

The Test of Unfavorable Circumstances

MATTHEW 7:24-27

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Today I would like to consider how unfavorable circumstances that come into our lives actually serve to test the genuineness of our Christianity. I would like to consider two categories of unfavorable circumstances. One category I will call trials. The other category I will call temptations. When I talk about trials in this message, I am talking about unpleasant things that happen to us. These unpleasant things cause us to feel uncomfortable in many different ways. However, trials (as I am now choosing to define them) cannot be considered temptations, because they do nothing in and of themselves to persuade us to violate truth. In contrast, when I talk about temptations in this message, I am talking about circumstances that become a persuasive force in our lives. They are the world and the flesh and the devil, acting in cooperation with each other, to persuade us to violate truth.

These two kinds of unfavorable circumstances are what I believe the rain and wind and flood represent in today's scripture lesson. I am aware that some commentators try to define each one of these natural forces as representing one particular kind of unfavorable circumstance. For instance, some will say that the rain represents the daily trials we face in our private lives; the flood represents the attacks on our lives from the world; and the wind represents the attacks from Satan.

It is hard for me to logically make those kinds of distinctions; however, I will agree with the commentaries I have read that all three elements—rain, flood, and wind—do represent unfavorable circumstances that put our lives to the test. The fact that a flood seems more severe than rain or wind simply illustrates that some unfavorable circumstances will put more strain on our lives than other unfavorable circumstances. At times the testing will be more severe than it is at other times.

The reason I feel it is necessary to emphasize the distinction between trials and temptations has nothing to do with the words "rain, flood, and wind." I feel it is necessary to make this distinction so we can understand God's role in allowing these things to happen to us. I want you to see that one of God's primary purposes in allowing trials and temptations to come our way is to test us so that we can see what we are made of. I know that our sovereign God allows trials and temptations to come our way for reasons that sometimes are impossible for us to comprehend and explain. But each time such an event occurs in our lives, it does provide us with an opportunity to get a glimpse of who we really are.

Think, for instance, how **trials** help us understand who we really are. Here I am talking about things such as illness, loss, and disappointment—perhaps being let down by somebody else. I am basically talking about some change for the worse in our circumstances. These are the things

that happen to all of us from time to time. They are unavoidable. We try to evade them, but sooner or later, they come our way.

You have probably heard someone say at one time or another, "trials build character." But today I want to remind you of something we learned when we first began studying the Sermon on the Mount. The very first topic we discussed was the topic of character. The Beatitudes are a description of Christian character. But that which makes us people who are poor in spirit and mournful and meek and thirsty for righteousness and merciful and pure in spirit and peacemakers—the thing that brings about these traits in our lives—is not trials. It is the Holy Spirit who produces these qualities in our lives. We cooperate by desiring for these qualities and asking God for them and doing everything practically possible to place ourselves in way of receiving them.

So it is not trials that produce Christian character. God produces Christian character, and He does so with our cooperation. In the same way the blind man, Bartimaeus, could not heal himself, neither can we produce for ourselves Christian character. But in the same way that Bartimaeus put himself in the way of being healed by standing by the roadside and calling out to Jesus, so we must put ourselves in places and do everything we can to cooperate with God in building Christian character.

So if the purpose of trials is not to build Christian character, then what is their purpose? That is a common question asked by people who are going through trials. They cry out, "Why is this happening to me?" Again, we must admit that there are many reasons why trials happen that we cannot understand and explain; however, there is one reason that we can understand. In every case the trials expose what is happening below the surface. How much rock is there below the houses of our lives? Our responses and our reactions to the trials we are facing will provide the answer to this question.

And, temptations serve the same purpose. The big difference between trials and temptations is this: Whereas trials reveal whether or not we are cooperating with God in building the foundations of our lives, temptations reveal the how serious those who are engaged in building really are. Our enemy uses temptations to persuade us to stop the work of building the foundations. Trials come to everyone, but temptations come to those who are, at least, making some effort to build the foundations of their lives. If there is no attempt whatsoever for a certain person to build the foundation of his life, then there is no reason for Satan to tempt that person.

