

THE ROCK

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

By Danny Hall

My dad is a great guy. He's eighty-three now. He's never been very outspoken. The word I would use to describe him is "steady." He's always been consistent, a man of great integrity. He wasn't a particularly strict disciplinarian, so I don't have many memories of his discipline in my life, but there is one instance that I will never forget. It serves as a great illustration for some of the things we're going to consider in this message.

When I was a little boy, we didn't have a lot of electronic gizmos to assist play in those days, so we had to use our imagination. Like most kids, we learned how to mine the treasures of our house for places to play. We learned all of the nooks and crannies of the house for hide-and-seek. Most all of the house was open for that, including the yard and the woods nearby. But one exception was a little closet where the water heater was kept. It was quite a tight space, and in those days water heaters were not as well insulated as they are today, so it was rather warm to the touch. It wasn't a particularly safe place to be, so my brother and I were forbidden to go in there. Of course, that presented a great challenge to the young mind and heart.

One day when we were playing hide-and-seek, I had exhausted all of the good places, and I decided now would be a wonderful time to go and hide in that little closet. So I wedged myself into that tight little space, closed the door, and waited for my brother to come and look for me. He didn't find me right away, but after a while he, and eventually my parents, discovered where I was. My dad came and stood outside the door of the closet and said, "Danny, come out of there right now."

My response was designed to elicit from him exactly what consequences would befall me if I were not to comply. I was merely trying to gain information. But what came out of my mouth was "What are you going to do about it?" So he promptly showed me.

I've thought about that story from time to time. Not only is it a vivid memory, but it's a great example of how you and I often conduct ourselves in our relationship with our heavenly Father. When I was hiding in the closet, I was trying to figure out how far I could go and still not get in trouble. I wanted to be able to set my own agenda, so I was constantly calculating how far I could push the boundaries. How many times have we played with God that way? We acknowledge Christ as our Lord at some level, and yet part of what goes on in our hearts is that same old tune: "How far can I go? Can I do what I want to do and still get God's blessing, or at least avoid some kind of punishment?" That is our approach to life.

I wish I had realized as a little boy that the prohibition on being in that closet had nothing to do with a desire on my dad's part to restrict us. Like our heavenly Father, he had given us that rule because he loved us and wanted to protect us from something that could be extremely harmful. It was out of lovingkindness that he said, "Don't go there."

We've been studying the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus is teaching us about the nature of the kingdom of God and laying out a blueprint for how people who are part of that kingdom are to live. In this message we'll come to the end of that teaching. In the next message we'll go back and review the entire Sermon on the Mount, looking at the major themes of God's kingdom and Christ's lordship in our

lives. But here at the end, Jesus speaks a great word of admonition, warning, and encouragement to us. He has laid out for us a picture of what kingdom living is, and now in summary, he will rivet our attention on the essential step we need to take in order to enter God's kingdom and be kingdom people. This is one of the more familiar passages in this sermon. Matthew 7:24-27:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

In this picture that Jesus draws for his followers, he does two things: he redefines the center of faith, and he defines what their response in faith ought to be.

Jesus: the center of our faith

To begin, he says that the person who is wise builds his life upon the rock. Obviously, the rock contrasted to the sand is a picture of stability vs. instability, or that which lasts vs. that which does not last.

But there is a deeper idea behind what Jesus says about building upon the rock. When his first-century Palestinian audience heard those words, their minds would have gone to one thing: the temple mount, which was the rock upon which the temple was constructed. It was the center of their culture and their worship, perhaps the most sacred place of their entire existence, from which they drew great comfort and strength. But this closing picture is the culmination of what Jesus has been laying out over the whole of this sermon: a redefining of what the center of their faith is to be. They saw their faith as built upon the rock of the temple. They had placed their faith not in the God of the Torah, but in the Torah itself; not in the God of Israel, but in the nation, in their ethnicity; their very possession of the Torah and the temple; and in their worship.

In one incredible picture, Jesus replaces the Torah with himself, echoing words he said earlier in this sermon: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18.) Jesus is the complete fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets. He is the new temple, the new focus of their faith.

