

The Two Builders

January 22, 2017

Matthew 7:12-14

We come this morning to the parable of the two builders. I suspect many of you have known this parable since you were young children, “The wise man built his house upon the rock...” Right? You sang this parable, complete with motions. In fact, the biggest surprise might be that this is a parable. What’s the difference between a parable and an illustration? Not much, but perhaps length (although not universal) or hard hitting nature of the message. And in this case, it is the latter that stands out to me.

The message of the parable of the two builders is as harsh as any of the other parables. Jesus is saying something quite strong, unexpected, potentially offensive here. And yet, He does so in the most innocent of ways, in a way adaptable to children’s songs. Children can sing this song, parents can listen without cringing, and yet the message is about judgment, proclaiming that one person will survive and the other will go splat! I guess that makes it a good parable.

So turn with me to Matthew 7:24-27. These are the last verses of Jesus’ great Sermon on the Mount. In fact, a few of you will remember that I preached this passage from that perspective on September 20, 2007, during my first year here. That’s right, this is my first sermon of my 11th year at Hillcrest. My 10th anniversary was last week. READ Matthew 7:24-27

Main point: Building your life upon a sure foundation will make the difference between heaven and hell.

In the text, the image of judgment is seen as a storm. This storm will show whether you are safe in your house. But as you might already suspect, by then it

will be too late. You can't rebuild in the midst of the storm. You can't reinforce. You are stuck with decisions you made long before, indeed before anything was seen above the ground. The difference between survival and destruction is foundational. Welcome to the parable of the two builders!

I. Setting: The Sermon on the Mount. 5:1-7:23.

To fully understand this parable, I would have to preach the entire Sermon on the Mount, going all the way back to the beginning of chapter 5 and the Beatitudes. As the briefest of recaps, Jesus here preaches His classic sermon on life in the Kingdom of God, who is there, what they are like, how they relate to various institutions and groups, how they live out their devotional lives, what ought and ought not concern them.

We have described it as an upside down Kingdom, the last shall be first, the first last, if you love your life you will lose it, if you give your life you will gain it. You become pleasing to God by admitting you have nothing in you that is pleasing to God, you go one to live a life pleasing to God by being more spiritual and less religious, you get over the bar by admitting you have no ability to get over the bar, you get rich by giving away, and so on and so on. With each sentence, each thought, the Sermon on the Mount turns our natural understanding of what it means to be a part of the Kingdom on its head. The religious people won't get in, the outcasts will. In fact, in the section just before our parable, Jesus says that many will be shocked because they displayed all the signs of being not just believers, but the power of God through them, and yet, they will get the harshest message in all of Scripture, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

So the setting for our parable is Jesus' whole preaching message, the message He taught wherever He went. And the gist of this message is that the normal course of religious people is wrong, not pleasing to God, not what God wants from His people. He doesn't want our rituals and deeds, but our devotion to Him, our recognition that nothing we do can be good enough. We need Him!

That has been the message in this great sermon. At the end are 4 word pictures, each with a set of two: two roads (and gates), two trees, two petitioners at judgment, and here two builders. In each, one turns out good, the other bad. In each case, the differences are not clear to the naked eye. You wouldn't automatically pick the one over the other. But in each case, the true difference is stark. The point is that there is a difference between the two that will make all the difference in the world. And the implication is that many will be shocked when they find out that they will not survive. They thought they would. They were sure of it. But in the words of our parable, they will find out their building was built on shifting sand. How tragic it will be for them!

We see all of this in the first half of v.24.

v.24- "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice..."

The first thing we notice is the "Therefore". This tells us we are on the right track regarding the setting. This is the summary, the last thought, the conclusion for the Sermon on the Mount. It ends with a word picture regarding where to go from here.

Then we see where it is headed, "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice". In other words, He points back to all of the sermon up to this point. In other words, "now you have heard what I am telling you about the Kingdom of God..." Take everything that you have heard, put it all together, and now.... In other words it is all or nothing. It is not a piece meal sort of approach. It is take everything and then decide which one of the two possible paths you will take. It is all or nothing.

Then we see the measuring stick. It is not learn from, it is not applaud, it is not carve on stone, it is not tell others what an awesome sermon you just heard. It is "put them into practice." It is to live them out. Make them a part of who you are. The two choices are either put them into practice or anything else.

