

Rock or Sand

Matt. 7:24-29

The choice between the narrow and the broad gate is one whose effect is felt immediately. The narrow gate is less attractive but we choose it because we are convinced that it leads to eternal life. It is the greater concern for a long term advantage that motivates the choice to enter the narrow gate.

The choice to build on the rock rather than the sand seems like much less of a choice. Why would you build a house on sand? Everyone knows better than that, do they not? The risks of building a house on sand are immediate. The storms of life could come at any time. A building on the sand will not stand up to a storm. It only makes sense then to build on the rock. It is to everyone's advantage to build on the rock. To do otherwise is clearly foolish and this is the exact word that Jesus used. So, the question is, Why is it an issue? And, clearly, it is.

If you were to build a house, it may not actually be clear to you that you are building on sand or on a rock. The surface that you are building on is dirt but you have to dig down to determine if you have bedrock underneath the surface or a material that is unstable such as sand. Builders will often dig through an unstable material to get to the bedrock in order to have a solid foundation for their building. This solid foundation is essential if you are going to build a building that will last.

So the first question is, do you think about the nature of your life and the choices that you are making in terms of whether you are building your life on the sand or upon a solid rock? This is not a natural question. It is normal for us to make assumptions about our lives, we feel that we are fine, that there is nothing unusual about us and that to think that we might not be ok is even absurd to consider. To think in this way is to be like a builder who constructs a house on the dirt with no concern about its foundation.

If you do accept the premise that you need to build your life upon a solid foundation, the next question becomes, how do I determine what is a solid foundation for my life and how do I recognize the soils that are unstable and that would lead to my own destruction? There are accepted norms in our culture such as a college education, hard work, and common sense. With these tools, we expect to build good lives. We might also cite spiritual values, charity, and church attendance. And, why not add a good job a nice home, a spouse and two kids? This is the good life but can we say with certainty that with this kind of life we build on the rock and not on sand?

The condition that Jesus stated as to whether you are building your house on the rock or on the sand is whether you are "hearing these sayings of Mine and doing them." Jesus spoke these words to a gathered multitude and they were "astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes." The implication of that description is that when you heard Jesus teach, you knew that He spoke the truth. Our experience of these words is different. We find them in the Bible, God's word. They are spoken by Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. They have divine authority. But, we share with those who first heard these words, the need to decide what we are to do with them. Now, as then, more choose to ignore them than to obey them. This is the foolish choice rather than the wise one. It is building on sand rather than the rock.

If Jesus' words are the Word of God and if they are, in fact, the rock upon which it is safe to build when nothing else is then why wouldn't everyone build their lives upon the sayings of Jesus? First, it would seem that we often think that we are hearing the sayings of Jesus and doing them when we get a college education, work hard and exercise common sense. Surely if you have spiritual values and you practice charity and go to church, you must be living as Jesus would want you to. And are not the spouse, nice home and two kids the proof that God is blessing? But, the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees would have also claimed to have spiritual values, to practice charity and they were very good at church attendance. It is almost certainly best in most cases if you get a college education, work hard and practice common sense but do not be deceived, these accomplishments are not exclusive to those who follow the sayings of Jesus. So,

problem number one is that we often assume without proper justification that we are keeping the sayings of Jesus.

Next, let's admit frankly that the sayings of Jesus are difficult and that they represent values that challenge us to adjust our priorities in ways that we would never consider on our own. A goal that is very significant in our culture is that of financial security. Millions of Americans participate in this quest asking questions like, how much is enough? and, what do I have to do to get to my goal, beginning where I am right now? How much can I accumulate with the right investments and with the regular contribution that I feel that I can make? When it is possible to prepare for our life's needs then we should do so. The problem is that there is no such thing as financial security. There is always the possibility that unforeseen events could destroy any fortune. We have been largely removed from these experiences here in America because of the stability of our country and our isolation from the rest of the world. But, unlikely is not impossible. If you build your world on what you think of as the rock of financial security and you lose it because of hyper-inflation or even divorce, then you will have built your life on sand.

But, look at the sermon. If you are poor in spirit, that is, if you have an accurate and insightful understanding of the flaws of your own character and that leads you to mourn the ruin caused by sin both in your own life and that of others and if that leads you to be merciful when you do encounter the flaws of others with the further effect that your heart longs for righteousness, so much so that you value it above any earthly possession then when the floods and storms of life come your way, they will take none of these things away from you for you will have built your life on the rock of Jesus' sayings.

Next, let's observe that Jesus' teachings are often counter-intuitive. It seems that He often asks that we do the opposite of what makes the most sense to us. Often, when His teaching seems unreasonable, we set it aside for a course of action that makes more sense to us. For example, if someone harms you, it is natural to strike back and to send a message that such things will not be tolerated and surely, there is a place for boundaries and for holding people accountable

when their behaviors are unacceptable but Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." All I am saying is that Jesus' teaching to love your enemies is counter-intuitive. He does not say that we are never to hold anyone accountable for negative or harmful behavior. He does say that we must respond to enmity with love, blessing, doing good, and prayer. If these responses seem to be at odds then please, choose to follow Jesus' teaching. For if you choose to do battle with your enemy you may win or you may lose but in either case, you will have tended to become like your enemy as you battle him. But, if you love and bless and do good and pray, then you will have done as Jesus taught and you will be a witness to the love and compassion of Christ to all who see what you have done. Fighting with your enemy is building on sand. Loving, blessing, doing good and praying for your enemy is building on the rock.

So, here's the thing. This life we're in is a battle and we do not win every time. On occasion, Jesus' teaching may be to do one thing and you will choose something else. In another situation, you may do well and reject your own thinking in order to do just as Jesus said. It is a battle that we're in and there are ups and down and victories and defeats. But here is an idea, what if we were to decide to try again whenever we failed? On the way to the Dodger - Giants game last week we stopped to eat at a Chinese Buffet. The place had more different kinds of shrimp than I think I've ever seen at one place at one time. I sampled several. I had a healthy sample of several kinds of shrimp. I looked disdainfully at the salad bar and thought, why should I eat salad when there is so much shrimp? I was stuffed when we left and uncomfortable for much of the night. I had overeaten and I had eaten badly. I failed. Now, I need to go back to that place and try again. Start with salad. Eat one of several kinds of

shrimp. Quit eating before I've had too much. There is no reason why I should let my failure define that place for me.

You know much of the teaching of Jesus and you truly understand a great deal of it. You will often choose to obey Him and follow His teaching even when it seems counter-intuitive. Sometimes you will turn things around in your mind and reject the sayings of Jesus for your own thoughts. It will soon become clear that you

have made a mistake. When that happens, do what you can to revisit the situation and try again. Don't let your mistake define your relationship with Christ. Correct it. Make it right. Build your house on the rock.