This is the culmination of Jesus' redefinition of the people of God: not those who are loyal to Torah, to their Jewish ethnicity, or even to temple worship in all of its facets, but those who are loyal to him. He places himself at the center of faith and asks them to change their allegiance to him. This was an extremely radical call in his day.

As Jesus' ministry goes on, he will allude to this theme over and over again. In Matthew 12:6 he is in a discussion with the Pharisees about the nature of the Sabbath, because they called his disciples into question for picking grain on the Sabbath. Jesus refers back to the time when David and his men became hungry and ate the consecrated bread from the temple (1 Samuel 21). He makes the startling statement, “But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.”

In John's gospel Jesus has just driven the moneychangers out of the temple, and he is again challenged.

The religious leaders ask him to give them a sign of his authority, and he says, “‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body. So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.” (John 2:19-22.) Later, at the time of his trial, when Jesus is about to be crucified and accusations are being leveled at him, this claim by Jesus is recalled. When asked for what reason Jesus should be crucified, witnesses came forward and said, “‘This man stated, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.’” (Matthew 26:61.)

The temple was the place where God manifested his presence among his people, but now Jesus is saying that *he* is the manifestation of God’s presence. God is now among them, and is among us, in Jesus, who is the center of our faith. This is the rock upon which we should build our faith: Jesus Christ, the new temple, the new focus and center of faith.

In this very vivid picture that Jesus is drawing for his followers and the others who hear his words, this means that when anything else is the center of their faith, their attention, or their passions, it’s like building their lives on sand. For us that may mean faith in the church, faith in studying the Bible, faith in a certain kind of worship music, or faith in whatever else we think is the most important thing.

Hurricanes have been pounding the southeastern United States, and we’ve seen a lot of vivid pictures in the news of what happens when you build in a vulnerable place. Back in 1989 one of the largest hurricanes to ever hit the U.S., Hurricane Hugo, struck the coast of South Carolina. The eye of the storm came ashore just a few miles south of where my wife Ginger’s parents had a beach house on Pawley’s Island. They sent us pictures and described it to us. Ginger’s father had built their beach house back in the late 1950s, so this was more than thirty years after he had built it. Most of the houses built in those years were knocked flat during that storm. But Ginger’s father’s house stood. It’s a very plain, simple house, but it’s built on a great foundation. After the storm was over, all the people whose houses were flattened took the insurance money and erected bigger, more beautiful houses. But in the midst of all those beautiful rebuilt homes, that old house is still there, after all these years (they’ve sold it since then).

We know what that means. If the center of our faith is Christ, then we have built our lives on something that is sure and eternal, and when life’s troubles and difficulties come, we can stand the storms.

The second thing Jesus does in this passage is define what his followers’ response in faith ought to be. Notice what he compares building on the rock to: hearing his words and acting on them.

Hearing Jesus’ words

After Jesus’ sermon (verses 28-29), it says that the people were astonished at this great teaching, because he taught as one having authority. Now, the concept of authority appears over and over in Matthew’s gospel. For example, Jesus shows his authority over nature (Matthew 8:23-27), and as we just saw, over the Sabbath. The idea of Jesus as the One with authority culminates in that wonderful proclamation by Jesus himself after his death and resurrection, before he returns to his Father, when he says, “‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.’” (Matthew 28:19.) Jesus is *the* authority, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Therefore, we need to pay attention to what he says. He is worthy of our attention. So the first step of response in faith, of building our lives on the firm foundation, is to hear his words.

One of the reasons we spend so much time teaching the Scriptures at PBC is this: All of us know how easy it is to build our lives on other things, to be persuaded (as we saw in the last message, Discovery Paper 4915) by the seductiveness of the world, the many broad, easy paths that purport to guide us to fulfillment and success in life. We're also often distracted by the words of false teachers who have this or that new idea of how to deal with our problems or make our lives better. We're distracted by our sinfulness, our desire to control our lives according to our own agenda. Because these forces work powerfully in our lives to tempt us away from what matters, from what is eternal, we must pay attention to the words of our Lord. We go time and time again into the Scriptures, not so we can brag about how much Scripture we know, but so we can hear the voice of our Lord. That's the first step in responding in faith to Jesus.

