

“...because it had been well built”

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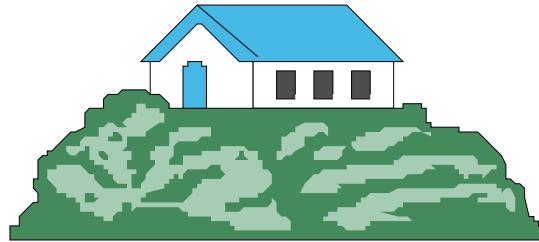
(a sermon preached at Calvin Presbyterian Church on Maundy Thursday 2004 as part of the “Churches on-the-Hill” Lenten meditations on “Plain Words from Jesus - The Sermon on the Plain)

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷ I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. ⁴⁸ That one is like a man building a house, who ***dug deeply*** and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. ⁴⁹ But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house." *LK 6:46-49*

I have spent a lot of time in the foundations of houses and other buildings. To earn money for university and graduate school, I worked as a mason in New Jersey. In fact, I've spent a lot of time *building* the foundations of many homes, shopping centres, churches and sinagogues, car washes, a liquor store, and the Ocean County jail.

So, in my theological studies and in my subsequent ministry, these words of Jesus at the conclusion of his *Sermon on the Plain* in Luke (and the perhaps more familiar version at the end of the *Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew) – these word about building a house on a solid foundation have great peronal meaning for me.

Perhaps, if you have had the opportunity to see your own house being built, or if you gazed into the abyss of a deep foundation for a large building – such as the condo towers here next to this church – you have noticed some things about foundations, that make Jesus' words vivid before our eyes.



First, foundations have to be fairly deep. Jesus said the man who hears and acts on his words is like one who ***dug deeply***. Down to the bedrock for larger buildings. A shallow foundation shifts with the forces exerted on it; it then cracks, becomes crooked and endangers the entire stucture. The *leaning tower of Pizza*, would be the most notorious example – built on marshy soil, it now has to be stabilized with massive underground injections of concrete. No, for a good foundation you have to go deep. It's more work, more expensive – but necessary and worth it.

So also for the foundation for our life, which is God's word in Christ. It must penetrate to the bedrock of your soul, to the depths of your being. Otherwise, it's just a shallow shell, shifting with every passing fad, cracking under pressure, becoming crooked and making the entire edifice of your life a precarious, tottering thing.

The deeper you dig your foundation, though, the more difficult and dangerous it gets. Perhaps you noticed the logistics involved with the construction of the condominium towers in this neighbourhood – hundreds of tons earth and rock have to be blasted, cut, shoveled and moved out; the walls of the pit may collapse and have to be reinforced; ground water and rain water collect in the bottom of the foundation pit turning it into a quagmire where every movement by man or machine is difficult.

The process of building a life on the foundation of God's word is often a messy and laborious undertaking. The old „self” has to be excavated out, the seeping mud of our failures and weaknesses makes work difficult. And the deeper we dig into ourselves, the messier it gets, because God's word confronts our prejudices, self-interests, apathy and all that we lump together in the idea of *sin*. And, like the excavations of these neighbourhood buildings, the work goes on inside of us, mostly shielded from the passing throngs who may be oblivious to the struggles going on deep in this pit.

It's worth noting, that when Jesus told parables or stories about our life and God's word, he never used symbols of ease or passivity: sowing the seed and tending the field, working in the vineyard, herding the sheep, building a foundation – those are messy, often outright dirty and sweaty jobs.

It seems unlikely that Jesus thought we could *act on His words* while enjoying a cool drink on the patio – (except perhaps on the Sabbath!)

Remember, Jesus said that it is not just the *hearing* of his words that is the strong *foundation*, but the *acting on them*. Our *action* is required, not just our attentive listening. As a symbol of that *action*, in this illustration, Jesus talks about a man who presumably is building *his own house*. Having worked for building contractors, I was always building someone else's foundations. I must admit, that I missed that nuance until yesterday, while writing this sermon; had I assumed the man in Jesus simile to be a fellow contractor! In Matthew's version of this story, it is explicitly stated that this wise man *built his house*. It is a very important to remember that he is building *his own* house.

Our life with God's word has to be *our life*, not someone else's, idea of what our life should be (as in those home renovation shows which seem to be flooding the cable channels – in which a home is radically renovated by a team of supposed trendy stylists who assume that everyone must live in rooms painted in retro 50's colours and have furniture more stylish than comfortable. You can't impose your life on someone else.

Nor can we build that foundation by hiring someone else to do our hard work for us. We have to *act on Jesus' words* ourselves. We can't hire *spiritual contractors* to do it for us. Neither Oprah, or Dr. Phil, nor Tony Robbins is going to do it for you, although they would all like for you to believe that!

We *can* get help, and we *can* help others, but each will have to do the work themselves. Jesus said, the man built *his* house. And I don't know if we can really successfully build someone else's spiritual house for them.

(As I was writing this, I thought of Habitat for Humanity and our participation in the building of houses for others. But even Habitat recognizes the necessity of the future home-owner families to put in „sweat-equity” and thus lay a good foundation not only for their „home” but also for their life.) We can't impose our blueprints on someone else's life. We can help- sometimes, and - as in the case of Habitat for Humanity – sometimes we *can* and *must* help a lot!

Not to strain this image of building and renovation too far, but it occurs to me that the church could do well to echo the current slogan used by Home Depot stores – ***You can do it. We can help.*** You can do it. I can do it. And... we can help each other.

„The conclusion of [the Sermon on the Plain] makes it abundantly clear that [Jesus] did not regard the discipleship [he described in the sermon] to be an impossible ideal. It is rather the way of life commanded directly by Jesus...and the commandments of [his] Sermon are not only divinely ordained, but eminently practical!”¹ His words are the only way to build for those who want to live, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians (2:20) as *members of God's household,*²⁰ *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*²¹ *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.*

Amen.

¹ Richard B. Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics, (Harper-Collins: San Francisco, 1996), 323.