

## Two Foundations

Matthew 7:24-27

I suspect that all of us here today would say, “I want my life to be marked by stability and strength. I want to thrive in the midst of the difficulties and suffering that are common to this life. I want to be the type of person who perseveres to the end of my life.” That’s the type of life we all want, right? I doubt that many of us would say, “I really want a shallow, superficial life that will eventually implode when the tough times hit. I want to look strong when life is easy but be very weak when things get tough. I really want to set myself up for catastrophic failure in the future.”

All of us want strength and stability in our lives, but we need to be honest about whether or not we’re pursuing a lifestyle that makes it possible. Today we look at Matthew 7:24-27 in which Jesus tells us very directly the determining factor for whether or not we will have strength and stability in our lives: whether or not we put into practice the things He taught.

Remember what a disciple is: someone who is learning from the Master how to live his/her life. A disciple isn’t merely a person interested in accumulating knowledge; a disciple isn’t merely someone who admires another person. A disciple is someone who is apprenticed to another in order to *learn a way of life*. The way of Jesus, the narrow way, is learned through putting into practice the things we hear from Jesus.

In this passage Jesus gives us a powerful image that can help us evaluate our lives. Notice the continuity between this passage and the previous paragraphs in which Jesus spoke about the importance of actually *doing* the will of the Father.

24 "Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. 26 "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell-- and great was its fall."

From a ground-level view, both houses were equally strong and sound. For all we know, both houses were made of the exact same materials with the exact same type of construction. The only difference was the foundation: one was built on the rock and the other was built on the sand. When “the rains fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against” each house, the difference became obvious. The house built on the rock “did not fall,” but the house built on the sand “fell – and great was its fall.” One weathered the storm and the other experienced catastrophic failure. The difference was the foundation.

The choice of foundations was Jesus' criterion for pronouncing the builder wise or foolish. When you build a house, nothing else matters very much if your foundation won't withstand the storms.

Jesus says that the foundational issue of our lives is whether or not we are "acting on" or "putting into practice" the things He has taught. This is an extraordinary claim to make – that putting into practice His teachings was the determining factor in whether or not we stand strong or fall. ***The strength and stability of our lives is a function of whether or not we put into practice the teachings of Jesus.***

There is great emphasis in the Scriptures on actually practicing or doing the truth of Scripture. A verse that has challenged me for 20+ years is Ezra 7:10 which says that the "good hand of His God was upon him" because "Ezra had set his heart to ***study*** the law of the Lord and to ***practice*** it, and to ***teach*** His statutes and ordinances in Israel." The great temptation is to study and teach, study and teach, study and teach. But all three (study, practice, and teach) are necessary.

Hebrews 5:14 tells us that "solid food is for the mature, who because of ***practice*** have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Maturity is a function of practicing (by the grace of God, of course) to the point of having our senses trained. And here Jesus teaches that strength and stability come from actually "putting into practice" what He's taught.

The person who hears Jesus' words and continually puts them into practice ("acts" is a present continuous active verb) is like the man who built his house on the rock. That person can walk into the future without fear and without anxiety because s/he has a solid foundation. As we all know, the storms ***will*** come. D.A. Carson points out, "If you live long enough you ***will*** suffer." Storms are part of this life: strained/broken relationships, illness and disease, and all sorts of disappointments (I don't think I know anybody whose life has turned out exactly how they thought it would). But we don't have to fear the future and the storms that will come if we've got a solid foundation.

The person who hears but doesn't put into practice Jesus' teaching is like the man who built his house on the sand. That person is a disaster waiting to happen because sooner or later the storms will come and will expose the type of foundation he/she has built. That person doesn't have the inner resources necessary to weather the storms of life. Sometimes the catastrophic failure of a person's life will be obvious to all; other times it is hidden and disguised. Sometimes complete ruin comes in this life; other times it isn't exposed until the next life (it's possible to "gain the whole world and forfeit your soul").

On the one hand Jesus' teaching is sobering because He is saying that we are responsible to put into practice what we've heard. Nobody else is going to do it for us. On the other hand His teaching should also give us great hope because it means that strength and stability are accessible to us in the Kingdom of God. The strength and stability of your life is not dependent upon your intelligence, your competence, your income, or your circumstances. The stability of your life is

dependent upon whether or not you are putting into practice the teachings of Jesus (and the Scriptures in general). That is something (by the grace of God) you can do.

Day after day every person here today is building a house. And each of us is choosing what we are building upon. You and I aren't helpless victims of our circumstances. We may be facing different issues – and some of them are more difficult than others. But we all face the same choice: Am I going to build my house on the rock or on the sand? Am I going to consistently put into practice Jesus' teachings or not?

In our time remaining I want to do two things. First, I will give an *example* how “putting into practice” or “not putting into practice” Jesus' teaching could mean strength and stability or ruin. Second, I want to discuss a *perspective* on putting into practice or “acting upon” Jesus' teaching that could be helpful.

***An Example: putting into practice Jesus' teaching on anger.*** Much of the Sermon on the Mount addresses the need to deal with the anger in our lives. At times we all find ourselves angry at other people, angry at our circumstances, and (sometimes) angry at God for not doing what we would have done if we were God. Sometimes our anger is confined (for the time being at least) in our minds and in our bodies; other times our anger spills out to others through our words and our actions.

