

Putting First Things First
Proverbs 2:1-15; Matthew 7:34-37

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We have a lot of smart engineers here. Let me ask you a building question. How would you build a life? Trick question, I know. But think about it. If you could take all your life experiences, your education, all those lessons learned in the school of hard knocks—if you could pool all that knowledge and wisdom and build a life, how would you do it? What would be of first importance to you?

We've all been slapped in the face this week with news stories of lives apparently not built well. Accused Ponzi schemer Bernard Madoff faced judgment day on Thursday, pleading guilty to bilking investors out of \$50 billion. People who were living comfortably in retirement, thinking that they had been prudent, that they had made wise financial decisions, lost everything. He told the judge, "I knew this day would come." What happened in the building of that man's life that would cause him to do that?

Then there was the seventeen year old in Germany. Dressed in military gear and carrying an automatic weapon, he allegedly went to his former school and opened fire on unsuspecting students and teachers. If it is true, he killed fifteen people before ending his own life. The night before his rampage he put this message on the Internet: "I have...a weapon here... I am going to go to my former school and give them hell. Everyone laughs at me. No one recognizes the potential." What went wrong in the building of his life?

Or bring it closer to home. Michael McClendon went through three towns in south Alabama this past week allegedly killing ten people, including his mother, other relatives, a small child, and complete strangers. What happened in the building of his life?

So knowing all that you know, what would you put first to build a life of mature love, strength of character, compassion, integrity and faith? The Hebrews of long ago took seriously this matter of building lives. When their children reached a certain age, it was time to lay the foundation for their

lives. The wisest men in the community would take them aside and teach them the values and wisdom of their community. The book of Proverbs is their textbook. Notice in the text that I read earlier and throughout the book of Proverbs that they are addressed as “my child.” Then they were instructed that if they would do this or do that they would have a certain outcome. The overriding instruction from the wisest men in the community was this: seek wisdom. That would provide a strong, solid foundation. If the young would seek to be wise, they could build a life worthy of their community. Wisdom was a “first thing” in the Jewish community, and they put it first.

It was for Jesus too and the community he was forming, but there was a difference with the work Jesus did. Jesus was teaching adults who already had a foundation of some sort. They were “built.” Their framework was in place. If they were to embrace the wisdom of Jesus, it would require of them a radical, life-changing conversion.

Jesus told a very simple story to make his point. He compared the actions of two men, a wise man and a foolish man. Each man built a house. The wise man built his house on rock, Jesus said, a strong, solid foundation. Then rains, floods, and winds threatened the integrity of that house, but it did not collapse because it was built upon a strong, solid foundation. The foolish man, on the other hand, built his house in one of the many wadis that exist in that part of the world. During the rainy season, the wadis became rivers and gushed with rainwater. The waters left behind a sandy bottom. Jesus said that the foolish man built his house during the dry season in one of these wadis. And when the rains fell, and the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house, the house fell because it did not have a strong, solid foundation. And Jesus said, “And great was its fall!”

Now here’s the point Jesus was making. This story is not about how to build a house. It’s about how to build a life. If you want to build your life well, Jesus was telling them, you must get the foundation right. If you don’t get the foundation of your life right, you will not be able to stand in the storms that inevitably will come.

So this story, in my opinion, begs an answer to this question: What is the foundation of one’s life? What does Jesus mean by foundation, and how do we build a strong one, especially if we’re adults and have some sort of foundation already?

That takes us back to the Hebrew notion of wisdom. This is how Jesus began this story. “Everyone then who hears *these words of mine* and acts upon them will be like a *wise man* who built his house on rock.” This story comes at the end of Jesus’ great body of teaching called the Sermon on the Mount. The phrase “these words of mine” refers back to everything he has just taught in the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with chapter five and ends with chapter seven. Everyone who hears and does the things that Jesus taught in these three chapters is considered wise. And here’s why. In the hearing and doing of these teachings, we are building our lives upon a rock foundation, something that is strong and solid, something that will help us stand in the storms of life. In other words, when we hear and do what Jesus teaches right here, we are being wise by putting first things first.

I know that some of you accepted the challenge I issued back at the beginning of this year to read the book of Matthew in 2009. I am reading it over and over this year as part of my devotional practice. Some of you have told me that you have purchased commentaries that you are reading as you go through Matthew. Wonderful idea! Some are reading several Bible translations simultaneously to give you a fuller understanding. Another wonderful idea! I recommended Matthew for two reasons. One, it has great parables, and the parables contain some of Jesus’ great teachings. But the main reason I recommended Matthew is that it contains the Sermon on the Mount. I believe that we need to immerse ourselves in the Sermon on the Mount. It is the heart of Jesus’ teachings, arguably the three most important chapters in the Bible. Jesus himself said that if you want to be wise, if you want to put first things first and build your life upon a good foundation, hear and do these teachings. But I’ll warn you. If you take it seriously, if you don’t water it down or try to explain it away, it may well require a radical, life-changing conversion.

For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that it’s not enough to *not do* what Michael McClendon allegedly did this week. We all agree that it’s wrong to murder. For most of us, it doesn’t take great discipline to not murder someone, at least most days! Listen to what Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’.... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” Jesus set a new standard. He said don’t even hold onto anger. That’s what this means. It’s not simply becoming angry; it’s choosing to remain angry, to nurture anger, to hold onto it. Jesus

expected his followers to do the difficult work of forgiveness and reconciliation. Even if you are offering a gift at the altar and remember anger against your brother or sister, leave your gift at the altar and go and seek reconciliation. For most of us, that requires radical conversion. But that's how a wise man lives. That is a foundation principle for one's life that will help you stand the storms. That's putting first things first.

Jesus also 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 has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Probably all of us would agree that adultery is wrong. It breaks families. It breaks relationships. It brings so much pain. And probably all of us would agree that lust in one's heart is as common as air. But Jesus set a new standard. If we look at someone with lust in our hearts, we have already violated relationships of trust. Radical conversion.

And then one of the hardest teachings. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Love your enemies and pray for the people who persecute you. It's a new standard that calls us upward to the highest and noblest way of life. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. It requires conversion in the deepest places of our hearts and minds. It is true wisdom, and it produces a life well built.

That is how you build a life. You put first things first.

I'm the first to admit that this is difficult. By the time we honor our work commitments, exercise at least thirty minutes a day, feed our family, tend our garden, attend social and family commitments, what time is left? We're kind of like a downtown parking lot. We can put just so much in, and then somebody has to put up a sign that reads "Full." If we're not careful, by default the world will tell us who we are. If we're not careful, we will miss our primary privilege and duty of life: building our life by putting first things first.

Closing Prayer

Lord, who taught great wisdom on the mount, who showed us how to build our lives, help us to be deliberate and faithful in doing so. Amen.