



Part 17 – Wise and Foolish Builders

Matthew 7:24-27

As Jesus concludes his sermon, joining his inner circle of disciples are the crowds that have now gathered to listen to his words. It is safe to say that not even his disciples fully understand who he truly is. They are just beginning to understand that perhaps Jesus is the Messiah. But even the implications of that will not be understood by them for quite some time. So Jesus presses upon his hearers the necessity of making

a choice concerning how they will relate to him. Will he be to them a good teacher? Or will they reckon with him as Lord?

It is the choice which is faced by all of us who hear Jesus' words. Are Jesus' words the words of God or simply those of an ethical teacher? Jesus presses us to this point of consideration by various illustrations. There are, he says, two gates through which we can pass. One leads to life everlasting, the other to destruction. Or, will we be trees that produce good fruit or those which produce bad fruit and are then gathered up for destruction? Will we plead his lordship from believing or unbelieving hearts?

Finally, Jesus calls us to consider whether we are wise or foolish builders. Have we heard his words only or have we embraced his words and responded in obedience? Have we heard and obeyed his call to believe? Or what of Jesus' call to follow him? He warns those who hear his words to obey him also lest they be like a builder who built his house on sand and whose end will be catastrophic.

1. Two Builders

Jesus' final metaphor is a contrast between builders. One builds on a proper foundation while the other builds upon sand. The difference between the two builders is how they respond to Jesus' words.

Vs. 24 – "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them..."

Vs. 26 – "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them..."

Notice that Jesus is not contrasting those who have heard his words versus those who have not. Rather, Jesus is speaking here to covenant insiders, those who are part of the visible community of God's people. Just like us, the crowd gathered that day had all heard Jesus' words. The dividing line cutting through the crowd is who will be like the wise builder and who will be like the foolish builder.

The exhortation with which the sermon concludes is all about our *doing* or *practicing* the words of Jesus. The *wise* man is the *obedient* man. It is only the fool who hears Jesus' words and rejects him. The wise builder "actually repents. He actually believes. He actually ceases to do evil, learns to do well, abhors that which is sinful, and cleaves to that which is good. He is a doer as well as a hearer (James 1:22)."¹

2. Two Foundations

Technically, Jesus is not contrasting two different foundations. Rather he is contrasting an actual foundation with a total lack of a foundation. Sand, after all, is no foundation. At first appearance, the two houses may appear identical in terms of their design and the quality of materials used. Only when the storm comes is the truth revealed. One house will stand while the other one will collapse.

In verses 24 and 26 Jesus distinguishes between those who hear and obey his words with those who hear and do not obey his words. The foundation is the word of Christ. The difference between the two builders is their response to the foundation, the word of Christ. Responding to the words of Christ with obedience is like a builder who builds his house upon a solid foundation.

Ephesians 2:18-22 – In this passage the Apostle Paul picks up on similar language when he makes reference to the church's foundation. He compares the church to a building, a holy temple which is expertly joined together (constructed). The church, he writes, is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Matthew* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 2012) p. 58

Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

- What are we to make of Paul's statement that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (vs. 20)? The reference to the apostles is clear enough. But there is some debate as to the identity of the prophets. Is Paul referring, as has been traditionally held, to the Old Testament prophets? In this case Paul is very simply summing up the word of God spoken by the prophets (Old Testament) and now the apostles (New Testament). Or, as some scholars suggest, is Paul using the term "prophets" to refer to those preachers (prophets in the strict sense) who were associates of the apostles like Luke, Apollos, and Timothy? Good arguments can be made for both. But in the end there is no real difference in the central point. God sanctifies his people and builds his church upon His word.
- The foundation of the church is the Word of God in all its Christian fullness. Christ, Paul explains, is the "cornerstone," by which the whole church as a living temple is held together. It is proper to speak of both Christ and the Word of God as the church's foundation because there is such a close correspondence between the two. Jesus is perfectly represented by his words. Indeed, God, by his Word gives authoritative revelation of his nature and character. For us, there is always a gap between what we say and who we are. Not so with Jesus. "God speaking and God acting are often one and the same thing."²

As he does throughout his sermon, Jesus is ultimately pointing us to something that begins deep inside. He is not prescribing mere outward conformity to certain ethical actions. He repeatedly calls us to consider our thoughts, motives, and the condition of our hearts. It is in the heart where genuine faith is given birth and grows to maturity. And this faith is grounded upon the Word of God. It is in our response of faithful obedience to all that God says that we find our lives secured upon a lasting foundation. "To read Scripture for its divine address is to approach a holy place; it is to climb with Moses to meet God."³

In Jesus' closing illustration, the two houses look identical except for one key difference. They face the same rain, the same flood, and the same wind. But they do so upon radically different foundations. The wise builder builds upon the rock. The foolish builder builds his house upon sand. Storms reveal the truth about the foundation on which we have built our lives.

3. Two Destinies

In concluding his sermon, Jesus repeatedly contrasts the consequences of either responding to him in obedient faith or rejecting him.

Vs. 13 – "For the way is easy and the gate is wide that leads to destruction."

Vs. 19 – "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Vs. 23 – "I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

Vs. 27 – "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."

It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of the differences Jesus sketches in these final words of his sermon. One way leads to life while the other to destruction. One tree stands while the other is cast into the fire. Among the voices crying, "Lord, Lord," are those whose profession is undermined by the absence of obedient faith. One house stands strong while the other collapses in disaster. The most significant of all our important choices is whether we will go the way of life or the way of destruction. Which foundation will we build upon? Will it be the rock-solid foundation of Christ or the innumerable other ways which amount to little more than sand?

"So ends the Sermon on the Mount. Such a sermon never was preached before: such a sermon perhaps has never been preached since. Let us see that it has a lasting influence on our own souls. It is addressed to us as well as to those who first heard it; we are they who shall have to give account of its heart-searching."⁴

² Timothy Ward, *Words of Life* (Downer Grove: IVP Academic, 2009) p. 26

³ Kevin Vanhooser, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024) p. 14

⁴ J.C. Ryle, p. 58