

## A Tale of Two Houses

### Matthew 6:24-27

On June 24, 2021, many of us turned on the morning news or checked our phones and saw the horrifying images coming out of Surfside, Florida. The south tower of the Champlain towers condominium collapsed killing 98 people while they slept. It is the third deadliest structural engineering failure in US history.

In the aftermath, it was discovered water leaked through the pool deck and caused corrosion of the rebar in the parking garage below the pool. Investigators also revealed that inadequate amounts of rebar had been used in the building's footing neck and starter columns in its initial construction.

However, the ultimate cause of the collapse might not have been the building at all, but the very ground it was built on. A researcher with Florida International University, which had studied the area throughout the 90s, said the building "was sinking into the sand it was built on." The condo was built on reclaimed wetlands and portions of the ground were sinking at significantly faster rates than the surrounding soil.

It turns out that's not a very smart way to build a building. You should be very careful where you build, it doesn't matter whether you are building a 12 story beachfront condo, or you are building a life. Jesus draws the Sermon on the Mount to a close with a cautionary tale about how we build our lives. Matthew 7:24-27 says.

*<sup>24</sup>"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup>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 <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*

Each one of us is building a life. If you're sucking in air, you are a construction worker. Every ambition you cherish sketches out a few more lines in the design. Every action is another brick laid into the structure. Every willful neglect is another corner cut. Every word you say is another nail hammered into place. And gradually, as the years pass, the building of your life takes shape.

Our choice is not between building or not building, but in how and where you choose to build. You can build wisely or you can build foolishly. You can build on solid rock or you can build on unstable sand.

The construction of our lives comes down to the choices we make. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been emphasizing and contrasting these choices. We

choose to either hide our lights or to shine them. We choose to follow one master or the other. We choose to store our treasures on earth, or store them in heaven. We choose to enter by the wide gate or the narrow gate.

But now as Jesus brings the sermon to a conclusion, he says that all of life's choices come down to one basic choice: Will we choose to build our lives on the bedrock foundation of God's word, or will we build them on the sandy foundation of doing it our own way.

We're not comfortable with such limited choices. We don't like good or bad, wrong or right, in or out. Yes or No. We like maybe. We would prefer lots of choices. We like fuzzy boundaries with lots of gray area. But Jesus says that all our lives are built on either rock or sand, and lives built on the sand will not last.

So what's the difference between a life built on the rock or a life built on the sand? How do we build a life that lasts, and not one that gets wiped out in the storm?

### **I. They Build the Same Houses**

First of all, both the wise man and the foolish man build similar houses. The difference isn't in the actual houses they build. Jesus doesn't say that there is any difference in the houses.

In the story of the three pigs it's all about the houses and how they are built. One is made out of straw, another out of wood and a third out of brick. But in Jesus' story both houses could very well be made from brick.

If you were standing out in front of these two houses, you might even swear they are the same. From all appearances the two houses could be identical. They could be made out of the same materials and built the same way.

The durability of each house has nothing to do with the strength of the building or the excellence of the craftsmanship or the quality of the materials. It's all about the stability of the foundation. You can have the most magnificent building. It can be large and impressive. It can be built out of the strongest and best materials, but if it is built on the wrong foundation it means nothing.

There are plenty of lives that from an earthly point of view look good and solid. They have a great family. They have a successful career. They seem to be living a full and happy life. They might even go to church and do spiritual and religious things. But their lives are built on sand, and they will not last.

The difference isn't in what they know. It isn't in the truth they believe in. They both hear the same words. They both have heard what Jesus says here in the Sermon on the

Mount. They both know the truth. They may even both believe the truth. But knowing the truth and accepting that its true isn't the same as living the truth.

### **They Face the Same Storm**

The wise and foolish builder both build the same houses, and secondly, their houses face the same storm. The difference isn't in the storms they face. One house doesn't face a storm that is more severe. Jesus doesn't say there is any difference in the storms at all. It might even be in the same storm. For both houses, "*the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against*" them.

During the rainy season in the Holy Land the storms can be quite severe. The rain can come down in torrents for hour upon hour and day after day. There are times in life that are like that. Jesus doesn't tell us to build where there are fewer storms. He doesn't promise us that if we follow him there will be fewer storms or that Christians face easier storms. There is no building outside of the flood zone of life. The question is can your life withstand the flood?

