

How to Build a Life
United Church of Broomfield
May 7, 2023

First Peter 2:2-10 (King James Version)

2 As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby: 3 If so be, ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. 4 To [him] coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious,

5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up [as] a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

6 Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture,

Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded.

7 Unto you therefore which believe, he is precious:

but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, 8 And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

9 But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light; 10 Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

Last November, while on vacation, Adam and I had the opportunity to visit The Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. Built from 1173 to 1372 this 12-story, solid marble structure began to lean even before it was completed. Interestingly enough, the word "pisa" means "marshy land," which gives some clue as to why--after the first three stories were completed--the ground underneath the tower began to sink. Also of note is that its foundation is only ten feet deep.

Obviously, for a very long time there had been concerns of the building collapsing and there had been repeated attempts to correct the tilt, but not too much – after all the tower's tilt is its tourist-attracting quality; being too straight wouldn't be a good thing. In the late 1980's, it was confirmed that the tower had been moving about 1/20th of an inch each year and had gotten ~5 degrees (17 feet) out of plumb. In 1989, the Civic Tower in Pavia, Italy collapsed, and this led the Italian government to close the Tower of Pisa in January of 1990.

It remained closed for 11 years while 70 metric tons of soil was removed, and the tilt was corrected to 3.97 degrees (~15 feet) out of plumb. This was where it had been back in 1838, so engineers determined this would stabilize the foundation for at least another 300 years.

Compared that with many of the foundations of the great European cathedrals, some of which go down as far as forty or fifty feet. In some instances, they form a mass of stone below the ground as great as that of the visible building above the ground.

Historically, the cornerstone is the most important part of any building. The weight of the entire building rested on the cornerstone. It ensured that the walls stayed level and straight. And set properly, the builders could be assured that all the other corners of the building would be at the appropriate angles as well.

As the Tower in Pisa demonstrates, no building is stronger or surer than the foundation on which it is built.

Likewise, building a great life is like building a great cathedral. You start with a sure foundation.

A professor was speaking to a group of business students and used an illustration to make a point. He said, "Okay, time for a quiz." Then he pulled out a one-gallon, wide-mouthed mason jar and set it on a table in front of him. He produced about a dozen fist-sized rocks and carefully placed them, one at a time, into the jar. When the jar was filled to the top and no more rocks would fit inside, he asked, "Is the jar full?"

Everyone in the class said, "Yes."

Then he said, "Really?" He reached under the table and pulled out a bucket of gravel. Then he dumped some gravel in and shook the jar causing pieces of gravel to work themselves down into the spaces between the big rocks. Then he asked the group once more, "Is the jar full?"

By this time the class was onto him. "Probably not," one of them answered.

"Good!" he replied. He reached under the table and brought out a bucket of sand. He started dumping the sand in, and it went into all the spaces left between the rocks and the gravel. Once more he asked the question, "Is the jar full?"

"No!" the class shouted.

"Good!" Then he grabbed a pitcher of water and began to pour it in until the jar was filled to the brim. Then he looked up at the class and asked, "Is the jar full?"

Yes!

"Good. What is the point of this illustration?"

One eager student raised his hand and said, "The point is, no matter how full your schedule is, if you're creative and try really hard, you can always fit some more things into it!"

"No," the speaker replied, "that's not the point.

The truth this illustration teaches us is this: If you don't put the big rocks in first, you'll never get the rest in."

The expert was giving the class a foundational life lesson in time management.

Put in the big rocks first. Make sure you have your priorities straight. Start with a solid foundation upon which to build. Take care of what's essential before you get bogged down in the extraneous.

Besides time management, this is also a good lesson in managing life. Put first things first and make sure your life is built on a strong foundation. Or else, it will all come crumbling down.

There are numerous scriptures in the old and new testaments that talk of the cornerstone ...

Isaiah 28:16

Psalm 118:22-23

Matthew 21:42-44

Acts 4:8-11

Ephesians 2:19-22

... and all indicate how a good life is built on a strong foundation.

What does that mean in practical terms?

