

“BUILDING ON THE ROCK”

(Matthew 7:27-29)

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[PROP NEEDED: Picture or PPT Slide of Leaning Tower of Pisa]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 7-12-09]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read NRSV Text: Matthew 7:27-29 and Pray.

2. In the year 1172, a widow left 60 coins in her will to a local opera company to buy stones to build a bell tower in the center of her small European village.

A–And from her money and other contributions, on August 9 a year later (1173), workers lay the first stones of marble and lime that will become the foundation of this new tower designed to reach 185 ft. into the sky -- one of the highest buildings of its time.

1–Five years later, though – at a height of only three stories – problems with foundation caused work on the structure to be suspended -- a suspension that lasts nearly 100 years.

2–Construction finally recommences in 1278, and the tower is “officially” completed in the year 1370.

B–By this time, though, the problems in its foundation have caused the tower to tilt at an angle of 2 degrees.

1–And despite the fact that over the next 600 years a myriad of architects, engineers, and self-appointed problem-solvers try to fix it, the tower’s tilt continued to accelerate, eventually reaching nearly 12 degrees (17 ft. from perpendicular).

2–And in fact, it’s only been since 1995 that efforts to halt the inclination -- and even reverse it slightly -- have actually paid off.

3. You may have already guessed, but the story I just told you is the true story of one of the most well-known bell towers in the world: “La Torre di Pisa” -- or as we know it better, the “*Leaning Tower of Pisa*” in Italy. **[SHOW PPT SLIDE OF TOWER]**

A–And its fame, of course, lies not in its great age or in the fact that it took nearly 200 years to complete, but in its tilt – which at least until recently has caused it be in grave danger of toppling over.

1–What’s interesting is that careful study of the tower and its site has revealed that the tilt was caused by the fact that the tower’s foundation was built upon the shifting soil of a former estuary, consisting of soft clay, fine sand, and loose shells.

2–In other words, if it had been built upon a firmer foundation, the cathedral bell tower of Pisa would have never “leaned” in the first place. ¹

B–I think that there’s a lesson in this for all of us that is mirrored in today’s scripture from Matthew 7: if we don’t build upon the right foundation to begin with, then we’re setting ourselves up for failure; and when we DO build upon the right foundation, then everything else (if you’ll pardon the pun) will “fall into place.”

C–[Contemporary Service ONLY:] Read MSG Text: Matthew 7:27-29.

4. In today’s scripture, we find Jesus sharing what has come to be called the “Parable of the wise and foolish builders.”

A–Jesus was, after all a carpenter -- a builder. And so he would have had at least some knowledge of the proper way to build a building.

1–He knew that especially there in Palestine, builders needed to plan ahead in their work because there are many potential construction locations and sites which may seem pleasant and appealing during the summer months.

2--But by late Fall and early Winter, many of these sites are revealed to be dry creek beds which are transformed into muddy swamps overwhelmed by torrents of rushing water.

B–And Jesus also knew that proper construction required builders NOT to build on top of the shifting Palestinian sands, but instead to dig down to the shelf of rock below and build the foundations there.

C–Only by doing this, Jesus knew, could a house withstand the storms and rains that often overwhelmed the Palestinian countryside.

5. So in telling this parable, I believe Jesus is saying that something similar needs to happen in our own lives if we’re to withstand the storms and rains and raging waters of life that often threaten to overwhelm us.

A–Like the wise builder, we must learn to build the “house” of our lives upon firm foundations – upon the rock, rather than upon the shifting sands.

B–So, what are these “rocks” of life? And how can we “build” upon them? In the time we’ve got left, let’s look at two “rocks” that I believe we find in today’s scripture reading.

–II–

6. First of all, I believe that today’s scripture tells us that if we’re going to succeed in life, then we’ll need a strong spiritual foundation – we’ll need the “rock” of **FAITH** in God through Jesus Christ.

A—This is what we find Jesus essentially saying here in Matthew 7 -- that a firm foundation for life will always include a belief and heartfelt trust in him as our Lord and Savior.

B—You know, as we grow up into adults, we're usually taught the importance of various qualities such as honesty, compassion, integrity, diligence, humility, and a whole host of other virtues.

1—We learn these at home with our families, at school with our classmates, and even at church.

2—But as important as character and integrity and good morals are, they can never take the place of us giving our hearts to Jesus.

