

The final paragraph of the Sermon on the Mount offers a challenge to anyone who wants to integrate their faith with their work. In this famous sermon, recorded in Matthew 5, 6, and 7, our Lord, following the tradition of the Jewish rabbis, does a teaching on the Law. It is expected of a rabbi to teach and interpret the Law. Thus, Jesus takes the Law as a model for this great Sermon. He begins it with the Beatitudes, reflecting Psalm 1:1, which pronounces a blessing on the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, but in the way of righteousness—“Blessed is the man [or woman] who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked . . . but in the way of righteousness”—that is, in the way of the Torah, the Law.

Psalm 1 contains a parable on the security of the believer:

*They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.*

*In all that they do, they prosper.*

*The wicked are not so,*

*but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (vss. 3–4, NRSV)*

Similarly, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells a "security parable" much like that in Psalm 1, although He improves upon it

*"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. 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. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"* (Matt. 7:24–27, NRSV)

Notice that this is essentially the same parable as the one in Psalm 1. The tree bears fruit, but those who don't follow the law of God are like the chaff that blows in the wind. But our Lord tells of a house built on a rock or built on sand that faces a flood.

Then Matthew makes this comment at the end, "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" (vs. 8). Jesus was different, and his listeners sensed it.

A little word of advice on parables. The first thing we should do in the study of any of the parables of Jesus is to realize that they are short stories. They are very brief, very spare, and we need first to understand what makes the story work. We try to get the outline of it, to see the things that Jesus repeats—the contrasts, the surprises—and then the interpretation of the parable becomes clear.

The parable here actually has two stories side by side, which again is typical of our Lord. Have you ever thought of the fact that so many of Jesus' parables consist of more than one story placed alongside each other? The most famous parable, the parable of the Good Samaritan, is composed of three stories. Three people walked by the person who fell among thieves. And the famous parable of the two sons contains two stories, that of the elder son and of the younger son. We look at both stories in order to understand the parable, looking for points of similarity and of contrast in the stories, seeking both constants and variables.

#### WHAT HOUSES TELL

The two stories in this parable are both about a person who builds a house. That is the point of similarity. As we read the parable we understand that it is a given that all of us are deciding every day upon a house we are building. We are building a philosophy of life, which will become the "house" in which we live.

If you saw that a house was being built in a neighborhood, and watched the land being prepared and the foundation being poured, even before the people moved in you could learn a lot about that family by the kind of house they were building. If they put in five bedrooms, and a basketball goal is being put out in front of the garage, get ready. There are going to be some teenagers in that house, or the father or mother loves to shoot baskets. If you see a house with one bedroom and a huge living room and a swimming pool with lap lanes, but no diving board, you know you've got a serious aerobic family coming in.

The house you build shows a lot about yourself. It is yours. This is the

freedom element in Jesus' story. Notice that in this parable Jesus does not reflect on the size of the house. He doesn't say, "Watch out now, this is a parable against big houses." There is nothing here about big houses or small houses—houses with five bedrooms or houses with one bedroom. That is not a teaching point of this parable. The point is that we do build a house. Everybody is building one.

Secondly, in this parable, each house faces a storm. That is not a variable. In fact, our Lord makes it very dramatic by repeating the storm's elements in each story—the rains fall, the floods come, and the winds beat against the house. He is not teaching that all storms are identical, but that storms beat against every house. It is a parable about the "house" or life that we build, not a story about weather.

#### OF WEEDS AND WHEAT

Our Lord told another parable like this. In Matthew 13, he tells about a man who planted wheat, and then a few days later the workers came to the owner of the field and asked, "Didn't you plant wheat?"

"Yes, I planted wheat," the landowner says.

"Well, there are weeds growing out there among the wheat!"

Our Lord has the owner say, "An enemy has done this!" The workers say, "Well, shall we pull the weeds up? See, they are different heights now, and we can get the weeds out right away."

And the surprise of the parable—you see, our Lord always has a surprise in every parable—is "No. Let the weeds and wheat grow together, and at the harvest we will separate them."

