

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Sermon on the Mount, August 20, 2023  
Matthew 7:21-29  
Building on Rock

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My Bible text for this morning speaks of building our house on rock. It is a verse that speaks of action. Jesus says this:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and *acts on them* will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.  
(Matthew 7:24, NRSV)

In speaking of our “house,” I am thinking of the place where we dwell in these threescore and ten years granted to us. I am thinking both of our individual lives and of our church. Let us build our house on rock. Let us build our lives on Jesus Christ, the solid Rock.

If you go down into our undercroft, down to the back hallway under the narthex, you can actually see some of the foundations of our church. There is a trapdoor there. Chris Schulze, who used to be our church sexton, showed it to me. You have to move aside the sofa — the sofa along the wall, near the water fountain. So, you shove aside the sofa, lift up the trap door, and climb down into the crawl space beneath the undercroft. There you can see an immense wooden beam stretching along the front of our church — the façade along East 88<sup>th</sup> Street. This wooden beam is breathtaking. It is huge, like the main mast of an old sailing ship, except that it is shaped to be rectangular. I bet that that beam is original growth timber. I figure it is like the beams in our ceiling overhead here in our church nave. A structural engineer once speculated that we could hang a 747 jet plane from the beams in our roof, that wood is so hard and strong. It is the same with that foundational beam in the crawl space down below. It is a big and strong beam of wood.

But that would not matter much if that beam rested on a big pile of sand. Glad to say, it does not rest on sand. Rather it rests of the cornerstone of our church. That cornerstone was laid in 1885, with the rest of the church being completed in 1886. Those were very good years. Brahms Cello Sonata Number 2 was composed in 1886, for example.

When I look at that great wood beam in the crawl space, and when I think of the weight of the whole structure of our church resting on that cornerstone, it is easy to understand why a wise person builds his or her house on rock, not on sand.

So, when Jesus speaks of building on sand, he is trying to save us. He would have us understand that it is possible for our lives to fall apart, as if the foundations of our lives are being washed away. But Jesus does not want that for us. And so he urges us to not simply *listen* to the Sermon the Mount, but also to *arrange our lives* according to his Sermon. Martin Luther said that Jesus ended his Sermon with words about the wise man building on rock because Jesus wants us to let the sermon get a grip on our lives. Our Lord wants the Sermon to make us better people. And so Luther makes this simple point about the Sermon on the Mount:

The doctrine is a good and a precious thing, but it is not being preached for the sake of being *heard* but for the sake of *action* and its application to life. (Martin Luther on Matthew 7:21-29, LW 21)

The great principle here is that we should build our house on Jesus. "Give me Jesus," the hymn says. "You may have all the rest. Give me Jesus" (WOV 777).

Before I turn to our main text about building our house on Jesus, let me say a word or two about the striking opening verse of our reading. Jesus says this:

<sup>21</sup>Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does the will* of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21, NRSV)

Martin Luther's comment about these people who say "Lord, Lord," but do not do God's will goes this way:

These are really high and outstanding people. Yet they are bitterly deceived and go to hell quite by surprise. (LW 21, on Matthew 7:21-29)

I can think of three classes of people to whom our Lord's saying applies: backsliders, demons, and hypocrites.

Backsliders are people who start off well, but do not continue well. At one time in their lives, they followed Jesus and built their house on him. But they drifted away. In the end, they were not following Jesus at all. So, in our passage Jesus warns them that it will not help that at one time in life, they said, "Lord, Lord." I guess they are like the seed sown on rocky soil. They did not have a deep commitment to Jesus. They did not permit themselves to be deeply grounded in Him.

The second group who call upon Jesus to no avail are the demons. Those doggone demons might cry out “Lord, Lord,” but it does not help them. Think of that poor man known as the Gerasene demoniac. The man ran up to Jesus, and the demons inside the man cried out:

“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” (Mark 5:7, NRSV)

The demons get it right: Jesus is indeed “Son of the Most High God.” But their faith in Jesus is not a saving faith. They hate Jesus. So, the fact that they can say “Lord, Lord,” does not save them.

