

"BUILDING A LIFE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
April 25, 1999

"BUILDING A LIFE"

INTRODUCTION

In a park out in California there's a rock hanging on a rope with a large sign next to it that reads:

"WEATHER STATION....CHECK THE ROCK...IF IT'S WET, IT'S RAINING. IF IT'S MOVING, IT'S WINDY. IF YOU CAN'T SEE IT, IT'S FOGGY. IF THE ROCK IS GONE, IT'S A TORNADO".

Today we check the ROCK...or better yet...to use the language of our text from First Peter, the STONE - the CORNERSTONE on which our lives are built or should be built. Reading from First Peter,

"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. For in Scripture it says, 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame.'" (First Peter 2: 6)

Jesus is the CORNERSTONE. It is familiar language to most of us. Some of you have seen the cornerstone of this church that dates back to 1837, here in the heart of the chancel area. Building on the Rock. On Jesus. Today we begin a series of three sermons and this one has to do with building a life.

THE FOUNDATION

Where does one begin building a life? You begin with the foundation. You begin where every builder begins. Yes, the foundation. The cornerstone. No building is any stronger or surer than the foundation on which it is built.

Raise a hand if you have visited the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. Built from 1173 to 1372, this 12 story solid white marble structure began to lean even before it was completed. Did you know that the word "pisa" means "marshy land" which gives some clue as to why after the first three stories were completed, the ground beneath the tower began to sink. Also, its foundation is only 10 feet deep.

Scientists are now working feverishly to keep this massive structure in place. They report that the tower moves about 1/20th of an inch each year and is now 17 feet out of plumb. It's been estimated that by the year 2007 this 810 year old tower will have tilted too far and will probably collapse. A famous historical landmark will be gone as will millions of tourist dollars that flow from this unique structure. No building is any stronger or surer than its foundation.

Compare the Tower of Pisa with its ten-foot foundation with the foundations of those great European cathedrals some of which have foundations that 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 ground. To build a great life is like building a great cathedral. You start with a sure foundation.

A seminar leader was speaking to a group of business students. To drive home a point, he used an illustration and began by saying, "Okay, time for a quiz."

Several years ago Oprah Winfrey got rid of her entire wardrobe. One woman bought a part of Ms. Winfrey's four hundred dollar shoes for five dollars. Later on that same woman told Oprah she was having a difficult time raising her children on her own, but then she added,

"Sometimes when I feel I just can't make it, I go into the closet and I stand in your shoes!"

For this woman, Oprah Winfrey is a model and an inspiration. She could do worse, of course. Oprah is quite a lady. However, she could also do better. Millions of persons through the centuries have discovered that Christ is the only sure foundation. When we build our lives on Christ, we begin with Him as our model...but let's move on to a second thought.

MAKE HIM YOUR MENTOR

We also begin with Him as our mentor. Christ is not only a dead, historical figure whom we admire, He is also, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Alive in our lives in the here and the now. Think of it this way. 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 Grip of Grace, Max Lucado writes of his boyhood days when he and his friends would gather on the street each afternoon to play football. One dad in the neighborhood, a die-hard football buff, would sometimes join them in their play. This dad always played for whichever team was losing that day. Max Lucado writes in his book,

"His appearance in the huddle changed the whole game. He was confident, strong and most of all, he had a plan..."

The kids fired up by his leadership and emboldened by his plan, played with new determination and usually won the game!

Lucado, of course, makes the point that Jesus did the same thing for us. He came to join the losing team and His appearance in the game changed everything. He was a leader who inspired hope and confidence and courage and love in His followers. And He had a plan, too, a plan so outrageous and amazing that no one - not even His disciples - truly understood it at first. But they trusted Him as their leader and so they followed and won. And now all of His followers can be sure that they, too, are going to win this game in the final inning.

It's a wonderful analogy. We are playing the game of life. And a bigger, stronger and more confident player steps into the huddle as our ally, as our coach, our friend, our partner and makes a difference. Jesus is not only our model, but He is our Mentor, as well. One may wonder...could not other people fill that void just as well? Perhaps...up to a point, but there are areas of our lives in which no other friend is adequate.

A woman fought a long battle with cancer. Her brother, a Dr. Earl Wolf, made the trip from Missouri to Pennsylvania to attend her funeral. While there, he spent time looking through his sister's Bible and there he found this handwritten poem tucked into 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."

CLOSING

Caught in the fog of uncertainty in our dangerous passage through life, we need on occasion to be "hugged". With some fellow Christians who know the way and can lead safely ahead of us and with a few others behind, gently encouraging us along, we, too, can pass through some of life's treacherous passages.

How do you build a successful life? You build on the rock. You build it beginning with a sure cornerstone. You build it on Christ - our model, our mentor and the mortar that joins us as believers together in a family that loves and cares....as "living stones in His holy temple".

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness in these moments, O God, sensitive to your peace and power...your hope and healing. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives...in those areas just below the surface of our lives. And help us to build strong foundations that will stand firm in those moments of testing and temptation. In the name and spirit of Christ - the cornerstone...our model, mentor and mortar. Amen.

