

The Rock

Matthew 7:21-29

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On Tuesday, October 17, 1989, at 5:04 p.m., I was bending over trying to put my key in the trunk of my '67 Ford Mustang, and I missed the keyhole. I thought that maybe it was the leaf-cut Redman chewing tobacco that made me miss. (I don't chew any more because it causes lip cancer and my wife won't kiss me.)

Well, I tried again and missed the keyhole again. I figured then that some high school kid was shaking my car, because the trunk was moving. I looked up, and the house was moving, the trees were moving, the street was moving, the mountains were moving, and *I* was moving. I could see waves coming down El Pintado Blvd.

It was the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

Earthquakes are incredibly unnerving, because everything moves and you feel entirely out of control.

When it was over, Susan, Jon, four-day-old Elizabeth, and I all sat in the front yard and listened to our radio as damage reports began to come in. The Cypress Freeway had collapsed . . . the Embarcadero was crumbling . . . in the Marina district buildings fell like cards and burned. It was strange: The same earthquake, and one block would be unscathed and the next obliterated.

If fact, if you were to draw a line around the areas of devastation, you would produce a geologic map exhibiting areas of bedrock and areas of unconsolidated sand and landfill. The Cypress Structure, the Embarcadero, and the Marina district

were all built on manmade landfills. The sand and mud shook like Jell-O in a bowl (liquefaction), so those great structures fell. “And great was the fall of them.” The earthquake—the earth-storm—revealed the rock and exposed the foundations.

Matthew 7:24 (This is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount):

“Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”

And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Well, both men built a house. Whatever you build on is what you have faith in. Everybody has faith in something: God, yourself, science, Atheism, religion . . .

And people may profess to have faith in one thing (like Jesus) but actually build on something else (like public opinion). And all the houses may look alike. All may say, “Lord, Lord” above the entryway, but the storm exposes their true foundation: sand or rock.

Why would a person build on sand instead of rock? Well, sand is easy to push around.

- If you build your house on rock, you have to conform your house to the foundation.
- If you build your house on sand, you can conform the foundation to your house . . . control the foundation.

Well, Jesus says, “The one who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock”— not *a* rock, but *the* rock.

What is *the* rock?

Well, we know building on it is like “doing these words of Jesus”: that is, the Sermon on the Mount.

Moses received the Law on Mt. Sinai at the start of Israel’s journey through the wilderness. Now on the mount Jesus expounds the Law and begins to lead His disciples on a journey. It’s clear Jesus’ words are more foundational than the Law, like His mountain is more solid than Sinai.

I certainly hope you work to conform your life to His words, that you dig down and study Scripture and obey. It’s frightening that often we *don’t*. For instance, so many couples profess faith in Christ and then live together—sleeping together—outside of marriage. That’s, like, not even *trying*. I want to say, “Don’t we get it?”

You can’t conform His words to your preferred lifestyle. You must conform your lifestyle to His Word. I’m truly sorry, but it’s not simply opinion; it’s *solid rock*. You’re slamming your head into solid rock, and the rock can crush you.

“But he who hears these words of mine and does them,” says Jesus, “will be like a wise man who built his house *on* the

rock.” “These words of mine” are the Sermon on the Mount, and it begins with the beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those hungering for righteousness.” They are *blessed* . . . and you wonder, “How can I be more like that?”

- Then Jesus starts expounding the Law
- Then Jesus talks about spiritual disciplines
- Then treasure, gates, and pearls

The Sermon on the Mount itself is like a journey. And His words are incredibly *hard* in places. I wonder if I’ve even *tried*. He sums up the Law by saying, “You must be perfect as my heavenly father is perfect.” And then, “Practice perfection without your right hand knowing what the left is doing.” Like, “Love to perfection and do it without consciously trying.”

It’s easy to think, “Well, I’m obviously going to fail. I can’t give without knowing it. Why even try? Lust, anger, turn the other cheek? Every time I look at my girlfriend I commit adultery in my heart. I might as well do it in my bedroom. Why try?”