The second step, Jesus says, is to act on his words, to obey them. Now, what do we mean by that?

Acting on Jesus' words

If we trace the idea of obedience throughout the New Testament, we reach an interesting conclusion: The first step of obedience is to believe in Jesus. In John 6 Jesus feeds the five thousand. The next day the crowds are trying to locate him again. John writes:

“Jesus answered them and said, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. [This was after the feeding of the five thousand.] Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.’ Therefore they said to Him, ‘What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.’ So they said to Him, ‘What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread out of heaven to eat.”’ Jesus then said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.’ Then they said to Him, ‘Lord, always give us this bread.’”

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst.’” (John 6:26-35.)

The obedience that Christ calls us to is absolute, complete trust in who he is. And when we trust him completely, it issues forth in a lifestyle of holiness characterized by caring for others. In other words, this whole description of kingdom life flows out of trusting in Christ, of a relationship of connection to him.

Let me illustrate this with the story of Jonah (from the Old-Testament book of Jonah). Jonah is called by God to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, which is a particularly wicked city full of all kinds of pagan worship, sexual immorality, and opposition to God's people, among other things. As soon as God calls Jonah to go and preach to them, he runs the other way. He doesn't want to be any part of that. In a dramatic turn of events, Jonah is on a boat trying to run away from God, a storm comes, and Jonah realizes what he's done and asks the sailors to throw him overboard. But God delivers him miraculously by means of a great fish, and he ends up on the shore, saved from his own stupidity, rebellion, and even his attempt to end his own life. Then God again calls him to go to Nineveh. He goes reluctantly and preaches to them. Then when the Ninevites repent and God has mercy on them, Jonah is still very unhappy.

We might surmise that in the first part of the story, Jonah's problem is that he's afraid, or perhaps he doesn't want to leave his comfort zone. At the very least he might think, "I don't want to go to Nineveh because those people hate Jews. They'll kill me!" But that's not Jonah's problem at all. Jonah's problem is that he doesn't like them. He's worried that they might actually listen to God, repent, and do what God wants them to do, and he doesn't want that.

Jonah's focus is on himself, not on God and the heart of God. Because his focus is on himself, his own comfort, self-protection, and what he wants the kingdom of God to be—comfortable, monolithic, concerned with going to the temple, or whatever—he doesn't want any part of bringing people he doesn't care about to repentance.

Jonah serves as a great illustration of us. How many of us, looking at other people out in our world, really don't want them to come to Christ? "My goodness, they might come to church here. Lord knows I don't want that!" How many of us have people in our families or living on our street whom we can't stand, whom we're actually reluctant to love? Maybe they've hurt us. Maybe they just seem weird. Our eyes get so focused on our own agenda that we can't love them. But when we place our eyes on Christ and make him the center of our faith, rather than our own notion of what a great kingdom of God might look like, all of a sudden God begins to change our hearts and work in our lives to produce a holiness that translates into love for others.

Now I would suggest that there are four parts to living out our faith in obedience to Christ. The first, as we've already said, is to trust in Christ as our Lord and Savior. That is the entry-level response of obedience to Christ. We trust that he is the Son of God who has come to save us from our sinfulness, who has paid the price to restore us to that for which we were created: an intimate relationship with God and truly being his people in this world.

The second part of obeying Christ is to trust that his purposes, in extending his love to all people and calling out a people for himself, are worthy. His purposes are grander than any agenda that we might design for ourselves or for the world. Ultimately they bring glory to him and bring people to faith, restoration, and healing. So when Jesus says we are the light of the world and we are to let our light shine, we believe that this purpose is a worthy purpose that we should engage in. It's an act of faith that God knows what he's doing.

