

**The Jesus Way** / **THE LIFE GOD WANTS FOR YOU**  
**Built to Last**  
Matthew 7:24-27

On the night of August 17, 1969, Hurricane Camille made landfall near the mouth of the Mississippi River. Camille was the only Atlantic hurricane to maintain sustained wind speeds of at least 190 mph at landfall. The storm flattened everything along the coast, killing 259 people and causing 1.42 billion dollars of damage, the equivalent of nearly 10 billion in today's currency.

For me, however, that hurricane was not just another storm reported on the evening news or scientifically analyzed by meteorologists. No, it was a storm that blew away the setting of so many of my most cherished childhood memories. Every summer my family would drive to the scenic town of Pass Christian, Mississippi, located right on the Gulf Coast. There we would stay in a quaint beach front cottage that overlooked the private, sandy shores of the Coast. My granddad had built that house along the sandy shores, thinking it could withstand the fiercest storms imaginable.

Our family didn't visit the coast that summer of 1969. We were in New England instead. But as we followed the news, we knew that our property was in jeopardy. When I visited the Gulf Coast with my parents in the fall of that year, I saw nothing but devastation. It looked like a literal war zone. Houses in shambles, highways impassible, trees blown down like match-sticks and cars scattered about like toys. I couldn't believe my young eyes. I had never seen anything like it. Nor have I seen such devastation since.

The moment of truth came, however, when I saw my Granddad's house which held so many childhood memories. All the other destroyed houses and buildings belonged to people I had never met. There was an eerie anonymity about it all. But when we turned the corner and I saw our *own* property ... the destructive power of the storm suddenly became very personal.

I'll never forget rummaging through that property, where not one stone was left standing on another. I discovered part of an old fishing pole and some crabbing nets we had kept in one of the outside storage rooms. As I turned over one of the concrete blocks that had previously been part of a wall, I discovered a clock that had been in our living room. It was stopped at 11:05 PM, the very moment the fury of the storm was at its peak.

I remember standing in the sandy front yard now covered with debris. I looked out over the unearthed highway, onto what used to be clean, white sandy beaches, and out into the Gulf of Mexico. I had done that so many times before. But now it was so very different. All I could think was, "It's gone; it's gone. The place that held so many memories as a child was now destroyed."

While I didn't think of it at the time, I've come to realize that what I was seeing and feeling and thinking is a picture of so many lives...

...Lives built on sand.

...Lives that cannot stand.

...Lives that buckle and break when the storms of life hit with all their fury.

Jesus, in his conclusion to his Sermon on the Mount, tells a story with the same theme. It goes like this:

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.  
Matthew 7:24-27 NIV

In many ways these two men are similar. They both hear the words of Jesus. They are both builders. They both experience the same kind of storm – the rain, the water, the wind.

But that's as far as the similarities go. From there on out the contrasts are striking. The first man – we might call him “Rocky” – builds his house on the rock. The second man – we might call him “Sandy” – builds his house on the sand.

At this point, we might conclude that it's just a matter of preference. After all, if it's *his* house, can't it build it where he wants? He certainly can. But the rest of the story reveals the consequences of each man's choice.

When the house built on the rock is confronted with the Camille force rain, storm surge and wind, it stands. It does not fall. It has its foundation on the rock.

On the other hand, when the house built on the sand is confronted with the Camille force rain, storm surge and wind, it falls. In fact, it falls with a great crash.

In this concluding story of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is talking about having a house built to last that can withstand the Camille force storms of life. The determining factor is the foundation. But here we have a choice. We can be like the wise man who builds his house on the rock. Or we can be like the foolish man who builds his house on sand.

Jesus is saying: If you want to build a house that lasts, you've got to build on the right foundation. Just how do we do that?

*The right foundation begins with hearing the words of Jesus.* Jesus says, “Everyone who *hears* these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (7:24).

The right foundation, then, begins with the words of Jesus. The “these words” that Jesus is talking about are the very words that he has just spoken in this talk high on a hillside in Northern Galilee.

Who was hearing the words of Jesus on this occasion? Matthew 5, verse 1 says: “Now when he saw the *crowds*, he went up on a mountainside and sat down...” Who are these crowds? They are the mass of people spoken in Matthew 4:23-25 who admired Jesus for his spectacular miracles. And in their enthusiasm they were pressing in around Jesus to hear his words.

But notice. There was also another group of people who *heard* Jesus’ words on this occasion. Matthew 5:1 also says “His disciples came to him...” Some of these disciples were those to whom Jesus has already said, “Come, follow me” (4:19).

Both of these groups – the curious crowds and the more devoted disciples – were hearing the same words fall from the lips of Jesus. And just what are these words?