When my son was an infant, he said to Susan and me, “Mom, Dad — I’m giving up on walking, because I’m sure I’m gonna fall. Mom and Dad, there are sixty-year-old men who trip and fall. Who has never fallen? So in my deep humility I’ll just acknowledge my failure and stay in bed the rest of my life.” Actually, he didn’t say that. He was a child. They just keep trying. (But surely God doesn’t want us to become like a child, does He?)

Philip Yancey tells how a solo violinist came to the great composer Stravinsky and said, “I can’t play this piece. I’ve given it my best and found it too difficult, even unplayable.”

Stravinsky replied, “I understand that. What I am after is the sound of someone trying to play it.”

Is that what God wants? Well, Jesus didn’t say, “He who hears these words and *tries* is like a wise man who built his house on the rock”; Jesus says, “He who hears these words and *does* them.” Yikes!

Well then, has anyone ever built their house on the rock? Heard these words and *done* them? Certainly the crowd would have thought of the scribes and Pharisees. They were absolutely stringent about the Law. They confessed, “Lord, Lord” and did “many mighty works” and great deeds in His name.

In the paragraph preceding this one, Jesus says:

Not every one who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.”

The scribes and the Pharisees said, “Lord, Lord” and did “great works,” yet they don’t do the Father’s will, and Jesus doesn’t know them.

Building on the rock is like hearing and doing the words, which is somehow knowing the Word—the One who speaks.

What *is* the rock?
And has anyone ever built their house on it?

The next place Jesus talks about the rock is Matthew 16. He's hanging out with His disciples and asks, "Who do men say that I am?" Petros (that is, Peter), answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus says, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter (Petros), and on this rock (petra) I will build my church"

Well, somehow Peter *is* the rock. Roman Catholics argue Peter *is* the rock and here Jesus inaugurates the Papacy. Protestants argue that the rock was the confession of Christ *in* Peter. Both would agree that ultimately the rock is Jesus.

In fact, it's all through the Old Testament: "The Lord is our rock," "a rock of refuge," "a sure foundation," "a rock to make men stumble," yet also "the rock of our salvation."

In I Corinthians 10, Paul writes that on the wilderness journey the Israelites all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink from the supernatural rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ.

Paul may mean a particular rock actually followed them, or he may mean that Christ was like every rock where Moses spoke in faith . . . like the narrow gate that's everywhere, like a pearl in every oyster, like a treasure in every field. Whatever the case, in I Corinthians 3 Paul writes, "No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Christ."

So not only are Christ's words like a foundation, He—the Word—*is* the foundation—the rock. Yet He says, "On Petros — Peter—this rock—I will build my church."

Well, you know Peter did *try* to do Jesus' words. He was like Captain Liquefaction, Jell-O Man, but He did *try*. And Peter did

know Jesus. In fact, after the Sermon on the Mount, Peter went on a journey with Jesus — like after the Law on Mt. Sinai, Israel went on a journey with the Lord. You really get to know somebody on a journey, especially a journey through a storm.

By the end of Matthew, Peter doesn't only know *about* Jesus; he *knows* Jesus.

The Pharisees refused to go on the journey with Jesus. They knew the good in their head but would not know Him in their heart. They would not walk with Him. They used knowledge *about* good to guard their hearts from knowing the good— Jesus.

In the movie Good Will Hunting, Will Hunting is a genius. He knows about everything with his head, but he uses that knowledge to hide from pain in his heart. He meets a counselor (played by Robin Williams) and guards his heart from the counselor by dissecting the counselor with his knowledge and crucifying the counselor's passions for art and his bride on his own knowledge. The counselor confronts him in a garden and says this:

[Movie clip]

You've never been out of Boston. So if I asked you about art, you could give me the skinny on every art book ever written. Michelangelo? — You know a lot about him . . . life's work, political aspirations, him and the Pope, sexual orientation, the whole works, right? But you couldn't tell me what it smells like in the Sistine Chapel. You've never actually stood there and looked up at that beautiful ceiling.

If I asked you about war, you'd probably throw Shakespeare at me, right? "Once more into the breach,

dear friends.” But you’ve never been near one. You’ve never held your best friend’s head in your lap and watched him draw his last breath, looking to you for help.