3—As the great 19th-century preacher Oswald Chambers put it, "*We must never put character in the place of faith. Our character can never be meritorious before God; we stand before God on the basis of his grace. Character is the evidence that we are built on the right foundation [of faith in Christ].*" [—from Bible Illustrator]

C—Now, we might say or think, "*I'm basically a good person: I've never killed anyone; never gone around beating up on people; I don't have a lot of bad habits; I'm basically a good, law abiding citizen.*"

1—Let me tell you, though: none of us is going to get into heaven through our "goodness" – the Bible says that "*all of our good deeds are like filthy rags*" to God (Isaiah 64:6).

2—Instead, the scriptures teach us that only through our *faith* in God through the acceptance of Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior can we gain access to the kingdom of God. ²

D—You see, without Jesus, when the storms of life hit we'll be washed away, ³ but with faith in him as our spiritual "rock," then (like today's parable says) no matter what "rains" come or "floods" fall, the "house" of our life will stand firm. ⁴

7. But if we're going to succeed in life, then in addition to our Faith in Christ, I believe today's scripture teaches us that we're going to also need the "rock" of **ACTION**.

A—If we look at the immediate context of today's scripture, we notice that it's part of story of Jesus complaining against the "scribes" (Vs.29) who *listened* to his words, but who then didn't put those words into *practice*.

1—That's why in Verse 24 he says that "*everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like the wise man who built his house upon the rock....*"

2–In other words, it’s NOT ENOUGH simply to BELIEVE in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

3–No. We’ve got to also put our belief into ACTION through our DEEDS.

B–In other words, like the scribes in this story, we can go from church to church and hear great, passionate, rousing preaching, but that alone doesn’t guarantee that our lives exhibit any evidence of *acting upon* the words that we hear.

1–As the great Scottish pastor William Barclay once wrote, “*Knowledge only becomes relevant when it is translated into action --...[when] theory... become[s] practice, [and] theology... become[s] life.*”⁵

2–And Jesus himself said, “*You will know them by their fruits*” (Matthew 7:16).⁶

C–If we claim to be followers of Jesus – if we claim that he lives in our hearts and our lives – then our ACTIONS should show it.

1–So let me ask: If all people knew about you was what they saw from your actions, would they be able to tell that you are a Christian?

2–If not, then perhaps we should re-examine whether we’ve actually built our lives upon the solid “rock” of Christ, or merely upon the “sands” of a living lie – saying that we believe in Christ when our actions reveal otherwise.

–III–

8. You see, the point is that if we’re going to ever hope to succeed in life, then we’ll need to build upon these twin “rocks” as our foundation:

A–We’ll need a firm *Faith* in God through Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior to give us the spiritual foundation we need for life.

B–And we’ll need *Action* to enable us to *live out* and *practice* our faith and belief in Jesus.

9. This morning let me ask: Upon what foundation is the “house” of your life built?

A–Is it (like the Tower of Pisa and the house of the foolish builder) the shifting “sands” of life? If so, you’re in for some rough times.

B–Or have you (like the wise builder) “built upon the rock” of Faith and Action that will provide a firm foundation which can withstand all the rains and storms that life may throw at you?

C–My prayer this day is that you will choose the latter.

10. [PRAYER:
 –For persons to receive Jesus Christ as the “rock” of their life for first time;
 –For those who already profess belief to put that belief into action]
11. [HYMN: #368, My Hope Is Built]

ENDNOTES:

1. For further information about the “Leaning Tower of Pisa,” visit the following websites: “La Torre di Pisa,” official website at http://torre.duomo.pisa.it/index_eng.html; “NOVA Online: History of Inventions, Tower of Pisa” at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pisa/interventions.html>; “Ask Yahoo!”, Monday, April 9, 2001 at <http://ask.yahoo.com/ask/20010409.html>; “Britannica concise online reference” at www.education.yahoo.com.
2. Read Hebrews 10:19-25.
3. By a similar note, bad times will often reveal what kind of foundation our life is built upon. I’ve heard it said that “*the true spiritual depth of a Christian (or even of a church) becomes evident when storms hit.*”
4. Along this line, I’ve even heard it said that “*A Christian is like tea – the best comes out only when placed in hot water.*”
5. William Barclay, Daily Bible Study Series Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1, p. 296.
6. Read Matthew 7:15-20.