

Chapter 27: Building on the Rock

Matthew 7:24–29

As Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount, he closes with his clearest statement of self-revelation to date. Here, Jesus declares that salvation is only possible by hearing and doing “these words of mine” (vv. 24, 26). No longer does Jesus speak only generally of ways and gates, false prophets and fruits, nor even of the will of his Father alone. Now, Jesus speaks of himself, and insists that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus’ authority becomes so clear through these passages, that the people are astonished as they contrast him against the scribes they were used to hearing teach (vv. 28–29). In this concluding passage, Jesus declares that he is the faithful foundation on whom God’s people should build their lives, as well as the faithful Lord over his people. That is, *Jesus is faithful under and over God’s house.*

God’s Son Under God’s House (Matt. 7:24–25)

To transition into this section, Jesus uses the word “therefore” (οὖν; *oun*; ESV: “then”). By this word, Jesus instructs us to read what he says now as “an inference from what precedes.”¹ Still, we should note a subtle—but significant—contrast between what Jesus says here in the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, and what he has said earlier. Namely, Jesus casts a broad net for his hearers. R. T. France notes that, “Unlike the image of the two roads in vv. 13–14, this parable does not draw a line simply between outsiders and insiders. Both men represent people who have ‘heard’ Jesus’ teaching.”² So, Jesus previously contrasted the “sayer” with the “doer” (Matt. 7:21), but here, everyone *hears*, and the contrast is between those who “do” and those who “do not do.”³ Thus, the question is not so much about *whom* Jesus is addressing, but on *what* those who hear will do with what they hear.

Indeed, by addressing “everyone...who hears these words of mine” (v. 24a), Jesus frames his words as a warning, but he infuses that warning with “an echo of invitation. The reader is in effect invited to be like the wise man, to do and not simply to hear.”⁴ As Leon Morris observes, “‘Doing’ words is a somewhat curious expression, but clearly it means that the person in view is not content with admiring some outstanding teaching; he makes it his guide and models his life on it.”⁵ Therefore, when Jesus speaks about *building*, he has a comprehensive view for all of life: “to live means to build. Every ambition a man cherishes, every thought he conceives, every word he speaks, and every deed he performs is, as it were, a building block. Gradually the structure of his life rises.

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 182.

² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 296.

³ Carson, “Matthew,” 230.

⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 190.

⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 182.

Not all builders are the same, however. Some are sensible, some foolish.”⁶

Specifically, Jesus urges his hearers to build their lives “like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (v. 24b). What, precisely, is the “rock”? In the immediate context, it is clear that Jesus identifies doing “these words of mine” as the significance of building one’s house on the rock. Here, then, we see not a contrast, but a development, of what Jesus said in the previous section. There, it was “the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” who will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21). Here, though, Jesus is identifying *his* teaching as the authoritative source of knowledge of the Father’s will.⁷ Beyond Jesus’ teaching, the idea of building one’s life on a “rock” calls to mind a number of texts from the Old Testament where “the security and stability of God” is depicted as a rock (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 22:2, 3, 32, 47; 23:3; Ps. 18:31, 46; 19:14; 28:1; 31:2, 3; 42:9; 62:2, 6, 7; 71:3; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1; Is. 8:14; 17:10; 26:4; 30:29; 44:8; Hab. 1:12).⁸ As we have seen throughout the Sermon on the Mount, however, Jesus is ultimately teaching about himself, although not explicitly.

The importance of building upon the rock becomes clear when the rains begin to fall. The word translated by the ESV as “beat” is more literally “fell against” (προσέπεσαν; *prosepesan*), coming from the same word that Jesus uses to say that the house “did not fall” (ἔπεσεν; *epesen*). Lenski brings out the power of this phrase by the translation, “the winds *fell* against the house, but it *fell* not.”⁹ Jesus clearly identifies the reason that the house (i.e., the life) did not fall: “because it had been founded on the rock” (v. 25b). How, though, should we understand the symbolism of the rain? Hendriksen is probably right to see a broad range of possibilities that may be true at various times in life:

So also for every hearer of the gospel, whether he be sensible or foolish, the test or crisis is surely coming. It comes in various forms: trial (Gen. 22:1; book of Job), temptation (Gen. 39:7–18; Matt. 26:69–75), bereavement (Gen. 42:36; Job 1:18–22; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1ff.), death (Acts 7:59, 60; 9:37), and in the present context (note verse 22: “in that day”) especially the judgment day. Its coming cannot be prevented. Often it arrives with dramatic suddenness (Matt. 24:43); 25:6; I Thess. 5:2).¹⁰

Thus, we face trials throughout the course of our lives, and especially at the moment when we must all face death, and then the judgment. Only by building our lives on the rock and foundation of Jesus Christ are we able to stand firm in the midst of trials, and to escape the devastation of God’s wrath against human sin.

The World’s Sand Under the World’s House (Matt. 7:26–27)

In the next two verses, Jesus gives a direct contrast to the first section. Here, Jesus warns those

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 379.

⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 230.

⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 343.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 311.