When the temptation does come to the person who is

making an attempt to build the foundation of his life, then the temptation will serve as a test. It will reveal whether or not he is a quitter. It will reveal the sincerity of his decision to begin building the foundation in the first place. God does not tempt us. Satan tempts us. However, God does give Satan the permission to tempt us. Without such permission, Satan can do nothing. And the reason why God gives the permission, at least in part, is to reveal to us how serious we are at building the foundation of our lives.

Now let's go back to our scripture lesson and try to put these thoughts into the context of what Jesus is teaching. In MATTHEW 7:24 Jesus is quoted as saying, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." The rock foundation of our lives is established when we take seriously and put into practice everything Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon begins with Christian character and then goes on to describe how people with such character will think and talk and act.

So Jesus is using the picture of people building houses. Some people are concerned about the foundations of the houses they are building while others are only concerned about the houses. On the surface the difference is hard to see. Both kinds of houses appear to be very similar. But, that which is below the surface of the houses is what really counts. And God will allow trials and temptations to come our way to expose what is or isn't below the surface. He does this for our own good so we will wake up to the reality of who we really are.

When we apply this picture to our own lives, we have to keep in mind that, for as long as we live, we are in the process of building. Not one of us in this auditorium has completed the building project of his life. All people who profess to be Christian are all in the process of building their houses, and all people who profess to be Christian should be in the process of building the foundations to their houses as well. The foundation and the house are to be built together, and the process does not stop until we die. Death is the final trial that all of us must face. And that trial will totally destroy any house that is not built on a solid foundation.

So this test of unfavorable circumstances needs to be applied in the present, before we die. It will be applied at the time of our death, but it's too late for us to do anything about it then. So we must not wait until then. We must allow the trials and temptations of our lives to expose what is below the surface before the final trial comes. We must observe how we respond to the trials and temptations and be aware that our response is revealing the deepest truth about our lives.

Let's take a moment to consider how we apply the test of unfavorable circumstances to our lives in the present.

The first thing we need to do is to remind ourselves that this test, like the two tests that precede it, is a test designed for people who profess to be Christian. Although the difference between the life of a Christian and the life of a non-Christian should be obvious, the difference between the life of a true

Christian and the life of a nominal Christian is not that obvious.

The picture is that of two men. They have the same desire. They both desire to build a house. They both desire to live a kind of life where they can enjoy all the benefits of salvation that come with being a Christian. These benefits include things such as peace and happiness and freedom from guilt and shame. The benefits also include experiencing power to live a certain type of lifestyle and the assurance that they will go to heaven after they die. Both of the two men portrayed in our scripture lesson desire to have the same kind of house. They both want and look forward to a life of blessing that is promised to Christians in the Bible.

In addition to desiring the same kind of house, they also have something else in common. They build in the same locality. Jesus clearly points out that the two houses were subject to precisely the same tests and stresses. This strongly implies that the two houses were in close proximity to each other.

I must conclude that, with the exception of the foundation that cannot be seen on the surface, there is little difference between the two houses described in our scripture lesson. And there is also little difference in the kinds of tests that come. Both houses are subject to the same kind of tests.

But, there is a difference. And, this test challenges us to exercise spiritual discernment so we can see the difference. In that regard, this test is very much like the second test. That test described the false prophet as a wolf in sheep's clothing. The only way you can discern the difference between him and a true Christian is to look at his fruit and discern whether his words and actions are doing anything to help people confess and repent and turn to God. And to do that requires a great deal of spiritual discernment.

The same thing is true here. How can we tell whether or not other people or whether or not we, ourselves, are actively cooperating with God to build the foundations of our lives? What are the signs that we must look for? Let's try to answer this question by considering the differences between a foolish man who builds his house on sand and the wise man who builds his house on a rock.

The first and most basic difference is one of priority. The top priority of a wise man is the foundation. The house is important, but the foundation is more important. I think, for the most part, both the wise man and the foolish man will agree to the doctrine that God is the one who must do the actual building. They will agree that man's role is one of cooperation. The difference is that the wise man is going to be rather laid back about the house but very concerned about the foundation. In contrast, the foolish man is going to care little or nothing about the foundation but will be very concerned about the house.