1) Make Jesus the model for your life. Draw your values from everything you know about him; his love, his compassion, his acceptance and forgiving spirit. Build your life on values and truths that are time-tested, those values and truths that have become universally recognized as the foundation for a lasting society, those values and truths that flow from the life of Christ. Make him the model for your life.

2) Make Jesus your mentor. Jesus is not some dead, historical figure whom we admire. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is alive in our lives here and now. So the foundation of our lives is not only a model that we copy, but a Mentor who dwells within us, guiding us and encouraging us daily.

In the 1970's Oprah Winfrey was looking for a way to grow her business and personal relationships. She had met Maya Angelou and looked to her for advice on building trust and relationships. Winfrey said that she always remembers the most solid piece of advice she received from Maya Angelou was that actions speak louder than words and not to take a person on who they say they are, but how they act toward you. Oprah Winfrey was born into poverty, and through her determination, drive and focus on relationships with great influencers, she became a millionaire by the age of 32. By 2000 her net worth was \$800 million. In terms of mentorship, Oprah states that she wouldn't be where she is today without advice and guidance from Maya Angelou. It was foundational.

Is it important that Christ be our Mentor?

Couldn't other people fill that void just as well? Up to a point, perhaps. But there are areas of our lives in which no other is adequate.

A woman fought a long battle with cancer. Her brother, made the trip from Missouri to Pennsylvania to attend her funeral. While he was there, he spent some time leafing through his sister's Bible. He found a handwritten poem tucked in its pages:

Often on the Rock I tremble,
Faint of heart and weak of knee;
But the steadfast Rock of Ages
Never trembles under me.

When you are battling life's fiercest foes, you want more than a dead hero or even a live but inadequate friend, even someone as great as Maya Angelou. You want the Rock of Ages. You want the precious Cornerstone on your side. You want a mentor who is present and who is powerful.

Jesus is our model and our mentor. He is the mortar that joins our lives with our Christian family. When you are building a life, you build it on the foundation of your faith. But you give added strength to that life when you form lasting relationships with people who care about you--strong relationships within families, with close friends and lasting relationships within the body of Christ, which is your church family.

Notice in verse 4 of our text, we read, "As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him--you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

You and I are living stones of the house of God. A stack of stones lying in a field may have little value. But take those stones, put them on a strong foundation and join them with mortar and you can fashion them into a skyscraper or a cathedral. When we build our lives on Christ, we become part of a very special family--the family of Christ. Thus, we find help in building strong lives through our relationships with others in his family.

A young woman, named Linda was traveling alone up the rutted and rugged highway from Alberta, Canada to the Yukon in late October. Linda didn't know that you don't travel to Whitehorse alone in a rundown Honda Civic, so she set off where only four-wheel drives normally venture. The first evening she found a room in the mountains near a summit and asked for a 5 A.M. wake-up call so she could get an early start. She couldn't understand why the clerk looked surprised at that request, but as she awoke to early-morning fog shrouding the mountain tops, she understood. Not wanting to look foolish, she got up and went to breakfast. Two truckers invited Linda to join them, and since the place was so small, she felt obliged. "Where are you headed?" one of the truckers asked. "Whitehorse." "In that little Civic?" one of them said. "No way! This pass is dangerous in weather like this. You'll never make it." "Well, I'm determined to try," was Linda's gutsy response. "Then I guess we're just going to have to hug you," the trucker suggested. Linda drew back, looking at these two strange men and angrily said, "Excuse me?!" "Not like THAT!" the truckers chuckled. "We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. That way, we'll get you through the mountains." All that foggy morning Linda followed the two red dots in front and had the reassurance of a big escort behind as they made their way safely through the mountains.

Caught in the fog in our dangerous passage through life, we need to be "hugged" ... with fellow Christians who know the way and can lead safely ahead of us, AND with others behind us, gently encouraging us along, we, too, can pass safely.¹

How do you build a successful life? You build it on the rock. You build it beginning with a sure Cornerstone. You build it on Christ who is our model and our mentor and the mortar that joins us as believers together as a family--as living stones in God's holy temple.

Amen

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, GROWING STRONG IN THE SEASONS OF LIFE (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 286.