And the third group of people Jesus is trying to warn are the hypocrites. These are people who use the name of Jesus to advance their own agendas. They care more about their various causes than they care about Jesus. They are not really trying to learn of Him and conform their lives to Him. And so Jesus tries to save them by warning them:

<sup>21</sup>Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does the will* of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21, NRSV)

Now, let me return to our main text about the wise person building on rock and the foolish person building on sand.

When I was a boy, I gave my heart to Jesus and I have tried to live for him since then. Over the course of a long life, I have failed often, I am sorry to say. My sins are ever before me. And yet Jesus has been available to be the firm foundation of my life. When I have wandered away from that foundation, I have soon regretted it and have tried to return...because everything else is sinking sand. I have come to believe that there is no good foundation for a life except for Jesus. All else is but shifting winds of doctrine. It is possible to live life apart from Jesus. Of course it is! It is possible to live life giving no mind to Jesus. And it could be a good life. But I believe that a human life can be even better if we will build it on Jesus.

The other day, when I was coming home at the end of the day, I found three teenagers sitting on the top step of our apartment stoop next door to the church. I was weary and I sighed a bit to myself as I headed up the steps because when people sit like that, it is hard for me to grab hold of the rail, which I like to do because I am afraid to fall. Anyway, I was making my way up the steps, in my clergy clothes, and one of the teenagers held up a marijuana joint and asked me whether I had a light. I was so stunned by this that I exclaimed “Are you out of your mind?” The three boys just rolled their eyes and I went on, making my way by them.

I told this little story to some people over supper, and we all laughed about it, and Pastor Lara said that I should have answered, “Yes! I have a light. I have the Light of the world! Let me tell you about Jesus.” We laughed some more, but upon reflection, Lara was exactly right. I could have done a better job than simply exclaiming “Are you out of your mind!”

So, that is a little story about teenagers. Then, a couple days ago, I read an article in the *New York Times* with the heading, “Drinking and Using Marijuana at Record Levels.”<sup>1</sup> It was an article about grown-ups here in America. It said that binge drinking among adults aged 35 to 50 reached a record high in 2022. Use of marijuana in this group also reached historical levels.

Now, this is not a sermon about drinking and marijuana. When the three teenagers asked me for a light, they were not doing anything illegal. Same with binge drink among grownups. It is okay, I guess, unless the person is driving.

I am just trying to say that there is a better way of life available to us. If we will be mindful of Jesus and build our lives on him, then he will lead us away from vice and sin and guide us toward a more pure and holy life. This is what I want for us and for our children and grandchildren.

In our Bible passage, the foolish person builds his house on sand. Jesus then tells the sad story:

<sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall! (Matthew 7:27, NRSV)

Such things can happen. It is possible for a human life to fall apart, as if its foundations have been washed away. If the chief thing in our life is money, for example, then we can be rocked when we lose it. If our chief thing is politics, then we can become depressed if the other side wins. If we place great stress on our good name, but then lose it — either because the truth comes out or because of slander — then it can become hard to lift up our heads again.

The Twelve Disciples built their house on rock in the sense that they kept their eyes on Jesus and they kept their hearts with him. Jesus was their North Star. Life had its good times and bad, but they were able to weather what life brought them because they kept oriented toward Jesus — all except for Judas. That man despaired. He imagined that he was beyond forgiveness. He feared that Jesus could not welcome him back. When he lost his connection with Jesus, then it was as if his foundation was sand and he fell all apart. But we

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/17/health/alcohol-binge-marijuana-drugs.html?campaign\\_id=9&emc=edit\\_nn\\_20230818&instance\\_id=100344&nl=the-morning&regi\\_id=9585997&segment\\_id=142336&te=1&user\\_id=09e7ab56593706befde5005d41373af3](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/17/health/alcohol-binge-marijuana-drugs.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20230818&instance_id=100344&nl=the-morning&regi_id=9585997&segment_id=142336&te=1&user_id=09e7ab56593706befde5005d41373af3)

need not follow his example. Jesus is indeed the Rock. He is the solid One. He is the One on whom we can build a good house, a strong life. Nothing else is like Him. Nothing else has conquered death. Nothing else loves us with a love willing to die for us. Nothing else, and no one else, is as trustworthy as this Preacher of the Sermon on the Mount, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.