

# BUILT ON THE ROCK

by Steve Zeisler

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John Stott has called the Sermon on the Mount a manifesto for the Christian counter-culture, and I think that is an excellent way of characterizing it. Christians are to live counter to every culture. In the first century Jesus called on his followers to live very different lives from the idolatrous Greek, Roman and cultic mystery religions among Gentiles; and from the Pharisees, Saducees, and zealots among the Jews. Christians are still to be a counter-culture among both the contemporary irreligious pagans and religious hypocrites.

In this final study of Matthew 5-7 we will recall much of what we have considered in these chapters. In the final paragraph we have come to an illustration in which Jesus is going to challenge us one last time to obey him from the heart. Matthew 7:24-29:

"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. 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."

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.

## **The right foundation**

The illustration is obvious to anyone who has ever erected any kind of structure. It shows the need for a good foundation.

I remember being on a backpacking trip with men from the church a number of years ago. I have always been a fair-weather backpacker. In general, I like to be able to go into the high country when the surroundings are beautiful, the friendship great, and the weather conditions favorable.

On this particular trip there were probably fifteen of us. Paul Winslow was the physical leader and Ray Stedman was the spiritual leader. Mike Tracy and I were sharing a tent, and we were among the first to arrive at a site where we were to spend the night. We looked around for a flat space without any rocks on which to pitch our tent, and picked out a great spot. In retrospect I think the reason there weren't any rocks and it was flat was the presence of layers of sediment.

But sure enough, that night the rain fell, the winds blew, and the stream rose. We had managed to choose a water course on which to pitch our tent! Streams that came down from all the country above us converged into this stream bed we were sleeping in. We woke up in the middle of what seemed like a lake. Everyone in the group got wet, but Mike and I got wet from underneath the tent, from water flowing in the sides of the tent, and from going outside to try to salvage our equipment. We were completely drenched. It was a test not only of our ability to make good decisions as backpackers, but also of our spirituality. I remember being sure it was Mike who had made the foolish choice to stay there. Of course he was sure it was I.

We would have gotten away with camping in the middle of a stream bed if it hadn't rained. You can survive choices like that until there is a test. When the test of the unexpected, torrential rain came, our spirituality and our skills and everything else were shown to be less than we had imagined them to be. That is the point that Jesus is making here: There is going to come a test. We cannot fend off hard times. We may do our best on some level to hold them at bay by providing securities of various kinds around ourselves, but we cannot

ultimately keep testing or pain from happening to us in this life. When it comes, we will discover whether the foundation of the house we have built has been laid upon the rock. That is much more difficult, of course, than just finding some easy, flat place on which to erect a building. But when the test comes, it is discovered to be worth every effort.

There are three issues I would like us to consider in Jesus' words here. The first is found in the phrase in both verses 24 and 26: "...everyone who hears these words of mine...." Hearing is the first issue. The second is found in the second phrase in verse 24: "...and puts them into practice." And the third issue is the requirement that we will be tested. What does it mean to face squarely that storms are going to come?

## **Hearing the words of Jesus**

We live in a house that has a somewhat circular layout due to the way it has been added onto and changed over the years. And it has always seemed to me that noise gathers volume as it circulates around our house. Maybe there will be a stereo playing in one bedroom, a television on in another room, and the dishwasher running in the kitchen, and the din just seems to build. You can be saying perfectly useful things to someone in conversation, and their ears can work just fine, but very little communication takes place unless you can deal with the noise.

Effective hearing has to take place in a setting where the competing noise is done away with. One of the clear teachings of the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' insistence that we pay attention to what he says and stop listening to the other voices that crowd in on our thoughts. He began with a series of blessings: Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, and so on. Remember that Jesus said elsewhere that hearing does not happen until you perceive what you've heard: "He who has ears, let him hear." In order to hear those statements perceptively, we need to stop the inner shouting of our own self-preservation: What is this business about poverty, about meekness and mourning and persecution? Everything in me resists wanting to hear that. I don't want such language to penetrate very far. I want to protect myself, to not take seriously all the risks that go with that.

The world in fact will threaten us. One of the Jews for Jesus members at our early service talked about growing up in Moscow, attempting to celebrate Rosh Hashanah as a fifteen-year-old, and being put in jail for it. Persecution can be that overt, or it can be more subtle. People will cut us off, deny us opportunities for advancement, misunderstand us, shut us out of relationships, and isolate us. The world will threaten us, and the noise of the world's threat can drown out the words of Jesus so that we don't hear them as well.