And if I asked you about love, you’d probably quote me a sonnet, but you’ve never looked at a woman and been totally vulnerable . . . known someone who could level you with her eyes . . . feeling like God put an angel on Earth just for you, who could rescue you from the depths of hell.

And you wouldn’t know what it’s like to be *her* angel, to have that love for her and be there forever, through anything, through cancer. You wouldn’t know about sleeping sitting up in a hospital room for two months holding her hand, because the doctors could see in your eyes that the term “visiting hours” didn’t apply to you. You don’t know about real loss, because that only occurs when you love something more than you love yourself. I doubt you’ve ever dared to love anybody that much.

Will Hunting knew *about* beauty, truth, love, and life. But he was too frightened to *know* beauty, truth, love, and life, and *live*. Because he wouldn’t know, he wasn’t known. He was an act hiding a wounded heart. “Behold, I never knew you,” said Jesus.

Does He know you . . . or only the act?

Well, by the end of Matthew, Simon Peter knows beauty, truth, and love. He knows life, because he’s walked with Him. He went on a journey with Him all the way to the cross. He knows and is known.

Jesus *is* beauty, truth, love, and life, and I believe He is waiting for you in every painting and every person, in every war, and in the pit of every disease . . . waiting to *know* you if you'll only hear and do . . .

that is, have faith,
that is, trust Him enough to try to obey,
that is, give up your control and surrender to His
control.

We're afraid to try, because we're afraid we'll fail and He'll fail, so we'll drown and die, because God really isn't good and He can't be trusted. That is, He's not a rock, or the storm is more powerful than the rock. So we dare not follow His counsel.

In Matthew 14 the disciples are perishing in a storm. Jesus comes walking by on the water. Peter calls out, "If it's you, bid me come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come," and Peter did. He got out of the boat and walked into the storm. Peter tried doing the word of His Lord, and, if only for a moment, Peter walked on water.

I doubt he was even very conscious of trying. I mean, his right hand didn't know what his left was doing. He wasn't conscious of himself; his eyes were fixed on the Rock, the Rock in the midst of the storm—Jesus. When he came to himself and saw the storm, he sank. He failed — Peter failed.

We remember that Peter failed. The other disciples *didn't* fail . . . or did they? They didn't sink, but they never *tried*, so they didn't *know* their failure. Because they didn't know their failure, they didn't know what Peter knew next. He called out to Jesus in the storm. He called to the Rock, and the Rock moved. The Rock came to him and saved him.

So Peter knew Jesus: the beauty, truth, love, and life;
And Peter knew Jesus: the rock of his salvation.

Perhaps you can't really know your own failure
Until you've tried to walk in the storm.

Perhaps you can't really know the Savior
Until you truly know you've failed.

When your heart admits that you've failed, that you're drowning and have no control, then you've become "poor in spirit." Your heart mourns, you are meek, you hunger and thirst for righteousness—the Rock. Then blessed are you. The Rock moves for you and saves you. You meet the Rock of your salvation—Jesus. He moves for you, under you, and in you. You are His house.

The scribes and Pharisees thought the temple was their house that they built: Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion, the Law. In reality, they built on sand, for they never really attempted the Law. They moved the Law around like sand in order to conform it to themselves and maintain control.

In Matthew 21, when Jesus said, "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed you could say to this mountain, 'Move,'" He was standing next to Mt. Zion. And when He was crucified, the sacrifice and the temple — the whole system — moved from old Mt. Zion to Mt. Calvary. And Matthew records that when He was crucified, the rocks split open, the earth moved, and the mountains moved.

In an earthquake (an earth-storm) . . .

if you're anchored to the rock,
you move with the rock and survive;

if you're not anchored to the rock,
you get crushed by the movement of the rock.

When Jesus was crucified, Peter tried and failed but clung to the Rock to save him. And the Rock moved to save Peter . . . and you . . . and me.