We don't really like that parable. We spend much of our life trying

to find that perfect school for our kids where there will be no temptations, right? We are trying to find that perfect place where we will never have any weeds. Well, we don't get any comfort with this parable. This parable says you'd better know about the wheat that can grow with weeds because they are going to grow side by side until the harvest. Our Lord makes it clear that we can't get away from the weeds; therefore, we had better prepare the kid for the road, not the road for the kid. But this is good news, too! It means that good wheat can grow in less than ideal growing conditions.

#### OF FOUNDATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

In this parable, each house has a storm; that is the constant. What then is the variable? The grand variable in this parable is the foundation, just as in Psalm 1. It's the foundation and our relationship with the foundation.

I want to make three theological reflections on the grand variable because it is the variable in this parable that is the teaching point that our Lord makes. Jesus teaches us that the wise man or woman is the one who hears these words of His and does them. That is the person who plants his house on a rock. The foolish man or woman is the person who hears these words and doesn't do them, for that person builds his or her house on the sand. The constant is the foundation, and the variable is whether it is laid on sand or rock as the foundation.

Now what does the parable teach? I think it is a very important parable as we think about trying to live out our faith in the workplace—where we are, and live, and have our being. How does this parable help us do that?

## *A Messianic Meaning*

This parable is a profoundly Messianic parable. We can see this by noting that, as Matthew tells us, the people were astonished by the authority with which Jesus taught. Our Lord claims that He and His words—think how tremendous this is—can be trusted as the fulfillment of the Law. Remember, that He has also said in this Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). “I’ve come to fill up the Law,” Jesus is saying, to bring to full circle that which has been merely an arc. When He says that we are wise to build our houses, our lives, on the rock, He is speaking of Himself as the fulfillment of the Law.

The logically, the most important Psalms are 113 through 118. They are called “The Hallel,” because the first word of Psalm 113, is *hallal Yah*—“Praise the Lord!” That set of psalms was memorized by everyone in first century Israel because they sang it at the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Passover. They reflect the Exodus from Egypt, praising the way God led the people out of Egypt and redeemed them (114:1). The people thought of this section of the Psalms as they welcomed our Lord to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They sang “Hosanna,” or “Save us, we pray!”—quoting Psalm 118:25, and showing that they realized that something Messianic was occurring. What is why the Pharisees, realizing that the people were reciting a Messianic Psalm, said to Jesus, “Tell your disciples to be quiet. They are singing to you as if you are the Messiah.” But our Lord accepts

the passage as applying to him, for he answered them, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke: 19:39–40, NRSV).

Then there is the highly important line in Psalm 118:22: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (NRSV). On the Monday of Holy Week, our Lord claims that very verse for Himself: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Matt. 21:42, NRSV).

That is the same affirmation that Jesus makes at the beginning of His ministry in the Sermon on the Mount. He is the rock. Everyone listening to our parable sensed a Messianic importance in what Jesus said. They caught the point. Jesus is claiming that He and His words can be trusted as the foundation upon which you may now build your life, your house.

### *Confronting the Question*

Our Lord is posing a huge question, here. The question is: If I do not choose to build my house, my life, upon Jesus Christ—upon Him and His words—then what do I propose to build my life on? What foundation do I choose if I don’t choose this foundation? If I don’t choose this cornerstone to build my life on, what am I going to build my life on? That’s the huge question that this parable raises.

Jesus gives us an almost humorous set of criteria to use. Whatever foundation I build on, it must be able to withstand storms. So I do have this criterion by which I can test foundations. You don’t test the foundation by how big the house is, you test the foundation by how well it supports the house and enables it to withstand storms. That is the test. Jesus has given us the criterion for evaluating the foundation of our lives.

## *The Workplace as a Foundation*

Let's apply this criterion to a few foundation choices. Since this is a workplace conference where we are trying to think through our place in the world and in our work, let's be bold and pick a foundation that is very close to all of our hearts. Our work! After all, the first question American males ask when they are introduced is "What do you do?" because that is very close to our hearts. "What are you going to do?" is the question I ask all the time when I meet a college kid. "What are you majoring in, and what do you plan to do if you ever get out of here?" What do you do? Okay, let's take what we do and make it our foundation.

