

Building on Bedrock

Matthew 7:24-27

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

It is the time of year once again for graduations and commencement speeches. Last weekend I was involved in graduation ceremonies at Princeton Theological Seminary, held in the Chapel at Princeton University. It was a regal affair, though perhaps not quite as regal as the royal wedding taking place on the same day at St. George's Chapel, Windsor. I guess my invitation to the wedding of Harry and Meghan must have gotten lost in the mail.

I'm fascinated by graduation speeches. As another class of young people cross the finish line and emerge with their college degree in hand, what wisdom shall be imparted from one generation to another? What message should be shared as they enter adulthood? What advice is there for how to build a life?

This summer we are going to explore the idea through a sermon series focused upon building a life on "solid ground." And this text from the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount is our guiding light and over arching theme. We're going to talk about character, and will examine biblical characters as guideposts pointing the way to building a life that withstands adversity.

Recently my good friend Dr. Ron White, spoke at Huntingdon College graduation. He helpfully addressed the question of character, after acknowledging that most of the graduating seniors had probably been asked repeatedly, "What are you going to do following graduation?" He told the story of being at a Dude Ranch with his grandson. The ranch manager asked everyone to share a little something about him/herself to become better acquainted. "I will never forget a woman from Seattle," he said. "She told us that during the previous fall, when her daughter entered middle school, her teacher asked each student to answer this question: What do you want to do when you grow up?"

When it came time for her thirteen-year-old daughter to answer, she replied, “That is an inadmissible question and I refuse to answer it.” She continued, “Now if you want to ask me *who* I want to be, I will try to answer that question.” Smart kid! The teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount are also much more interested in the question, “Who do you want to be?” than “What are you going to do?”

In the past, commencement speeches tended to be a call to arms, “Be bold!” Or “If you set your mind to it, you can be anything you want to be!” Today there is a call to lower your expectations and just learn to accept yourself. It will inoculate you against serial disappointments, according to a new book entitled, *Assume the Worst: The Graduation Speech You'll Never Hear*. The authors debunk “lame platitudes” like “Live each day as if it’s your last,” and “Try to find goodness in everyone you meet,” that clog the graduation and self-help industries. Instead there is an increasing sense of skepticism about achievement. “Take a chill pill” and resign yourself to passive self-acceptance. Of course, some students carrying the load of student debt that sometimes reaches six and even seven figures may be motivated for other reasons to high achievement.

According to an article in *The New York Times*, “In 2012, schoolteacher David McCullough, Jr. told the graduating class of Wellesley High School near Boston ‘You are not special. You are not exceptional,’ setting off a fire storm of media attention. His 2014 book-length expansion of the speech became an international best seller. In 2013, when the transcript of George Saunders’ convocation speech at Syracuse University was put on *The Times*’ website, it and its galvanizing humility (“What I regret most in life are failures of kindness.”) were soon shared more than a million times, and published as a book a year later.”

What does make the difference in life? What determines the quality of one’s life? Some of the most important things in life only become apparent over time. Surely the answer has something to do with the kind of decisions we make, the choices we exercise and even the ones we avoid – perhaps out of fear of making a wrong decision. Life requires each of us to decide; to choose that which is to be valued. What will we give ourselves to? What will we seek to accumulate? What commitments will we make? Will life take

the path of least resistance or will some greater and nobler cause become the foundation; become the ground of our existence? What do you think Jesus would say to the graduating class of 2018?

Matthew and Luke both record this parable about being hearers and doers of the word, and about building life on a solid foundation. Following the largest sections of Jesus' teachings, which include the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer (known as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew) this parable reminds us that the Christian life is about more than right beliefs, it is also about right behaviors and actions. It is not knowing alone but doing that matters most, acting on what you know. Beliefs and behaviors in Christian faith are inseparable like two sides of the same coin. Inevitably the storms of life will come and reveal what kind of ground our lives are built upon.

As Luke tells it, the one who digs down deep to lay the foundation of life upon the rock is the one who survives the storm and the flood. As if to say, you have to dig deeper than the shallow stuff of life, or you are likely to be swept away when any adversity comes. Popularity, good looks, fame and material gain are the kinds of superficial "sand" that some have built upon only to find it doesn't last. You have to dig deeper than that, according to Luke.

In the 19th century a fable emerged about the three little pigs. Remember that each of the three left home to find their fortune. One built a house of straw and one of sticks, but the big bad wolf came along and blew both of them down. Only the third pig, who built his house of brick, survived the terrible wolf. The author must have been familiar with this parable and Luke's telling of it in particular. The moral of the story, build your life with the right materials or you will suffer the consequences.

Matthew tells the story slightly differently. In his Gospel, it is not how deep you dig but where you choose to build your life in the first place. Will you build upon the rock (the high ground) or will you build in the sand, where the old riverbed periodically swells with torrential rains, and floods, and winds. In other words, it's not so much about the

depth of your foundation in life but about what you build upon – what moral and ethical grounding is beneath the surface. In both stories, the point is that building your life upon the ethical constraints and commands of Jesus is solid ground in life. It is bedrock, constant and unchanging. “All other ground is sinking sand” as a familiar hymn reminds us.

People's lives sometimes turn out tragically even though no one intends them to turn out that way. It really does matter how you build your life and especially upon what ground you lay the cornerstone. If the foundation isn't solid, the rest doesn't much matter because it's a house of cards anyway. This weekend we remember those who gave their lives to preserve our form of government, the value of freedom and government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Collectively we must build upon that foundation that our Constitution and Bill of Rights provides. That is the solid ground that has withstood the test of time and many storms.

Jesus said there are two paths: one wide and one narrow, one easy and one difficult. He says, “Enter through the narrow gate and take the hard road for it leads to life.” And your life will be built on solid ground, on bedrock. Following the prevailing standards is not enough. Fitting in to the dominant culture is not enough. The “path of least resistance” often leads to disaster. Where there is no concentration of mind and no discipline of life; where there is no inward righteousness developing; where only convenience matters, then there is a life that can be washed away with the next storm. We have all known people who have built on the wrong foundation, to their eternal detriment. I'll bet someone comes to mind right now – perhaps a family member or friend, someone at work or school who has a shaky foundation in life, or is in danger of the next, even mild, crisis. We are disappointed when popular actors are revealed to be sexual harassers. Even famous chefs turn out to be abusers in their kitchens. We long to see examples of people who live more authentic lives, with character and integrity.

It makes a difference how we choose to build our lives. To take lightly the teachings of our Lord and the commands of God is to bring calamity upon ourselves. The parable makes no distinctions. Wherever one builds you can expect the storms to rage. One is

not protected from life's storms; only from the disaster of a house that falls, only from the disaster of a life that caves in on itself. And that depends upon the builder, the choices made especially while laying the foundation. Some things only become apparent over time. What is your life built upon? Are you on solid ground or shifting sands? This summer we are going to explore the different characters in the Bible to uncover how God established solid ground for their lives. We will explore the question, "Who do you want to be?"

It takes time before it becomes apparent whether we are building on solid ground or shifting sands. But it is never too late to begin again, to rebuild our lives on stronger, more stable, and more solid ground. Jesus is the rock upon which we can build. Thanks be to God.