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*And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. Matthew 7:24-29*

On the evening of June 16, 1992, a few minutes after 11 pm, Nancy and I were dramatically awakened from our sleep by a force that hit the side of our farmhouse, that shook our walls and furniture, and rattled the glass in our windows. Jumping out of bed in the dark, we looked out the bedroom window into even a darker darkness, but even in the shadows we could see the branches of trees, and the trees themselves, frantically waving in the wind. It was then we turned and ran down the hall to go up the steps to get Eric and Jennifer from their second-floor bedrooms – all the while hearing the familiar roar of a super-cell thunderstorm - which quite often generate dangerous, life-threatening tornados – which it did on that night. Well, we survived that tornado, just as we had done so a few times in the past.

The tornado that night caused some slight roof damage to our home and we lost a number of trees and a new animal shed I had built in the front pasture was now scattered about in our neighbor’s field. But that wasn’t true of Cokato, Minnesota, a town of about 2,000 people. After the tornado had left our place, it headed north for four miles and went right through the middle of town. Although no lives were lost, nine people were seriously injured and transported to the hospital. But the tornado did destroy 12 homes, the town bank and the church where Nancy and I came to faith in Jesus and served as members.

But that tornado was just part of a bigger storm, in that it was part of one of the largest tornado outbreaks on record on the continental United States, affecting portions of the central states from June 14 through June 18, 1992. The outbreak began on June 14 when six tornadoes touched down in Colorado and Idaho. And on June 15 58 tornadoes touched down across the Great Plains, and 65 more were reported over much of the central U.S. on June 16. The 123 tornadoes that touched down on June 15–16 make that two-day span was one of the largest two-day tornado outbreaks in U.S. history. But there are also places in the U.S. that have experienced a *greater number* of storms. In 1998 the state of Florida experienced tornadoes in January; severe thunderstorms, tornadoes and flooding in February; extreme wild fires in June; Hurricane Earl and Hurricane George in September; and tropical storm Mitch in November. The worst of these was the night February 22<sup>nd</sup> when 12 tornadoes touched down overnight killing 42, leaving hundreds more injured and destroying or damaging thousands of homes.

1998 was a tragic year for natural disasters in the state of Florida, impacting and destroying the lives and homes of thousands of people. That being said, we have seen our share of destructive natural disasters in 2017 – and again tragically impacting lives and destroying homes of thousands of people. Such disasters prove to reveal much about our human nature, both the good and the bad. Such disasters also prove to reveal much about building contractors, both the good and the bad. Both become evident once the storm has passed. Some builders honor construction standards and follow the building codes. Other builders are not so honest; to save money and make money they cut corners, and ignore standards and codes, which destroy many homes and buildings - and sometimes lives. In our text for today Jesus tells a us parable about foundations and buildings and storms – and how they reflect the quality and conditions of the foundations and buildings and storms of our hearts, lives and souls. He uses this parable as he brings us to the end of the Sermon on the Mount, the three chapters in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus has been teaching us about the nature of the kingdom of God, the character of those who live in the Kingdom of God, and how those in the Kingdom of God are to live out their lives.

Throughout his preaching our Lord Jesus has touched on a number of real life heart and soul issues we all struggle with, and always his bottom line challenge ended up being whether or not we are living in submission to his Lordship over our lives. Here at the end, Jesus speaks great words of admonition, warning, and encouragement, as he lays out for us the foundational reality of what kingdom living is for those who claim to be a people of the Kingdom of God. In his words to us this morning Jesus does two things: 1) he tells us what the foundation of our faith in the Kingdom of God ought to be, and 2) he tells us what kind of life we should build on that foundation of our faith in the Kingdom of God.

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. . . . And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.”* Matthew 7:24, 26

Jesus begins his parable by talking about two men who each build a “house” on different foundations. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, building a “house” is reflective of building a “life.” The truth is, each one of us builds our “lives” as we live out our lives according to our thoughts, desires and our decisions - and what we say and do with those thoughts and desires and decisions. The truth is we are in a continuous state of building our “lives” because we are constantly adjusting our thoughts and our desires and our decisions - and what we say and do with those thoughts and desires and decisions – as we respond to the shifts and changes that come with the many up and downs we face in life.

