

## “Rock On” (Stories – part 4)

Matthew 7:42-49

I loved to play with wooden blocks when I was a kid. There is something immensely satisfying about building towers and trying to make them higher each time. If you have had the privilege of being a nursery volunteer, you know downstairs we have red and blue cardboard bricks that the children love to play with. A few weeks ago, I watched some of them make the tower that almost reached the ceiling. But you know what the best part was, for them? Knocking the tower down! They loved to see it crash.

If you have ever built a tower, in Jenga or in real life, you know the importance of a solid foundation. I learned a lot about foundations when I was a civil engineer. You can have a beautiful house, but if the foundation is rotten, it does not matter how well you installed the windows and doors or the colors you painted your rooms. The foundation is critical, and it is not usually the part you notice, unless something is wrong with it.

This concept is often used as an analogy to real life. If you have a solid foundation, you will withstand life’s storms. All of us have them. Help me name some storms: Unemployment. Sickness. Family division. Natural disaster. Financial difficulties. Death. Church division. There are a lot of storms we all face.

Having a solid foundation in life helps us survive these storms. But let me make one thing clear at the start: having a solid foundation is not the same as being an optimist. An optimist simply shrugs off disaster and takes what comes. Someone with a solid foundation survives storms intact.

So the question we are really trying to answer today is, “How do we have a solid foundation so that we can withstand life’s storms intact?” Thankfully, Jesus gives us a pretty direct answer. We find it today in the parable of the wise and foolish builders, in Matthew 7.

Although we have already read this story, a bit of context is necessary to truly appreciate this parable. If you have read Matthew before, you may have noticed that his material is intentionally arranged in blocks of narratives and discourses - stories and speeches.

The first section of stories includes the birth, baptism, and temptation of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry. Then in the fifth chapter, his teaching is brought front and center. This section is commonly called “The Sermon on the Mount,” one of the greatest sections of moral teaching in the whole world. The verses we read today are its conclusion.

So what is in the Sermon on the Mount? I’ll give you a very brief overview. Jesus talks about how people are blessed in the kingdom of heaven (The Beatitudes). He talks about matters of the heart – hatred and murder, adultery and divorce, revenge and loving your enemies. In this short three-chapter section, we have the Golden Rule, the Lord’s Prayer, and several admonitions: not to worry, not to judge others, to seek God’s kingdom first, and to enter by the narrow gate. Jesus concludes this sermon with the story of two houses: one that stood, and another one that fell.

So why is this story at the end of the Sermon on the Mount? It is Jesus’s challenge. Effectively, he says, “Hey, everyone. You were nice enough to listen, but listening isn’t enough. What are you going to do with this information?”

Notice verse 42, the very beginning of this short parable. “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice...” The key phrase is “puts them into practice.” Jesus, like any good preacher, is expecting a response to his teaching. There is no point in preaching if we are not expecting people to change as a result. Jesus is effectively giving his listeners a warning – they are now accountable for what they have just heard.

There is a slight misconception I probably have to clear up. I apologize if you were misled this morning. We sang a great song called “My Hope is Built – the Solid Rock.” Remember the refrain? “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.” In the church, we like to say, “Build your life on the Lord Jesus Christ.” While that is true, technically, Jesus said to build your life on his words. Jesus and his words are not exactly the same thing.

To be clear, salvation is through Jesus Christ alone. I completely believe that. As we celebrate Holy Communion this morning, we are reminded that Jesus redeemed us through the cross. Disciples are supposed to build their life on Jesus. All I am saying is, building a life on Jesus Christ means trusting in him alone for salvation AND doing what he says. It is not “either...or,” it is “both...and” Consider these other verses:

*John 8:31 - “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”*

*John 14:15 - “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”*

*1 John 2:3 – “By this we can be sure that we have come to know Him: if we keep His commandments.”*

*1 John 2:6 – “Whoever claims to abide in Him must walk as Jesus walked.”*

*Mark 13:31 – “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”*

So what does it mean to obey Jesus' words? When you look over the Sermon on the Mount, you find that Jesus has very challenging words for us, but all of it is possible with God's help. To build a strong foundation for your life, you practice what Jesus preached. You turn the other cheek, love your enemies, and do not worry. So how does this build a solid foundation for us? Jesus tells us in John 15:10 - "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love." When we do what Jesus commands, it keeps us close to God and far from sin. That is what makes Jesus' words a sure foundation in life.

Take "loving your enemies" for instance. Say you practice loving your enemies. You know this is hard, but you keep doing it. Then, when your enemy attacks you by slandering you, your actions will speak to your reputation. The gossip will die out, because your foundation has kept you from reacting badly. That is one example of how Jesus' words are a foundation for your life, if you put them into practice.

Here is another one: not worrying. That is a very hard task, indeed. By practicing not worrying and turning your burdens over to God, you are free to minister to others who are anxious. Think about it. In a crisis, a non-anxious presence is golden. A calm presence draws others to you. You can become a foundation for others, because your foundation is sure.

When you read the gospels, and really the whole New Testament, you are forced to make a decision about who Christ is. (The fancy seminary word for this is "Christology".) If you believe Jesus Christ is Lord and Master, then you follow him. You strive to be like him – loving, kind, a servant, caring for justice.

But Jesus reminds us that it is our choice. We are not forced to love him, listen to him, or follow him. We have freewill. Our choices determine our foundations' strength. That is why Jesus tells of the disaster that awaits someone who ignores his words. Jesus calls him or her a fool – a biblical word for someone unwise, rash, and deliberately rejecting God. As it says in Psalm 14:1, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

This foolish person may experience immediate disaster in their own life as a consequence of rejecting Jesus. Or they may not. There is also the possibility that the crash will come when they die, or when Jesus returns to judge. This parable is a caution for our earthly lives. It also has far-reaching consequences. At the end of your life, Jesus will ask you if you loved like he commanded you to love. He will want to know if you trusted in his words. Each person will give an answer for their actions.

I admonish you all to have a strong foundation by trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation and by putting his words into action. Don't topple over in the wind. Strengthen your mind, your soul, and your spirit by being a disciple of Christ. If you call yourself a “Christian,” you should earn that name by doing what our Commander tells us to do. When you walk as Jesus walked, and love like Jesus loved, others will see Christ in you. They will see the foundation of your life, and how you have withstood the storms, and they will give God glory.

At the time I picked this passage, I did not know I would be preaching a week after the worst rainstorm in the history of the United States. Hurricane Harvey has lots of people thinking about wind, rain, floods and foundations. I am not implying that those who were flooded did not listen to Jesus' words, nor that God kept the Jesus followers safe. All were affected. The point today is this: we

are to act on Jesus's words. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us to do things like: store up treasures in heaven and give to the needy without boasting. I think by giving to UMCOR today to help hurricane victims, we would indeed be putting Jesus' words into practice and building on a strong foundation.

Memory verse:

"When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever." - Proverbs 10:25

Questions for reflection:

1. To whom do I go in a crisis?
2. What is the foundation of my life?
3. Do I believe that following Jesus' commands makes my foundation strong?  
Why or why not?
4. How am I being a strong foundation to others?