First, Jesus tells us that the values of the Kingdom are *upside down*. This is what Jesus is saying in that well-known section called the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-11. Who will be in my Kingdom? Not whom you might think! It’s not the powerful, the popular and the persuasive, but rather the poor in spirit, the pure in heart and the persecuted who are the true citizens of God’s Kingdom. Why? Because Kingdom values are “upside down” in relation to the world around us.

But not only are the values of the Kingdom upside down. They are also *inside out*. Jesus tells us in the rest of chapter 5 that a radical form of righteousness will characterize true citizens of God’s Kingdom. True kingdom citizens are marked by radical righteousness, not religious righteousness. True kingdom citizens not only refrain from murder. They put aside anger that is the root of murder. True kingdom citizens not only refrain from sleeping with their neighbor’s wife. They turn from the lust that is the root of adultery. True citizens not merely love their neighbor. They even take the radical, unheard of step of loving their enemy. *Why* will they do this and *how* will they do this? Because they are being changed from the inside out.

Finally Jesus tells us that the values of the Kingdom are *upward not outward*. That’s what he says throughout chapter 6. The focus of Kingdom citizens is not so much on outward actions as on inward motivations. Whether it has to do with giving, praying or the way we handle our material possessions, the focus of kingdom citizens is *upward* (preoccupied with God) and not *outward* (preoccupied with what others think).

But notice. As we come to the end of Jesus’ sermon, these same enthusiastic crowds – these “admirers” – are still around. Chapter 7:28 says, “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were *amazed* at his teaching, for he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.”

If you want to build your house – your life – on the right foundation, it takes more than being an admirer of Jesus. The entire crowd around Jesus admired his works (his miracles) and heard his

words (his message). But for some – possibly very few – it went far beyond admiration. Initial curiosity began to grow into full-fledged commitment. Some were no longer admirers; they were now followers.

I imagine that for some – as they listened to Jesus’ words – their hearts began to pound. Deep inside (for some of them) they began to say: *Yes, this is what I want more than anything else in life. I truly thirst after such radical righteousness. I long for such forgiveness. I want new values – the upside-down values of the kingdom. And I’m willing to count the cost and pay the price. I want to be changed from the inside out. I’m sick of my lust and anger and hatred. I’m sick of my superficial religion. I want radical righteousness, not mere religious righteousness. I’ve been enthusiastically following the crowds, but now I want to follow Jesus. I now want to live for one audience alone, not man but God. I’m leaving the crowd to follow this man Jesus. As of today, I’m not just an admirer anymore. I want to be a fully devoted follower.*<sup>1</sup>

The other night Justin and I watched the movie entitled *Four Minutes*. It’s the story of how Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile. After Mount Everest was conquered in 1953, there was yet one test of man’s endurance and determination that remained – the breaking of the four-minute mile.

As Bannister runs, the crowds are looking on with admiration. I imagine that in those crowds there were several young boys who were thinking to themselves: *What Roger Bannister is doing, I could do. The way he is running, I could run.* And then that kid begins to read books about running, joins his school team, trains, and sets his eyes on the Olympics. At that point, he is no longer an admirer, he is a follower.

When it comes to running, I’ll have to admit. I’m not in that category. I used to be. I was an admirer of Jim Ryan, who less than 10 years later made Roger Bannister’s record-breaking run look like kid’s stuff. And my admiration led me for a period of time to the discipline of following. And now when I run with Justin, I follow too...*way behind!*

An admirer is impressed, like the crowds of Jesus’ day. A follower is devoted. An admirer stands up and applauds. A follower bows down and surrenders his very life.

To drive home this distinction, Jesus gives us in the final portion of this “sermon” a series of pictures all of which show us that we must choose. There is a narrow gate and there is a wide gate. There is a good tree and there is a bad tree. There is a foundation of sand and there is a foundation of rock. Which to you want? There are only two choices. There is no third option.

We live today in a society of options. When I was growing up, we used to have Coca Cola and Dr. Pepper. Oh, there were a few other choices. But for me, those were the main competitors. Today I go to the grocery store and find caffeinated coke, and coke without caffeine. I find diet coke and organic coke. I find diet caffeine free coke and vitamin diet coke. I find cherry coke and vanilla coke. And I find diet vanilla cherry coke.

