

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **A Church Built on Jesus**

Matthew 7:24-29

Wind and water have been in the headlines a lot recently. Hurricane Ida wrecked lives and destroyed property, beginning in Louisiana, and eventually making its way to the Northeast, where it dumped flooding rain at record-breaking levels. The storm even spawned tornadoes, including one in Annapolis.

Considering all the death and destruction caused by Ida, it may seem a little unsettling to arrive at church, open the Scriptures to today's text from Matthew, and encounter a story about a natural disaster. It's usually not a good idea to make a point by playing on someone else's suffering and misery. But in this case, Jesus can be excused because he's describing a hypothetical situation. According to Jesus, there were two men. Each one decided to build himself a new house. The first one picked a sound location where workers could dig deep and lay a good foundation on solid rock. He selected a good contractor and used quality building materials. No sooner was the house done than a vicious storm rolled in. Torrential rain. Howling winds. Local streams and rivers overflowing their banks. Pretty wicked stuff. By the time it was all over, the power was out for a day or two, and some trees were down, but everything else about the man's house was intact.

The other man had built his house not far away. He too had picked a good contractor known for doing quality work. But this man's choice of location didn't make sense. For some unknown reason, he broke ground on the dry, sandy bed of a seasonal river. Maybe he thought the river was dead and gone. But when the same storm I just described plowed through his area, a wall of water rushed down from the hills and engulfed his home. It was horrible how the flood just lifted the house and tore it to shreds. Folks in the community hadn't seen flooding like that in decades.

So here we have two men who both embarked on the same project. By the time the work was done and the last light bulb was screwed in, both of them were pleased and proud of their new home. But after meteorological disaster struck, one of them was left with minor damage and a solid, weather tested house to occupy. The other one was left with the awful memories of his house being smashed to pieces by the forces of nature. He had no flood insurance, no place to go. Thankfully, the government provided him with temporary housing and a few days worth of necessities. A disaster relief team from the local church even showed up with chainsaws, supplies, and comfort.

So what made the difference in how these two stories turned out? Why did one man end up picking up a few limbs in his front yard and the other man end up picking up the pieces of his life and starting over? Why did one man end up sleeping in his own house and the other end up sleeping in a FEMA trailer? According to Jesus, the answer to these questions isn't so much a matter of who or what or when. It's more a matter of where. It's about location. It's about wise and foolish choices of a construction site. The foolish man built as well as the wise, but he made the disastrous mistake of erecting his house on a very precarious foundation. In fact, it turned out to be no foundation at all.

Jesus says that the difference between the wise man and the foolish man is like the difference between those who do the will of God and those who don't do the will of God. And how are we to know God's will, so that we can do it? Through Jesus. He himself is the one who brings in the reign of God and teaches us the will of God.

Remember that today's Scripture text is actually the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. In this portion of Matthew, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the kind of life they're called to live. He's giving instructions about what life looks like in the reign of God among the community of God's people. In the Sermon on the Mount, we've heard Jesus' teach through the beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and so on. We've heard Jesus teach about being salt and light, about loving enemies, about praying, about giving to the needy, about laying up treasures in heaven, about not being anxious, about not judging, about the narrow and the wide gates. Jesus has covered a lot of ground in Matthew 5-7. And now, he brings it all to a decisive conclusion by telling the story of the wise and foolish builders.

Matthew rounds it off with this statement: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (vv. 28-29). The crowds who listen to Jesus aren't merely impressed; they're amazed. The word translated in the NIV as "amazed" is a strong word. It means they were "in shock." They were "astounded" (NRSV) at Jesus' authority. Matthew doesn't mean that the crowds were impressed by Jesus' style, by the tone and volume of his voice, or by his confidence, personal charisma, and rhetorical skills. Matthew means that they recognized Jesus as God's unique representative, acting in God's place. God is present in Jesus, moving in a new and decisive way that changes everything. This means that Jesus himself—not a book, a tradition, or a body of laws—is now the authority of God operating in the world. He himself embodies the kind of living that God requires.