The third part of obedience is to trust that his way of life is right and best, to believe that he gives us instructions about how to live in his kingdom, not to impose arbitrary and cruel restrictions on our behavior, but to set us free to know him more fully and to live life to its fullest, because he loves us. For instance, earlier in the Sermon on the Mount he said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28.) When we hear that, we think it's almost impossible—why such a huge burden? But it's not designed to be a burden. Rather, our loving Father wants to protect us from the shipwreck in our relationships that comes when we fail to understand how he has made us and what he wants for us. We will find the greatest fulfillment, being the people God has created us to be, when we follow his ways as an act of faith. We don't approach the commands of Scripture as a burdensome list of rules. Obedience becomes an act of faith in God's goodness to us in laying out what's best for us.

The fourth part of obeying Christ is to trust that he will provide all of our physical and spiritual needs. In this sermon Jesus has said over and over, "Don't trust in the things of this world. Trust in your heavenly Father. He'll provide everything you need. He's not going to give his children stones and snakes." When we are called to minister in ways that are difficult, we can come to our Father—ask, seek, knock, plead—and he will supply everything we need. Christ never calls us to follow him without supplying

what we need. When I step out in faith and decide not to pursue my own personal wealth at the expense of everything else, when I believe that I can trust God and sacrificially give of myself and what I have in order to meet the needs of my family and others, whoever God calls me to love in his name, then God is going to take care of me and supply all my needs.

When God challenges us to be lights in the world and we wonder how in the world we can ever live up to the responsibility of being God's spokespersons in this world, we can trust that the God who called us will supply what we need. God has given us his very presence in our lives, the person and power of the Holy Spirit living within us. We have every resource at our disposal to do what God has called us to do. We do it not in our own fleshly strength, but in the wonderful power and presence of God himself in our lives.

Jesus' call to holiness and to following him has been a dramatic theme throughout this sermon. He asks us to put our trust in him, make who he is the center of our faith. When we do that, we have built our lives on a firm foundation. This theme is one that will carry forth throughout his teaching.

Loving God and loving people

An episode that takes place toward the end of Jesus' earthly ministry is recorded in Matthew 22:34-39. Once again it is an occasion on which the lawyers and Pharisees are trying to get him to make a mistake:

"But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Some fifty years later, the youngest of Jesus' immediate disciples, John, echoes those same words in 1 John 3:23: "This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us."

Summing up the entire Law, Jesus says it really boils down to two things: we love God with our whole heart, and out of that love for God, we love people. That's what God has called us as his people to do and to be.

Our first priority, then, is to worship, to love our Lord Jesus passionately. We can never put anything else before him—not Bible knowledge, not conforming to a code of Christian conduct or system of religious practice. No matter how good it might be, if that becomes the center of our faith, what we care about most, we'll miss the point. We'll fall back into the trap that the Jews of the first century did, worshipping Torah and the temple, and not God.

Our relationship with God then issues forth in a deep, abiding love for others and a commitment to meet the needs of others. That is the vision that Christ gives for his people, and that should be the vision of every church.

Now, we do other things, and they are very important. But all the other things we do serve those two great goals of worshiping God and following him. As I mentioned before, we teach the Scriptures at PBC, and we think that's very important. But it is never, ever designed to be an end in itself. The study of God's word is not so we can say we have the smartest Bible students of any church around. We study

Scripture because we want to know the God we are worshiping. Scripture instructs and informs and enables our understanding of who God is so that we can be better, deeper, more passionate worshipers of him, and so we can be better equipped to love the world as it needs to be loved. The study and teaching of the Scriptures is a gracious, marvelous tool that God gives us so that we might really, truly worship him and serve him.

The same thing is true of fellowship. It's so wonderful to be in the body of Christ together to encourage each other. But sometimes we can be so focused on fellowship that we forget God. God graciously gives us each other so that we can stimulate one another to worship him, so that we can collectively stand together before him and enrich our worship experience, so that we can learn from each other, so that we can partner together in ministry, so that we can challenge each other to grow closer to God and to love more effectively for God.

At the end of this sermon, Jesus draws our attention to this: He is the center of our faith, and he calls us to hear his word and act on it in faithful obedience to him, trusting who he is, to become worshipers and lovers of him, and through that, to be lovers of our world and servants of the people God places in our world.

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Catalog No. 4916
Matthew 7:24-27
Sixteenth Message
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September 19, 2004