If you don't put them into practice, then it matters not what you do with them. You can marvel, study, memorize, engrave, or preach. But if you don't live that way, then they haven't had their intended impact on you. In case you're wondering, this is why I end sermons with, "If this is the Word of God, then what ought to be different about our lives." This is precisely the same thought: put them into practice!

There, that is the setting. Now the parable.

II. The parable: a strong storm will show the true quality of construction. vv.24b-27

You can't tell the quality of construction of a building by just looking at it from the outside. You can only tell by putting it under a stress load, revealing the true nature of the parts of the building not meant to be seen.

v24b- is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

We will get to the other man in v.26. Notice that we are given the assessment of the man at the very beginning, "wise". In other parables, it is given as a question such as, "Which of the two men is wise?" But here, we are told up front. One of these men is wise and the other is foolish.

Then we see the subject matter of the parable: building a house. Now, why a house? Well a house is where you live. It is where you sleep, eat, and spend your time. It is not just a building, but a house, your residence. We will see the implications of this when the storm comes in v.25. It is our shelter, the place we run to when harsh weather comes our way. So there is a wise way and a foolish way of building a house.

In this case, the issue is location, or more precisely the location of the foundation. Now, we can't think basements like we have here. We dig down and

build a whole floor underground. But for most of the world, the foundation is right beneath the surface. Is this distinction important? Absolutely. When your foundation is 8 feet down, you can get away with more. On the other hand, just having a foundation 8 feet down does not mean your building is on solid ground. The issue here is the type of material upon which you are building. And in the first case, the material is rock.

What do we know about rock? It is hard, heavy, less likely to move. It would take a lot to cause it to shift or compress or crumble under a load. You anchor things to rocks. Right? Then we notice here that there is a definite article, the rock. That is quite intriguing to me. In fact, I have never noticed it before. It then caused me to look later in the book where Jesus tells Peter that upon this rock He will build His Church. Guess what? Same word. It is not the masculine form of the word where we get “Peter”, petros, but the word for smaller stone, petra, the feminine form. So Jesus says the wise man builds his house upon THE rock, the same rock as He will later mention to Peter.

²⁵ 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.

Now comes the storm. Notice the pressure is from every direction, up, down, and across. Water from above, water coming up from below, and wind which pushed across. The quality of this home is being put to the test.

I think of an image I saw recently from the storms in California. It was a picture of an expensive piece of property on a cliff overlooking some body of water, probably the ocean. But there was a problem: the storm had so impacted the soil that chunks of the cliff had broken off, exposing the layers of foundation. It was a bit humorous to a builder like me. The foundation was all there, but it was worthless when the ground beneath it had given way. The strong foundation could not be supported just by air. The expensive house was dangling over the cliff. It was not built on the rock. The storm exposed the flaw.

The error was made with the first decision, “Where will we build this house?” They went with the beautiful view rather than the sure foundation. It was a tragic mistake.

But with this wise builder, the building survives the storm. The owner inside the house was safe. The foundation material had proven its worth. Next we have the foolish builder.

²⁶ But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

I think it is important to note that Jesus repeats the setting. Hearing “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice.” The issue is putting “these words of mine” into practice, changing the way you live.

The opposite of the wise man is the foolish man. The man did not lack zeal, effort, building skills, concern for quality. He was perhaps all of these things. He simply made one mistake, a mistake on the very first question: where will we build this house? He spent the same amount of time and effort, probably spent the same amount, perhaps even prayed for God’s blessing on the project. But he built on the wrong spot, (kind of like finding out that 55 acres of Seward all drain to your backyard, like we found out with the Mother’s Day deluge of a few years ago. We were okay until St. John built a dike containing the water called their west parking lot, but that is another story).

So a man is declared to be a fool based on one issue, one decision made at the beginning of the building process: where to build the house. He chose the sand rather than THE rock.

²⁷ The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

Once more, the same pressure from the same directions, up, down and across. But this time the house crumbled. It was loud, spectacular. It made the national news. Everyone wanted to see this wonderful building undergo the unthinkable, collapsing during a storm. It strikes me that “a great crash” points to public humiliation. “Fell” points to the loss of stature, the house was built up. And it fell. But the great crash points to the scene that it creates. The destruction of this house will not go unnoticed. It will be a spectacular failure. The gawkers will surround the ruins. This is the scene of a foolish man who entrusted his safety to a house that was built wrong. This would be a film shown to all building engineering classes in the future. This is what not to do.

