

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 7:21-29

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“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.

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 deeds of power in your name?’

Then I will declare to them,  
‘I never knew you.  
Go away from me, you evildoers.’

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them  
will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.  
The 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.

And 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.  
The rain fell, and the floods came,  
and the winds blew and beat against that house,  
and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things,  
the crowds were astounded at his teaching.  
For he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

This is the end of the Sermon on the Mount. There are two parts to Jesus’ discourse. The first two episodes are the dialogue about those who profess to follow Jesus and do not do his teaching. The second two episodes are the parable of the two houses. In these episodes as in the sermon as a whole, the storyteller embodies Jesus and the audience is addressed as Jesus’ disciples and the crowds surrounding them. The last episode is a short address by the storyteller to the audience as themselves. There is a distinct change of tone for this concluding episode.

The verbal thread in the parable of the two houses makes it really easy to learn. It’s a repetition of the same phrases with minor changes. The house built 1) on the rock and 2) on the sand; those (1) who act on them or 2) who do not act on them, and 1) it didn’t fall and 2) it fell. This threefold repetition heightens the contrast between the first and the second in the pair.

The picture that Jesus is drawing here is a metaphor of houses that were built along the wadis in Israel. If you look at the map of the Judean wilderness, you can see all of the

wadis. A wadi is a dry riverbed most of the time. But when it rains, the waters rush down the hills and create sudden, severe floods.

When I was in Israel in 1978, we were driving through the Judean wilderness on the way back from Galilee to Jerusalem, and there was a major rainstorm. Suddenly on our right, this torrent of water came down and washed across the road. There was real anxiety about whether or not our tour bus was going to be picked up and washed away in the flood. Fortunately the water never got higher than a foot or so and we made it through.

You do not mess around with flooding wadis. The torrents can be very powerful and if you get caught in one, you are a goner. Guides in Israel are resolute about telling you not to risk trying to get through. If there is a rainstorm, wait it out and stay on high ground, because the wadis will sweep you away. That's what Jesus is referring to here. When these sudden floods that follow rainstorms in the Judean wilderness hit, there is no way for the water to be absorbed in the dry ground and it all rushes down in a violent flood: "The rains fell, the floods came, and the wind blew." The telling of this parable invites a storyteller to make a big deal of the storm: loud, violent, scary.

Many houses in ancient Galilee were mud and those built on the ground near these wadis would be washed away in the floods. It was cheaper and easier to build a house on the ground but it was also really stupid. The only chance that a house had of surviving one of these floods was to build it on rocks. It's an image that everybody in Jesus' audiences knew.

Both the saying to those who assumed that they were his followers but did not do his teaching and the parable of the two houses were frightening. Thus there is a coldness about Jesus' pronouncement—"I never knew you"—that is shocking as is the collapse of a house. That coldness is the way to tell this teaching of Jesus. The shock is the contrast between the intimacy of Jesus as a teacher earlier in the sermon and the sudden emotional distance of this pronouncement at the end. This saying invites a storyteller to put up a hand and reject any relationship with the audience.

These stories of fear are Jesus' way of trying to wake people up, to get them to do what he is asking. This is a picture of Jesus as the judge of the world. In Jesus' sermon, one's life in the future depends on what one does now. The metaphor is not tranquil beaches with sand castles. The picture here is homes in the immediate area of the nearby Judean wilderness where Jesus taught. Some homes survived but others did not. Standing or falling depended on how the house was built. So it is now.