

You Are Building a House

Matthew 7:21-29

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

March 6, 2011

Every one of us is building a house. Everything we do, everything we say, even what we think, goes into the structure that we call our lives. We are free to choose from many different building materials and free to build in many different architectural styles. We may build carefully or carelessly. But each of us has to live in the house we build. Jesus reminds us that the house we live in is not made of the things we hear, even the things we hear in church. The house we live in is made primarily of the things we do.

Last Sunday while we were sitting in worship, a neighborhood in La Paz, Bolivia, slid right down a hillside. It had rained a lot. It was a poor neighborhood on the top of a hill. The houses were not built on foundations, but just sat on top of the soil. The soil turned to mud; 400 houses and the road that went through them fell down the side of the hill. By the end of the day, some 1500 homes were either damaged or destroyed.

That is something like the scenario Jesus paints as a warning. As you are building a life for yourself, beware what foundation you choose. I am giving you a solid foundation, Jesus says, in my teaching—in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. You can trust it as the foundation for your life. But having my words as the foundation for your life does not mean just saying you believe in me or call me “Lord.” Having my words as the foundation means that you actually put them into practice. If you listen to my sermon but think to yourself that I am awfully idealistic, or that this is asking too much in the real world, then you are choosing your own foundation. Beware what foundation you choose.

Jesus uses the two things Block Island is most famous for—rocks and sand. You know that when you go to the beach when the tide is coming in, you have a choice of two places to stand. You can stand on a rock and watch the water swirl around you, and if it’s a large enough rock, your feet will stay dry. Or you can stand on the sand and enjoy getting your feet wet. But if you stand there very long as the tide comes in and sucks the water back out, the water itself will take the sand right out from under your feet.

So, Jesus asks, will we stand on what he tells us? Or will we stand on something soft, something more comfortable that we choose for ourselves?

Jesus is thinking of a house somewhere near the Sea of Galilee that is built properly on a rock foundation. When the Jordan River floods in the rainy season in the early spring, the water rises to the level of this house and presses against it, but the house does not move. It has a solid foundation. That can be your life if you listen to what I am saying and put it into practice.

But you have another choice. You can build a house on sand. In the area where Jesus lived, it doesn’t rain for six months at a time. The sand gets hard. It looks a lot like rock. It is possible to build a house on it. But when the rain comes in the winter and spring and the river rises, the water will flow around the house, pressing on it. The water will begin to eat away at the foundation. This can be your life if you hear what I say and choose not to obey me, if you just listen to the sermon but never put it into practice. If that is your choice, the hard times of this life will eat away at the sand beneath you, and the flood of God’s judgment will reveal that you have no foundation.

What is your house built on? We are about to share the Lord's Supper together. We know that the apostle Paul says "Let each one examine himself" before partaking of this supper. That is just what Jesus wants at the end of the Sermon on the Mount: examine yourself, and see if your foundation is Jesus and his teaching, or some other foundation you have chosen for yourself. It may look solid enough in the dry season, but will it hold when the rains come?

Jesus warns us that we may say "Lord, Lord" to him but what we really believe is revealed in our actions. Sometimes in our emphasis on believing in Jesus as the basis of salvation, we have turned believing into something merely intellectual or emotional. But Jesus always understood faith or belief to be a matter of the will that produced obedience. As his brother James summarized it later, "Faith without works is dead"—or "belief without obedience is not belief at all." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who led the resistance against Hitler, put it this way: "Only he who obeys believes, and only the one who believes obeys."

Jesus has no intention of letting us get away with intellectual assent to the proposition that he is Lord. If you really believe that I am Lord, he says, you will do what I say. Here's what Bonhoeffer says about the parable of the house built on the sand:

[Jesus] does not allow his hearers to go away and make of his sayings what they will, picking and choosing from them what they find helpful, and testing them to see if they work...Humanly speaking, we could understand and interpret the Sermon on the Mount in a thousand different ways. Jesus knows only one possibility—simple surrender and obedience, not interpreting it or applying it, but doing it and obeying it. That is the only way to hear his word. But again he does not mean that it is to be discussed as an ideal, he really means us to get on with it.

OK, so what exactly is it that Jesus wants us to do? It's no mystery. I think it's safe to assume that Jesus is talking about the teaching he has just given in the Sermon on the Mount. Here's a short list of what he tells us to do.

- We are to be salt and light influencing the world.
- We are to seek reconciliation with brother, sister, and adversary.
- We are to avoid lust.
- We must not divorce for the purpose of taking another partner.
- We are to be so honest that no oaths are needed.
- We are not to resist evil persons but to be nonviolent.
- We are to love our enemies—which certainly means not killing them.
- We are to give to the needy and pray and fast in secret, not out of a desire for approval by others.
- We are to value our relationship with God more than money.
- We are to stop worrying.
- We are to stop judging people.
- We are to ask God for what we need.
- We are to do to others what we want them to do to us.

That's it! That's the foundation Jesus offers us, the basis we can build a life on. If we say we believe in Jesus but don't do those things, then on some level we don't really believe that Jesus was right about how to live. We must think the foundation we choose for ourselves is better than the one Jesus offered us. If we commit ourselves to doing those things, we are giving evidence that we really believe that Jesus was God's revelation of himself in human form.

What would be the point of believing that Jesus was the perfect Son of God who died for us on the cross if we didn't believe that what he taught was true and right and a sound foundation for our lives? It makes no sense to accept the story of Jesus' death and resurrection but then act as if Jesus was wrong about how to live. We can't say "I believe in Jesus but I still want to worry and be judgmental" any more than we can say "I believe in Jesus but I still want to lust and lie."

I know that sometimes we *intend* to obey Jesus and fail. We all fall down and fall short. Jesus is not saying that only the sinless can be in his kingdom; why would he tell us to ask the Father to forgive us every day? But the question of what foundation the house you are building is built on is the question of your deepest intention, your deepest belief—because most of the time what you *really* believe, what your *actual* values are, will come out in the way you behave.

We are on the threshold of Lent, that season of self-examination and repentance as we meditate once again on what Jesus did for us on the cross—and the life of discipleship to which he has called us. As we prepare our hearts for the Lord's Table this morning, let us consider whether our lives are being built on Jesus or on some other foundation.

When Becca and I were young, before we had children, we rented a house built in 1911 for coal mine supervisors on the side of Red Mountain in Birmingham. It was just under the statue of Vulcan, on a steep slope. It had a great view of the city. We loved the details of that house: the mahogany banisters, the pocket doors, the butler's pantry, the high ceilings. As far as we knew, it was built on a solid foundation. But the house next to us was empty. Not too long before we got there the residents had heard a loud pop. They discovered that the main beams holding the house up had cracked, because down the mountain someone had built apartments and moved a retaining wall. The earth had shifted beneath that house, and it was too dangerous for anyone to live in. But if you looked past the condemned house next to us there was a gap. That lot was completely vacant, because the house had already fallen down the hill and the debris had been carried away. A family lived there once. They thought their life was secure. But the foundation was not what they thought it was. All I can say is: each of us had better check our own house.