Another way to say the same thing is this: The ultimate goal of the wise man is to know God. He does enjoy the benefits of knowing God, but those benefits are not his primary concern. The foolish man majors on the benefits but lacks

a deep desire to know God. He does not know the meaning of 'hungering and thirsting after righteousness.' His basic motive is different. He is out to please himself and not God.

This means the foolish man will seek the right things for the wrong reasons. The right things are things such as peace and power and hope for the future. The foolish man will seek these things just because they are pleasant things to experience and not because he loves God with all his heart and mind and strength.

The story of Simon the Sorcerer is a good illustration of a person seeking the right thing for the wrong reason. In Acts 8 we read that Simon saw Philip working miracles, and he was very impressed. Simon had been doing the same thing, but not on the same scale. He wanted the benefits that these Christians were experiencing. He wanted the power, but he had no thought about using the power to obey the commands of God.

And, the same thing happens today. A man will come into the church and see certain people who seem to exercise a lot of power. He will see people living clean, moral lives without worrying what will happen to them after they die. He will see these things, and he will say to himself, "I would like to have this kind of power and I would like to live this kind of life that keeps me out of trouble and I would like to be free from worrying about life after death. This Christianity really appeals to me. I want it." Now the problem is this: Unless this man has a vision of God that is even stronger than his desire to experience all of these things, he will think little about building the foundation.

These are what I consider the basic differences between the wise man and the foolish man. Now I would like to get a bit more practical, and describe how these basic differences play themselves out in real life.

First of all, the foolish man will have the tendency to be outcome driven. He will think what a Christian should look like or he will think what a group of Christians should look like, and he will say to himself, "In order to reach this goal, we must do this and that." The wise man, on the other hand, will tend to be purpose driven. He will define "purpose" as knowing God and doing His will. He will use the Sermon on the Mount as a guidebook to knowing God and doing His will. He will define "success" as doing one's best in the power of the Holy Spirit to obey the commands of God while leaving the outcomes to God. The outcomes are not unimportant. They are just not as important as living out what Jesus teaches in His Sermon.

So, one man will tend to be purpose driven while the other man will tend to be outcome driven. This is one practical difference that can be seen over a period of time. Another *[second]* related difference is the tendency to be impatient. The foolish man wants to experience the benefits of salvation now. He can't wait.

The story of Jacob is a good illustration of this difference. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. All the blessings and special privileges God gave to Abraham had been passed down to Jacob. Jacob knew about those blessings. He

learned about them at an early age, and he wanted to experience them. But he was in too much of a hurry to do so. He couldn't wait; therefore, he used bribery and trickery so that he could experience the blessings as soon as possible.

The wise man is different. He is not in a hurry to experience the blessings. He knows that they will come in time. He is far more concerned about the issues of obedience and devotion to the God he loves.

A *third* practical difference between a wise and foolish man I would like to point out is an emotional difference. The kind of peace and happiness experienced by the wise man will be different from the kind of peace and happiness experienced by the foolish man. The wise man will never be satisfied about his relationship with God. Perfection in holiness is always his goal, and he is always aware that he has not yet reached the goal. You will often see the wise man troubled and concerned about his spiritual condition. His concern will constantly drive him to Christ. In contrast, the foolish man will give you the impression that he has no concerns about himself. Everything is just fine. You may hear him say, "Since I became a Christian years ago, I have not worried a bit about my sins."

Many cults today like to advertise the fact that their adherents have reached the state of spiritual bliss through whatever means they offer. They show pictures of people who seem to be completely content with themselves and their surroundings. But all this is counterfeit, because the true picture of Christianity is one of struggle that never ends. A person who is focused at cooperating with God to build the foundation will never reach an emotional state of complete bliss, at least not on this side of the grave. Those who are focused at building the house **only** may think they have reached such a state, but they are being deceived by the devil and their false contentment will sooner or later come to an end.

