

“Building on the Rock”

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[Psalm 62:5-8 and Matthew 7:24-29](#)

I imagine most, if not all, of us are familiar with the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It is probably the most famous example of a building with a pronounced flaw. The top floor of the tower is 12 feet off of center! The tower began leaning soon after its first floors were constructed in the year 1173. It was actually constructed in three phases over nearly two hundred years. The lean began almost immediately, and the angle was so much that, by the time the upper floors were constructed, the engineers decided to build the highest floors with one side taller than the other. In 1990, there was a concern that the building might actually collapse and so it was closed to the public for over a decade to work on strengthening the structure. During that work, millions of dollars were spent to shore up the leaning tower. Yes, this tower has been leaning for over 800 years. Do you know why? The tower does not lean because of a poor design of the tower itself. It doesn't lean because of poor workmanship. It doesn't lean because it was made of an inferior grade of marble. No, it leans for one reason only. It leans because it was built on an inadequate foundation. It is built on ground made of clay, sand and shells in an area with a very shallow water table. The Leaning Tower of Pisa leans because it was not built on a firm foundation.

The fact that this particular tower leans is what makes it famous. The engineers working to stabilize the tower actually chose to not straighten it out *too much* because it would no longer be interesting for people. Tourism would fall off. Who wants to visit the *formerly-leaning* Tower of Pisa?

However, our lives must not reflect that attitude. We need to have lives that are built on steady foundations. That's what Jesus was telling us about in our Gospel lesson for today. He said that the wise person builds their house on rock, rather than on sand.

Most of us have probably built sandcastles. They are fun to build, but you know when you are building one that it is very temporary. It is an enjoyable experience, but when you build on the sand, the building is not going to last. Jesus was teaching His followers about firm foundations. The problem is that many people in ancient Palestine didn't want to build their houses on the rocks. Building on the rocks took a lot more time and energy than building on the sand. Building on the rocks meant you had to endure backbreaking labor, smashing bigger rocks into smaller rocks. You had to assemble the rocks just so before you built the house. Building on the sands was much easier. Often, people took the path of least resistance and built their houses along the riverbeds. Waterfront property was popular, even then. It was nice to be there along the river—you had nice scenery and easy access to water for cooking, drinking, and bathing. And those bothersome floods couldn't come around *that* often, so what's the risk? It was shortsighted thinking. When the floods came—and they did come—those houses built on the sand could not withstand the raging waters, but those houses built on the rock foundation could. When, as the children's song says, "the rains came down and the floods came up," the houses built on the sand collapsed. That wonderful children's song evokes such vivid imagery. The rains came *down*, and the floods came *up*. "And the house on the rock stood firm." Not so for the house built upon the sand. Here's where that song gets really good – "and the house on the sand went *SPLAT!*" What fun it was to sing that part! *SPLAT!* What kid doesn't want to sing "SPLAT?" While the house on the sand *was* more fun to sing about, we get the point that the house built on the rock stands firm, and *that* is what we should strive to be like. Jesus says "the rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock."

And so the metaphor is a compelling one. The language is evocative. The imagery is vivid in our minds. We want to build our lives on the rock foundation, so that we can remain standing in the midst of the storms. Jesus tells us that, though there will be floods and winds that will attack us in life, if our foundation is strong, we will remain standing. We are not promised an easy life if we build ourselves on a strong foundation. We are not promised lives without any pain or struggle. The same words are used for both houses: "The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house." Life happens to all. It rains on the righteous and the unrighteous. We are promised that, *when* the winds and floods batter us, we can stand tall. We are promised that Jesus will be with us through it all.