And that's exactly where Jesus puts the accent in this parable. The emphasis here is on living, not just hearing or knowing. Keep in mind that just before the story of the wise and foolish builders, Jesus warns his followers about Christian prophets who may mislead the church. How can you spot them? By their fruit, says Jesus. If they bear good fruit, you'll know that they're truly my disciples. If they bear bad fruit, you have good reason to be skeptical. Just because someone knows and confesses all the right beliefs ("Jesus is Lord," "Son of God," "Savior," and so on), or even has the ability to perform spectacular miracles, doesn't mean they'll enter the everlasting reign of God. At the final judgment, what will count is whether you have actually done the will of God revealed in the Lord Jesus.

That's the purpose of the church, to be a community of people who are committed to doing the will of God revealed in Jesus. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (v. 24). This is true not just for individual disciples but for the community of disciples as well. Every Christian congregation, including our own, is a construction project. And one of the critical decisions in any construction project is where to build.

Barb Lee writes about a small Methodist church near the ocean in Swan Quarter, North Carolina. In 1876, it was damaged by a hurricane. Lee says:

It was restored, but another hurricane came and damaged it, and the town, again. The parishioners restored their place of worship once more, but enough was enough, so they searched for a safer location. They found some land, and offered the owner of the property a generous amount of money for it, but he refused.

Then came another hurricane, and again there was massive flooding, so massive that it lifted the church from its moorings, and sent it meandering downstream. The residents of the town tied ropes to it, hoping to keep it from floating away forever, but the current was too strong.

When the water receded, the building came to rest on that exact piece of ground which the parishioners had previously tried to buy. So they went to the owner and once again made an offer. He refused their money again. "But I'll give it to you," he said, "The Lord definitely wants this church on this lot."

The sign in front of the church, from that day forward, said, "The House God Moved."<sup>1</sup>

Though our church didn't start in this exact location, I think it's safe to say that the Lord has certainly wanted us on this lot for 63 years. So today, as we reflect on and rejoice in our congregation's anniversary, remember that we didn't float to this spot. We were built on this spot. And more importantly, we were built on a solid location called Jesus. We were constructed on discerning and doing the will of God revealed in the one who is Messiah and exalted Lord. That's the main reason we're here, still worshiping, working, and witnessing about the kingdom.

Our church has withstood many storms, including the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The threats and hardships created by COVID-19 are something our congregation has never faced before. But in the midst of the suffering and struggles, there's also a good opportunity for us to examine the foundation on which we're building, to see if, when, and where we've placed our ultimate trust in things that aren't as firm and steady as we may think. Our church is still a work in progress, so we need to make sure that our life together is still resting on the solid ground of Christ and his teachings, no matter how countercultural those kingdom values may be.

In 2008, Orthodox Church officials in Russia discovered that one of their church buildings had disappeared. The 200-year-old structure northeast of Moscow had been a school for disabled children during the Soviet era before it was closed down in 1998 and turned over to the church. It had gone unused for a decade, but now the Orthodox Church was experiencing some growth, and considered reopening the building. But that's when they discovered that it wasn't there anymore. An investigation revealed that the perpetrators were villagers from a nearby town, who had taken and sold bricks from the building to a businessman. For each brick, they received one ruble (about 4 cents). Here was a church facility that didn't vanish with one violent storm, or the push of a bulldozer, but was dismantled brick by brick, until there was virtually nothing left.

When you arrived today, our church was still here. Brick walls still intact, resting on foundations that have provided stability for more than six decades. But in another sense, bricks are still being laid, one at a time, day by day, week by week, as this congregation gets built. According to the Scriptures, you and I, "like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house" (1 Pet. 2:5). Each believer is a living brick, whom God assembles into a dwelling place called the church, a community where God is present revealing his glory. Sometimes we may feel like we're being built from the ground up, with God doing something new and creative. That was probably how many people felt 63 years ago at the beginning of our church's story. At other times, especially circumstances like the present, with all the effects of COVID-19, we may feel like we're being rebuilt, as we continue to regather our people and eventually restart parts of our ministry that had to be closed down or have grown idle. But whether we're building or rebuilding, the foundation remains the same, putting into practice the will of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Fredin, as reported to and written by Barb Lee in *The Highland Church Highlighter* (Jan.-Dec issue 2014).