I fear that we have read this mentality of options into Jesus’ words, as if we can pick our particular “brand” of what it looks like to follow Jesus. Oh, we’re enthusiastic at times. We get “pumped” about a new insight into Scripture or a worship experience, or a book that we’ve read,

or ... you name it. We're great admirers. Some are enthusiasts. You might even raise your hands when you worship. You might hear a good Bible lesson and say, "Wow, that touched me; wasn't that great!" But when it comes to Jesus' words penetrating the very core of our being and bringing radical change to our lifestyle...we'll, that's where it stops. That's not our "brand" of Christianity. After all, don't I have the right to choose?

Jesus says, "Yes, you can choose. But between two options, not fifty." You can choose the narrow way, or the broad way. You can choose the good fruit or the bad fruit. You can choose to build your house on sand, or on the Rock.

If you want to build a house that lasts, you must not only *hear* the words of the Master Architect. You must also *obey* the words of the Master Architect. In Jesus' story, both the wise man and the foolish man hear the words of Jesus. But only one puts them into practice. If you want to build a house that last, it means moving beyond *hearing* the words of Jesus to *doing* the words of Jesus.

Last week we turned to the book of James which is the only inspired commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. The most likely candidate for the author of this book is James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ. And while he didn't come to faith until after the resurrection, the close family tie could explain the many parallels in his letter to the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>ii</sup>

For example, James says: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22). The word translated "listen" referred in the secular Greek of the day to those who would listen to the philosophers and teachers, but never actually become disciples. It literally means "to audit," like those who audit a class. Auditors listen to the lecture but do little if any of the work. Many in the crowds who heard Jesus' words were "auditors." They listened, but they had no desire to obey. They were admirers, but had no intention of becoming followers.

Many so-called Christians are like that today – auditors. Maybe you are one of them. Many people in our churches today love to listen and go through the motions, but then walk right out and don't do anything with what they've heard. Some flit from church to church, looking for a new, novel word or insight, or for the latest model of church, or maybe for the latest self-help remedy for their lives. But all they while they refuse to put into practice what they already know.

Let me ask you this morning: Are you *auditing* the Christian life? Do you *audit* our weekly gathering? Or are you for real? Are you building your house on the sand or on the rock, Christ himself? Are you an admirer or are you a follower?

I want to give you a picture of the difference between hearing and doing, between being an auditor (an admirer) and a follower. I read about a word this past week that I had never heard before: *funambulist*. Do you know what it means? It refers to an acrobat who walks on a cable from a great height. It's what we call a tightrope walker.

Though there have been many through centuries, one stands out above the rest. About 150 years ago he was at the height of his career. His name was Charles Blondin. When he came to the United States, he was enamored – if not obsessed – with Niagra Falls. He determined to cross it on a rope. So he strung a hemp cord 1,100 feet across and 160 feet above the Falls.

A crowd of 100,000 people gathered to watch Charles Blondin walk a tightrope across Niagara Falls inch by inch, step by step. Can you imagine the drama and emotion of that moment? There was no safety net underneath. It was a question of life or death.

He crossed all the way over. Hundreds were taking pictures, so he did it again. He loved the drama, so he crossed over again with a camera and took pictures of the crowd while they were taking pictures of him. Then he went another time and took a chair. He balanced the chair on the rope and stood on it. Then he went another time and small stove and what was needed to make an omelet. He actually camped for some time on the rope and cooked an omelet, that he then let down to the bystanders looking on so they could eat it! Then he took a wheelbarrow across. The crowd went crazy.

He turned to the crowd and asked them, “Do you believe I can do this again?” Of course, they all believed. Then he asked them, “Now, who will get in the wheelbarrow?” Suddenly, it got really quiet. All 100, 000 people were silent. But there was one man, named Harry Colcord, who knew Blondin. He had worked with him. He had seen him do it 100 times. He got into the wheelbarrow and they went across inch by inch, step by step. What a ride. In a wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls. The crowd once again went crazy. But only one was willing to step in the wheelbarrow. Thousands applauded, but only one was followed.<sup>iii</sup>

As Jesus finished his sermon on the mount, he asks each of us: Will you follow me? Will you choose the narrow gate? Or do you prefer the wide gate? Will you choose the rock as your foundation? Or are you going to build your house on the sand? Are you a mere auditor, or are you one of my disciples? Are you an enthusiastic admirer or are you a devoted follower?

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<sup>i</sup> The idea for this reflection is adapted from an excellent message on this passage by John Ortberg, “The World’s Greatest Talk: Choices” [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

<sup>ii</sup> There are no less than forty-five direct parallels between the teaching of James and Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. See

<sup>iii</sup> Illustration adapted from John Ortberg, “The World’s Greatest Talk: Choices” [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com) and from the original account of this event found at [http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=9402EED7143DE73ABC4E51DFBE668382649FDE](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9402EED7143DE73ABC4E51DFBE668382649FDE).