In this parable Jesus speaks of how vital it is to have a proper foundation when one builds a “house.” Honest builders who construct houses know that houses that are built on weak or fragile foundations severely jeopardize the integrity of the structure of the house. This is true for all buildings. In 1174 the Italian architect Bonnano Pisano began work on what would become his most famous project: a separately standing bell tower for the Cathedral of the city of Pisa. The tower was to be eight-stories in height and 185-feet tall. There was just one problem: the builders quickly discovered that the soil was much softer than they had anticipated, and the foundation was far too shallow to adequately hold the structure. And sure enough, before long the whole structure began to tilt and it continued to tilt – until finally the architect and the builders realized that nothing could be done to make the Leaning Tower of Pisa straight again. It took 176 years to ultimately complete the Tower of Pisa and during that time a great number of things were done to try and compensate for the “tilt.” The foundation was shored up; the upper levels were even built at an angle to try to make it look straight. Nothing worked. And now the tower has stood for over 800 years, but it still leans 18 feet away from where it should be.

Jesus is telling us that this is what will happen in our lives when we build the “house” of our lives on the weak and fragile foundations of passions or beliefs or teachings or philosophies or presumptions that are not of the Kingdom of God. This is what Jesus was getting at when he said, *“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”* (Matthew 6:33). This is what Jesus challenged us about when he talked about choosing the solid foundation of the narrow gate, the hard way, the healthy tree, and the will of God - rather than the weak foundation of the wide gate, the easy way, the unhealthy tree and the will of “self.” We cannot ignore nor escape the reality that God has given us the human free will to be the builders of the “house” of our lives. But the most important question that we need to answer before God is: “Will we be “wise” builders or “foolish” builders?”

This morning God’s Word tells us that “wise” builders are those of the Kingdom of God who build the houses of their lives on the “rock” solid foundation of Jesus Christ. *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. . . . And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.”* The “rock” solid foundation of faith in the crucified and risen Son of God, Jesus Christ here is contrasted to a weak foundation of “sand” which is a picture of stability versus instability – in other words, that which is strong and sturdy endures versus that which is weak and fragile will not endure.

When the faithful Jews of first-century Palestinian heard the word “*rock*” their minds would have gone to one thing: the *Temple Mount*, the rock upon which the great sacred Temple was constructed. The Temple was the center, the foundation of their culture and their worship, the most sacred place of their entire existence, the place where they drew great comfort and strength. But Jesus closed his Sermon on the Mount by redefining the foundation of their faith as *himself*. This would have been unheard of in those days, as at this point the Jews saw their faith as built upon the rock of the temple. The truth is, Jesus was calling them out because they had placed their faith not in the God of the Torah, but in the Torah itself; not in the God of Israel, but in the nation of Israel itself, who worshipped the Torah and the temple more than they worshipped God. The temple was the place where God manifested His presence among His people, but Jesus declared that now he was the new manifestation of God’s presence. He was now the new rock, the new temple, the new foundation upon which they should build the houses of their faith in God. God was now among them, and God is now among us, in Jesus, who is the foundation of our faith in the Kingdom of God. True disciples of Jesus in the Kingdom of God are to build the houses of their lives on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ. Not on a building or a church or a pastor or our families or our friends or our opinions or our feelings or ourselves. If we build the houses of our lives on the foundation of anything other than Jesus, we are doing so in sand. But when we build our lives on the rock of Jesus, we will stand through whatever storms come our way.

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”* Jesus tell us here that when the wise builder builds his “*house*” upon the rock-solid foundation of Jesus, he is building his life on the *character of God*. The original meaning of the word for “*rock*” here does not mean a stone or even a boulder, but rather a great outcropping of rock, a large expanse of bedrock, an enormous range of majestic mountains that reaches into the clouds of heaven that is solid, stable, and unmovable. Psalm 125:1 says: *“Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.”* Isaiah 26:3-4 says: *“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock.”* The effect on the lives of those who do build the houses of their lives on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ is stunningly dramatic and powerfully staggering: *“And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”*

The picture that our Lord paints is a very graphic picture for those who were listening to him that day. The people that Jesus was talking to often witnessed sudden downpours during the rainy season in ancient Palestine. Dry creek beds would turn quickly into violent rivers in just a few moments of time after a cloudburst. The building materials of the day were not the best and often included just dried mud. One storm could wipe out a poorly constructed house – unless it was built on a good foundation. In the Palestinian desert, it is much easier to build on the sandy surface than to dig down to bedrock, yet our Lord Jesus said the work pays off when you’re willing to dig deep into the foundation of God. If you build on the rock of Jesus, your heart and life will withstand whatever storms of life might come.