The scribes and Pharisees—the religious folks—didn't want a savior and hated the Rock. They crucified Jesus to maintain control of their house. They tried to push the foundation around to make their house great. And to quote Jesus, "Great was the fall of it."

In 70 A.D. the Romans obliterated it. They literally plowed the temple into the ground, and it hasn't been built since. Yet by 312 A.D. the Roman Emperor himself confessed to living in Christ's house . . . His temple, His people, His Church. And His Church had been built on Peter the Rock.

Has anyone ever built on the rock? Well, Christ has. He said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Jesus is the Rock, and Jesus was in Peter, for Peter surrendered control to Jesus. And so on that Rock (Jesus in Peter) Jesus built His Church . . . and still builds His Church.

Now, Pharisees see that and try to build houses that look the same. But they're the exact opposite at the foundation. They're built on the glorification of self rather than the surrender of self. They're built on the flesh rather than the Spirit.

The religious spirit is a spirit of control. It uses God to maintain control, rather than surrendering control to be used by God.

What are you standing on? Some formula, some system, some philosophy, some idea with which you hope to control God?

What are you building on? Your wisdom, deeds, knowledge, goodness?

And what are you building with? Spiritual nuggets, chunks of Jesus, as if He's your building material?

Gosh! You're still building *your* house, aren't you?

Well, He's the Rock, and He builds His Church. You don't build *your* house with *Him* so much as He builds *His* house with *you*.

Peter said, "Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house . . ." He builds His house with you, and the gates of hell—storms of hell—cannot prevail against it.

His house, His New Jerusalem, withstands every storm.

Several years ago I was with Aram, and we were praying with a friend who is free now but at the time struggled with demonic spirits assigned to her from her past of Satanic ritual abuse. It was about 2:00 a.m., Aram and I were at her place, and obviously we were not in control. It was a crazy storm, and we were in way over our heads. Yet it's clear Jesus was calling from the storm.

I've been saddened that we religious people won't walk into storms like that. We'll say, "That violates my boundaries," or "You need an expert for that, someone who knows what he's

doing.” Experts can be very helpful, but control in a storm is an illusion.

Well, we were praying against a demonic spirit that took the name Control and inspired our friend to hide from her heart and maintain a good, religious act. At one point it manifested in her body and choked her. Aram and I watched as she stopped breathing and fell over lifeless on the floor. I put my face by hers, and there was no breath.

I thought of everything I knew. I began reciting every religious formula I could think of . . . “I take authority in Jesus’ name! I command in Jesus’ name! I rebuke in Jesus’ name” . . . tongues, gifts, whatever. Aram prayed and I yelled, and still she wasn’t breathing.

After a while I looked at Aram, he looked at me, and we realized we were going down! The church was going down. It was 2:00 a.m., and we were in a single woman’s house — a *dead* single woman’s house. Sure, the cops would understand . . . “It was a demon, officer!”

Well, almost unconsciously I forgot what I knew and thought of the One I know. Like a child, from somewhere deep in my heart, I mumbled, “Jesus, help us.” And He did. She gasped for air, and the gates of hell could not prevail.

I don’t think I’ll ever forget that. I think the Lord was reminding me: “Peter, with all this religion, all your knowledge, formulas, systems, and theology, never forget I’m the Rock, and I will build my Church, and I will take you into the storm so you can know the Rock of your salvation, and I can build you into my house, and I can say, ‘LMCC, I *know* you, and you are where I live.’”

So on the night our Lord was betrayed, was there ever a bigger storm than that night? In the midst of that storm, He took bread, and having given thanks He broke it saying, “This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

In the same way, after the supper He took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of many. Drink of it, all of you, in remembrance of me.”

I invite you to come to the table. As you come, come worshipping. Come and stand on God’s grace, that is, Christ, and be built up into His house by Him. For we are His house, and He is the rock. And the gates of hell cannot prevail against it.

In Jesus’ name, amen.

“And so, Lord Jesus, we pray that you would open the eyes of our hearts so that we could see you high and lifted up. Lord, I think of what you said in the Gospel of John: ‘When I am lifted up I will draw all men to myself.’ You were talking about being lifted up on a cross, and there we saw your glory.

