

Bedrock

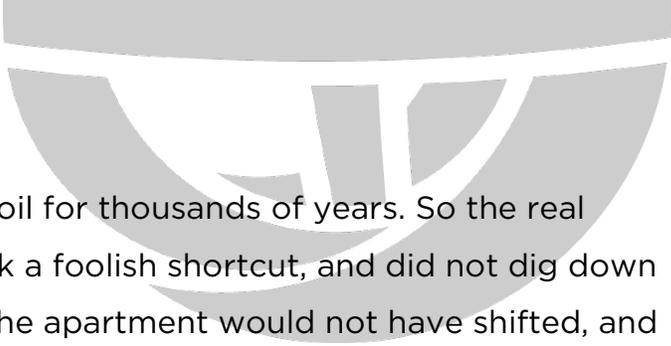
Pastor Peter Strommen

LUKE 6:39-49 NRSV

³⁹He also told them a parable: "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? ⁴⁰A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. ⁴¹Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴²Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye. ⁴³No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. ⁴⁶Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? ⁴⁷I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. ⁴⁸That 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. ⁴⁹But 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."

On the outskirts of Jerusalem, October 4, 1991, in the suburb of Talpiot, a large apartment building collapses, forcing 28 families to evacuate. It looked like an earthquake hit. But there was no earthquake. All the other buildings were just fine. Why did this happen?

The answer is found in the investigation. It illustrates Jesus' parable in our Scripture today. The sewer line leaked water under the complex that collapsed. The soil in Israel has a high clay content; so the ground under the apartment became mushy. As the building settled, it collapsed.



Now folks in Israel have known about wet clay soil for thousands of years. So the real culprit was the construction company. They took a foolish shortcut, and did not dig down to bedrock as is standard practice. If they had, the apartment would not have shifted, and those 28 units might still be there today.

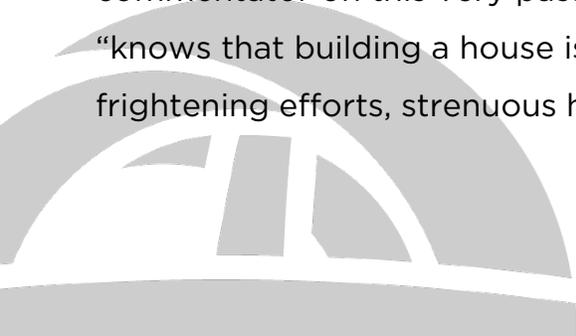
When Jesus speaks of the wise and foolish builders in his parable, he illustrates exactly what happened in Jerusalem. And his listeners would have understood too, because most of them had to build their own houses and knew only too well what Jesus was saying.

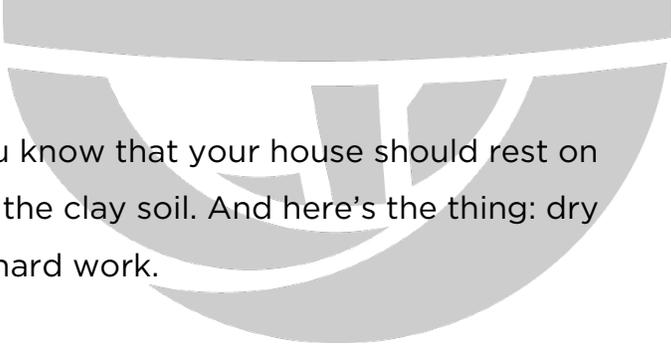
My message today centers on Jesus' parable of the wise and foolish builders. Jesus teaches that building our lives on a firm foundation matters greatly in the long run. He tells us the foundation is formed by doing his word, but if we look closely, his parable prepares us for even a bigger surprise lurking in the parable. But more about that later.

FIRST, THE HARD REALITY OF BUILDING A FOUNDATION

In your mind's eye, picture yourself as one of Jesus' listeners. You are one of many with thick calluses on your hands. Everyday living demands physical strength, including something most of us take for granted - - getting a house. You and I think of realtor or construction company, mortgage and sub-contracting. A few of us may do it ourselves, but we also sub-contract, have supplies shipped to our site, and a backhoe digging out the foundation.

As a listener to Jesus though, it's a different thing altogether. You, like just about every other man, have to build your own house, by hand, with rocks and mud for mortar. Your roof has a few wooden beams and tiles (or thatch), but the lifting, gathering, and cementing are by the sweat of your brow. It's hard, difficult labor, done in the hot summer, because it's dry. A valuable source for all this is Dr. Kenneth Bailey, who quotes a commentator on this very passage from many centuries ago, Iban al-Tayyib. (1) Everyone, "knows that building a house is not an easy endeavor. Rather, it involves exhausting and frightening efforts, strenuous hardships, along with continuous life-threatening struggles."





And the house itself is not the only struggle. You know that your house should rest on bedrock. But that means digging down through the clay soil. And here's the thing: dry clay soil of the summer is like concrete. It's just hard work.

So you might wonder - - most years the winter rain is manageable. Perhaps you can position your house on slightly higher ground in your village. Why dig to bedrock? - - things will be ok. As it is, the soil is hard and firm, and it will take a lot of water to do real damage.

