

“Two Foundations”

Introduction: “After Jesus had finished saying these things . . .” This, as you just heard, is how Matthew concludes the conclusion by Jesus to his Sermon on the Mount (7:28). But neither Matthew, nor Jesus, is really finished. There are in fact four more blocks of teaching by Jesus that Matthew concludes in similar fashion:

- “After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples...” (11:1) [instructions for mission]
- “When Jesus had finished these parables...” (13:53) [parables of the kingdom]
- “When Jesus had finished saying these things...” (19:1) [community life]
- “When Jesus had finished saying all these things...” (26:1) [warning of coming judgment]

Why does Matthew organize his account life of Jesus in this way? It’s as if, after some very brief comments about his birth, childhood, and preparation for ministry, Matthew lays out five trail markers (perhaps paralleling the five books of Moses) that are to lead us up to the summit, to arrive at a place where we come to know and understand who Jesus is and what he’s come to do.

At the end of the first marker – the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus lays out for us several sets of pairs: two paths, two voices, and two foundations, that serve as both a warning as well as a way to respond to the teaching of Jesus that will be life-giving. This morning, we’ll consider the two foundations and those who build upon them.

I. The Similarities

A. Both individuals are builders. Each constructs a house. Each assembles a structure that they intend to live within, something they rely upon and which they believe will keep them safe and secure. There is no such thing, Jesus implies, as not building. We all build something. We all have a world-view by which we live.

Take, for instance, a discussion of religion between three individuals. One expresses belief in the God who reveals himself in the Bible. Another declares her belief in a “higher power.” A third says he is an atheist and considers a conversation about religion and belief to be irrelevant. But even an atheist, Jesus would say, has a system of beliefs. Even an atheist has a structure, a world view, within which he intends to live. We are all builders.

B. A second similarity Jesus says these two builders share is that both experience a storm. On both structures the rains fall, the floods come, and the winds blow. It is important to note that Jesus, in his teaching, and in the example of his own life, never promises that there is a place we can build which will be storm free. Don’t like New England winters? Move to Chicago and enjoy a tornado or two. Don’t like tornados? Move to California and experience an earthquake or wildfire! No matter where, or who, we are, the storms of life will hit us.

A while back a pastor friend of mine was sharing the challenges she was going through caring for her ageing father, having just returned home from several days of sitting with him in the hospital making sure he didn’t tear his various tubes out. Then she revealed that her doctor had discovered a lump on her that was concerning enough that it needed to be removed within a few days. This is a woman who has given her life to serving the Lord, yet, despite her devoutness, the storms of life had not passed her

by. Christians will get sick, struggle with temptation, have difficulties with their children, lose their jobs, and suffer terminal illness. Storms will come upon us all. COVID may be waning, but what's next?! If constructing a world view and facing the storms of life are similarities for both builders, what are the differences?

II. The Differences

A. The most obvious difference is that Jesus calls one builder wise, and the other a fool. In fact, the word "fool" literally means "moron" or "idiot!" Why such strong language? The second difference gives us the answer. It is in the foundation on which the builders build. The wise man built his house upon the rock and the foolish man on sand.

Illustration: This consideration of foundations, of what is underneath the surface of a structure, would have been a pertinent question for a first century resident of Palestine. There, particularly in the spring, torrential rains could turn a dry riverbed into a raging torrent, within a matter of hours. If you lived in the vicinity, what was under your house was vital to your survival. If you were anchored on rock, you were safe, but if on sand, your house didn't stand much of a chance.

B. And so we have the third and most important difference between the two builders – in the midst of the storm, one house stood firm while the other fell with a great crash.

III. Foundations

A. Asking what is under the surface was a pertinent question for residents of Essex a few decades ago when we were all having our septic systems inspected. The question asked then was remarkably similar to the one Jesus was raising: Can the systems we have in place effectively deal with the crud which life inevitably brings? Jesus challenges us to "test our systems," to ask whether what we believe will hold us up when life gets difficult. The best system, he offers, is the one built upon the rock of his word. What else might we build upon?

1. How about our jobs? They can provide good support to be sure but what about when we lose them, or when we retire? What happens to our support, both financially and emotionally, when either of those events occur?

2. How about our families? Parents and spouses and children who love us and bring us joy are significant to our well-being, to be sure. But what about when those parents become sick and dependent upon us, or when the kids leave home, or when our spouses let us down? Where does that leave us?

3. Or how about our investments, if we're even fortunate to have some?! They may provide us with a sense of security, but they can also cause us a great deal of worry, and what happens when the stock market fluctuates, or even crashes?

These are all good things. The problem arises when they become ultimate things, when they take the place of God and become idolatrous things. In the end, they will not hold up to the storms of life. As the psalmist puts it, "The sorrows of those who run after other gods will increase..." (Ps. 16:4).

B. Instead of pursuing any of these possible, yet shaky, foundations, Jesus puts forth the way of the Kingdom of God, which he has begun to outline in this first "trail marker" of his Sermon, as the best of all possible foundations. To experience the strength of this foundation, these are words we cannot just

listen to, agree that they might make a good plan, but then do nothing with them. That, we heard James, the brother of Jesus, warn, is a faith that really is dead. It would be like, James writes in the previous chapter, looking at your face in a mirror and seeing you need a shave, or that your make-up needs adjusting, but then walking away, forgetting what you looked like, and doing nothing about what the mirror revealed needed fixing (1:22-25)!

C. John, who also spent significant time with Jesus, has similar echoes in his first letter:

If we claim to have fellowship with him [God] and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. [1 John 1:6]

Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. [1 John 2:4f]

Both our relationship with God, and with others, hangs on not merely hearing, but doing, the word that Jesus teaches.

D. This is not, we need to say, Jesus teaching that we enter a relationship with him by what we do. But he is saying that the proper response to grace, to what God in Christ has done for us, that the way we work out and experience a growing relationship with him, is seeking to walk more and more in the light of his word by putting it into practice, not looking for perfection overnight, but progress over a lifetime. And that's how our foundation for living becomes strengthened. That's when growth in the marks of "kingdom of God citizenship," – loving our enemies, forgiving those who've wronged us, dealing with our anger, lust, and unfaithfulness, not being overcome by anxiety, seeking God in prayer, refraining from being judgmental, and securing our hope in the resurrection, all become building blocks of rock for our life.

As the 19th c. Evangelist, D. L. Moody wrote in the margin of his Bible by this passage, "Build on the rock and fear no shock."

E. Jesus' word, as the crowd listening to him was able to discern, was like no other. "He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (7:29). He did not teach derivatively, that is, he did not teach with an endless string of quotations from famous people, nor did he begin "Thus sayeth the LORD," but rather, simply, "I say to you." He didn't teach by authority; his word was authority.

Put it into practice, says Jesus, and see how excellent a foundation you will have, even and especially in the midst of whatever trials life may throw at you. And, it will prepare you, Matthew wants us to know, for the trail markers that yet lie ahead. The SOM is not simply "good moral teaching." It sets us on the path of the life that is truly life.