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KNOWING WHERE TO BUILD Matthew 7:24-27

Starting at the top might be possible in some jobs, but not in the building business. Every house, hotel, office building, school and skyscraper is built from the bottom up. Even with the highest quality materials and the finest craftsmanship, a building is only as strong and stable as the foundation upon which it stands.

For several years I served on the board of Buckhorn Children's Center, a residential treatment center in the mountainous terrain of eastern Kentucky. The building that served as the director's home stood perched upon a steep hillside overlooking the rest of the campus. For years that house had presented one problem after another: persistent leaks in the roof, cracked walls, jammed windows and doors, and dripping pipes. It turns out the house was slowly sliding downhill. Built quickly and cheaply some decades earlier, the house lacked a proper foundation, and gravity was winning. With every minute shift of the foundation, the house twisted and contorted, resulting in cracked plaster, separated shingles, and leaky plumbing.

Because we had a tight budget, we continued to patch the house's problems for a couple of years, but we realized that was a losing proposition. So was establishing a new foundation. We bulldozed the place and built a new house on a more stable site. The "money-saving" shortcut of building on a poor foundation turned to be quite expensive in the long run.

Jesus the carpenter knew the importance of a firm foundation. Speaking of Christ, the Letter to the Hebrews says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands," (Hebrews 1:10 NIV). The Greek word for "laid the foundations" carries the root meaning of making stable or firmly establishing. A good foundation provides a sturdy, enduring, unshakable surface to build on.

That applies to both buildings and people. The life that endures and prospers is the life established on an unshakable foundation. Jesus told two stories about people with foundation problems. The stories are similar, but they teach different lessons. Next week we'll consider the version in Luke's Gospel, but today let's look at the more familiar parable from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

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. 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! (Matthew 7:24-27 NRSV)

In ancient Palestine, building a house in a valley was easy. The land there tended to be flat because centuries of wind and rain had filled the valley floors with sand and gravel washed down from the hills. Also, water was more accessible. Wells didn't have to be as deep, and sometimes a creek or river might wind through the valley.

The alternative was building in a higher spot where the bare rock of the hills could serve as the foundation of the house. This was a lot more work. The solid rock might have to be chiseled to provide a flat surface. Even if a naturally level shelf were available, the builder still had to lug materials uphill, and the homeowner might have to haul water as well.

Many people took the easy route; they built in the valley. Those houses served perfectly well as long as the weather was agreeable. One might count on ten or twenty years of good weather, but sooner or later the storms came and torrential floods roared through the valleys. Trickling streams became raging whitewater. “The rain fell, and the floods came,” says Jesus, “and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!” On the other hand, the house built high upon the rock stood firm while the floods tumbled through the valley below.

Of course, Jesus isn’t offering a crash course in architecture. He’s talking about life, your life and mine, real life. He’s challenging us to consider where we will build. And when we’re choosing where to build a life, the stakes are high.

For instance, I might build my life on the pursuit of wealth. Money makes the world go around, so the more money I make, the more secure I am.

Or I could make my career the basis of my life, devoting long days and nights, giving my energy and creativity to the job, and postponing other priorities while I climb the corporate ladder.

Maybe winning the admiration of others is the lot I choose to build on. What is more gratifying than praise and a good name in the community?

I could lay my foundation on having a good time, grabbing the gusto and seeking immediate gratification in every occasion. Surely all those television commercials can’t be wrong!

Or I might stake everything on being a good person, piling up the brownie points, amassing good deeds, and proving my value as a worthwhile person.

“What’s wrong with that?” you’re wondering. What’s wrong with wanting to be well-liked or trying to be virtuous or making a lot of money? Nothing at all.

But none of those goals is adequate ground upon which to build a life. When the storms come—and the storms surely do strike sooner or later—the life built upon reputation or pleasure will collapse, and great will be its fall. The flood will sweep away the life built on money or hard work or good works. Even the most worthwhile efforts are simply too uncertain and unreliable to establish a foundation under our lives.

I recall asking an engineer about the best way to build on a steep hillside. He assured me it could be done, and he told me some of the ways to go about doing it. Then he paused and said, “But if you really want my best advice, here it is: Build somewhere else. There are pieces of land where no house was meant to stand. Why risk losing everything?” Some plots look so attractive to the human eye, but there are situations and priorities where God never meant us to build a life.

In a world where sand is the preferred spiritual real estate, God offers us something solid to build on—no, *someone* solid to build on. The old hymn points our way: “On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.” The apostle Paul is less poetic, but equally fervent. Reminding his Corinthian friends of the fundamentals of Christianity, Paul writes, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ,” (1 Corinthians 3:11 NRSV).

To establish ourselves upon any ground other than Jesus is to build our lives upon gravel and shifting sand. Of course, taking a stand on Jesus doesn’t spare us the storms of life. In the parable both houses are beaten by the weather, but the believer survives the trials. The one who risks everything on Jesus is still standing after the storm passes and after the flood subsides.

One day I visited a young man who had cancer. We talked about what lay ahead, and he expressed his confidence that God would see him through.

“I’m at peace,” he said, “but I’m glad to have the chance to talk about this. I’ve tried to discuss my therapy with my mother, but she can’t handle it. The D-word terrifies her. She accepts that I’m a Christian, but she wants no part of it for himself. I have Christ to hold me up, but my mother has nothing to fall back on. She’s a very successful woman and her career is rising like a rocket, but I think she’s running scared.”

In those few poignant words, my friend laid out the alternative that lies before each and every one of us. We choose where to build, and then we live with our choice. Next week, we'll think about what to do if we've made a poor choice, if we wish we had built elsewhere, if we're stuck with circumstances we can't change.

But for today it's enough to know that the Lord who laid the foundation of the universe, has given us a foundation to build on—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. No other ground can uphold us to the end and beyond the end.

Those who build on the sand, build for fair weather.

Those who build on the Rock, build for eternity.

Soli Deo Gloria!