

Series: Key Moments

January 4, 2015

Title: Storm Warning!

Text: Matthew 7:21-27

Foundations

Herod's Temple:

How important is a good foundation? How important is the part of a building that you *can't* see for supporting the part you can see?

In the year 19 B.C. Herod the Great set out to rebuild the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. His plan was nothing if not grandiose. His goal was to create a temple complex more magnificent than anything in the Roman world.

He began by rebuilding of the temple structure itself. Its construction took a year and a half, and required the services of 1000 priests, specially trained for the job. But Herod was only getting started. His plan included not only a new temple building, but a massive courtyard surrounded by cloisters and halls – all located on the top of a hill. The complex, known as the Temple Mount, covered almost 37 acres. It was supported by retaining walls over 100 feet high. Those walls tell the story of just how important it was to Herod that his temple had a good foundation.

The Western Wall:

The best place to see the Temple Mount's foundations is along what is known as the Western Wall. It is 1600 feet long, running from north to south. Seven courses of Herodian masonry are still visible above ground level. The bottom row of stones rests on bedrock, the first of 17 underground courses. The largest single stone measures 43 feet long, and weighs 520 tons! The recently excavated southwest corner of the Temple Mount gives us a glimpse of its immovable foundation.

It's hard to imagine the labor and effort that went in to quarrying, transporting and setting place such massive stones. Construction continued for some 80 years, meaning that the Temple Mount was a construction zone when Mary and Joseph brought the Baby Jesus to be presented to the Lord. It was still under construction when Jesus came some 30 years later to drive out the money changers. He and His disciples may well have seen the placing of some of those massive stones.

Herod's temple is long gone, but the wall he built to support it serves as the holiest site in Judaism to this day.

Foundations:

What a contrast to those images we see from time to time of houses in beachfront communities that are swept away in a matter of hours by a hurricane! The houses may have been built to state-of-the-art specifications. They may have been filled with the best appliances and the latest technology. They certainly had a wonderful view. But if they were built on sand, then it was only a matter of time before the big storm came along and swept them away.

What matters most is not how fancy the building is, but what it's standing on. There is no substitute for a good foundation.

The Parable of the Builders

A Stern Warning:

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus issues a startling warning:

Matthew 7:21-23 The Message

"Knowing the correct password—saying 'Master, Master,' for instance—isn't going to get you anywhere with me. What is required is serious obedience—doing what my Father wills.

I can see it now—at the Final Judgment thousands strutting up to me and saying, 'Master, we preached the Message, we bashed the demons, our God-sponsored projects had everyone talking.' And do you know what I am going to say? 'You missed the boat. All you did was use me to make yourselves important. You don't impress me one bit. You're out of here.'"

Ouch!

Jesus pulls no punches: He fast-forwards us to the Final Judgment when we will give account for our earthly lives. And He issues a stern warning. It's not enough to say all the right things or get our religion right. What really matters is that we put our words into practice, doing the Father's will.

It's not that Jesus is saying that it's *wrong* to call Him "Lord." It's not that Jesus is saying that there is no value in preaching or prophesying, driving out demons or healing the sick. It's just that these things have to be based in a life of obedience to God.

The Two Builders:

Jesus goes on to tell a little story – a parable – about two builders:

Matthew 7:24-27 NIV

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house upon the rock. 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.

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

Two builders, two houses. Only one difference – their foundation. One had a secure foundation resting on bedrock; the other rested on sand. No doubt Jesus wanted us to see that our accomplishments in this life are like the building of a house. We may know all the right things to say and pour our lives into religious activity. All of that effort is like a house that may be very impressive and important-looking. It may even convince us that we’ve done all we need to do to gain God’s approval! But if that house doesn’t have a secure foundation, then it will all come tumbling down when the storm strikes.

What the house stands on makes all the difference.

Storm Warning!

Storms will come!

As Vermonters we’re accustomed to having weather alerts run across the top of the television screen or on our phones. It may be a Winter Storm Warning. It may be a Severe Thunderstorm Warning. Whatever the case – we have no excuse. We’ve been warned.

And we know what it’s like for the storm to pack a double or triple punch! Wet snow plus freezing rain plus wind means.... You know the drill. Sooner or later the lights start going out. The temperature plunges. We’re being put to the test. It’s not a matter of “if,” but “when.”

Well, Jesus is saying the same thing about our spiritual house. Storms will come! It’s easy enough to say, “Jesus is Lord!” when we’re riding high and everything is going well. Doing God’s own work can make us feel useful and important. It can become our very identity. Believe me, as a pastor I know that temptation well! But when the storm hits, how strong is my spiritual house? It’s not a question of whether it is nice and shiny, but rather a question of what it’s built on.

Digging Deep:

Building a good foundation is hard work. It means building “down” before you build “up.” It means doing work that will never be seen by anyone else. And what’s true in the construction trade is equally true when it comes to building a solid and secure foundation for our lives.

Jesus defines a life with a good foundation as one in which we listen to His words and put them into practice. Jesus' commands are the bedrock that our lives must be built upon. Building our lives on Jesus' words isn't something that everyone else can see. It happens deep down inside us.

You might say that Jesus is calling us to embrace a new set of *core values*. Core values are values that we actually live out in our lives. We all have "preferred values," notions about what we ought to do or not do. Too often, God's commands are part of our "preferred values," but not the basis of what we *actually do!* We may talk about our preferred values, but we live out our core values.

For example, I might *know* that it is wrong to gossip about someone who has offended me. I might even call others out when they gossip. You could say that I have a preferred value of not gossiping. But what happens when I'm in the middle of the storm? What happens when I feel angry or threatened, abused or betrayed? The thing that I do in that case reveals my *core value* when it comes to gossiping. If I give in to my anger and hurt and begin spreading negative things about the other person, then my true values (or lack of values) is revealed.

Jesus challenges us not to merely keep a new set of rules, but to *build our entire lives upon His words so that our core values line up with His commands*. The OT prophet Jeremiah had promised that God would come and enable us to do just that:

Jeremiah 31:33-34 The Message

"This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them—write it on their hearts!—and be their God. And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about GOD. They'll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I'll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I'll forget they ever sinned!" GOD's Decree.

Let's get digging!

So what does it take to build our lives on the bedrock of Jesus' words?

- It means actually *knowing* what Jesus has to say about the things we face in our lives.
- It means acknowledging that He is the final Authority. He is *the Rock*.
- It means recognizing that everything else we build on is shifting sand: Culture, public opinion, our own likes and dislikes are easy enough to build on, but guaranteed to let us down when the storm strikes.
- It means soaking ourselves in God's Word and letting Him do the deep work of transforming our minds with His truth, instead of taking our cues from the world around us.

The storms will come and go. Society will change the “rules” and expect complete conformity to the new regime. We will feel the winds of doubt from time to time, as it threatens to knock down our faith. Friends will take different paths, make different choices. Sometimes every fiber of our being will want to take a vacation from the path Jesus has put before us. At those times we need a foundation that is stronger than ourselves. We need to be resting on the Bedrock of Jesus and His Truth.

Every one of life’s storms is a reminder that one day at the end of Time we will stand before our Creator and give account for the life we lived here on Earth. When that day comes, all of the false security of this world will have been swept away, like sands carried off by a hurricane. The only ones left standing will be those who built upon the Bedrock of Jesus.

So, let’s get digging!