Suppose you are a United Airlines pilot. Let's make you the best. You are a 747 United Airlines pilot. That means you even own the company. I like that. It's "*Our* Friendly Skies." Wouldn't it make sense to give yourself to this company? After all, you own it! You could make United your life, and show how much you love it. You could live for United Airlines, making it your foundation (and it is doing well on the stock market!).

But let's just test making your foundation your career as a captain with United Airlines. You're going to work one day, just feeling terrific, walking in to catch your flight to Tokyo then a person comes up to you and says, "Hi, John, we are just doing our routine physical check before you get on the plane today. Let's take your blood pressure." You roll up your sleeve and the nurse or doctor takes your pressure and says, "Hey, let's just try that other arm." They won't tell you the number yet. "You were a little nervous when you came here today. Hey, look, just settle down. Let's try the other arm. This darn machine." They hit it a couple of times. It doesn't work too well. Finally, his or her expression changes



and you hear, “Hum, 175 over 125. I’m sorry, you can’t fly today. In fact, probably your career is over.”

“But I never felt better in my life,” you say. “I’m so energized!” Of course with hypertension, you feel wonderful. That is why it is the silent killer. But you know, you can’t fly with those blood pressure numbers.

Would you call that a little storm? I’d call that a little, tiny storm, and yet it just knocked out your foundation. You can work in customer service, but you can’t fly even though that is your life! “I built my whole life around this!” you protest. “Don’t you realize that this nurse is now knocking me out of my whole profession?”

Or here is another one. Maybe you usually fly the Tokyo route, but now they have you flying Frankfurt to Seattle. You are coming into Seattle, and you like to get on the mike because you are a friendly captain. “Hello, this is your captain from the Friendly Skies speaking. We are now coming into Seattle and I want you to take a look—we’ve got some mountains to show you. Over here, on the left, you will notice beautiful Mount Fuji, and if you look closely you can see the little climbers as they are climbing in great lines up to the top. The people here just love this mountain.”

Suddenly the passengers start pulling out their bags and writing notes that they think might be their last words. “This guy thinks we are coming into Tokyo,” they write, “and we are coming into Seattle. That is not Mount Fuji. It could be Mount Baker, or Adams, or Rainier. But it’s not Mount Fuji.” And so you lose your job because of a little bit of mental illness. You’re just a little confused. You might be able to work in politics, but you can’t fly a United Airlines plane with just a little bit of mental illness. It is just a tiny mistake, a small storm, but your foundation is eroded and you are out.

The fact is that United Airlines is a good house, but it is a lousy foundation. You can make a wonderful house out of United Airlines or any company you work for. It is a full and exciting and rewarding place to work, but if you make it your foundation it will destroy you. It can't bear the weight of high blood pressure or mental illness or a thousand other variables.

But Jesus Christ can. You can have a full-scale mental breakdown, and it doesn't destroy the foundation of Jesus Christ. He can handle it. He knows how to handle high blood pressure. In fact, if you were to die from it he can even handle your death—which no other foundation can do. United Airlines can't.

In other words, we need to draw the distinction between the house where we work and the foundation on which we live.

### *What About the Family?*

Then you say, "I'm not going to build my life on United. I'll build my life on my family!" That is great, but although the family makes a fine house, it also is a terrible foundation. You can't build your house on your house! You can't build your life on your children. You say that your children are going to give meaning to your life? Hey, folks—that is putting way too much weight on your children. They can't bear that weight. In fact, if you try to get meaning from your kids, they are going to want to try to get out of your house as fast as they can.

Neither can youth build their life on their parents, and you, as parents, should not try to orchestrate it in that direction. Where and how are they going to get the meaning of their life from you? You are a loving

parent, but you are a lousy God. You'll destroy your children if you try to give meaning to their life. They have to have their own journey.