The arguments of those who would twist the Law also sound in our ears. They take the firm, sharp, and incisive word of God and say, "Yes, it sounds like it means that, but once you add all of the extenuating circumstances, it changes the real point to be this in fact, which is much smaller, easier, and less profound than the actual words declare." So these voices add to the din, and we don't hear clearly what Jesus is saying anymore because we prefer things easy to manage, the "ear-tickling," to use Paul's phrase.

Applause can sometimes drown out the words of Jesus. That is another warning of his. People will clap us on the back and give us acclaim for our godly public behavior, whether it is giving alms, fasting, praying, or whatever.

The clamor to worship money, the anxious thoughts that wail in our thinking-have we done enough, are we secure enough?-the hoarse whisper of judgmentalism, and the noisy bustle of the crowds on the broad road all have the effect of making us engage less perceptively with the words of Jesus.

He says that everyone who hears his words has taken the first step toward building a house (a life) that is not going to be vulnerable in the storm. But be very clear, hearing is only the first step, because the people who are spoken of in verse 26 and those spoken of in verse 24 both take this first step. Both of them hear, perhaps even perceptively. The second step is what differentiates the group who will live securely from those who will not.

## **Obeing what we hear**

The second step is to act on what we hear. The group I imagine Jesus is thinking of here are people who love the language of Scripture, Christian conversation, Christian music, and even good Bible teaching. All the buttons on their car radio are set to Christian stations. They have Christian tapes. They have plaques on the wall with beautiful calligraphy declaring their favorite verses of Scripture. They may have memorized Scripture. They have libraries of Christian literature, with some volumes they have even read. Their world is filled with Christian content. These are people who love to hear-but they have a big disconnect when it comes to acting on what they hear and obeying it. The words of Jesus have penetrated their minds, but they haven't penetrated to the point of making any change in the way such people live. These are the ones whose lives have been built on sand, whose lives will be swept away when the hard times come.

Let me make the point clearly, though: Salvation is a gift. The Incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas is pure grace. We can never deserve it, never win our way toward it; nor can we fail sufficiently to have made ourselves unworthy of it. Turning to God's grace and saying, "Thank you" even at the last minute, with our last breath, is to experience salvation. A quality life built on the rock over a lifetime is not required to be saved. A relationship with Christ is all that is required. We are either children of God through faith in Christ, or we are not children of God.

But at some point we will be confronted with illness, the loss of a job, or violation done to our life and heart by someone we trust and love. Were we to live on a different continent-or perhaps our own a short time from now-we might easily face war, famine, political chaos all the terrible things that such storms can do to human beings. So if you live a life that will not crumble under pressure, and become a man or woman of substance who can face those things and not have the house come down, it will be because you have chosen to listen to and do what Jesus said. You have become strong on the inside. You have become someone who has learned so thoroughly to walk with Christ this day and the next day and the next, facing whatever it is you have to face, that when the day comes that brings the storm that day will be no different from the ones that preceded it. Jesus will be your companion then because you have made a practice of hearing and obeying him, and your life will have a foundation under it. You will be able to deal with whatever tragedy life brings.

That is what the Lord is teaching us here. If we have received the gift of his words and perceived what he said; if we understand that he loves us and we are convinced that it is true, then the only reasonable response is to say, "Thank you" by obeying what he said; by allowing it to alter our convictions, our attitudes, and our actions-the way we live our lives.

What are your options if you hear the truth of Jesus, the gospel, the promises of God? One is to treat the truth with contempt. Jesus used the figure of speech "throwing pearls before swine." Or you can receive the truth with a phony enthusiasm. Have you ever expressed hypocritical enthusiasm at Christmas about gifts that you really didn't want? You say, "Oh, Aunt Fanny, you sent your fruitcake again this year. Thank you so much!" when you have no interest in it at all. Another option is to have a genuine but short-term enthusiasm; to be very grateful for and completely enthralled emotionally with something for the moment. But a day or two or a week later the memory of it fades, and nothing very substantial takes place in your heart. Finally, the wise option when you hear the words of Jesus is to receive the gift that is in that message and to enter a love relationship with him.