Storms come in every life, but will is life built to withstand them? What are these storms? Let me tell you about two kinds of storms. The first kind of storm are the trials and challenges we all face. They come in many forms. It could be the loss of a loved one. It could be a physical challenge or some sort of illness. Paul spoke of his thorn in flesh through which he was tested. It could be persecution and temptation. It could be the loss of work or a rebellious child. These are storms that blow through our lives.

There is a greater storm we also must face, a storm that will put each and every life to the ultimate test. This storm is the final judgment.

Later in Matthew, Jesus will compare the final judgment to a coming storm. All of our actions, all of our words, all of our thoughts and ambitions will be weighed and measured. This is the final inspection, the ultimate test for the life we have built. Even if you make it through all the storms of this life, you still have to make it through this one last storm.

Maybe it's possible for someone to escape the storms of this life with a life built on the sand. There are plenty of people who build their lives on the wrong foundation, and the storms of life never seem to wipe it out. They die with millions. They die with a good name and lots of respect. They live a long and prosperous life and never give Jesus a second thought. Not only do they not obey His words, they never take 2 seconds to hear them. It doesn't seem like any storm came along and caused their lives to fall with a great crash. The storm that will wipe these people out comes after they die. No life built on the sand will escape the storm of God's judgment.

The difference isn't in the houses that are built. It's not in what they know to be true. The difference isn't in the storms they face, the trials of life and the judgment we each must face. The difference is the foundation on which they build.

### **Only One Acts on What they Hear and Know**

The difference is in what they do with what they've heard. Only one builder acts on what he knows. Only one is changed by what they believe to be true. The other hears the truth. They know the truth. They may even accept the truth, but the truth doesn't change them. They still live life their own way.

The foolish person builds the way that seems the easiest. They take the quickest route to what seems to be a happy life. The easy way seems attractive for several reasons. It's quick. It seems to deliver immediate results. It looks good without a lot of effort.

The Wise builder builds his house the hard way. They dig down until they can build their house on solid rock. The word Jesus uses for rock here doesn't mean any sort of rock. It means bedrock. Luke records this story this way:

*<sup>48</sup> He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.*

The wise builder is the one who removes the topsoil, the loose gravel, and the sand. He digs down through the earth until he hits solid, immovable bedrock. This is backbreaking work in the age before bulldozers and backhoes. In the 1st Century this could mean weeks of grueling labor. The guy building on the sand looks like he's almost finished, whereas the guy building on the rock looks like he's hardly started, but the house on the sand will never last.

In Israel, there are these valleys called wadis. For most of the year they are dry, and often beautiful, lush places. They may seem like a perfect place to build a home. But for two months out of the year, the storms come. The rains come down for days on end. In the torrents, these wadis become raging rivers overnight. Everything is washed away. Often they flood, wiping out everything around them. Since so much of the soil is loose gravel and sand, the only things that will survive are those things secured to solid rock.

Jesus says the life built on solid rock is the person who not only hears and knows Jesus' words, but obeys them as well. They do not build on the loose gravel of popular culture or the shifting sands of fickle opinion. They only build on the rock of what is timeless and has stood the test of time— the Word of God, the truth of the One Who is the Truth.

One thing we can't miss while sitting in a church on a Sunday morning and listening to a sermon is this— it's not enough to just hear and know the truth. The Jewish religious

leaders were constantly debating whether hearing the law or doing the law was more important. In Jesus' day, most had concluded that hearing the law was the most important, because one could not do it unless they heard it first.

All the emphasis was on the hearing. People loved to hear all the latest theories and interpretations of the law. They would discuss and debate. They had all kinds of knowledge, but they never really acted on it. They knew it in their heads, but it never took hold of their hearts and it never bore fruit upon their lips or in their hands and feet.

Here's what God told the prophet Ezekiel about what He thinks about those who listen to His Word, but don't live it.

*<sup>31</sup> My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. <sup>32</sup> Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.*

Do you hear what God is saying here? He's saying that if you go to church and listen to sermons, but it doesn't change your life, it's no different than going to a Taylor Swift concert.