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 381.

who hear his words *without* doing them. Such a person is not wise, but foolish, and will be likened to a man who “built his house on sand” (v. 26). To live in this way may or may not be “a deliberate choice...but a failure to take seriously the necessity for a solid foundation.”¹¹ Lenski, writing in the early 20th century, offers a solid list of options available in his own day for building one’s life on the sand:

“The sand” is as definite as “the rock.” A simple definition is: all teachings and doctrines that are *not* “these words of mine.” “*All other* ground is sinking sand.” Some of these attractive sandy sites, sold constantly by the real estate agents mentioned in v. 15, are extremely popular: merely hearing the Word by church attendance; treating the righteousness that God requires as civil righteousness, work-righteousness, a moral life according to common moral rules; omitting true contrition and relying on historical faith; modernistic faith which alters vital doctrines of the gospel; etc. Sometimes these sandy sites are quite near the rock, the houses built on them may also be very pretentious. All is well while the sun shines. Some of the preliminary floods of adversity and the moderate winds of trouble may be safely endured, adding to the false feeling of security. Of course, sometimes already these lighter tempests cause sad wrecks among the houses on the sand. That is a good thing if it serves to expose the folly and drives men to seek the rock.¹²

One hundred years later, the primary kind of “sand” offered to the world takes the form of radical individualism, especially in the area of human sexuality.¹³ At a basic level, radical individualism insists that each individual must be permitted to determine everything about his or her life. Former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy put this memorably when he wrote, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”¹⁴

At the heart of this kind of individualism is a rejection of the Creator and his created order. It defines liberty as the right to throw off even the most basic, fundamental aspects of human nature, such as the sexual boundaries of lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual marriage; the dignity of all human life, born and unborn, young and old, healthy and disabled; all the way down to the maleness of men and the femaleness of women. Our culture holds that the ability to “define one’s concept of existence” stands at the core of liberty to seek happiness. The Bible, however, reveals that such efforts to redefine human nature are fundamentally sinful and rebellious. More than that, to seek to redefine human beings is not freedom, but slavery to sin. Everywhere we turn, our culture is evangelizing a false gospel of life through autonomous self-definition and self-creation, and celebrating even the most radical, unnatural, and barbaric manifestations of this rebellion.

While the world holds up radical individualism as liberty and strength, those who give

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 182–83.

¹² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 312–13.

¹³ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

¹⁴ Anthony Kennedy, *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey*, United States Supreme Court 1992.

themselves to this way of living build their lives on sand. In v. 27, when Jesus speaks again of the coming rain and floods, there are two contrasts between those who build their lives on the rock. First, whereas those who had build their lives on the rock were save from the rain and the floods and the winds, every house built on the sand *falls*, “and great was the fall of it” (v. 27b). Second, while the earlier rains “beat on” (lit., “fell on”; προσέπεσαν; *prosepesan*) the house on the rock, these “beat against” (lit., “struck upon”; προσέκοψαν; *prosekopsan*). The contrast between the two words is one of relative strength: “The [word in v. 27] is the weaker verb, ‘to stumble against,’ ‘to strike the foot against,’ while the [word in v. 25] means ‘to fall upon suddenly,’ ‘to strike.’ The idea suggested is that the house on the rock withstood all the pounding of the winds and the waters while the house on the sand gave way as soon as the tempest stumbled against its foundation.”¹⁵

As Christians, we must always remember that what seems strong and powerful in this world today will be swept away in a moment tomorrow.

God’s Son Over God’s House (Matt. 7:28–29)

It is difficult to translate a phrase that appears in v. 28, so that many translations (including the ESV) do not really even try to translate it. The KJV has “and it came to pass,” and it is “a formula that Matthew uses at the end of each of Jesus’ major discourses (11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1), as a way of transitioning into his next section.”¹⁶ Here, we come to the end of Jesus’ introductory sermon to inaugurate his public ministry. While we read back in Matthew 5:1 that Jesus taught “his disciples,” now we read about the “crowds” who “were astonished at his teaching” (v. 28). As John Calvin explains, “where he had given the people, on all sides, a taste of his doctrine, all were seized with astonishment, because a strange, indescribable, and unwonted majesty drew to him the minds of men.”¹⁷

The reason for this astonishment is clear: Jesus did not simply teach as one more teacher among the rank of scribes (v. 29b). Rather, he taught them “as one who had authority” (v. 29a). Indeed, it will be on Jesus’ words that we will build our lives and be saved, as a house on a rock, or apart from Jesus’ words that we will perish, as a house on sand. Jesus has much more to say and to do, but he begins his public ministry by establishing the authority of his word. Everything else in the Gospel of Matthew presumes this.

Discussion Questions

1. How does what Jesus says in vv. 24–27 compare with what he has been saying since Matthew 7:13? How does the specific contrast that Jesus gives in this passage contrast with the contrasts that came earlier? What does it mean to “do” Jesus’ words? What does it mean to “build [your] house” in this context? What is the “rock” that we will build our houses, if we do Jesus’ words? Where have you learned to trust in Jesus’ faithfulness in the midst of storms in your life?

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 313.

¹⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 184.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:370–71.

2. What is the “sand” that Jesus warns about in v. 26? Why do you think people would be so foolish as to build their lives on sand, as Jesus mentions? How have you seen yourself lured into trusting in false hopes in your own life? What makes sand so attractive to us? What particular kinds of sand are you most susceptible to trust? Why are those plots of sand so inherently unstable and incapable of protecting us when storms arise?

3. How did the people respond to Jesus’ teaching? What should we learn from their response? How does the authority of Jesus compare to the scribes? How does the authority of Jesus compare even to that of Moses, from whom the people of Israel received God’s Law (Heb. 3:3–6)? How are you tempted to devalue the importance, significance, and authority of Jesus in your own life? Why do you think that is?

4. If someone asked you to give a short summary of the Sermon on the Mount, what would you say? What key points have stood out to you through these nineteen studies? As you think about the whole Sermon, how does Jesus’ teaching about the law fit in with his comforting words not to be anxious (Matt. 5:17–48; 6:25–34)? How do the Beatitudes fit with Jesus’ closing exhortations (Matt. 5:1–12; 7:13–27)? What main application will you take with you?