

The decider

by EARL PALMER

I'VE BEEN THINKING ... At the close of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes use of a freedom word in the parable when he tells about the act of deciding. He puts it this way: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock ... 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" (Matthew 7:24, 25). Most English texts use the word "wise" to describe the first person in this sentence, but the actual Greek word is *phrono* not *sophia*. *Phrono* describes the decision-making part of the human mind that weighs evidence and then comes to a conclusion that sets into motion a course of action.

Wisdom (*sophia*) is different as it describes a person with previously seasoned experience already in place, and it is from that established source of understanding that a wise person decides and acts. Jesus could have described our decision to trust him as the teacher with the settled and mature word for wisdom, but instead he makes use of a more movable process word *phrono*. In the choice of this word, Jesus is saying to his disciples and those who might become disciples, "Hear what I am saying, then do your work to weigh what you have heard — test the teaching and the teacher."

Jesus tells us that when we are faced with a decision we must use our heads and take the time to think through our deciding moment. This parable encourages us to do just that: use our mind. Eugene Peterson catches this meaning in his translation: "The smart carpenter" builds on the rock.

His point is made all the more clear when he describes another builder whose choice of foundation reveals him to be foolish — *moronic* is the word he uses: one not thinking and deciding clearly.

In this house-building parable Jesus sets up a way of testing the foundation. The testing criterion is simple. How well does the house on the foundation we have chosen endure storms? There are storms of rain and moving water and wind that every house must face; therefore, the parable is not about finding good weather or even about the

houses. It is about foundations that either survive or fail when the pressures of stormy weather come. Jesus has preserved for each of us a lag time between "to hear" and "to do." It is in that time in between that we are to use our brains, and to think through the large question of trustworthiness. Jesus has posed the deciding crises by the Messianic claim he makes about himself at the heart of his invitation. Jesus as Lord claims to be the faithful rock upon which we may put the full weight of our house.

The houses we are building represent our lives, with unique features and rooms that identify who we are. They encompass our desires, often complex and sometimes baffling, our philosophy of life, our relationships, our discipleship, and not only our steps but also our missteps. And as is obvious in the houses of those perpetual decorators, their rooms are ever changing. The wall colors and furniture arrangements of our lives are in perpetual motion.

The ultimate challenge in the Sermon on the Mount is the decision about the foundation and cornerstone. If I do not choose to trust in Jesus as the solid rock, then what do I propose to trust as the foundation for my life? The Sermon on the Mount ends with that question echoing in our heads.

Jesus must be very sure of himself to set us free to make such a decision.

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