Right now, we may feel like the rains are falling, the flood waters are rising, and the winds are strong around us. In the last two and a half years, we've had not one, but two, pastors retire. Both were well-loved and appreciated, and we had wonderful celebrations for both. But now they are gone, moved on to new chapters in their lives. We've been discerning God's will for the future senior pastor of our congregation, and the Pastor Nominating Committee has been working industriously and diligently toward that goal. We find ourselves in a time of transition yet again. Changing demographics and a changing society bring new challenges. How will we face the rains, floods, and winds? By being built on a strong foundation. The hardy souls who started this church on the edge of the swamp built it – spiritually and physically – on a firm foundation. The church has been blessed with great pastors, like Pastor Rick and Pastor Chuck, and we stand in deep gratitude to God for them, but the church is not built on any one person. The church will not be built on the next senior pastor. The church is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, and will not fall! Jesus has promised us that He will be with us, through it all. Jesus is our rock and steady foundation!

How do we continue to be built on that steady foundation? Jesus tells us how it was that the wise one built a house on the rock. He made it clear. It's quite simple – all we have to do is hear Jesus' words and "act on them." Simple enough, right? *Just do what Jesus says.*

But, of course, it's just that easy and just that hard. It's easier to build on the sand than on the rock. It's always easiest to take the path of least resistance. It's easiest to come to church on Sundays – or to not come to church at all – and then live the rest of our lives whatever way we want. But Jesus said "everyone...who hears these words of mine and *acts on them.*" It is not enough to come to church on Sunday mornings. It is not enough to read our Bibles. It is not enough to think nice thoughts and say our prayers. It is not enough to *know* what it is that we are to do if we do not actually *do* it! It's not enough to just "go to church" – we must *be* the church!

Jesus made this statement about "these words" at the end of the sermon on the mount, the collection of instructions found in Matthew 5, 6, and 7. He starts out with the Beatitudes – those "Blessed are" statements, but He says a lot more than that. He tells us that we should turn the other cheek, give to those who ask, and love our enemies, not just our friends. He tells us that we should not show off our religion so that others will praise us, but we should do things in secret so that only God sees us. He tells us that we should not store up our treasures here on earth, but we should store them in heaven. He tells us that we cannot serve God and wealth. He says "do not worry" and "do not judge." He gives us what we call the golden rule—"in everything do to others as you would have them do to you." He tells us to beware of false prophets. There is so much recorded in those three chapters in Matthew. There is so much instruction and wisdom. There is so much for us to read and understand. But, we also have to *do what Jesus says.* He says we have to *act* on His words. We have to study His words and learn what they mean for our lives. We have to internalize His words, so that they are second nature to us. But more than that, we have to take action. Loving our enemies – those are not just trite words. It is an instruction to us that is to be taken literally. We are truly to love our enemies, whether they a neighbor that really gets on our

nerves or a politician with whom we strongly disagree or even a terrorist. We are to love *everyone*, even those who wish us harm. We really are supposed to do that! This is not a simple, naïve notion that we can ignore. We are to do as Jesus did and *love* our enemies. Hanging on the cross, with some of his last breaths, Jesus cried out to God to forgive those who were killing him.

We are to store up treasures in heaven, not on earth. That's not just something nice to think about – it's a command. We Americans are especially guilty of breaking that command – we store up stuff all over this earth. Just look at the number of self-storage buildings that have popped up all around. Though American houses keep getting bigger and bigger, we have so much stuff we cannot even fit it in our houses anymore. Jesus told us not to worry and not to judge others, and anyone who listens to most of us talks knows we are guilty of both of those sins. He wasn't kidding about that! And we know the golden rule so well and yet we practice it so poorly. Jesus told us that it is not enough to know these things if we do not follow them.

*The Message* paraphrase captures this vividly: “These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock. But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.”

Jesus tells us the wise person builds on the rock. If we are to be wise, we have to build our lives on the rock of Jesus Christ. This is about our lives in all that we do, inside and outside of this building. We have to follow His commands. We have to have strong foundations so that our lives do not look like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. This church stands straight and strong because of its foundation, built by our spiritual ancestors. It has weathered storms over the years, and will

continue to do so, rooted in faith and carrying out the will of God. May we be wise, as we continue to build this church on the rock of Jesus Christ. Amen.