*The storms of life will reveal what we have built our lives on.* When struggles and difficulties come, the foundation of our faith will be exposed. The great architect Frank Lloyd Wright was given the challenge of building the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, one of the most earthquake prone cities in the world. Wright’s investigation showed that a solid foundation could be floated on a 60-foot layer of soft mud underlying the hotel, which would provide a shock-absorbing but solid support for the immense building. Shortly after the hotel was completed it withstood the worst earthquake in fifty-two years, while lesser buildings fell in ruins around it. Jesus promises that when we build our lives upon the rock of his character and his word, while life may shift around us or underneath us, he will be with us. Jesus said: *“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33); *“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20). Psalm 46:1-3 says: *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.”*

When we build the houses of our lives in the Kingdom of God on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ, we need not fear that the storms of life will wash us away because - *storms bear the fruit of the character of the Kingdom of God that has been built into our hearts and lives and souls*, which happens when we walk with Jesus down the hard path and through the narrow gate that leads to the Kingdom of God/Heaven. Jesus told us that he is to be the foundation of our faith in the Kingdom of God - and when he is, he will build the house of his Kingdom character within us. What does that Kingdom character look like? It looks like everything that Jesus spoke about in his Sermon on the Mount.

The apostle Paul writes of the foundation of Jesus' Kingdom character and how He builds it in us.

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*      Philippians 2:4-13

Here we read that God the Father sent Jesus His son into the world to “*empty himself*” of his divine nature; and Jesus “*humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” in our place for the forgiveness of our sins; and then he rose from the dead so that we might be forgiven, redeemed and restored back to God. This is salvation! This is the faith that happens when, after Jesus says: “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24) - we then surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. And when that happens, 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us: “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*” and Ephesians 4:24 says: “*Put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*” and Colossians 3:1-4 declares: “*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*”

In all of these words that we have just looked at, we see the foundation of Jesus' Kingdom character and how Jesus builds his Kingdom character into us. Jesus humbly obeyed the will of God to “*empty himself*” - and Jesus calls us to humbly “*deny*” ourselves. Jesus humbly obeyed the will of God that he would die on a “*cross*” - and Jesus calls us to humbly die to ourselves and “*take up his cross and follow*” him, down the hard path and through the narrow gate that leads to the Kingdom of God/Heaven. This is where we become a new creation, as the old passes away and new comes; this is where we put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness; this is where we have been raised with Christ where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God; this is where our lives are hidden with Christ in God; it is where we know that when Jesus Christ who is our life appears in glory, we too will also appear with him in glory. This is the humble path of obedience of the Kingdom character of Jesus that leads us down the hard path and through the narrow gate to the Kingdom of God/Heaven. We see this reflected in what Paul wrote: “*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” The crucified and risen Jesus Christ saves us and calls us to follow him, and as we work out that salvation, God is at work, through the indwelling spirit of Christ, building the Kingdom character of Jesus' humble obedience into our hearts, lives and souls. Ultimately those with the Kingdom character of Jesus Christ will recognize their humble obedience is not of them, but is the work and the will of a joyful God.

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. Here Jesus tells us that the wise builders of the Kingdom of God “hear” his words and “does them.” James 1:22 tells us the same when he writes: “be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” About this, Scottish pastor and scholar William Barclay wrote: “There is little point in going to a doctor, unless we are prepared to do the things we hear him say to us. There is little point in going to an expert, unless we are prepared to act upon his advice. And yet there are thousands of people who listen to the teaching of Jesus Christ every Sunday, and who have a very good knowledge of what Jesus taught, and who yet make little or no deliberate attempt to put it into practice. If we are to be in any sense followers of Jesus we must hear and do.” What this means in the context of our text for today is *obeying the words of Jesus is the key to withstanding the storms of life.**

*“And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”* Notice that the one who is called the foolish builder is the one who, in spite of hearing Jesus’ words, builds their lives on the fragile shaking ground of their own truth. It is fatal in the end to listen to heavenly instruction and then live out earthly pursuits. We build our lives on sand when we build our lives on the foundation of human opinion instead of God’s Word. You see, the sand Jesus speaks of here is composed of fallen, human opinion, attitude and will - which in our fallen state, is always shifting and always unstable. Every area of our lives that are not built upon the rock of God’s word will fall. If we try to build a marriage in the sand of “what’s in it for me” - it will fall. If we try to raise our children on the sands of “give them what whatever they want” - it will fall. If we build our security in life on the sands of financial or relational or emotional stability, it will fall when the winds of struggle and difficulty began to blow. If we try to build ourselves up on the sands of position, respect, knowledge and authority we will fall in the tornados of ego, pride and self-promotion.