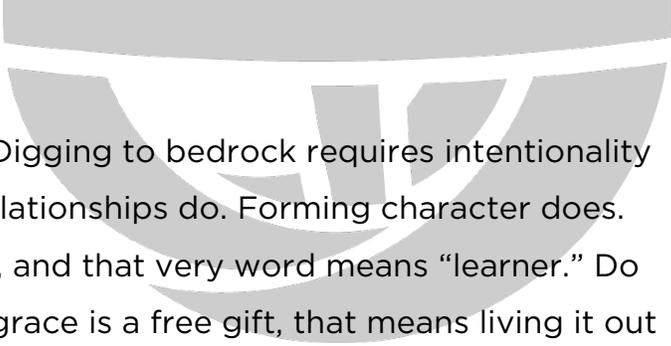
Then comes that rainy winter when the ground gets saturated, puddles and pools everywhere, with little streams forming here and there. You can't control it, and dread the day you notice a slight bulge on your west wall. It gets bigger the next day. You try hasty repairs, but the whole house is settling in the mushy wet clay beneath. One day some rocks just pop out, and the whole west wall collapses, taking part of the adjoining walls and with it the roof. That house you worked so hard to build is a pile of rubble.

OUR LIVES HAVE SIMILARITIES

Aren't our lives something like building a house? We build our lives with others for sure, our parents and relatives, teachers and friends teach us as we do, passing on a culture, a way of doing things, morality, how we relate to each other, laws, practices, and values. In all this, though, we make individual choices as we grow into our sense of identity, and these accumulate into habits, practices, and the way we look at life. For some it may be just going with the flow. We are tempted to take shortcuts too. We may just do what is expected without giving it a lot of thought, except perhaps in preparing to get a good job.

But here, Jesus challenges us. What we may build our lives on can be unstable and foolish in the long-run. Do we have a foundation built on bedrock? Life always has its storms, it can be unfair and uneven. What is our foundation? In this parable, Jesus claims that living out his word is bedrock.





What resonates for me is the parable's realism. Digging to bedrock requires intentionality and work. Most of what we value in life does. Relationships do. Forming character does. Learning. Followers of Jesus are called disciples, and that very word means "learner." Do we sometimes assume that if God loves us and grace is a free gift, that means living it out can be casual? In this parable, digging to bedrock is the hardest option. It's also the option with enormous promise--the "pearl of great price"--to use a metaphor of Jesus.

LOOKING DEEPER STILL

As we look deeper, beyond this parable, bedrock is something greater than following Jesus' teaching.

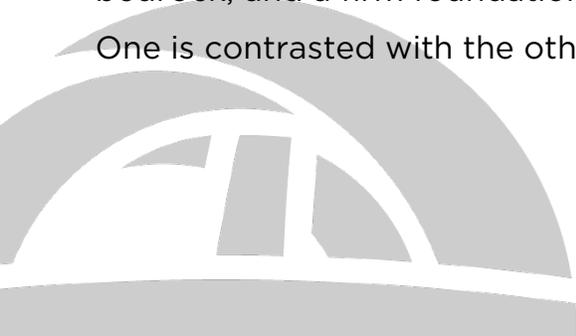
Centuries before Jesus, in a time of terrible crisis, the prophet Isaiah called out Israel for basing its hope on a lie - - a treaty with the Egyptians so leaky Isaiah called it a, "covenant with death." And it was. The first superpower in the region, the Assyrians, utterly destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, carted its inhabitants off into Babylonian exile, and shattered their illusions of where security lay. The Egyptians were nowhere to be found.

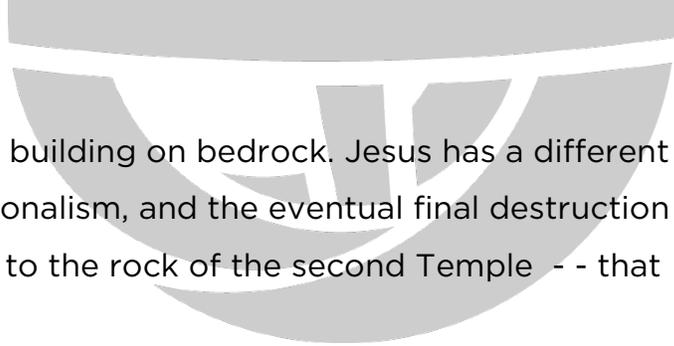
But even as Isaiah saw the doom of that false hope, he gave a promise to Israel of a true bedrock, the promise of a future stone, "laid in Zion, a sure foundation" (Is. 28.16). In Jesus' day, many thought this promise was a remaining rock from the original temple that now formed the center of the second Temple's Holy of Holies.

That's not where Jesus is going. Isaiah's way of depicting the difference between the false security behind Israel's hopes in a treaty, and the promise that God would create a sure foundation in the future ("laid in Zion, a sure Foundation") was a parable of two buildings. One stands on a lie, and the other on God's promise.

Jesus' parable would call to mind Isaiah's for many of his hearers. Both center on rock, bedrock, and a firm foundation that withstands storms and crises beyond our strength.

One is contrasted with the other.





Here Jesus is claiming that following his word is building on bedrock. Jesus has a different rock in mind, for he sees the path of Jewish nationalism, and the eventual final destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus doesn't point to the rock of the second Temple - - that would be destroyed 40 years later.

So, what is this rock with such promise that it will endure war, evil, the foolishness of our own sin, we might ask? And what gives Jesus the authority to be making these statements? Is bedrock based on our success at digging to that foundation, by following Jesus' teachings? Or, is it something more? Who or what is that rock Isaiah promises, and now Jesus, using his parable motif?

We understand God's Word to be the rock, but what unfolds in the Gospel is something beyond teachings, wisdom, law, and prophecy. The great manifestation of bedrock is Jesus himself! "God with us" at a level beyond all telling. This foundation transcends time, death, creation itself—inviting us into a relationship with the living God, who loves us. We can trust this foundation. Indeed, it is a covenant with life, not death. And it's mystery and scope invite us into what we could not possibly build ourselves. This rock will end up astonishing the disciples as its truth unfolds. It continues to astonish each generation that chooses to dig. May we be wise in the most important things of life. Amen

(1) Kenneth E. Bailey. "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels. IV Press.

