

Building Codes

Matthew 7:24-29

West Valley Presbyterian Church, November 19, 2023

Today we're going to look at Jesus' wrapup to all three chapters of the Sermon on the Mount. And just in time! Next week is Christ the King Sunday, and Rev. Todd Misfeldt will be preaching about the sheep and the goats. And then in two weeks we start Advent. This year during Advent and Christmas Eve, we will be focusing on the songs in the gospel of Luke. There are four of them: the songs of Mary, Zechariah, the angels, and Simeon.

But for today, we are wrapping up the Sermon on the Mount. Last week we heard about what Jesus thinks of attention-seeking miracle workers. And four weeks ago we heard about how you can distinguish between a sincere Christian and a false one: on the basis of their actions. And today, I'm going to put in a good word for building codes.

Our passage for today is Matthew 7:24-29. Hear now the reading of God's holy Word.

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

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.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. (Thanks be to God.)

When Rob and I moved to San Jose, one of the first things we did was to talk with a contractor about replacing the garage. The garage was a separate building behind the fence in the back yard, which is typical of older bungalows in Japantown. It was maybe 70 years old; the foundation was cracked, not level, and not above the ground; the roof was (mostly) waterproof; and you had to manually shove a very stiff sliding door all the way across the front. A modern garage, with insulation and electricity, was at the top of Rob's priority list.

And of course, since we wanted the old garage torn down and rebuilt, that meant learning at least a little about San Jose's building codes. Which are very detailed, and strictly enforced. The planning department, from which you need approval of the plans before construction can start, was backlogged because of the Covid shutdowns. Part of the reason we hired a contractor was so that we wouldn't have to deal with the planning department and the minutiae of building codes!

But, now that the garage is built, I have to admit that I am grateful for those codes. If we have storms this winter like we did last winter, then our garage is in better shape than our house! Like many of the old houses in Japantown, our house has a root cellar that's used for utilities and storage. It's not really a proper basement, and I'm sure it wouldn't meet today's building codes. Last winter the root cellar flooded; and it might this year too. But the garage will be just fine. It has a concrete foundation that's more than a foot thick, and is more than six inches above the ground. It's got rebar all through it. It's about as solid as it's possible to be! The house's foundation is not nearly that good! Building codes were not as stringent eighty years ago; so if there's another whole series of atmospheric rivers, then yes, our root cellar will be flooded and our house might be damaged. But our garage? Thanks to the building codes, it'll be just fine, no matter what the weather.

In the same way, we can all be grateful for the building codes of Jesus. The fact is, that just as all of us are affected by winter storms, so also all of us are affected by the storms of life. We've all had to deal with economic downturns. We've all faced disappointments, broken promises, unexpected bills, job losses, online theft. We've all experienced friendships that faded away or went sour. We've all had family members get sick; and we've all gotten sick ourselves at one time or another. All of us are acquainted with grief; we've all had friends and relatives move away or die. The longer we have lived, the more life storms we have lived through.

Jesus says that storms affect everyone, whether wise or foolish, whether Christian or not. Being connected to Jesus is not a guarantee that life will be easy. Life isn't easy for anyone, including not Christians. We are all limited creatures with finite lifetimes, and we are all affected by the world in which we live. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:45, God "causes his sun to rise on the evil **and** the good, and sends rain on the righteous **and** the unrighteous." The wise and the foolish man both have to deal with storms. The difference is that the wise man is prepared, and he gets through the storms of life without much damage.

It matters whether we adhere to the building codes that Jesus laid out for us. Only, Jesus' building codes don't cover things like the required thickness of concrete, and the density of rebar. They cover things like how we respond to God and how we treat one another. And Jesus' building codes aren't enforced by the city planning department! God does not force us to make good choices. God sets choices before us, and tells us which ones we should choose – for our own sakes and for the sakes of the people we love. That is what Jesus is doing here. He sets out a choice, and asks us to choose rightly.

Jesus' building codes tell us, first of all, about who we are: that we are blessed, and we are salt and light (the first part of Chapter 5). We are God's beloved and blessed people. That's who we are. We can choose to accept who we are, and learn to live into that identity.