There are many people like that today. They attend church for years, but their lives are no different now than they were ten years ago. They know their Bibles, they know what it says, they know who Jesus is, and they understand what He did, but their lives are still untransformed. You can have a great life, a picture perfect family, a successful career, a nice house, the car you love, but if its built on the wrong foundation, it won't last.

Two people can be members of the same church, sing the same songs, go to the same classes, read the same Bible, and know the same truth, but one will stand and one will all. You can't be repeatedly exposed to the truth and go on being the same greedy, lustful, selfish, angry, prideful person. It won't last. William Barclay writes,

*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.*

In the book of James, our Lord's brother warns about the same thing.

*<sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. <sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror <sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. <sup>25</sup> But the man who looks intently*

*into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.*

Hearing and doing; Knowing and acting; Believing and Living; the Bible sums this up in a single word. Obedience. It's a word that grates on our modern American ears. It seems old fashioned and out-dated. But Jesus says only by obeying his word can we build a life strong enough to withstand the storm. If we build on anything else it won't last.

I like the idea of freedom and independence as much as any red-blooded American, but I'll obey someone, if they know more than me, can see a lot more than me, can do a lot more than me, and I know they have my best interest at heart.

When something electrical goes wrong in my house, I call someone who knows wiring and electricity. Okay, I call Ty. I ask him questions and he tries to tell me on a "for dummies" level, and then I obey what he says, because I want to live and have lights.

And when it comes to life, who better to obey than the One who created life, who created your life, who put you here with a purpose, who lived his life perfectly, without sin and with perfect love.

There are times when obedience is absolutely necessary. Imagine a parent who doesn't expect their child to obey them until they yell at them. Or children who are allowed to disobey until they get 3 strikes. Now imagine one day the child is playing in the front yard and chases their ball which is bouncing across the street. Mom looks up and sees a car approaching at high speed. Mom shouts at her child. "Honey, stop!" Obedience is absolutely necessary.

A navy man told about a time when he was serving on a tug boat towing a much larger vessel in rough waters. In the midst of the wind and spray, the officer in command of the tug barked an urgent order, "Down!"

Instantly, every man in the crew dropped to the deck, just as the cable snapped and whipped across the taffrail like a steel blade taking much of the boat's rigging with it. Any man left standing would have been sliced in two. Had they stopped to argue or ask why, they would have instantly met their fate. Obedience is absolutely necessary.<sup>i</sup>

When it comes to the words of our Savior, obedience is absolutely necessary. That's the only solid foundation.

So what foundation are you building on? Are you building on the solid rock of obedience to Jesus' words, or are you building on the constantly shift, unstable sand, or your own desires, human opinion, and what is popularly accepted at the moment? I don't care how good your life looks, it won't survive the coming storms.

In 1174 the Italian architect Bonnano Pisano began work on what would become his most famous project: A bell tower for his city's cathedral. The tower was to be eight-stories and 185-foot-tall tall. There was just one "little" problem: 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 the project was even finished, the whole structure had begun to tilt... and it continued to tilt... until finally the architect and the builders realized that nothing could be done to make the bell tower straight again. It took 176 years to finish the tower, and during that time many 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 the top of the tower look straight. Nothing worked. All because it wasn't built on the right foundation. Over the centuries, the tower continued to tilt until eventually the top of the tower was seventeen feet further south than its base, and it leaned at nearly 15 degrees.

In 1990, this tower had to be closed to the public as collapse seemed imminent. Then, after a dozen years, the "Leaning Tower of Pisa" was finally reopened to the public. During that time, engineers completed a 25 million dollar renovation project designed to stabilize the tower. They removed 110 tons of dirt from its high side. Thousands of tons of concrete were pumped beneath the sinking side to stabilize the foundation. All sorts of cables and lashings were attached to the tower. When they were all finished the engineers were able to reduce its famous lean by sixteen inches.

Why was this necessary? What was the problem? Bad design? Poor workmanship? An inferior grade of marble? No. The problem was what was underneath. The sandy soil on which the city of Pisa was built was just not stable enough to support a monument of this size. The tower had no firm foundation.

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<sup>i</sup>*The Gospel of Matthew : Volume.* 2000, c1975 (W. Barclay, lecturer in the University of Glasgow, Ed.). The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. (292). Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.