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A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

The Integrity of Concrete

Matthew 7:21-29

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²²On 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 deeds of power in your name?" ²³Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." ²⁴Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!' ²⁸Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

A sermon on concrete sounds downright strange. A friend, after reading my title printed in the weekly email from the church, said that it sounded like a very "heavy" subject, to which I replied, "At least it won't be abstract."

Kidding aside, concrete is an important part of our lives. We are literally surrounded by the stuff. It is used as the foundations for our homes and buildings. It is integral to the structure of bridges and parking garages. There are, however, differences in the quality of concrete. If you walk through some neighborhoods you will see concrete sidewalk slabs that have been there for generations, and other slabs and installations will crack and crumble after only a few years. I have wondered why some concrete is stronger and more resistant than others.

I

The book, *Basic Concrete Engineering for Building*, opens with these words: "Concrete is one of our most common construction materials. It's permanent, resists decay, moisture, fire, and corrosion, and it's easy to install. But it's also the most unforgiving material. If you make a mistake with concrete, it can cost a great deal to correct.... If you use the wrong blend of ingredients, the concrete can develop holes. If you don't put reinforcement bars in the right place, a wall may crack."

In short: concrete needs to have integrity... it needs to be mixed properly and installed correctly. Usually when concrete fails, it can be traced to its mixture. The problem is, we don't see it right away. Good and bad concrete

look the same! When the concrete hardens, it looks fine. But the years, heavy use and the elements will soon expose its weaknesses and it will crumble.

This message is not about building... nor is it ultimately about concrete... but rather it is about our lives and the foundation upon which we build our lives. The question: Does the foundation of my life have the integrity to withstand life's storms or will it crumble like faulty concrete?

II

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with a story (a parable) about construction. He spoke about the foundations upon which houses were built. In the Middle-East, in the heat of the summer, it was possible to build a house on the sand. It was hard, dry and packed and the house would look just as good as the one that was built on the solid foundation of rock. But in the winter and spring, when the rains came, it was a different story. The hard ground soon crumbled as the water soaked the ground and often the home was washed away. Jesus told this parable to sum up his teachings from the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon, found in chapters 5-7 of Matthew, was Jesus' foundation for discipleship.

Foundations are important. We can build the most beautiful building or home, but if our foundation lacks integrity, the building will not last. Pay attention to the foundation! But as I mentioned, this is a parable about life and Christ's teachings. Jesus was challenging his listeners, (and that includes us today!) to examine the foundations upon which we have built their lives. Will our foundations withstand life's storms?

Most of us can handle life when things go well. Most of us can handle, what we call "normal" times, but ultimately we face hardship and difficulties. Are we able to withstand these storms or will our foundations wash away? Will our lives crumble like a broken sidewalk?

What is the foundation of your life? On what is your life built? Does it have integrity?

III

When my daughter went off to college, one of my colleagues asked me, in an almost accusing manner, how I could let her go to a college that was not "Christian." I replied that I hoped we had given her the foundation she needed to live in a world that was not "particularly Christian."

This foundation was the values that we imparted. It was the faith that she learned and committed to as a young adult in confirmation. It was the influence of Sunday School teachers and youth leaders who nurtured her in the teachings of Christ. Parenting is all about enabling the child to build a foundation upon which to live out their lives. We give them the best foundation for living.... And then pray.

Once again, I ask, what is the foundation of your life? Does it have the integrity to withstand the storms of life? Can it be exposed to the elements and life's storms, or does it need to be sheltered and protected?

The parable of the builders that Jesus told at the end of the Sermon on the Mount underscored the importance of these teachings to our lives. The wise individual builds his or her life on the foundation of Christ's teachings.

Let's return to the metaphor of concrete: Just as there are four basic ingredients in Concrete: **sand, gravel, lime** and **water**: so too, the foundations of our lives require four ingredients for integrity.

1. The **sand** of our foundation is hope.... Hope and belief in that which is beyond what we can see. Hope that is able to endure the dark moments of life, in order to blossom in life's sunshine. Hope that recognizes that in all things, we are in the hands of God.
2. The **gravel** of our foundation is love, but not the sentimental soft love to which we often allude. Gravel is hard and our love needs to be a firm love that demands much of ourselves, and gives much to others. It is a love that is courageous and sacrificial.
3. **Lime** is the cement which binds all these things together. The foundation of our life also needs cement: something that binds and holds things together, and that is community, others, family, and the church. We need each other, and we need to be bound to each other in hope and love, so that we can strengthen and fortify one another amidst life's storms. The cement of our foundation is the 'tie that binds'
4. Finally, there is the **water**, so common, and yet so necessary. The water of our foundation is the everyday practice of our hope and love. This "living water" is the life of devotion and prayer. It is the inner life of the spirit and when that is present, it is Christ's "living water."

The concluding sentence in the introduction of *Basic Concrete Engineering for Builders* states: "Once concrete has cured or set up, it's difficult to correct mistakes... With concrete, you'll probably have to demolish what's wrong and start over." Here is where the metaphor ends. Christ is the "new foundation." Through forgiveness and grace, God does not destroy us and start over. The grace of Christ enables us to put integrity in our life's foundation, beginning today. This is the challenge of Jesus' message and the Good News of the Gospel. Amen.