

## HOUSE OF SAND AND ROCK

Scriptures: Matthew 7:24-27; Matthew 7:15-23

Up until this week I had a great sermon in mind for this scripture passage. It was going to be about how Jesus is our rock. Everything else on which you might build your life is sand. Investments—we have seen what can happen to investments. Popularity—we have seen how fast popularity can go down for a politician or an oil company. You all know perfectly well how suddenly and unexpectedly people can lose their jobs or their homes or their health. Everything else on which you might plan to build your life is sand. Only Jesus stands firm. When the storms of life come along, only your relationship to Jesus will last forever.

It would have been a great sermon, and some time, if you come back, I will preach it. There is just one problem. It is not the sermon Jesus has in mind for this scripture passage we read today. Listen again to verse 24: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.” Now listen to verse 26: “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand.” Do you see the contrast? The contrast is not between those who listen to Jesus and those who don’t. Both people listen to Jesus. This parable is not about people who believe in Jesus and people who don’t. It’s about people who believe in Jesus and *act* on that belief versus people who believe in Jesus but in practice ignore him.

Jesus addressed the same issue in our first scripture lesson. In verse 21 he says, “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.” This is not a contrast between people who believe in Jesus and those who don’t. All of them call Jesus “Lord.” The difference is between those who believe in Jesus and do nothing about it, versus those *act* on their belief by doing God’s will.

Jesus’ point here is that faith without works is dead. Believing in Jesus without obeying his commands is empty. It is like a house of cards, a house built on sand.

Now we have to be careful here. I am not saying that our salvation is based on works. There are many places where the Bible makes that clear. In Ephesians 2:8-9 the apostle Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

The Bible is clear: we are not saved by our works but by faith in God’s grace through Jesus Christ. And yet the Bible also says that faith without works is dead, that believing in Jesus without obeying him is empty. So how do we put these two things together?

Let me try a comparison. Two years ago Michael Phelps dazzled the world when he won a record eight gold medals in the 2008 Olympics. In seven of the eight races he set or helped set a new world record. It was, arguably, the greatest swimming performance in history.

But not to me. To me the greatest swimming performance in history happened four years earlier in 2004. In the 2004 Olympics Michael Phelps was on his way to six gold medals when

he did something truly unprecedented. He gave up his spot in the finals of the 4X100 medley relay to another member of the American team, a butterfly swimmer named Ian Crocker. He did this so that Ian Crocker would have the chance to win a gold medal.

To me that was an amazing act of grace. It was grace because Ian Crocker did not earn his place on that relay team. By all rights Michael Phelps should have been swimming the butterfly leg of the medley relay. The day before Michael Phelps had won the gold medal in the 100 meter butterfly, beating Ian Crocker among others. But Michael Phelps wanted Ian Crocker to experience the thrill of winning a gold medal in the Olympics, so he sacrificed his place on the team so that Ian Crocker could compete.

Do you see the parallel to Jesus? Jesus sacrificed himself so that we could have a place in the celebration of God's kingdom. That is what we Christians call grace. It is not something we earned. It is a gift given to us by Jesus' sacrifice.

But what if Ian Crocker had been given that opportunity and had said, "Oh, I don't want to swim. I just want to march in the parade during the opening ceremonies"? What if Ian Crocker said, "I did not actually come here to compete. I just want to wear one of those cool warm-ups and hang out with the other athletes in the Olympic village"? How would Michael Phelps feel about sacrificing his spot in an Olympic race to a swimmer that did not really want to swim?

That, I think, is the issue Jesus addresses here at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. In the last three paragraphs of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus describes three different groups of people. First, in verse 15 he talks about wolves in sheep's clothing. Those are people who appear to be followers of Christ but who don't really want to bear the fruit or produce the results of being a disciple. In other words, they want to wear the uniform, but they don't want to get in the pool.

In the next paragraph, verse 21-23, we meet people who claim Jesus as their Lord. They say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name." These people wanted to be associated with the popular, high profile things Jesus did, like healing or casting out demons. But they could not be bothered with the ordinary discipline it takes to be a follower of Jesus. In other words, they are like athletes who want to march in the Olympic parade, but do not want to go to practice.

The last paragraph, our second scripture reading, is about two builders. One hears Jesus' words and acts on them. The other hears Jesus' words and does not act on them. The latter is like the swimmer who hears the coaches' instructions, but pays no attention to them.

All of these people are invited to be on Jesus' team. They are all given a spot in the final race. That is grace. Like Ian Crocker, you don't have to be perfect or even the best to be on Jesus' team. You have been chosen by grace. But given that gift and the sacrifice it required, how tragic would it be if you refused to swim the race or acted as if it really did not matter.

There is one other response that would also be tragic. It would be tragic if you said, “I’m not good enough to swim on Jesus’ team. I’m not good enough to be a Sunday School teacher; I’m not skilled enough to work on a Habitat House. I’m not spiritual enough to lead a small group or even to be in one. I am not a good enough Christian myself to invite anyone else to follow Christ.”

There was a great sequel to the story of Ian Crocker. When Michael Phelps sacrificed his spot on the team for Ian Crocker, Ian did not say, “Sorry, I’m too busy.” Or “Sorry, I’m not good enough.” Or “Sorry, I don’t want that kind of responsibility.” Ian could have run away, fearing that he would mess up the race for the entire team. But he didn’t. Instead, the next day he went out and swam the race of his life. It was incredible. Not only did his team win the gold medal, but they broke the world record. One day Ian Crocker wasn’t even on the team. The next day he is standing on the medal platform with his name next to a world record.

That’s what it means to build your house on a rock. It means not only to believe in Jesus, but to believe in what Jesus can do in you, if you do what he tells you to do.

- Ken Onstot  
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