out of her.

"I'd trust God more."

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That's a remarkable statement to make – no matter your age. Here is a woman who has lived what must have looked like a life of great faith to anyone observing her life over her many years. She was known as "teacher" to thousands of young adults. She introduced many, many young men and women to a living, vital faith in Jesus. And yet if she had her ministry to do over, she would **trust God more**.

That's the dynamic of faith behind the parable we are going to look at this morning. How do I trust God more? How do I decide to trust Jesus Christ instead of something else?

This is one of Jesus' freedom parables. It is called a freedom parable because it has to do with the dynamics of trusting – of faith. We have a choice to make and we have been given the freedom to make that choice. How do I decide to trust God/Jesus Christ instead of something else? What are the things at work so that I can trust God more? We are free to trust or not to trust.

I am intrigued by Mathew's comment on the parable in verses 28 and 29:

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Those who were hearing Him sensed that the authority here was very different than anything they were used to.

Jesus is a master at story telling. He often spoke in parables. And a parable is fundamentally a story. It may contain various layers, a question and even a surprise or two.

This brief, unforgettable parable about building a house and building a life comes as the conclusion to Jesus' most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. Because this parable comes at the end of that sermon, it is important. It is there for His hearers to consider carefully.

It is a story under told -- not over told. Imagination is important here. Jesus leaves us with a lot to think about.

I understand your focus at Kanisa this month is on family life. A great theme. I imagine you have or will be talking about what is the best foundation for a good family. I imagine you will be looking at the best building blocks to set on that foundation. This morning, I believe you will find this story by Jesus about foundations complementing your current emphasis.

In this parable Jesus is actually telling two stories side by side. When He does that the key to interpreting the parable is to look closely at **what is the same** in the stories and at **what is different** in the stories.

Listen again to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 7, starting at verse 24:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.
(That's story number one.)

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell— and great was its fall!
(That's story number two.)

The first thing that is the same in these two stories is that everyone heard the words of Jesus. It wasn't that some heard and some did not hear. It wasn't that those who heard got it right and those who didn't hear didn't get it right. Jesus is telling us up front that this parable is about those who hear His words. So, this is a story for us – for me and for you. It's not for those who are not hearing yet. We are here in this place this morning. Most of you are here most Saturdays or you are involved in smaller fellowship groups during the week. You come together and you listen to the words of Jesus, the words of God, in one way or another – through music, art, literature and I hope/imagine through direct study of the Bible. **So the first thing that is the same is that everyone in both stories are hearers of the words of Jesus.**

The second thing that is the same in these two stories is that everyone is a house builder. Everyone is building a house that she or he will live in. There is no indication in this parable that the kind of house that is being built matters. That's for another story. However, everyone is a builder. Everybody is a builder of a house, a builder of a

philosophy of living, a builder of a way of looking at God. The intriguing thing here is that -- some are wise in the way they do that and some are foolish.

Our houses are the place where we live, where we raise our families, where we express ourselves. For example, if you were to visit our condo, where my wife Marg and I live, you would get a sense of who we are, what is important to us, what we like, what we value. You would certainly notice the books spread throughout the several rooms – 5 million and one and counting as my mother says. You might conclude knowledge is significant to the Millers. And you would be correct.

By walking through the den you would see our stereo system, our collection of CD's and my collection of vinyl records. That's for any of you over 45 in the congregation. You would probably reason that music plays an important part in the Millers' lives. And you would be correct again.

On the walls of most of the rooms in our condo are pictures – of our families from the past and of our families in the present. You might also notice some original oil paintings and wonder who painted them. Marg would tell you with pride that her mother is the artist behind those oils. You would catch, I hope, a wonderful sense of our family history through those pictures on the walls.

Until recently we had a wonderful little blue and green budgie named Freddy. When you passed his cage you just might have heard a tiny voice “Freddy is a birdbrain.” [I don't know what **that** would tell you about the Millers. {smile/laugh?}]

You would meet my mother who lives with us. That might give some more insight into my background. Our house signifies our identity, and represents our philosophy of life, our goals, our hopes, our dreams.

According to Jesus in this parable, **we cannot avoid this house building**. Whether we do or not do something, we are still building a philosophy of life. Even what we think of as not making a decision or non decisions construct a house for us that we must live with. Even the non decision becomes a decision and we drift with whatever comes along. It's like a student who can't make up his mind whether to go out for the hockey team. As a result, he misses the tryout deadline and, therefore, will be living through the winter in a house that does not include hockey practice, hard work, making new friends, fan reaction, and the chance to play and maybe even to win the coveted trophy. Whether we make a decision to build or not, we will still end up living in a house of some kind that we have built. We are all builders. Jesus does not leave us any room to manoeuvre on this point.

The third thing that is the same in this parable is that both houses will face storms. Not every storm is of the same intensity we know, but storms will come. “S” happens. Oh, you thought I might have meant something else. Well, that too. We know there will be rain, there may even be drastic flooding; we know that the wind will howl and beat against the windows of our house. The repetition of the coming storm to both houses is a clear indication that Jesus is not teaching about building a house where there are no storms. Even in the most beautiful and seemingly calmest of climates storms will come – Hurricane Katrina in the Caribbean and the gulf of Mexico in 2006 and the tsunami in December, 2004 were evidence enough. So, we know that it's important to build and live in a house that will withstand the severest of storms.