SLIDES 6-8

So the rest of Jesus' building codes tell us HOW we are to live into our identity as God's blessed people. And that takes up the rest of Chapter 5, and all of 6 and 7. Specifically, we are to:

- 1) abide by Scripture;
- 2) let go of our own anger, and settle matters with those who are angry with us;
- 3) remain faithful to our spouses in our souls as well as in our bodies;
- 4) not curse or swear an oath;
- 5) love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us;
- 6) pray and fast and give to others in secret;
- 7) focus on God and not on money;
- 8) not worry about tomorrow;
- 9) focus on your own sins rather than on the sins of others;
- 10) and ask God for whatever we need.

If we build our lives to Jesus' code, we will be wise builders. We will still go through difficulties in life; but at least they won't be difficulties of our own making. If we don't build our lives to Jesus' code, we will be foolish builders. We will have difficulties of our own making, on top of the life difficulties that we all face. With that combined force of difficulty, our lives are likely to fall with a great crash.

For example, I know a woman who does try to abide by Scripture. She does remain faithful and doesn't curse and does pray for her enemies. But she worries far too much; and that worry makes life more difficult than it otherwise would be. She worries about whether she will be able to pay for a care home in her old age. She worries about whether people think poorly of her; and she really worries if people are angry with her. In fact she gets so worried that she doesn't even try to settle matters with angry people, as Jesus tells us to do; and thus she misses opportunities to make peace. Issues that could have been settled, aren't; and that makes her daily life more difficult for her, and also for those who are close to her. She winds up like the foolish builder who built his house on sand; her efforts come crashing down in the face of even a small storm.

And, I also knew a woman who did build her life according to Jesus' code. She was a faithful church leader; and in her professional life she had been a teacher and guidance counselor. She did remain faithful, and manage her anger, and keep her focus on God; she did pray and fast and give to others in secret; and she seldom worried about tomorrow. If anything, she met a life storm with the determination to live through it to the glory of God. She had a son who had been a drug addict. Though he was clean and sober by the time I met his mother, he had done a lot of damage to his health; and he died young. I did his memorial, and was deeply moved by my friend's courage in the face of crushing, terrible grief. She built her house on rock; and when the worst storm imaginable crashed against her, she still stood and she did not fall.

If we live as Jesus tells us to do, our skies won't magically be blue all the time. We will still have storms. But when they hit, they won't knock us over. And if we don't live as Jesus tells us to do, storms will hit us also. But when they hit, they will knock us over, and we will suffer needlessly. It's clearly better to be a wise builder, who builds his life on Jesus' teaching, and can withstand the storms of life.

But how do we do that? I suggest praying one of the many prayers of St. Augustine. He was a man who had built his life on sand. Then he got converted and built a whole new life on rock. He was a North African who lived about 1600 years ago, born into the Roman empire. He was very well trained in the Roman arts of rhetoric and philosophy. By the age of 31, he was a very successful teacher and philosopher; and yet he was restless. He felt that there had to be more to life than what he found in pagan beliefs. God persuaded him to take up Scriptures and read them. So he did. And God's speech through Scripture persuaded him to give his life to Christ and get baptized. He became a priest and later the bishop of his home city. One of his most famous prayers is very short. It goes like this: "Command what you will; then give what you command."

That can be a really good prayer for us too. Jesus already commands us what he will, for our own good; we might as well be aware of that, and ask for it. Can we do what he commands? No; not without help! That's why Augustine asks God to give what he commands. We know what Jesus wants of us. We have spent months studying the Sermon on the Mount together. So now we need to take the next step, and ask Jesus to give what he commands. Let's pray that God would make it possible for us to live as he has taught us to do. Let's join our hearts and minds together and pray.

Almighty God, you have told us, through Jesus' words, that we are blessed, and that you love us; and for this we give you thanks. You have told us, through Jesus' words, how you want us to live; and for this also we give you thanks. You know us far better than we know ourselves; and you know what we need to live as your people in this world you have created; and for this also we praise you and thank you.

And yet, without your help, we cannot live as Jesus told us to do. And so we ask for that help. Teach us, we pray, to let go of anger when it rises up within us; and help us to reconcile with all who have something against us. Teach us, we pray, to live faithfully with our spouses – faithfully in spirit as well as in body. Teach us not to resist someone who insults us; and even more, grant us the grace to love our enemies, and forgive those who have sinned against us. Help us to love and serve you without fear or worry. And, Lord, when we see a speck in someone else's eye, remind us of the plank that is in our own eye; in your mercy, remove that plank from each one of us. We thank you for the good gifts that you give to us every day; and we pray that, by the power of your Holy Spirit, we would grow in your grace day by day. For it is in Jesus' name, who has taught us all these things, that we pray. Amen.