The key to being a good parent is knowing how to both stay close and step back. If you learn to do that, then the family can be a great house, especially when it is built upon the foundation that lasts.

### *Not even the Church*

“Well then, I'll make the Church the foundation of my life.” Some will say, “There pastor, finally, now you are preaching. We'll build our life on the Church.”

Not even the Church is a good foundation. If you want proof of that, remember how we sometimes shoot our wounded. The Church is not a good foundation. That is why Scripture calls the Church the house of the Lord, but never the foundation. It is for this very reason that I don't like the Church to become too prominent as a social and political power. We do far better when we are persecuted. We are far better off when we are not too powerful. We don't try to throw our weight around when we have to live by the gospel, the truth, and to trust only in Jesus Christ. The Church is a house where healing and wholeness can happen because of the Church's one foundation, Jesus Christ; but the Church itself is not a good foundation.

### *Not Science, Either*

By the way, we are in the midst of post-modernism right now, when people are calling anything they want their “house,” anything they wish their “foundation.” But it's not working. One of the foundations that is

very popular right now is science, because we are moving into the great technological age of the future. In a blockbuster book, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, author Marilynne Robinson writes about the failure of science to be an adequate foundation. She says that it is a modern fable that science “exposed” the Judaeo-Christian faith as a delusion and, therefore, more or less supplanted it. She denies that science can replace faith because it cannot generate ethics or morality. Science can give us no reason for preferring a child over a dog,” she writes.<sup>1</sup> Think about that for a minute. Science cannot provide us with a reason for that preference because science always favors the survival of the fittest.

Robinson goes on to say that science can give no reason for preferring “an honorable poverty over a fraudulent wealth. It can give us no grounds for preferring what is excellent to what is sensationalistic, and this is more or less where we are now.”<sup>2</sup> Science is a marvelous house, but it is not the foundation. We need something underneath. We need something under the family. Something under religion. Something under myself. And Jesus Christ claims that He alone is that safe and dynamic foundation.

## THE JOURNEY OF FAITH

Secondly, Jesus’ parable at the end of his Sermon on the Mount is also a parable about the journey of faith. Notice that “everyone that hears these words, and does them” are the wise persons “who build their house on the rock.” In this parable, our Lord teaches us about the dynamics of faith. Faith is both hearing and doing according to Jesus. Believing is a dynamic experience. It is a journey toward the willingness that we finally come to when we wager on the faithfulness and love of Jesus Christ.

There is a struggle involved in faith. By its nature, it is honest because you have to hear.

Notice again that our Lord is giving us a freedom parable. We are *invited* to hear, not coerced. In fact, have you ever noticed how many times our Lord says in His ministry, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” That is a freedom sentence. There is risk involved in faith. It is a hearing. I have to decide whether or not to trust it, to listen.

One of my heroes is Blaise Pascal. Pascal was a sixteenth-century physicist, and he is on any list as one of the five most brilliant human minds that ever lived on the face of the earth. When he was six years old, he figured out the Pythagorean theorem by himself, unaided. He was a genius. He was the inventor of the computer. Did you know that in the sixteenth century Pascal figured out how you could calculate anything with just two switches, on and off? He is the father of Randomness Theory, and of a great deal of modern molecular physics. He was also a Christian. Although Pascal died at age 36, he wrote down thoughts all through his life. After his death, his sister, who was a Roman Catholic nun, gathered his thoughts in a little collection called *Pensees*, or “thoughts.” It is on any list of the great books of the western world. Most of the thoughts are about his faith in Jesus Christ. They are numbered as random thoughts.