“Then in Revelation, you opened the eyes of our hearts. And we see you high and lifted up, and you are a Lamb, as though it had been slain, sitting on the throne. Lord Jesus, what an incredible storm! And you’re the Rock — the holy, amazing, marvelous, beautiful, gracious Rock. Thank you. It’s in your name that we pray, Lord Jesus, amen.”

When I decided to preach on Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount, I thought, “Oh good, Lord. We’re in the new building. We’ve gotten through all that freaky weird stuff in the Revelation, and now I can just preach some of that warm, fuzzy, Gospel stuff.”

It wasn’t long until I realized Jesus wants to build His Church on the Rock. So right at the start He goes after the Pharisees. He goes after us religious people who want something else to build our house on.

Pharisees don’t like to walk into storms. So much of American religion is all an effort to control the storms and avoid the storms, using Jesus. Yet we meet Jesus in the storms.

So I’m not preaching on how to control storms and build your house by getting Jesus to work tricks for you. And I’m trying not to care how big our church is and how great it may appear. But I really *do* care that we are built by Him on *The Rock*.

The storm is coming, and the Rock will prevail. In His name, believe the Gospel. It’s solid. Amen.

Further Reading

Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting Rock.

Isaiah 26:4

“The LORD lives; and blessed be my rock, and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation”

II Samuel 22:47

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Romans 9:30-33

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

I Corinthians 10:1-4

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. For no other

foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

I Corinthians 3:10-11

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Matthew 14:28-33

There are many people who arrive at conclusions in life much the way schoolboys do; they cheat their teachers by copying the answer book without having worked the problem themselves.

Soren Kierkegaard

Before the visitor embarked upon discipleship, he wanted assurance from the master. "Can you teach me the goal of human life?" "I cannot." "Or at least its meaning?" "I cannot." "Can you indicate to me the nature of death and of life beyond the grave?" "I cannot." The visitor walked away in scorn. The disciples were dismayed that their master had been shown up in a poor light. Said the master soothingly, "Of what is it to comprehend life's nature and life's meaning if you have never tasted it? I'd rather you ate your pudding then speculated on it."

Anthony DeMello

For murdering his brother, God sentences Cain to the life of a restless wanderer; five verses later Cain is building a city (Gen. 4:27, 17). That sort of commitment - the refusal to trust God

and the reach for control - runs deep in every man. Whyte talks about the difference between the false self's desire "to have power over experience, to control all events and consequences, and the soul's wish to have power *through* experience, no matter what that may be." You literally sacrifice your soul and your true power when you insist on controlling things, like the guy Jesus talked about who thought he finally pulled it all off, built himself some really nice barns and died the same night. "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

John Eldredge

It's too radical, too uncontrolled for many of us, so we build churches which are the safest possible places in which to escape God. We pin him down, far more painfully than he was nailed to the cross, so that he is rational and comprehensible and like us, and even more unreal. And that won't do. That will not get me through death and danger and pain, nor life and freedom and joy.

Madeleine L'Engle

Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner," and "A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall"; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

I Peter 2:4-8

“And the fall of it was great.” It is interesting that the last word of the Sermon on the Mount is the word most cherished by Jesus’ major historical enemies: the word “great” (megali). Greatness, we learn from Jesus, was his enemies’ major goal in life, the major reward they sought, and even God was used to make this goal transcendent and impressive. Jesus’ war against greatness, a war that filled his teaching career, is one of the most impressive features of Matthew’s Gospel. Yet here is the term “great” as the final and emphasized word in Jesus’ major sermon. This could suggest that the only finally great thing about greatness-seeking Christians is the greatness of their fall. The quest for greatness rather than for righteousness, for the sensational rather than the simple, for doing the charismatic rather than the ethical, for speaking prophetically rather than compassionately, for being up-to-date at all costs rather than a loyal disciple of Jesus in all cases, is a quest that will end only by crashing greatly. The crash may be postponed as late as the last judgment, and to all outward appearances sand houses may appear to stand. But one day “a hard rain’s gonna fall.”

Dale Brunner

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