We have seen two things in the parable that are the same. Everyone is a house builder and every house will face storms.

Now, we come to the difference. **The difference, the grand variable in the parable, is where the houses were built. Where we build our house will make all the difference in the world. So the wise person is now identified as the one who will not fall and the foolish person is identified as the one who will fall hard.**

It is from this difference that we discern Jesus' teaching in this parable. Jesus is affirming to us his words and himself. He is saying that **he is a faithful and solid place to build our lives upon. In fact there is no more solid place than on Jesus and His words. That's why the wise person building on the rock of Jesus and His words will not fall. That is the bold affirmation of this parable.**

It is also a messianic affirmation. Notice -- Jesus closes the Sermon on the Mount with this affirmation and Matthew says the people noticed that Jesus spoke with an authority altogether different from the scribes who often quoted from well-known rabbis in order to give their words more authority. But Jesus didn't have that need. "You have heard that it was said," Jesus would often tell his hearers, and then he would declare, "But **I** say to you."

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

Jesus is making the affirmation that **his** words and **his** life are profoundly trustworthy – faithful. **We can build our house, our way of living, our philosophy of life, on his words and his life. Jesus' words and Jesus' life [in your life] will stand the test of any storm.**

At the heart of every parable is a question. The question of this parable is also the question that closes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This is a parable about foundations after all and that is where the question is imbedded. The inescapable question our Lord raises in the parable is this:

**“If I do not choose to build my life on Jesus Christ and his words,
then what do I choose to build my life upon?”**

Because as we have seen, everybody is a house builder and everybody has to put the house somewhere.

Jesus even gives us criteria with which to evaluate our foundation. It is quite simple and yet incredibly profound. The house we build has to be able to withstand storms, because every single house will face storms. **The criteria then is: “what can I choose to build my life upon to withstand storms?”**

People choose all kind of things to build their lives upon. How about **your career as a foundation**? As one of my favourite preachers once said: “a career makes a wonderful house, but a lousy foundation.” Think about it for a moment. You choose hockey to build

your life around – what happens when you get old, say 35 or so, what happens if you want to play in the NHL? Hockey may not be the best career option after all. You choose being an air line pilot as a career upon which to build your life. A great career I understand – at one time anyway a pilot could earn over a quarter of a million dollars [\$250,000] annually -- not too shabby. However, your blood pressure bumps up beyond the norm and you are out. No more flying.

What about choosing to build my life on the church, on religion? In recent decades we have seen too much toxic faith in Christianity and other faiths, where faith has been hijacked by terrible people. **The church is a marvellous house, but a dreadful foundation.**

Of course, there is always your family – your spouse, parents, children. Important. Wonderful. Significant. But we know, don't we? Every one has clay feet. Your family may well let you down. When we allow ourselves to think clearly, you and I know that to be true. **Families thrive as houses but not as the foundation. No family can bear the weight of worship.**

How well can our foundation handle storms? And what about when that final storm hits, when death comes? Jesus Christ is the foundation that can enable our lives to withstand the storms that will inevitably come our way.

One final reflection: In this parable Jesus says: “Everyone then who hears my words and **acts** on them is like a wise person. Everyone who hears my words and **does not act** on them is like a foolish person.”

When I was a young Christian in high school I was introduced to the writer C. S. Lewis. Lewis has written many books to help followers of Jesus become more mature followers and grow in their trust. You may be familiar with his series of radio talks titled *Mere Christianity* or probably more so the Narnia series, especially *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He also wrote a little book titled *The Screwtape Letters*. It's a series of letters from a senior devil to a junior devil. It was helpful to me with all the doubts and hesitations I had as a young adult. As well the book introduced me to a witty and profound analysis of Christian strengths and weaknesses.

Here is a quote from chapter 13 [p. 69-70]. In this chapter the young man whom Wormwood the junior devil has been working on repents and comes back to Christ. This is what Screwtape the senior devil wrote:

It remains to consider how we can retrieve this disaster. The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about this new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has any bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing seeds which the Enemy [meaning God] plants in a human soul. **Let him do anything but act.** No amount of piety in his imaginations and affections will harm us **if we keep it out of his will.** As one of the humans has said, active habits are strengthened by repetition but passive ones are weakened. The more often he feels without acting, the less he will be able ever to act, and, in the long run, the less he will be able to feel. Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape.

Remember I talked earlier about Dr. Henrietta Mears telling her boys, **“I'd trust God more.”** During the summer the church where she ministered had week-long camps where

she used to take her young adults. In the evening there would often be campfires. The campers would gather around the fire and have the opportunity to make a commitment to Jesus. At one of the campfires one of the young men decided to throw his cigarettes into the fire as his commitment. Dr Mears looked at him and in her characteristically straightforward manner said: **“Jesus Christ doesn’t want your cigarettes. He wants you!”**

Jesus wants me. He wants you! When we hear His words, we need to act. Let us be wise and not foolish. Let us choose to build on the solid rock foundation who is Jesus Christ.

Rev. Chris Miller
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