In the beginning of what editors have titled “The Section on the Necessity of the Wager,” Pascal says, “Men and women despise Christian faith, and they hate it because they fear it is true.” What an intriguing line! “And therefore, to remedy this,” he continues, “since people hate the Christian faith, we must show them that the Christian

faith is not contrary to reason.” Pascal realized that as we hear the gospel it must make sense to us. “Therefore, we must show that it is venerable,” he adds.<sup>3</sup>

What Pascal means by “venerable” is that, if you were to believe in Christ, it would have a good effect in your life. The venerability of a good person doing good work wins a hearing for the gospel. So Pascal says, “We must show that it is venerable in order to inspire respect for it. And then we must show that at its center is love, in order to make good men and women hope that it is true, and then we must prove that it is true.”<sup>4</sup> That’s Pascal’s strategy for winning people to Christ. We must show that love is at the core of the gospel, and finally that it is true.

That is the journey of hearing. We are taking a journey to decide and discover if it is true. Is it good? Is there love? What motivates it? What is at the core? What happens in the New Testament is that we hear and we watch the ministry of Jesus Christ. I always say to people on their journey of faith, “Take a look at Jesus Christ and He will win your respect, but then the truth is validated by doing” Truth is validated when you actually put it into practice, when you put your weight down on it. Christian faith is putting your weight down on the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ.

That is how I first became a Christian. I was a student at the University of California. Dr. Munger, pastor of First Presbyterian church of Berkeley, spoke at a conference I attended, and he said, “When, on the basis of what you know about the trustworthiness, you are ready to become a Christian.” When I decided to trust in Christ’s faithfulness, I became a Christian. I trusted in Christ’s trustworthiness. I put my weight down on His trustworthiness

He is the only rock, the only foundation, we can trust to hold us up when we put our weight down on it.

To illustrate, I can teach you how to do downhill skiing in about one minute. There are just three rules. The first rule is that you must face down the mountain, putting your hands forward. Second, you must go fast. In order to execute turns in downhill skiing, there has to be enough speed. Third, you must keep your weight on the downhill ski. Then there is a half-rule: You never stop, you only turn. That's really all there is to downhill skiing.

But there is only one problem with those three simple rules. All three go contrary to our natural human instinct, especially when you're at the top of a chairlift at Vail. You're an adult, you have family, you have obligations, you have the company to keep track of, you're a CEO, and you get to the top of the hill, and the instructor says to face downhill. It looks darn steep, and downright dangerous, and you say, "Oh no, I'm not going to do that."

And then there is the rule about going fast. The instructor says, "We want you under control, but we want you to go fast enough to execute the turns." But again, that rule is contrary to human instinct. You're up there and you say, "If I want to be in control, I'd better not go too fast"—the opposite of what the instructor is saying.

And the rule about putting your weight on the ski that's on the downhill side? You want to say, "No, I'm going to stay as close to this mountain, to the uphill side of this slope, as I can, so, if I fall, I don't fall very far." That means that all your weight is on the uphill ski—which is how you break your knee. If your weight is on the downhill ski, you'll never have a bad fall.

The three rules on learning to ski simply go contrary to human instinct. But when you can break that instinct and actually put your face down the hill, go fast, and on those turns put your weight on the downhill ski, it works! And then, in that moment that you realize that it works, it is very exhilarating! But you can come to realize that it works only when you do it, and not one minute before! Only then is the truth validated.

The same is true of all spiritual truths. Take tithing—giving one-tenth of your entire income as a symbol that Christ is Lord of all of life. You think about tithing and you get an ulcer. But I want to tell you, you do it and it works. It changes your standard of living. It changes your priorities. It works, but only when you *do* it, not when you *think* about it.

I'll never forget Dr. Munger telling a story about a man who came to him after Dr. Munger had preached a sermon about tithing. He said to Dr. Munger, "Pastor, do you realize how much money I make, and if I tithe, do you realize that you are talking about a tremendous amount of money? What are you talking about—gross or net?"

And Dr. Munger said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I'm sorry I made it so complicated. Let's just pray together, brother." And so they started praying and Dr. Munger prayed, "Dear Lord, please reduce the salary of this brother to the point that he can afford to tithe."

Tithing is a spiritual truth. It works when you do it.