In 1 Corinthians 3:12-13 the apostle Paul wrote: *“Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.”* Hebrews 4:12-13 tells us: *“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”* In John 14:15: Jesus said: *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* We are deceived if we think we can profess a relationship with Jesus Christ but not joyfully surrender and obediently live out his words. *“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”* The only validation we can ever have of our salvation is a life that is so joyfully surrendered and so obedient to God’s Word that it withstands any and all storms that might come into our lives.

On Oct. 17, 1989 a massive earthquake struck the San Francisco area and the people there gave a lot of thought to the foundations they had built on. Buildings built on solid ground sustained much less damage than those built on "filled in" areas. The south pier of the Golden Gate Bridge sits directly on top of the San Andreas Fault. Yet it was undamaged in that quake because the weight of the bridge rests on the two towers deeply embedded into the rock beneath the sea. Yet the double-decker freeway in Oakland collapsed because it was built on land that had been filled in. In a time of testing it failed. The difference between those who have built their lives on the foundation of the words and character of Jesus Christ and those who have built their lives on the foundation of the words and character of their own fallen sinful opinions – is revealed in how they react to the storms of life. Times of tribulation reveal the genuineness of a person’s faith and the foundation they have built it on. Those who have truly trusted Jesus as their Lord and Savior will prove their faith by their obedience. And they have nothing to fear. Their house, their life, is built on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus Christ - and it will stand, regardless the storm. But those who claim Christ, but who do not obeyed God’s will, will all fall away.

And one day everything will fall for all of us. In the midst of the storms of life, the day of the Lord, the storm of Jesus' return will be at hand. And on that day the foundations of what we have built our lives on will be exposed which of the two gates we've opened, which of the two paths we've chosen, which of the two trees we've eaten from, and which of the two disciples we have become. On that day we will stand before God and we will know for sure whether or not we have obeyed God and have done God's will. On that day, we will then know whether or not our kingdom conduct reflected kingdom character; whether or not we truly lived out a sacrificial life rooted in God's love that was spiritually-poor, sin-grieving, humbly-dependent, God-pursuing, merciful, pure-hearted, peace-making and endurance-in-the-face-of- persecution. On that day we will know if our hearts and lives reflected the transforming, recreating and perfecting work of the Holy Spirit that was rooted in our conformity to the character of Jesus; whether we lived out a genuine faith in God before each other and before the world without anxiety and worry, that revealed our heart treasured God above anything and anyone else; whether or not sought first the Kingdom of God and loved our enemies and prayed for those who persecuted us. On that day we will know if we forgave others and God has forgiven us; whether or not we had a radical commitment to live in redemptive love relationships with others that reflects a humble, non-judgmental, forgiving spirit; and whether or not we embraced the reign and rule of Jesus in our souls. *And on that day, Jesus will tell us whether he knows us or not.* Jesus challenges us today to listen to his words and obey him. If we do, we will know most of the answers to the things we will know in the end.

Many who do know Christ, do know those answers today because they are paying the ultimate price for putting their faith in Jesus Christ. Today we remember and honor and pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the world who living out the reality of: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Matthew 5:10-11); *"You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world"* (Matthew 5:13-14); *"If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . . And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles"* (Matthew 5:39, 41); *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"* (Matthew 5:44); *"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (Matthew 6:33).

Most likely as Jesus delivered the end of this great Sermon on the Mount he looked out among the crowd with a heavy heart, knowing that many to whom he was speaking would hear his words but still wouldn't respond and do what he said. Imagine the heaviness of knowing that the lives of many of those whom he loved would fall apart in the end because they chose to build their lives on the shifting sand of human opinion instead of the solid rock of Jesus Christ and his word. And even though God's people today possess the written words of our Lord Jesus right in their very hands, many still rely upon their own reason and opinions and evaluation of things to decide what is of God and what is not.

*"And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."* The concept of authority appears over and over throughout the gospel of Matthew. Authority has always been an issue with us ever since the fall in the Garden of Eden. We see rebellion against the authority of God throughout the world and sadly we see also see rebellion against the authority of God in the church. Brothers and sisters, Jesus is the ultimate authority of your life and the ultimate authority of my life and the ultimate authority of the life of this church. Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is the judge, the giver and taker of life. He is worthy of all our undivided attention and worthy of all of our affections. Jesus is the hard way, the narrow gate, the only foundation on which we must build our lives – and Jesus is the hard way, the narrow gate, the only foundation on which we must build this church. May we hear his words and joyfully obey what he tells us to do. Know that if we do listen to Jesus and obey his words – we will not hear him say: *"I never knew you; depart from me"* (Matthew 7:23) but rather he will say: *"Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . enter into the joy of your master"* (Matthew 25:21). Amen? Amen!

2017-11-19

Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church