Here's some of what Jesus taught about anger and the cluster of issues associated with it:

- Jesus said that anger is basically murder of the heart. Just as someone who murders another is liable to the court, so too the person who is angry with his brother is guilty before God.
- Jesus said that we should have a radical commitment to reconciliation. If you are at worship and you remember that someone has something against you, first go and seek reconciliation, then bring your offering to God.
- Instead of loving your neighbor and hating your enemy, Jesus said, “Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.” That's how God treats His enemies so that's how we should treat ours.
- Anger is often fueled by sins/offenses that others commit against us. Jesus taught that instead of storing up offenses that others have committed against us, we should forgive. In essence we say, “Because God isn't going to make me pay for my offenses against Him, I am not going to make others pay for what they've done to me.”
- Many times anger manifests itself through judgmentalism. Instead of condemning others for the weaknesses and sins we see in their lives, Jesus tells us to first deal with our own issues (whether lack of compassion or desire for revenge or whatever) and then we can help the other person become more like Jesus. We take the log out of our own eye so that we can see clearly to take the speck out of our brother's eye.

Jesus had a lot to say about anger and the various ways it manifests itself.

Let's say that two men hear Jesus' teaching on anger but respond differently. The first man hears all of these teachings, and they make a lot of sense – but mainly only on Sunday mornings. When this man gets out into everyday life, the teachings of Jesus are forgotten. He feels fully

justified in getting angry at others. And when there's conflict, he never takes the risk of pursuing reconciliation. And so there's a growing list of people to avoid and to be careful around. This man continually rehearses old offenses and treats people according to how they've treated him. Sometimes there are outbursts of anger – in traffic, at home, in the workplace. Basically his soul is poisoned by anger in ways that he doesn't even realize. His life keeps getting smaller and poorer and more petty. Because he doesn't enjoy the normal satisfaction that comes from relationships, there's a tendency to pursue destructive things – destructive habits and dangerous relationships. When the storms come, he feels quite alone because he hasn't developed honest, caring relationships; they're all conditional. Relationally this man has built a house on the sand.

By contrast, the second man not only hears the teachings of Jesus but puts them into practice. Progressively he thinks the way Jesus thought and acts the way Jesus acted. When anger surfaces in his life, he's careful to consider the source and to take concrete steps to address it. When there is conflict with others, he is eager to pursue reconciliation: sometimes an offense is simply overlooked, sometimes he turns the other cheek, sometimes he asks for and extends forgiveness, sometimes the response is to pray for the person (asking God to do what only He can do in that person's life). There's great freedom in this lifestyle. Instead of being pushed away, others are attracted to this man because he has the type of life that they want. When the trials of life come, he trusts God because that's the habit of his life anyway. And he is surrounded by others who want to be there for him. This person's life keeps getting larger and richer and more abundant. Relationally he has built his house on the rock.

I'm painting a picture of the extremes, but that's how Jesus taught. Most of our lives are somewhere in between the extremes, but Jesus wanted to make the choices very clear, so He taught in extremes. When it comes to dealing with anger, are you building your house on the sand or on the rock?

***A Perspective: allowing Jesus' teachings to captivate us.*** Allow me to close with a perspective on putting into practice Jesus' teachings that I hope you find helpful. I'm thinking about long-term motivation here. Willpower may last a day or a week, but not a lifetime. We need to put into practice Jesus' teachings for a lifetime. For that to happen we need to allow Jesus' teachings to captivate us, capturing our imaginations to the point of fueling obedience.

During World War II, the Nazis laid siege to the city of Leningrad, Russia. The Hermitage Museum in Leningrad was full of priceless works of art. During the early days of the war, the Hermitage staff packed up and evacuated 1.1 million pieces of art in case the museum was bombed. This was a labor of love by the museum staff who actually lived in the basement of the Hermitage during the siege. Most of the paintings were removed from their frames and rolled up in paper and packed in crates to be evacuated. Interestingly, the empty picture frames were hung back on the walls as a pledge that the paintings would one day return.

Accounts tell us that during the war Russian soldiers who came back to Leningrad from the front would sometimes come to the Hermitage. Some of the tour guides knew the paintings so well that they could give tours with just the empty picture frames hanging on the wall. The paintings

were so etched into their minds and hearts that they would point out features and colors and tell the story of the paintings in moving detail. These descriptions flowed from such a deep place that “visitors could almost see them” (appendix of *Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean).

What if the teachings of Jesus captivated our hearts and minds in similar fashion? What if the teachings of Jesus were like paintings etched into our memories to the point where they captivated the deep places of our hearts to the point of moving us to action? That was Jesus’ intention all along. Jesus told His disciples that His word should “abide” in them – it should be right at home in their minds/hearts. Paul wrote the Colossians, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you. . .” Instead of a superficial acquaintance with the teachings of Christ, we should let the teachings of Christ captivate us so that they accompany us wherever we go and whatever we’re doing, moving us to act on what Jesus has said.

Think of a statement as simple as “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” That’s a very simple yet beautiful and powerful way to respond to others who oppose you. If that statement captivated your imagination and you made it your ambition to live it out, over time you would be like the man who built his house on the rock. Over time you would have strength and stability that most people couldn’t fathom.