And, this brings me to the *final* practical difference between the wise man and the foolish man. This difference is the one that the rain and flood and wind will expose more than any other differences I have mentioned so far. When the trials of life come to the foolish man, he will protest. The trials will bring partial or total interruption to the benefits of the Christian life that he so desires to experience, and that will not make him happy. You will hear him whine and complain about the trials. You might even hear him protest to God, saying, "How could God ever let this happen to me." It will seem to the person that God has broken His promise of an abundant life.

When faced by the same trials, the wise man may feel confused, but his confusion will not cause him to complain. Instead, he will be driven to seek God's counsel. Bible study for the wise man is not a process of picking out and then claiming the promises that he likes. It is a process of growing to know better the God that he so deeply loves and desires to obey. And when something happens that he cannot understand, it only drives the wise man to know God more.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that a wise man is perfect. With the exception of Jesus Christ, there has never been a perfect wise man or wise woman. Wise people are tempted to leave the work of building the foundations of their lives and sometimes they stop that important work for a period of time. But the true Christian will be nothing less than totally miserable while he is away from the work of building the foundation of his life.

Every person in this auditorium is either like the wise man or the foolish man. Every one of us is their doing our utmost to put into practice the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, or else we are not. Either we are Christians or we are deluding ourselves into thinking we are Christians.

This test of unfavorable circumstances is for all of us. It is to be applied in the present. When temptations persuade us to temporarily put aside the work of building the foundation, do we feel miserable? When the rain and flood and wind beat against the houses of our lives, do we complain? Are we people who struggle to live holy lives, or are we people who give an appearance that everything is always OK? Are we in a hurry to get as much out of the Christian life as possible with a minimum amount of effort? Are we outcome driven, always setting goals of what we should look like as individuals and as a church?

We should be asking ourselves these questions when we face unfavorable circumstances in the present. And, we should remember the final trial that all of us must face sooner or later. The words of MATTHEW 7:27 are meant to be a warning about the future. They speak to us about the final judgment when the houses without foundations will fall with a great crash. After that happens there is no second chance to rebuild. The judgment is final.

I want to end this message by leaving you with a picture of a wise man or woman using words taken from writings not found in our scripture lesson, yet complimenting everything Jesus has to say in the scripture lesson about the nature of the wise man or woman.

First of all, I think about the words of PSALM 112:7 that so accurately describe the wise man. "He (the wise man) will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord." And then, I think about the early Christians we read about in the book of Acts who, when they were being persecuted, even being put to death, thanked God that He had counted them worthy to suffer for His name's sake (Acts

5:41). And I read in history books about those who were thrown to the lions in the arena, yet they praised God. And don't forget the stories of those who advanced to the stake smiling, and preached from the stake as the flames engulfed them. The death of a wise man or woman is a glorious thing. And the life of a wise man is an example to follow.

While in prison, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi. He thanked God for his imprisonment, because it gave him an opportunity to preach the gospel. The apostle Paul was able to endure the treachery of false friends. He could look death in the face and say that it was kind, because it meant going 'to be with Christ which is far better.' When he wrote to the church at Corinth, he made a list of his trials and tribulations. But listen to his words recorded in 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-17. "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." And then, at the end of his life, we hear these words coming from this beloved apostle: "I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." May God grant us all the grace to finish our lives knowing we have been faithful to the end at building the foundation.

The final words I share with you come from a man named Albert Simpson. They are written in the form of a hymn. They are words of a professing Christian who once had been living the life of a fool. Then, after applying the test of unfavorable circumstances to his life, the fool came to his senses and began living the life of a wise man. Listen to the words he penned into his song:

Once it was the blessing, Now it is the Lord;
Once it was the feeling, Now it is His Word;
Once His gift I wanted, Now the Giver own;
Once I sought for healing, Now Himself alone.

All in all forever, Jesus will I sing;
Everything in Jesus, And Jesus everything.

All these words I share with you are just a small sample of the testimonies of wise men and women. Once they started working to build the foundations of their lives they never stopped. I hope that their testimonies will be an inspiration to all of us.