There, this is the parable. Now what does the parable say to the setting?

III. Application: Build your house (life) only on the rock.

In this case, it is “these words of mine.” In other words, the instructions that Jesus gave about His Kingdom, who is in, who is out, how those who are in ought to view themselves, others, and all other institutions.

Let’s identify the various characters in the parable. Who is the wise man? Someone who lives according to the instruction of Jesus, someone who takes him seriously, someone who treats His words as THE Word. We see that in v.29, “He taught as One who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.” He was the Law. It was His teaching, His word, His understanding of everything. Even though we are only in Matthew 7 and thus at the beginning of

His ministry, this would have been enough for them to take aim at Him. He claimed the authority of God Almighty.

But the wise man is the one who actually allowed the teaching of Jesus to change his life. Okay, who is the foolish man? Everyone else. And that is the whole point, as seen in all four of the choices of two. There really is only one choice, Jesus or anything else. Jesus or nothing. Living according to Jesus or just praising Him as a great speaker and moral influence. Take your choice on how to articulate it, but there are really only two alternatives: His way or no way.

What is the house? I think you have already discovered that. It is the way you live your life, all the things you do, the things you say, the beliefs you hold dear. They are all built upon each other, revealing a structure where you live. It is your life's work. In this sense, everyone is building a home, every single one of us. They will all be put to the test. They will all be squeezed from above, from below, from the side.

Then what is the storm? It is judgment. There will be judgment. You and your creation of a house will be put to the test of judgment. How does that make you feel? Does this bring anxiety to you, knowing that God is going to test the quality of the construction of your life? It ought to.

So, what is the feature of the story that warrants a parable? In other words, why not say what He wanted to say? The answer to that is clear. In that crowd, in all those crowds were people who were building their lives on sand. In fact, as seen in the preceding illustration of the two paths, there were more on the road to destruction than on the road to life. The one road was wide, smooth, and filled with people. But the road to life was narrow, hard to find, sparsely populated. No wonder Jesus told it in the form of a parable.

Can you imagine if He actually told them percentages of His audience who were building on sand? "Okay, 90% of you will come crashing down at judgment. Did you hear that?" Instead, He leaves it an open question and makes the point via illustrations and parables.

Now, how does this hit us? It hits us on one basic level and then countless other levels as well. On the basic level, is your life built on Jesus, THE rock, or something else? That is the ultimate question. You have to face that issue. And in this regard, the good news is that you can start over on a firm foundation, on THE rock, on the rejected cornerstone from last week's parable. It is possible to abandon your one shelter and build another one. But I warn you that you will have to start over. You can't build on the house you have already built on sand and hope that it will stand. This is key. You can't simply do better starting now. No, you have to start over. The Bible calls it being born again, or receiving Jesus.

I bring this up because I believe there are many, many people who are treating Jesus as additions to their house. They simply can't grasp the idea that their house is in danger of falling down. They think it simply needs a few more things added to it. Will they be surprised at judgment? Absolutely.

There are also many who think they are "too big to fail." They have built and built, spent and spent, imagining that their very size, very shape, very beauty will prevent them from crashing. I believe there are many such people. They view the structure of their lives as resume enhancements. They pray every day. They read their Bibles ever day. They give and give. They lead very moral lives.

And then we have a whole group who simply do not think it matters where you build. They just don't think it will make a difference. You can build here, or you can build there and the results will be the same. Every house will withstand judgment. Right? All roads lead to God. Right? Who's to say that your way is the right way? Right?

Now, let me say it straight forwardly. All of those houses will come crashing down. There is only one type of house that will stand. It is the house built on the person of Jesus, the Rock. There will be NO exceptions. There, I said it. I just said in a straight forward way what Jesus said in the parable of the Two Builders. Now, what will you do with it?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will inspect our foundation.

2) We will make sure we are anchored securely to the Rock. We will follow after Jesus.

3) We will not envy other people's houses, knowing the most important part is that which cannot be seen.

4) We will start over if necessary.