I was looking at a *Calvin and Hobbs* comic strip this week, which illustrated hypocrisy. Every year, Calvin has the problem of having to be good in December so Santa will bring him gifts. It's an enormous struggle for this six-year-old wild man to be good. In this strip he tells his friend Susie,

"Fortunately, I asked Santa for such great presents that I can withstand any temptation. I'm being an absolute angel."

"What did you ask for?" asks Susie.

"A heat-seeking guided missile, he replies. "I figure five minutes with one of those babies will make up for this whole rotten month!"

That is a hypocritical response to the gift-giver; it is manipulation, being good only in the short term, building life on the truth in a phony fashion. But what Jesus is talking about is something different. He is talking about hearing the truth and obeying it because it matters to us, because our hearts have been changed.

## Being sure that storms will come

The third issue, beyond hearing and practicing what we hear, is being very sure that there is going to be trauma. We cannot avoid a life that is going to descend on us with pain and unexpected tragedy at times. It is going to demand more of us than we have to give, surprise us, and threaten to crush us.

Leslie and I were reading Friday's paper, and the front page told the story of a prominent Stanford Medical School physician, whose wife we know slightly. He had a young family. He was a brilliant, loving man with a marvelous professional future. He was very athletic and trim; he worked out all the time. But he dropped dead at fifty-one while running. His heart failed, his life was forfeited and those who loved and counted on him faced sudden loss. There is no way to protect ourselves, no way to have enough money, enough health, or enough of anything to be sure that the storm won't come. The question is, does our house have a foundation, or will it collapse? Will the depression, darkness, and devastating sense of loss overwhelm us so there is nowhere to turn, or is Jesus going to be with us because we have learned day in and day out to be his companion in life?

Most people know the right thing to do in a lot of settings. Most of us know that cholesterol is bad for us. We know that we're supposed to back up the hard drive on our computers. We know that we should take time to be with our kids when they're young. The question is, do we do anything about it? Having been willing to hear with perception what Jesus said and knowing the truth, will we make the tough choice to embrace it, live it, and obey it as we ought?

The Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 5 verse 1 by saying that Jesus sat down as a rabbi to teach, and his disciples came to hear him. But as the teaching proceeded, others joined them and were listening in. The Sermon on the Mount ends with the declaration of Jesus' authority. The crowd reacted by saying, "This one speaks as no one else speaks. He doesn't quote the ancient teachers or anybody else. He just tells us the thoughts of God from the heart of God." But what we don't know about either the disciples or those in the crowd is whether they believed any of it and it issued in obedience for them, except for that handful of disciples whose lives we can trace to the upper room after Jesus' death and resurrection.

We ourselves have been hearing some of what Jesus has said. We know what matters to him. We have had an opportunity to be engaged with his mind, to have him strip away our excuses. At this time of year-in the middle of gift-giving, year-end evaluations, and resolutions for the year to come-let's pick out just one of the things Jesus has taught us and find the courage and conviction to say, "Lord, I hear your word, and I will trust you for the strength to begin to do it." Engaging in the process of setting a foundation under the lives we're living is worth attempting. I don't mean that we should try to do everything all at once; we cannot go from immaturity to maturity in one bound. But we can faithfully say, "Lord, let me practice what I've heard in just one area today. Let me begin this obedience. And I will trust you to open doors to further hearing and obedience to make my life like Christ."

Let me ask you a few questions to close: Are you hiding something under a bushel that ought to fill the room with its light? Are you pulling back in a relationship? Are you failing in courage to speak up, to act differently, to take a risk, to stand for Christ in a setting where it's going to be hard and there's going to be a price to pay? Jesus said that light shouldn't be hidden under bushels. It's not hard to understand what he meant.

Are you in the grip of lustful or angry thoughts and habits? Jesus said, remember, that being overwhelmed in the interior of your mind with either lust or anger is violent and deadly. Are you willing to take steps to obey what you have heard him say in those things?

Is there an enemy you hate whom you could love? Is there a brother you could stop judging? Are you anxious about life, or do you love money too much? Is your spiritual life perfunctory and done for the crowd?

There are many things in just these three chapters that Jesus has made plain to us. And the question we're left with is, will we do what he says? Will we build a house on a foundation so that it will stand firm when the test comes?

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Catalog No. 4416  
Matthew 7:24-29  
Fourteenth Message  
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December 18, 1994

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