Fidelity in marriage is like that, too. Fidelity is what produces happiness in marriage - when we are faithful. Sometimes it goes contrary to instinct. Dorothy Sayers says adultery is one of the "tired" sins. It is usually bored people who commit that sin. Sometimes bored people abandon the very commitments that validate and enrich their lives. They



have to discipline the instinct against truth so they can follow the truth. Then when they *do* the truth, it is validated. That is what our Lord says, “Hear these words of mine and do them.” Put them into practice.

#### CHRIST, THE LAST WORD

Finally, note that this parable leaves us with our eyes fixed upon Jesus Christ Himself. You know, I could make the parable better! It sounds impudent for me to say that Jesus could have improved this parable, but I lived in the San Francisco Bay area for twenty-one years, and I could improve this parable. I could make it even more terrifying than Jesus did. He could have made it more dramatic by saying that the wise man built his house on the rock, and the rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew, and *there was horizontal and vertical earth movement!*

An earthquake such as Bay area residents sometimes experience would make the parable even more urgent. With earthquakes, they have discovered that you have to put your foundation *into* the rock for the house to stand. When they build a house in California now, they don't build *on* the foundation, they bolt the building *into* the foundation. They found that a house that is bolted into the foundation (a wooden house is best) can better handle an earthquake.

In life, you have to relate the house *into* the foundation. It is like Paul saying, “By faith we are *in* Christ”—*into* the foundation. So that would make this parable even better; the wise man or woman builds his house *into* the rock. That is what Paul says—we are not just attached to Christ, we are *in* Christ. A life that is built *into* Christ is the life that will withstand the storm.

In San Francisco, the safest place to be, even in an 8.0 earthquake, would be on the Golden Gate Bridge, not the Bay Bridge. The Bay Bridge is a “cantilever” bridge, and one of the sections actually collapsed in the last major earthquake (and we drove over that bridge just one hour before it fell). But the Golden Gate Bridge did fine, because it is a *suspension* bridge. That’s the best. The Golden Gate is actually built on the San Andreas Fault, yet it is the most earthquake-proof structure in the whole San Francisco area. It has two great towers that are anchored in the rock, giving it an anchor in San Francisco and an anchor in Marin. Then there is a third anchor in between the towers.

At its mid-section, the Golden Gate Bridge is designed to sway twenty-two feet horizontally and ten feet vertically, in a strong wind. It can do that because it is suspended between those anchors. It has only been closed twice because of high winds—not because they were worried about the bridge falling but about trucks on the bridge tipping over onto cars.

It’s been said that the bridge’s movement has even prevented people trying to commit suicide off the middle of the bridge from jumping into the water below because the bridge would swing over and catch them.

The Golden Gate Bridge is safe for three main reasons. Three things give it its strength. One is its flexibility, the fact that it sways. Theologically, that is the forgiveness of sins because of grace. The second secret of the bridge is that every single piece in that bridge, every yard of concrete, every piece of steel, is related to two great cables—not twenty-four cables, but two great cables between two great towers. And third, the towers to which the cables are connected go deep into bedrock. That’s it. That is why it stands in a storm; and that is what this parable is about.

G. K. Chesterton's book, *The Everlasting Man*, played a key role in C. S. Lewis' conversion. Lewis called this the finest book on the Christian faith he ever read. Written in 1925, it is a "two-story" book, like many of Jesus' parables. First it is a story about us, and second it tells the strangest story ever told about the everlasting man, Jesus Christ. This is how Chesterton ends his book. He says:

This is the last proof of the miracle that the church grows younger while the world grows old. I have not minimized the scale of the miracle [he has just narrated the resurrection of Christ—EFP] as some of the milder theologians think it wise to do. Rather I have deliberately dwelt on that incredible interruption [that is what he calls Jesus Christ] as a blow that broke the very backbone of history so that we have B.C. and A.D. I have great sympathy with the monotheist, with those of Islam and Judaism, to whom this miracle seems a blasphemy. A blasphemy that might shake the world. *But it did not shake the world, it steadied the world.*<sup>5</sup>

Jesus Christ steadies the world. He steadies your house, so you can build the entire structure on Him. He is the foundation.